

Reflections of Reference Practice: Analyzing Virtual Reference Transcripts

ALISE, Seattle, WA, January 16-19, 2007.

Marie L. Radford & Lynn Silipigni Connaway

Abstract:

Virtual reference services (VRS) generate transcripts that provide fascinating mirrors of practice. In-depth analysis of an international sample of chat VRS transcripts allows researchers and practitioners to unobtrusively capture the nuances of actual reference practice previously unavailable in face-to-face (FtF) settings. This study reports results from the first year of a two year grant, "Seeking Synchronicity," supported by IMLS, Rutgers, and OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc. At the 2006 ALISE conference, preliminary findings were reported and this presentation provides a more detailed analysis of a larger sample of transcripts.

Fifty chat transcripts per month are being randomly selected from OCLC's QuestionPoint service during a twenty-four month period, resulting in a sample of 1000+ transcripts out of a population of 298,000+. Transcripts are stripped of identifying information and undergo six different analyses. In-depth qualitative analysis of the interpersonal communication aspects of VRS interactions involved repeated reading, identification, comparison, and categorization of themes using NVivo software. The categories and coding method were developed in a previous study (see Radford, 1993, 1999) and applied to VRS in prior research (Radford 2006a, 2006b, 2003). The theoretical frameworks of Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) and Goffman (1967) were used in the category development.

Preliminary results include:

- Geographical Distribution (the most questions were received by US Pacific, US Northeast, Australia, and US Southeast; the most questions referred/answered were by US Pacific, US Northeast, US Southeast, and Australia)
- Type of Library Receiving Question (Consortium, Public, University, Medical, Law, State)
- Type of Query (Subject Search, 29%; Ready Reference 27%; Policy and Procedural, 21%; Inappropriate, <1%)
- Subject of Query (Social Science, 24%; Procedural, 19%; History & Geography 14%; Other, 12%)
- Session Duration (Mean 12 min. 42 sec.; Median 12 min.)
- Interpersonal Communication (identified detailed components of the dimensions of facilitators or barriers to positive chat interactions and compared librarian dimensions to VRS user dimensions).

As noted, this study is in progress, but is nearing completion of the first year. Based on the research findings to date, the authors will discuss implications and will provide recommendations for LIS education that promotes reflective practice and service excellence in both face-to-face and virtual environments.

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PowerPoint slides for this presentation are available at the Seeking Synchronicity web site:
<http://www.oclc.org/research/projects/synchronicity/>

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Radford Chat Reference Category Scheme Relational Dimensions ©2006

Analysis of 558 Transcripts

FACILITATORS	Librarians	Users	Total
Greeting Ritual	216	77	293
Deference			
<i>Agreement to try what is suggested or to wait</i>	4	157	161
<i>Apology</i>	67	26	93
<i>Asking for other to be patient</i>	178	7	185
<i>Expressions of enthusiasm</i>	11	24	35
<i>Suggesting strategy or explanation in tentative way</i>	21	16	37
<i>Thanks</i>	105	286	391
<i>Use of polite expressions</i>	244	96	340
<i>Use of praise, admiration</i>	0	23	23
<i>Use of self-deprecating remarks</i>	3	15	18
Rapport Building			
<i>Familiarity</i>	5	10	15
<i>Humor</i>	1	11	12
<i>Interjections</i>	46	58	104
<i>Offering confirmation</i>	30	44	74
<i>Approval</i>	9	25	34
<i>Empathy</i>	12	10	22
<i>Inclusion</i>	172	7	179
<i>Offering reassurance</i>	124	58	182
<i>Encouraging remarks, praise</i>	71	12	83
<i>Enthusiastic remarks</i>	14	18	32
<i>Repair self-correction</i>	23	25	48
<i>Seeking reassurance, confirmation, self-disclosure</i>	254	180	434
<i>Self disclosure</i>	40	195	235
<i>Admitting lack of knowledge, at a loss as to where to search</i>	59	51	110
<i>Explaining search strategy</i>	41	3	44
<i>Explaining technical problems</i>	60	24	84
<i>Offering personal opinion, advice, value judgment</i>	167	18	255
<i>Use of informal language</i>	24	27	51
<i>Alternate spelling abbreviated single words</i>	66	77	143
<i>Use of all lower case</i>	16	84	100
<i>Use of slang expressions</i>	12	19	31
Closing Ritual	118	202	320
<i>Explanation of signing off abruptly</i>	6	14	20
<i>Invites to return if necessary</i>	50	2	52
<i>Makes sure user has no more questions</i>	88	1	89
<i>Offers to continue searching & email answer</i>	35	0	35

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FACILITATORS <i>continued</i>	Librarians	Users	Total
Rerepresentation of Nonverbal Cues			
<i>Phrase abbreviations</i>	3	11	14
Spells out nonverbal behaviors	2	4	6
Use of ALL CAPS	17	25	42
Use of alpha-numeric shortcuts	2	2	4
<i>Use of ellipsis</i>	114	57	171
Use of emoticons	9	16	25
Use of punctuation or repeated punctuation for emphasis	78	87	165
BARRIERS			
Negative Closure			
<i>Abrupt ending</i>	53	212	256
<i>Disclaimer</i>	23	0	23
<i>Failure to refer</i>	7	0	7
<i>Ignoring cues that user wants more help</i>	16	0	16
<i>Premature or attempted closing</i>	16	1	17
<i>Premature referral</i>	15	0	15
<i>Sends to Google</i>	10	0	10
Relational Disconnect Failure to Build Rapport			
Condescending	4	6	10
Derisive use of spelling out NV behaviors	0	0	0
<i>Disconfirming</i>	19	36	57
<i>Failing to offer reassurance</i>	16	3	19
Failure or refusal to provide information when asked	10	4	14
<i>Goofing around</i>	1	8	9
Ignoring humor	2	0	2
<i>Ignoring self-disclosure</i>	11	0	11
<i>Impatience</i>	2	15	17
<i>Inappropriate script or inappropriate response</i>	15	2	17
<i>Lack of attention or Ignoring question</i>	12	0	12
<i>Limits time</i>	18	1	19
Mirrors rude behavior	1	1	2
Mistakes	0	1	1
Misunderstands question	3	0	3
Reprimanding	8	5	13
<i>Robotic answer</i>	8	0	8
<i>Rude or insulting</i>	0	5	5
<i>Use of inappropriate language</i>	0	6	6
Uses jargon no explanation	8	6	14

* *Italics emphasis relational dimensions that differ greatly between VRS Librarians and Users.*

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Positive Relational Dimensions Transcript Example

1	User 16:15 2005/12/08	Chat Transcript: what are natural resourses of washington?
3	Librarian 16:16 2005/12/08	Do you just need a list of resources? Or do you need information about the resources too?
4	U 16:17 2005/12/08	I am doing a research project for school and I need just a long list or what our resourses are. could you help me you [Librarian Name]?
5	U 16:17 2005/12/08	sorry, typo
6	U 16:18 2005/12/08	Could you help me to find a list of Washingtons' supplied materials to the world?
7	L 16:18 2005/12/08	Don't worry about the typos - I make them too! Let me see what I can find online. You may also want to check an encyclopedia and/or the World Almanac because I know they contain the kind of info that you're looking for.
8	L 16:18 2005/12/08	Give me just a minute to do some searching...
9	U 16:19 2005/12/08	Thank you SO much!
10	L 16:21 2005/12/08	I'm still searching. Thanks for your patience...
11	U 16:22 2005/12/08	pardon my spelling, it is resources.
12	L 16:23 2005/12/08	I'm not finding a list online. Do you mind if I do some more searching, both online and in our print collection, and send you an email to let you know what I find?
13	U 16:24 2005/12/08	alright
14	L 16:24 2005/12/08	What's your email address?
15	U 16:24 2005/12/08	I would like to know if i will be on a mailing list, and if it would be brodcast to the world.
16	L 16:25 2005/12/08	You won't be on any type of mailing list. The only people who will see your email address are me and perhaps some of my coworkers. That's it.
17	U 16:26 2005/12/08	So, it is strictly confidential?
18	L 16:26 2005/12/08	Yes, it is strictly confidential. We actually all sign confidentiality agreements stating that we won't release customer contact information.
19	U 16:29 2005/12/08	Thank you I appreciate it.
20	L 16:29 2005/12/08	You're welcome.
21	U 16:30 2005/12/08	If you could just give the return address I would be grateful as well. I am at [Patron Email]
22	L 16:30 2005/12/08	Ok. The return address on the email should be [Librarian Email]
23	L 16:31 2005/12/08	Expect an email from me by the end of the day (5:00) today. Will that work for you?

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Positive Relational Dimensions Transcript Example, *continued*

24	U 16:31 2005/12/08	I think It will! thank you very much!
25	U 16:32 2005/12/08	My name is [Patron Name] by the way
26	U 16:32 2005/12/08	I hope that you enjoy the rest of your day.
27	L 16:32 2005/12/08	You're welcome! Is there anything else that I can help you with at the moment, [Patron Name]?
28	U 16:33 2005/12/08	other than finding me a million dollars, I think that I am fine! Thank you once again [Librarian Name].
29	U 16:34 2005/12/08	Good bye,
30	U 16:34 2005/12/08	*
31	L 16:35 2005/12/08	I wish I could help with the million dollars! And thank you for using our Ask a Librarian service! If you discover that you have more questions, or if you need more info, please feel free to contact us again. I hope you have a great day too!
32	U 16:35 2005/12/08	bye!

Negative Relational Dimensions Transcript Example

1	User**	I want to learn how to have telekinetic powers
2	Librarian	[A librarian will be with you in about a minute.]
3	L	[Librarian [Name] - A librarian has joined the session.]
4	L	will be things about it, but may not tell you how to do it
5	L	"telekinetic powers" gets 19,000 hits in google -
6	L	adding site:edu gets 141 - mostly things about stories that talk about it
7	L	"telekinesis" site:edu gets 1900
8	U	I HATE THIS WEBSITE AND I WILL NEVER COME HERE AGAIN
9	U	[patron - has disconnected]
10		Note to staff: COMP [Librarian [Name] - user has closed this session]

** Note: Time stamp not available for Negative Transcript Example.

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