

Virtual Reference Interviewing and Neutral Questioning

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While I did not know Anne Grodzins Lipow personally, I went to a program on reference interviewing and neutral questioning that she did at a Nevada Library Association conference in the late 1980s. This was one of the best sessions I have attended at any local, state, regional or national conference. I was so impressed that I still refer to Anne's handouts when I conduct reference interviewing training sessions. She was one of the first librarians to discuss using neutral questioning techniques in the virtual environment. As we know, Anne became an articulate proponent of virtual reference services; her major publications on this topic include *Establishing a Virtual Reference Service: VRS Training Manual*, co-authored with Steve Coffman (2001) and *The Virtual Reference Librarian's Handbook* (2003). Her articles on reference services, including virtual reference, appeared in periodicals such as *Library Journal*, *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, and *Reference Services Review*. We hope this effort honors some of Anne Lipow's many accomplishments.
— Allison A. Cowgill

The Reference Interview

Librarians have “long recognized the tendency of library users to pose their initial questions in incomplete, often unclear, and sometimes covert terms.”¹² Some users may be hesitant to ask questions and when they do, their questions do not necessarily convey what they want. Other patrons may not

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Technology in Libraries: Essays in Honor of Anne Grodzins Lipow, ed. Roy Tennant. Lulu.com, 2008.

¹² Patricia Dewdney, “Asking ‘Why’ Questions in the Reference Interview: A Theoretical Justification,” *Library Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (1997): 51.

have fully defined to themselves what they need or they may insist on using specific sources when librarians can readily identify alternatives that are much more helpful.

Questioning during the reference interview may elicit more information about: what the user wants to know; how the user plans to use the information; and what level of detail, technical specialization, or reading ability would be best. Questions also help the librarian to determine what format of information is preferred and identify other restrictions, about the amount of work the user is willing to do, concerns about time limits or deadlines, and or if only the most recent information will do.¹³

According to the American Library Association's Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), "the reference interview is the heart of the reference transaction and is crucial to the success of the process ... strong listening and questioning skills are necessary for a positive interaction."¹⁴

The librarian uses open-ended questioning techniques to encourage patrons to expand on the request or present additional information. Some examples of such questions include:

- Please tell me more about your topic.
- What additional information can you give me?
- How much information do you need?

The librarian uses closed and/or clarifying questions to refine the search query. Some examples of clarifying questions are:

- What have you already found?
- What type of information do you need (books, articles, etc.)?

¹³ Catherine Sheldrick Ross, Kirsti Nilsen, and Patricia Dewdney, *Conducting the Reference Interview* (New York: Neal Schuman Publishers, Inc.: 2002): 4.

¹⁴ Reference and Users Service Association, American Library Association, "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers," <http://www.ala.org/ala/rusa/rusaprotocols/referenceguide/guidelinesbehavioral.htm> (accessed 7 July 2007).

- Do you need current or historical information?¹⁵

Bill Katz, the highly respected author of *Introduction to Reference Work*, states that “the reference interview points up the true nature of reference service. It is an art form with different responses for different people, different situations.”¹⁶ It involves listening, being approachable, and using verbal and nonverbal cues in order to understand what patrons want.¹⁷

Virtual Reference Interviewing

Discussions on virtual reference began in the late 1990s and journal articles and conferences, such as the annual Virtual Reference Desk Conferences that began in 1999, widely promoted this new service. Books soon followed. Some major monographs include: *The Virtual Reference Desk: Creating a Reference Future* edited by R. David Lankes, et.al (2004); *The Virtual Reference Experience: Integrating Theory into Practice* edited by R. David Lankes, et.al. (2004); *Virtual Reference Training: The Complete Guide to Providing Anytime Anywhere Answers* by Buff Hirko and Mary Bucher Ross (2004); and *The Virtual Reference Librarians Handbook* by Anne Grodzins Lipow (2003). Other works, such as *Reference and Information Services in the 21st Century: An Introduction* by Kay Cassell and Uma Hiremath (2006), cover virtual reference as one part of a larger discussion on library public services. Libraries of all types and sizes throughout the United States now offer Internet-based chat reference assistance.

Materials on virtual reference cover a wide range of topics including staff training, service implementation and maintenance, consortial agreements, software selection, policies and best practices, service assessment, ongoing research agendas, and concerns about its usefulness and costs. Many works discuss the importance of reference interviewing in the chat environment. In its “Guidelines for Implementing and Maintaining Virtual Reference Services,” RUSA states that “standard guidelines of reference service (such as

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Bill Katz, *Introduction to Reference Work: Reference Services and Reference Processes*, Vol. 2, 8th ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002): 125.

¹⁷ Ibid., 134-135.

reference interviewing, exchange of questions between services, et al.) should prevail” and “staff should follow interpersonal communication practices that promote effective provision of reference service.”¹⁸ Cassell and Hiremath concur: “librarians should approach the virtual reference question in the same way as a face-to-face one” and “proceed to do a reference interview, asking the user for the context of the query, followed by open-ended questions.”¹⁹ In *Virtual Reference Training: The Complete Guide to Providing Anytime Anywhere Answers*, Buff Hirko and Mary Bucher Ross also address the importance of asking open-ended questions in online reference interviews.²⁰

While traditional reference interviewing techniques are used in the virtual environment, many librarians readily agree that reference interviewing in the computer-mediated environment is quite dissimilar. In virtual reference, some patrons may expect answers relatively quickly and do not understand why they are asked so many questions. Problems with software and connectivity are decidedly frustrating for both librarians and patrons and compound the challenges of determining what is really needed. Jana Ronan, stressing that “text-based chat is very different,” discusses the “lack of nonverbal cues, such as body language or gestures” and the “lack of voice intonation or accents.”²¹ Librarians routinely rely on these cues at reference desks, and patrons also use them when they interact with librarians who are helping them. Ronan suggests:

- using open-ended questioning techniques;
- using popular texting abbreviations with patrons who are familiar with them;
- communicating understanding and empathy;

¹⁸ MARS Digital Reference Guidelines Ad Hoc Committee, Reference and User Services Association, American Library Association, “Guidelines for Implementing and Maintaining Virtual Reference Services,” <http://www.ala.org/ala/rusa/rusaprotocols/referenceguide/virtrefguidelines.htm> (accessed 7 July 2007).

¹⁹ Kay Ann Cassell, and Uma Hiremath, *Reference and Information Services in the 21st Century: An Introduction* (New York: Neal Schuman Publishers, Inc., 2006): 24.

²⁰ Buff Hirko, and Mary Bucher Ross, *Virtual Reference Training: The Complete Guide to Providing Anytime Anywhere Answers* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2004): 78.

²¹ Jana Ronan, “The Reference Interview Online,” *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 43 (Fall 2003): 43.

- determining appropriate levels of formality and informality;
- providing updates to users while working on their questions; and
- determining if results meet patron needs.²²

Hirko and Ross state that “Like in-person and telephone reference communications, the online interaction between the librarian and the customer is complex.”²³ Participants in their VRS training sessions reported that online reference interviewing was “prone to failure” and Hirko and Ross found that “many queries were treated superficially” in practice exercises.²⁴ In her study of chat interactions, Ronan notes that “transcripts revealed that surprisingly few librarians and library staff took the time to clarify the goals of the user’s research or to simply rephrase the question at the beginning of the transaction.”²⁵ Using neutral questioning techniques is certainly one way to improve reference interviewing in the chat environment.

Neutral Questioning

Neutral questioning was developed to improve reference interviewing outcomes. Brenda Dervin and Patricia Dewdney define neutral questions as a subset of open questions that:

guide the conversation along dimensions that are relevant to all information-seeking situations. The neutral questioning strategy directs the librarian to learn from the user the nature of the underlying situation, the gaps faced, and the expected uses.²⁶

²² Ibid., 43-44.

²³ Buff Hirko, and Mary Bucher Ross, *Virtual Reference Training: The Complete Guide to Providing Anytime, Anywhere Answers* (Chicago: American Librarian Association, 2004): 74

²⁴ Ibid., 74-78.

²⁵ Jana Ronan, “Application of Reference Guidelines in Chat Reference Interactions: A Study of Online Reference Skills,” *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 13, no. 4 (2006): 15.

²⁶ Brenda Dervin, and Patricia Dewdney, “Neutral Questioning: A New Approach to the Reference Interview,” *RQ* 25 (Summer 1986): 508-509.

More importantly perhaps, neutral questioning allows “the librarian to understand the query from the user’s viewpoint. Neutral questions are open in form, avoid premature diagnosis of the problem, and structure the interview along dimensions important to users.”²⁷ Anne Grodzins Lipow believes neutral questions leave “control of the interview in the patron’s hands and assures success from the patron’s point of view.”²⁸ It is easy for librarians to quickly make incorrect assumptions about reference questions and then provide information and resources that do not meet user needs. While Dervin and Dewdney note that “closed, open, and neutral questions are all options and all appropriate under different circumstances,” they stress that neutral questions help librarians overcome “assumptions based on initial statements” and “past experiences.”

Neutral questions are also known as “sense-making questions” and according to Ross, Nilsen, and Dewdney, they “provide more structure than open questions, but are less likely to lead to premature diagnosis than closed questions.”²⁹ They use the following examples to illustrate how closed, open and neutral questions, and their outcomes, differ:

User question: Excuse me, but can you tell me where to find information on travel?

Librarian’s closed response: Would you like a book on travel – a travel guide? (closed question that makes an assumption)

User: Yes, I guess so. Thanks.

Librarian: Our travel guides are over there [points to shelves].

Librarian’s open response: What sort of travel information do you have in mind? (encourages the user to say more)

²⁷ Ibid., 506.

²⁸ Anne Lipow, “Reference Workshop / Neutral Questioning,” (n.d.): 1

²⁹ Catherine Sheldrick Ross, Kirsti Nilsen, and Patricia Dewdney, *Conducting the Reference Interview* (New York: Neal Schuman Publishers, Inc., 2002): 93.

User: Information on New York City. I'm traveling there next month.

Librarian: We have several good travel guides to New York City. Here's the *Fodor's Guide*, etc.

Librarian's sense-making/neutral question response: We have quite a lot of travel information in different parts of the library. If you could tell me how you would be using this information, I could help you find something.

User: I need New York City information. I'd like to read up on plays that will be on in New York next month so I can order some tickets in advance.

Librarian: Ok, you want to learn about what's playing in New York so you can order tickets. (acknowledgment) You'll need really current information for that, and so the Internet would be a good place to look, etc.³⁰

Ross, Nilsen and Dewdney add that librarians do not usually use neutral questioning but state that "they can learn to use this skill and they can use it intentionally."³¹ As the examples above illustrate, it is a valuable tool for clearly identifying what patrons want.

Some background on neutral questioning highlights how it was developed. Professor Brenda Dervin, Ohio State University School of Communication, wondered how libraries can better serve their users:

Library research needs to ask how the librarian can intervene usefully with users presenting different situation needs at

³⁰ Ibid., 94-95.

³¹ Ibid., 98.

different points in time? ... What questions can he ask? How can he enter the user's informing processes? What can he deliver that will be "informing" to that unique individual?³²

Much of Dervin's subsequent research focused on how people find and use information. She uses the term "sense-making" to refer to her model of information seeking, which really deals with how people 'make sense' of the world." People "contact or come to libraries when some "gap in their understanding ... must be filled before they can achieve a goal."³³ Reference librarians, then, "need to know three things: (1) the *situation* the person is in, (2) the *gaps* in his or her understanding, and (3) the *uses* or helps – what the person would like to do as a result of bridging this gap."³⁴ Dervin's sense-making methodology has also been used in classrooms, information centers, counseling services, public information campaigns, and web site design.³⁵

Neutral Questioning and Virtual Reference

Neutral questioning is also a valuable technique in virtual reference because incorrect assumptions about user needs are as easy, if not easier, to make online. As noted earlier, little has been written about applying it in chat reference. Interestingly, Anne Grodzins Lipow and Steve Coffman first addressed the importance of neutral questioning in chat reference in 2001. In their discussion on interviewing in *Establishing a Virtual Reference Service*, they listed sample questions that "elicit the client's goals:"

- Can you describe the kind of information you would like to find?
- Is there a specific question you are trying to answer?

³² Brenda Dervin, "Useful Theory for Librarianship: Communication, Not Information," *Drexel Library Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (1977): 29.

³³ Catherine Sheldrick Ross, Kirsti Nilsen, and Patricia Dewdney, *Conducting the Reference Interview* (New York: Neal Schuman Publishers, Inc., 2002): 93.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 93-94.

³⁵ Brenda Dervin, "Welcome to the Sense-Making Methodology Site," <http://communication.sbs.ohio-state.edu/sense-making/> (accessed 11 July 2007). This site provides a great deal of information on the topic including references to articles, papers, dissertations, theses, conferences, and workshops, and a variety of methodology applications.

- What are you hoping to find?
- Tell me what you're ultimately trying to do, so I can head in the right direction.
- Can you give me a little background on your interest in this?³⁶

Lipow continues her discussion of neutral questioning in the chat environment in *The Virtual Reference Librarian's Handbook*:

In the chat medium ... in which the question comes to you in text form, the client's words may seem less tentative, more thought out (If it's in print, believe it), so you are likely to start your fingers flying over the keyboard as soon as you see the question. Because skipping that initial interview can lead to wasting precious time, you'll be a more efficient searcher if your knee-jerk response is a neutral question rather than simply jumping immediately to answer the question as first asked.³⁷

Lipow succinctly explains what neutral questions are, provides examples of them, and recommends using them to determine if search results meet user needs.³⁸ She suggests that librarians "provide the client with a quick tentative answer," such as a Web resource, and then "simultaneously ask a neutral question" to elicit more information from the user.³⁹ She also provides specific practice exercises that use neutral questioning techniques to "get at the real question."⁴⁰ One of her examples is:

³⁶ Anne Grodzins Lipow and Steve Coffman, *Establishing a Virtual Reference Services: VRS Training Manual* (El Dorado Hills, CA: Library Solutions Press, August 2001): 1-4C.2-1.4C.3.

³⁷ Anne Grodzins Lipow, *The Virtual Reference Librarian's Handbook* (Berkeley, CA: Library Solutions Press; New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc., 2003): 65.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 157-160.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

Client: I am looking for a copy of the Van Gogh painting called Girl with Ruffled Hair.

Librarian: Greet client and add: There are a few ways to search for this, depending on what specifically you are looking for. Can you describe what you are hoping to find?

Client: I am a painter myself and I want to paint this Van Gogh as a present for my daughter who looks just like the girl in the painting, messy hair and all! I want to make the painting in the original dimensions, but the copy I have shows the dimensions in centimeters. I was hoping the copy you found for me would give me the dimensions in inches.

Librarian: Oh, so if you give me the dimensions in centimeters and I get them converted to inches, will that fill the bill? Or will you still need the copy of the painting?

Client: Oh no, I don't need the painting itself, just the dimensions in a form I can understand. My copy gives the measurements as 35.5 cm. x 24.5 cm.

Librarian: Now that you know the real question, look for a site that converts centimeters to inches.⁴¹

Reference interviewing in both face-to-face and virtual encounters can be challenging even for experienced librarians. Users, needs, and situations are always different and it is easy for librarians to make incorrect assumptions about what people want. As Bill Katz notes, it really is an art. The lack of visual and auditory cues, and computer-mediated communication add to the complexity of virtual reference interviewing. Neutral questioning techniques are a valuable tool in both environments because they help librarians understand what patrons really want. As Kathleen Kern states: "we need to remember that the type and quality of the service we offer must depend on our philosophy of reference service and not on the mode of communication

⁴¹ Ibid., 66.

with the user.”⁴² Anne Grodzins Lipow’s work on neutral questioning and virtual reference interviewing is just one reflection of her articulate and profound commitment to user-focused library services. The library community – librarians and users – have all benefited from her many efforts.

⁴² Kathleen, Kern. “Communication, Patron Satisfaction, and the Reference Interview,” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 43 (Fall 2003): 49.