
QUESTIONING AND VIRTUAL REFERENCE

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Abstract

The article briefs about the activities of the Digital Reference Service its present scenario. The importance and functionalities of the service are highlighted. This service can provide the real missing link between the electronic resources and the users of the services.

Keywords: Digital Reference Service; Virtual Reference Service; Realtime References Service

1. Is really 'question' important?

The Reference Service, be it's in any form, is the direct consumer of 'questions' because of its very nature of the orientation. When it comes to Virtual Reference Service, absolutely nothing can start without having a question in hand. In fact, the service itself is orientated towards the questions it can expect to receive and the answers it is equipped to provide. Hence, "Questioning", the basic mechanism of knowledge acquisition, is the core issue around which the entire domain of reference service revolves around. The study of 'Questions' or 'Questioning Behavior' or 'Question asking behavior' have not only been studied in Library and Information Science but also in different branches of knowledge. Study of 'Question asking behavior' is important not only because of its sheer edge to reveal the insight of human inquisitiveness but also because it helps to understand the hidden cultural, social, linguistic, psychological complexities of an enquirer and elucidation of all these factors. The beauty of human inquisitiveness is that its infinite horizon. Asking a question can be aggravated simply because of the absolute necessity for an information to find a location or may be motivated to acquire knowledge about an intricate subject or further development of it. Otero and Graesser have noted that, questions are asked where are contradictions, anomalous information, obstacles to goals, uncertainty, and obvious gaps in knowledge.(1) From more psychological and cognitive perspective it can be said that, question is an observable behavioral act reflecting information need and proceeds from a series of cognitive processes produced by need "to know". The need "to know" is the cognitive information need which, when satisfied, creates understanding and the subsequent altering of one's state of knowledge.(2) To build up a better-equipped Virtual Reference System and administer it effectively, it is, therefore, an absolute necessity to understand the matrix of questions been submitted, determine its context and provide appropriate answers.

In the past one decade the Virtual Reference Service has improved technologically and expanded universally. Innumerable libraries, irrespective of its type, location and size have embraced and implemented this service because of its amazing advantages over the traditional methods of

referencing. International initiatives are gradually ensuing consortia efforts for establishing virtual reference services, globally. Shachaf, Meho, and Hara identified that many libraries in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia participated in collaborative virtual reference, exchanging questions among members of a consortium. Some of these consortia involve international collaboration among libraries from different countries to provide direct virtual reference services to end users worldwide.(4) To provide an effective and service, such initiatives do require some level of understanding of the cultural milieus and social settings of the diverse consumer groups. Though there is a growing theorization that virtual communication is culture immune(4, 5) the basic fact that anxiety to communicate with a stranger cannot be denied (6), nor do it can be denied that cultural background has direct implications on the behavior of asking questions(7) There is also opinion that silence may not always have negative effects and that silence is an embedded part of this environment as it reinforces the very nature of virtuality(8). Ironically, virtual reference system cannot sustain without questions and silence; rather it is more important that the users of the system ask questions and relevant answers are delivered. Hence it is an utmost importance to study the 'Question asking behavior' in its proper perspective.

2. What did we thought about question ?

Subjects like, nursing and clinical practices(9-11), education(12-14), artificial intelligence(15,16) and psychology(17-19) have devoted extensive range of study of 'questions', 'questioning behavior' or 'question asking behavior'. These studies have enriched the knowledge-base about the customers of their systems. In all these disciplines, including Library and Information Science, extensive seminal works have done on different perspectives of questioning and related issues.

While characterizing the questioning behavior that occurs withing reference interviews, White found that interpretation of question is a problem and the information specialist had to elicit more information, especially about the subject and the service requested in the question. (20) The late nineties observed the initial hesitance of accepting the virtual reference service (21) However, the situation was to change soon as growing number of professionals realized that the value of the reference librarian is providing context to the practically infinite information resources available to the present day library patrons and not the ability to produce a warm smile and easy conversation.(22) It was also realized that the increased complexity of the information environment in turn leads to more complex reference inquires from users attempting not only to utilize these resources, but also to select the best databases to meet their research needs. It was recognized that there were not a great deal of current, formal research data that characterize the profile of users of virtual reference services and the nature of their questions.(23) To address this need, Diamond and Pease conducted a case study of question types received in a digital reference setup at California State University, Chico and found that limiting digital reference service to "ready reference" questions alone does not adequately meet users' needs and because the digital environment is so fluid that the digital reference services will require ongoing adaptations in the way librarians work.(24)

In a study of questions asked in web searches, it was found that there seems to be some common patterns of web question and request format query structure and users of general web search engines are not using complex querying. (25) This anecdote fully explains the situation when Murray,,, found that the availability of internet access in public and state libraries has enabled more users to initially attempt to find information independently, but often will eventually turn to librarians for additional assistance.(26)

It can be observed that except another efforts by White, where the author reinstated the importance of 'questioning behavior' as it is useful to understand the provide useful answers (27), research in the areas like communication style, interaction style, cultural cues, etc. is really scarce virtual reference. Virtual Reference is growing internationally, but the literatures are mostly based upon North America. The available literatures are biased towards this culture and work needs to be done to enrich the international cultural awareness in Virtual Reference.

3. What are the doubts ?

In virtual reference setup following five components play important role to complete the entire interaction process:

- Question
- Questioner/user
- System
- Answerer/librarian
- Answer

The first and foremost component is the 'Question' itself, as a type, nature and kind of questions been put forwarded to a particular system to retrieve information. The second component is the 'Questioner', person's cultural background, linguistic capabilities, behavior, interaction style etc. The third component is the 'System', which acts as a tool to answer the question. In the field of Virtual Reference, the Virtual Reference Software can be considered as an example. The fourth component that is the 'Answerer' or the librarian, who provides the answer, is not only need to be equipped with the knowledge about available resources to provide an answer but also need the skill to interpret the questions and the knowledge about the users' communication pattern, their cultural background. The last component in the entire scenario is the 'Answer', its relevance, appropriateness, authenticity, etc.

While all these components together play the vital role for a successful completion of a virtual interaction, it is the Questioner/user who is the real focus of the entire game. After all, the entire purpose of the existence of virtual reference is the satisfaction of the user and that is the component is emphasized in this discourse process.

In a normal situation the users are generally categorized based on their age, level of education, status, etc. To put these users at the center is to realize that they have different needs and that even the same user's needs vary with time and circumstances. In a virtual situation it becomes difficult for a reference librarian to distinguish all these factors as in most of the cases the personal touch is missing. The situation becomes more complicated when a triage system works behind. In a triage system, where questions get filtered from one answerer to another, the context and the cultural clues start diminishing. It is to remember that answer formulation includes factors for creating "good" answers such as age and cultural appropriateness.(28) However, it is apparent that not much effort has been given to develop enough elaboration on the cultural appropriateness. There is a need to further develop the QuIP (29) to make the protocol more appropriate in the international context.

Though it can always be argued that virtual situation tends to reduce the bias between the communicators, recent studies however, reveals that it is possible that the reference librarians provide unequal levels of service only online.(30) As in the virtual situation both the parties may not be aware about the exact interaction style it can always lead to bad answering leading to dissatisfaction of using the system. It is therefore, required to investigate that the librarians perceive and react according to cultural norms of the users.

Communication behavior and interaction skills play vital roles when it comes to reference service. Interpersonal communication, or communication between persons, is a fundamental part of the work performed by librarian within the reference process.(31) Communication behavior in any interaction process can be based mostly on personal, social, or human identities. Individuals' personal and social identities influence all of their communication behavior. The uncertainty and anxiety about the others behavior also influence communication pattern. The importance of anxiety and the complexity of its potential effects have given rise to several theories that attempts to capture the role of anxiety in intergroup relations.(32) Uncertainty influences the way people think about others and hence influences about asking a question. In a virtual situation where a questioner is not aware about the answerer the anxiety to approach, the uncertainty about the way to approach, how to communicate what is intended to ask, naturally enhances. Does the virtual reference provide enough cues to resolve these issues? Are there any online cues that would motivate people to comfortably ask questions?

Culture influences the individual level of communication skills. The culture in which individuals are raised influences the way they are socialized in terms of general tendencies towards communication.(33) Hence, the pattern of communication is bound to differ from an individualistic culture to collective culture. In an international virtual situation or in a multi-cultural society these differences do create communication gap. A recent study e-mail communication of Shachaf suggests that miscommunication do play a vital role due to differences in culture, language and verbal and nonverbal cues. (34) Even the users perceptions of the librarians in a particular society can also have different impact. In the western society, where the librarians enjoy a very highly regarded status, can have a successful virtual venture as the anxiety and perception about the communication success is always high. The situation would vastly differ in the cultures where librarians are perceived poorly. Any international venture with such society may lead to unsuccessful outcomes. Can the virtual reference overcome such dogma?

4. What is next ?

With every new technology the virtual reference is evolving from e-mail to web-based to IM. Recently blog has found to be an alternative method of virtual reference. Now blog, in its different regulated form, took a suitable and cheap replacement for mass level referencing system, for example, Google Answers (<http://answers.google.com/answers/>) . Even in recent days there are efforts to hybrid chat-reference and blog to effectively reach the target users. However, the basic questions about the culture and context of the questioner is still grossly unaddressed in library and information science. A more contextual and phenomenological research about the 'questions' or 'questioning behavior' would provide a suitable ground for successful international collaborative ventures in this direction.

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