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LBSC 650

### Assignment #2: Interpersonal Communication within the Reference Interview

The reference question used in the following face to face, telephone, email, and chat interactions was, “I need to find articles that provide a feminist critique or analysis of A Streetcar Named Desire. Do you have suggestions of databases to search and search terms I can use?” I used this question as a means for analyzing the quality of the interpersonal interaction and establishing if all points of a good reference interview were present: establishing rapport with the user through initiation, availability, proximity, familiarity, and gender; negotiating the question; developing a search strategy; locating and evaluating the information; ensuring that the question is fully answered through follow up; and closing the interview (Cassell and Hiremath 17; Radford 708–710).

#### **Description of Interaction 1: Face to Face**

I visited the Rockville Memorial Library in Rockville, Maryland for the face to face reference interview on a Sunday afternoon. As I walked up to the reference desk, one of the *female* librarians *initiated* the interview by making eye contact and asking me if I needed help. I am a regular patron at this library, but I had no other *familiarity* with this librarian. The librarian made herself *available* to me; however, she wasn't in close *proximity* to me. Her chair was on the other side of the desk and she didn't make an effort to come to my side, I had to lean over the desk. Because of this, the librarian did not listen to (or hear) my entire question. As the librarian did not listen to my entire question, she did not *negotiate the question*. She did not ask any sensemaking, open-ended, close-ended, or probing questions. The librarian *developed a basic*

*search strategy* and *communicated* it to me. She led me to her side of the desk and I stood behind her (clearly seeing the computer monitor) as she went through the appropriate databases and worked with me to create search terms (though none that would help me find feminist critiques). She also answered my question on if I could perform a cross-database search, and showed me how. The librarian then performed a few sample searches which *located the information*. She provided an *evaluation* of the results based on whether full text was available, not on if they were relevant to my question. There was no *follow up* from the librarian, she did not ask me if the information was useful or to contact her again if I needed further help. At one point, there was no indication that the librarian was going to offer any more information, so I *closed the interview* by thanking her and walking away.

### **Description of Interaction 2: Telephone**

I contacted the University of Maryland (UMD) McKeldin Library on a Saturday morning for the telephone reference interview. The interview was *initiated* by a *male* librarian who asked, “McKeldin Library, can I help you?” After asking my question, the librarian indicated that he was *available* and excited to help me with my question. The only *proximity* and *familiarity* I had with this librarian was my current student status at UMD, my ability to access the databases, and my previous experience with the library’s website. The librarian *negotiated the question* by repeating it back to me and asking what kind of materials I needed (books or articles)—to which I replied, “Either, but primarily articles.” He did not ask any further open-ended, close-ended, or probing questions. The librarian *developed a search strategy* and talked me through it. He asked if I was on the UMD library website, led me through the sources available, and suggested the best databases for my reference question. He chose a database and made sure I was on the right webpage. He then started developing search terms but did not *communicate* them to me; there was a lot of silence as I heard him mutter and typing. Only when I asked him what he was doing

did he communicate his search term strategy. *We located the information* for this initial search strategy together and *evaluated* its usefulness to my reference question. He then developed a secondary search strategy in a different database, but did not adequately *communicate* this to me. He suddenly started *evaluating* articles and asked me to join in, but I could not replicate the results. I attempted to *close the interview* early by saying, “This is great, thank you for your help.” He *ensured that my question was fully answered* and provided *follow up* by asking me if he had been helpful and to call back if I needed anything else. I *closed the interview* when I thanked him again and hung up the phone.

### **Description of Interaction 3: Email**

I emailed the DeKalb County Public Library in Decatur, Georgia with my reference question on a Monday afternoon. The reference interview was *initiated* by a response from the library that began, “Hello and thank you for your email.” The *male* librarian was very *available*, as I received a response in under an hour. The librarian was not in close *proximity* or *familiar* to me, as I have never visited, I am not a member, and I have never been to Georgia. The librarian did not *negotiate the question* with me. He did not ask any sensemaking, open-ended, close-ended, or probing questions. He did negotiate my strategy in coming to the library for information, as he suggested I use my school’s databases instead. I did not indicate in my email that this question was for a school project. The librarian *developed a search strategy* and *communicated* it to me clearly. He gave me a list (with hyperlinks) of relevant databases along with useful search terms. The links and search terms aided me in *locating the information*. He provided an *evaluation* of the information by explaining which search terms gave him the best results. He also inserted a link to a relevant book available at the library and suggested I search their catalog as well. The librarian did not end his email with any *follow up* questions nor did he

ask me to email or call if I needed more information. The lack of questions and automated email signature was his way of *closing the interview*.

#### **Description of Interaction 4: Chat**

I chose the St. Mary's College of Maryland (SMCM) library for my chat reference interview. The chat feature was not always *available*; the website made it clear that librarians logged on sporadically. When I was able to connect, the *female* librarian *initiated* the chat 4 minutes after I entered the chat space by typing, "How can I help you?" I was not in close *proximity* geographically to the librarian, but SMCM is my alma mater so I have access to their databases and am very *familiar* with the library. The librarian *negotiated the question* by asking if I had already searched the library's databases. She did not ask any further sensemaking, open-ended, close-ended, or probing questions. The librarian *developed a search strategy* and *communicated* it to me clearly. She sent me links to relevant databases and described how to access them from the library homepage. She also developed a search term strategy with advanced techniques and explained how it worked. She assisted in *locating the information* by asking me to execute her search strategy and *evaluated* the usefulness of the results with me. She *ensured that my question was fully answered* by asking if the information was helpful. I agreed and attempted to *close the interview* by thanking her for her help. Her *follow up*, "Let me know if you need any more assistance" and my logging out of the chat space *closed the interview*.

#### **Efficiency and Quality of Interpersonal Communication Analysis**

To start, the quality and efficiency of the interpersonal communication in all four formats was not influenced by the librarian's gender. The elements of the interactions discussed below were more impactful than if the librarian helping me was a man or a woman.

The quality of the face to face interpersonal interaction was the most frustrating of the four formats. The librarian did initiate the interview by making eye contact, which sent a "strong signal

that the communication channel [was] open” (Radford 713). But, once I started speaking, she did not listen to my whole question and she wouldn’t move her chair closer to me. The librarian did not indicate through “positive body movements” (Kazlauskas 133) that my question was of importance. Moving her chair closer, a cheerful disposition, or nodding would have shown that she was interested in helping me. Since the librarian also made no attempt to discover the elements of my question she didn’t listen to (or hear), i.e., focus on feminist critiques, all the information she gave me was inefficient and incomplete. The librarian also gave very short, exasperated answers to small questions I asked throughout the reference interview. For example, when I asked if I could perform a cross-database search, she replied, “I told you that already, [name of database] does that for you.” From her body language, insufficient listening skills, and choice of words, I felt like I was just a waste of her time and that she had no real regard for my question.

I also felt frustrated with the interpersonal interaction during my telephone reference interview. The librarian I spoke to on the phone was initially very willing to help; he listened to all elements of my question and asked a few sensemaking and close-ended questions. However, I was frustrated at his inability to communicate his search strategies. The librarian did not include me in the development process, so there was a lot of silence and muttering as he tested out searches. This behavior goes against Cassell and Hiremath’s argument that librarians need to keep the user constantly informed and make a conscious effort to minimize silent time during telephone interviews (24). Because of his inability to communicate, I became completely lost. I finally said, “This is great, thank you for your help”—which was a lie, but it was also a way for me to close the interview early. While the librarian was enthusiastic and asked me to call again if I needed more help, I left the telephone interview feeling frustrated and awkward for having lied instead of asking him to clarify. If the librarian had communicated his search strategies more efficiently, or if he had continuously checked in with me to make sure we were on the same

page, I probably would have felt more comfortable and wouldn't have resorted to my awkward exit strategy.

My email reference interview was helpful and efficient, but a little alienating. The librarian got back to me within an hour and he seemed interested in helping me, as proven by his thorough list of resources (including books) and his willingness to test his search strategy to make sure it was relevant to my question. The librarian was also honest enough to tell me that GALILEO had discontinued the library's access to many databases that would be useful for my reference question. However, this just felt like he was dismissing me. Being told that "the information will not be found for one of a number of reasons" (Cassell and Hiremath 23) is an example of one of Cassell and Hiremath's behaviors to avoid. While the librarian did suggest checking my school's databases as an alternative, his assumption that my question was for a school assignment seemed a little impertinent. I also felt alienated when he did not invite me to respond with further queries or confirmation that the information was helpful. The librarian made no effort to create an open correspondence, which Straw suggests is vital to an email reference interview (379). While the information the librarian provided was helpful, the lack of questions, assumptions, and sharing of negative information about the library was alienating and discouraging.

In regards to time it took to get an answer, the chat reference interview was the least efficient. I had to check the SMCM library website multiple times before the "Ask Us" sidebar finally said "Chat is Online." I also had to wait an additional 4 minutes before a librarian entered the chat space. That being said, the librarian hit every point of a good reference interview and really made me feel as if I was occupying her full attention. She also followed Ross, Nilsen, and Dewdney's advice for a chat reference interview, as each response from her had a small amount of information and either a request for clarification or feedback (199). The chat front-end design

also indicated when each party was typing, which alleviated confusion or crossed messages. The only time I felt uneasy was when the librarian asked, “Ok, have you tried looking at any of the library’s databases?” at the beginning of the interview. While I understand that this was her way of negotiating the question, I felt like she was scolding me for not having already done independent research. As I struggled to think of a response, she immediately took back the conversation and followed up with, “I can recommend a few if that would help you.” This immediately put me at ease. Though the availability of this format was not ideal, I felt comfortable throughout the majority interview and it seemed that the librarian was invested in helping me even though we were not in close proximity and did not have the added value of Kazlauskas’ “positive body movements” (133) or voice cues.

### **Preferred Format**

Out of all four reference interview formats I sampled, I preferred the chat format. While it was the least efficient in terms of availability, I received the most quality information and left the interview feeling positive and not as discouraged as I was after the other three reference interviews. I communicate best through written correspondence and I retain information better when I am put in the driver’s seat. The librarian I was chatting with had a “try that and let me know how it works” approach to our reference interview, which was completely in line with how I learn. In the chat format, links to databases and other relevant information can be sent in real time, which is more efficient than having to figure out how to navigate simultaneously during a phone interview or replicate a strategy at home after a face to face interview. I could ask questions and receive answers immediately, which wouldn’t be the case if the interview was conducted via email. All in all, the chat format hit every point of a positive reference interview, was in line with the way I communicate and learn, and with better (or more clearly structured) availability, will be a great asset to my alma mater’s library.

## Works Cited

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