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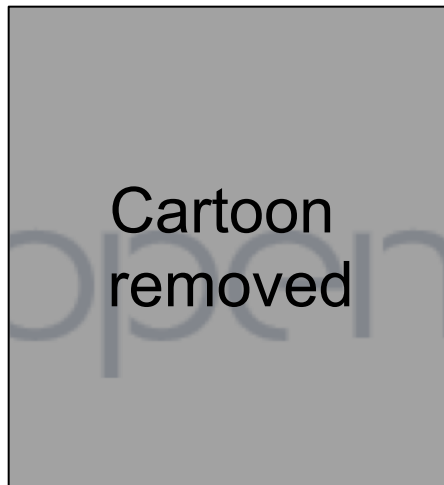
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Reference & Unobtrusive Observation Introduction

SI 643

February 12, 2009

Reference Interview-A Complex Interpersonal Interaction



Source: undetermined

Cartoon of a young girl pretending to be a flower while her classmates guess what she is, guessing everything from a horse to an octopus to a sailboat. Meant to highlight how hard it is to communicate and understand during interpersonal interactions

Taylor (1968): Information need

Four Levels of Information Need

- The visceral need
 - The actual, but unexpressed need for information
- The conscious need
 - The conscious, within-brain description of the need
- The formalized need
 - An inquirer can form a qualified and rational statement of his question (formal statement)
- The compromised need
 - The question as presented to the information system

Defining the Reference Interview

A conversation between a professional and a client or user in which the professional asks questions in order to:

- a) get a clear and more complete picture of what the user wants to know
- b) link the user to a system or other appropriate resource.

Adapted from Ross & Dewdney

What is a “successful” reference interview? How do we know?

- Researchers help shape profession’s understanding of success
- “Success is too hard to measure--we can’t try.” (Prior to about 1970)
- The Reference Interview is a success when the professional says it is. (1980s-->)
- Interview is a success when the response is accurate (Based on years of unobtrusive obs studies)
- The interview is a success when the questioner says it is. (Researchers found this one too difficult to deal with)

What is reference success/ failure?

If 'success' meant *providing accurate answers* to questions, then the challenge was to measure it.

- Researchers developed ways to determine how accurate librarians' answers to questions are.
- Observe the interaction. Unobtrusive is most effective.
- Ask questions with known answers to determine accuracy of librarians' answers.

Implied Assumptions Behind Focusing on **Accuracy** as the Measure

- Librarians who answer questions accurately are the most successful.
- A researcher can make up a set of questions (that have specific answers) which represent the questions of typical users.
- Typically people only ask questions at reference desks that have straightforward answers that can be provided by resources readily available to staff.

Early Research Question: How accurately do librarians answer questions?

- Scores of studies from 1970-early 1990s focused on accuracy
- Most studies show that librarians answer questions accurately 55% of the time (35%-60%).
- **To solve the inaccuracy problem:** Researchers & trainers suggested increase accuracy by training staff *to gain a better knowledge of their resources (rather than gaining skill in communicating with the questioner)*

Evolving Research on the Reference Interaction that Moved from the Question to the Interaction

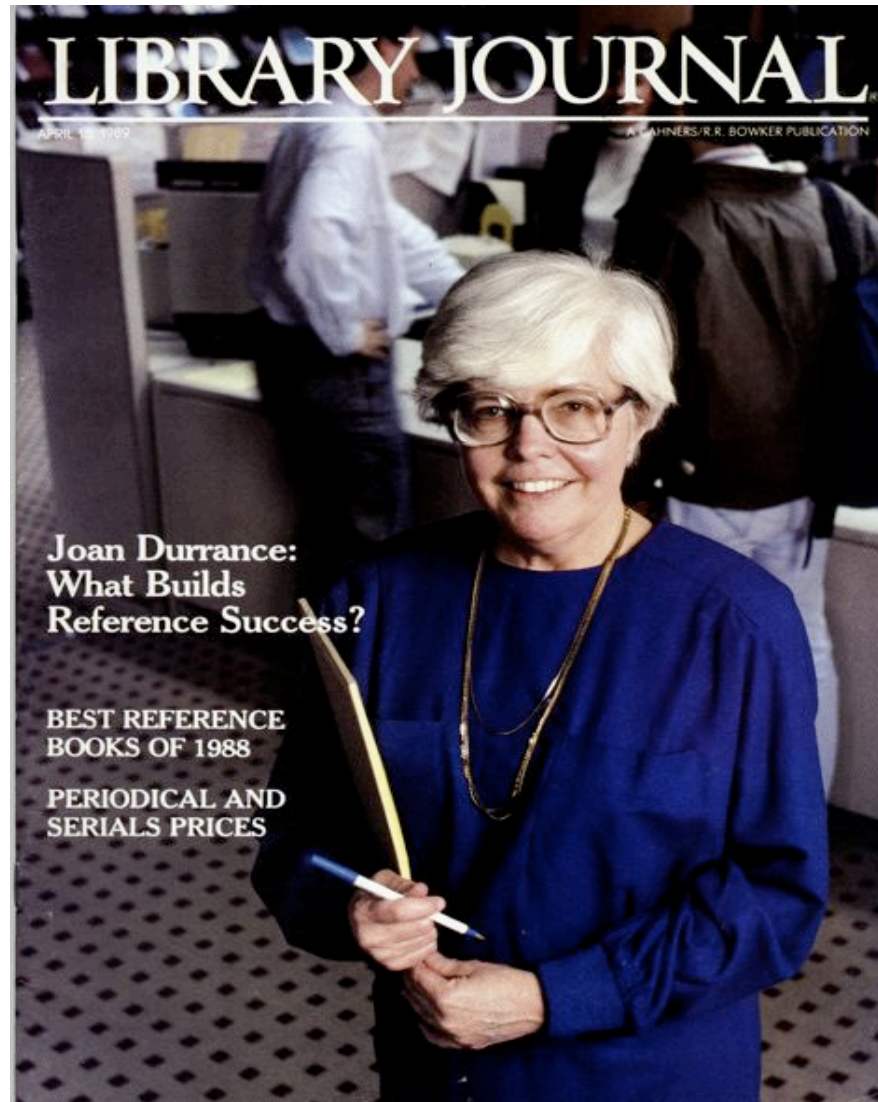
- Lynch (1976) and Dewdney (1986) recorded interviews in their natural setting
- Lynch & Dewdney found that:
 - People phrase Qs from the system perspective
 - Staff respond with system-centered answers.
- Researchers in 1980s and 90s (in a series of studies) identified specific approaches that either help or hinder interactions (e.g., Durrance, Dewdney, Dervin, Ross, Nilsen)
- Theoretical framework from 1970s to present (Taylor, Dervin, Dewdney, Durrance, Kuhlthau, etc—See Ross et al)
- Durrance WtoR: *The willingness of the questioner to go back to the professional (the staff member) at another time.*

Willingness to Return Study

JCD--1986--

- Approach: Questioner Focused
- Method: Unobtrusive observation (Secret Shopper)
- Observer or Proxy asks general question **that is important to him/her**
- **Starting with a general question**
 - Where are your books on...
 - Do you have information about...
- The question should result in an interaction where the staff member may attempt to find out more about the question
- Observer completes Instrument and writes report based on the experience.
- Key variable: Willingness to Return

1989 Willingness To Return Article



Library Journal: April 15, 1989

Willingness to Return Study-Additional Info

My website provides basic information about the study.

- <http://www.si.umich.edu/~durrance/>
- Willingness to return tested by Ross & Dewdney and others in in-person reference
- Some researchers apply to e-reference
- <Willingness to return to the same service>

643 Unobtrusive Observation: “Secret Shopper”

- Done with a partner
- Each partner does 1 in-person & 1 e-reference interaction
- Unobtrusive observation is governed by a set of rules laid out in the revised syllabus
- Instruments are on C-Tools
- Develop and submit one report plus appendices