

# Virtual Rituals: Applying Goffman's Face-Work to an Analysis of Live Chat Reference Encounters.

LRS IV, London, Ontario, Canada. October 10-12, 2007

Marie L. Radford, Lynn Silipigni Connaway, & Jocelyn A. DeAngelis Williams

Marie L. Radford, Lynn Silipigni Connaway, & Jocelyn A. DeAngelis Williams

**Abstract:** Responding to user demand and technological trends, an increasing number of libraries now provide Web-based virtual reference services (VRS) as alternatives to traditional face-to-face (FtF) reference. Live chat, synchronous VRS interactions are complex interactions fraught with the possibility of misunderstandings or miscommunications due to constraints in computer-mediated communication (CMC) including a paucity of nonverbal cues. Nonverbal cues provide a major channel for conveying relational (affect) aspects in FtF communication. Perhaps the online relationship may be different, but it still encompasses the common traits of FtF relationships. "Mediated interactants can and will develop personalized relationships characterized by intimacy" (Tidwell & Walther, 2002, p. 342) and the processes of give and take through the turns in CMC. Erving Goffman's (1959, 1967) concept of face-work provides a theoretical framework that has the potential to greatly increase our understanding of interpersonal dynamics in VRS. This study reports results from an analysis of 746 chat reference transcripts randomly selected from the Online Computer Library Center, Inc. (OCLC) QuestionPoint service from December 2005 to August 2006 from a population of over 500,000.

Research demonstrates that reference encounters can threaten the user's face and identified deference (protecting the "face" of the other in interactions) as integral to success in FtF reference and VRS encounters (Chelton, 1997; Radford, 1999, 2006a, 2006b). Goffman (1967) defines "face" as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself" (p. 5). This idea provides one explanation for the fear users have of appearing stupid to the librarian (see Swope & Katzer, 1972). In Phase 1 of this project, focus group interviews with VRS non-users and users, respondents reported fear of appearing stupid when interacting with librarians, plus graduate communication students expressed an added fear that their chat transcript may be shown to their professors or others. In Goffman's terms, the students fear being "in wrong face" if their library skills are revealed to be inadequate and anticipate that they would be "likely to feel ashamed and inferior" (1967, p. 8).

Transcript analysis also reveals that users and librarians frequently engage in chat versions of interpersonal rituals such as greetings and closings. Expressions of affect, such as deference, are important to the success of chat reference encounters and users greatly value how they are treated in addition to their receipt of information. Users and librarians express deference in chat by using polite expressions such as please and thank you, performing ritual repairs when there is a miscommunication (with an apology, explanation, or self-correction), and using self-deprecating remarks. Missing nonverbal cues are represented through use of different fonts, characters, text-based comments, and symbols (e.g., emoticons, abbreviations such as LOL for laughing out loud, ellipsis [...] to indicate more is coming, and ALL CAPS for emphasis).

Relational communication in chat mirrors that of FtF encounters and users, as well as librarians, report similar expectations for service excellence. Differences and similarities in relational patterns between librarians and users have been revealed in this analysis. Librarians offer more encouraging remarks or praise, while users tend to do more repair and self-correction. Librarians use more polite expressions, but librarians and users tend to offer apologies at about the same frequency. Users tend to show greater instances of rudeness or impatience and are generally more disconfirming (e.g., "I already found that, it is not useful"). Users end abruptly in much larger numbers than librarians, although librarians sometimes demonstrate "negative closure" (Ross & Dewdney, 1998) strategies such as premature closing, ignoring cues that the user wants more help and failing to refer.

Virtual Rituals: Applying Goffman's Face-Work to an Analysis of Live Chat Reference Encounters.

LRS IV, London, Ontario, Canada. October 10-12, 2007

Marie L. Radford, Lynn Silipigni Connaway, & Jocelyn A. DeAngelis Williams

Note: This study reports final results of the transcript analysis from a two-year grant supported by Institute for Museum and Library Service (IMLS), Rutgers University, and OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc. An earlier, preliminary version of this paper was presented at the American Library Association, Library Research Round Table, New Orleans, LA, June 26 2006.

**Authors Contact Information:**

Marie L. Radford, Ph.D., Rutgers, the State University of NJ

E-mail: [mradford@scils.rutgers.edu](mailto:mradford@scils.rutgers.edu)

[www.scils.rutgers.edu/~mradford](http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~mradford)

Lynn Silipigni Connaway, Ph.D.

E-mail: [connawal@oclc.org](mailto:connawal@oclc.org)

[www.oclc.org/research/staff/connaway.htm](http://www.oclc.org/research/staff/connaway.htm)

Jocelyn A. DeAngelis Williams, Doctoral Student, Rutgers, the State University of NJ

E-mail: [jocelyn.scils@rutgers.edu](mailto:jocelyn.scils@rutgers.edu)

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

**Bibliography of Cited References**

- Chelton, M. K. (1997a). The "overdue kid:" A face-to-face library service encounter as ritual interaction. *Library and Information Science Research*, 19(4), 387-399.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual, essays on face-to-face behavior*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday. (See: "On Face-Work :An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction," pp. 5-45).
- Radford, M. L. (June, 2006a). Encountering virtual users: A qualitative investigation of interpersonal communication in chat reference. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*. 57(8), 1046-1059.
- Radford, M. L. (2006b). Interpersonal communication in chat reference: Encounters with rude and impatient users. In R. David Lankes, Eileen Abels, Marilyn White and Saira N. Haque. (Eds.) *The Virtual Reference Desk: Creating a Reference Future*, pp. 41-73. NY: Neal-Schuman Publishers.
- Radford, M. L. (1999). *The reference encounter: Interpersonal communication in the academic library*. Chicago: ACRL, A Division of the American Library Association.
- Ross, C.S. & Dewdney, P. (1998). Negative closure: strategies and counter strategies in the reference transaction. [Retrieved on October 8, 2007 from: <http://www.ala.org/ala/rusa/rusapubs/rusq/specialfeatures/rspawardwinning/20001/2000.htm> ]
- Swope, M. J. & Katzer, J. (1972). The silent majority: Why don't they ask questions? *RQ*, 12, 161-166.
- Tidwell, L.C. & Walther, J.B. (2002). Computer-mediated communication effects on disclosure, impressions, and interpersonal evaluations. *Human Communication Research*, 28 (3), 317-348.

Virtual Rituals: Applying Goffman's Face-Work to an Analysis of Live Chat Reference Encounters.

LRS IV, London, Ontario, Canada. October 10-12, 2007

Marie L. Radford, Lynn Silipigni Connaway, & Jocelyn A. DeAngelis Williams

**Radford Chat Reference Category Scheme Relational Dimensions ©2006  
N=746 Transcripts**

<b>Facilitators</b>	<b>Users</b>	<b>Librarians</b>	<b>Total*</b>
<b>Greeting Ritual</b>	167	196	363
<b>Rapport Building</b>	<b>Users</b>	<b>Librarians</b>	<b>Total</b>
Seeking reassurance confirmation self-disclosure	448	424	872
Interjections	129	42	171
Offering confirmation	54	24	78
Inclusion	22	212	234
Approval	50	7	57
Empathy	16	10	26
Offering reassurance	119	137	256
Encouraging remarks praise	39	83	122
Enthusiastic remarks	22	11	33
Use of informal language	54	21	75
Alternate spelling abbreviated single words	263	76	339
Use of slang expressions	58	14	72
Use of all lower case	283	29	312
Repair self-correction	68	22	90
Humor	25	1	26
Self Disclosure	523	38	561
Offering personal opinion advice value judgment	33	254	287
Admitting lack of knowledge at a loss as to where to search	128	59	187
Explaining search strategy	22	52	74
Explaining technical problems	64	52	116
Familiarity	2	6	8
Acknowledging humor	2	5	7
<b>Deference</b>			
Use of polite expressions	230	371	601
Thanks	882	103	985
Apology	56	59	115
Use of self-deprecating remarks	22	3	25
Asking for other to be patient	18	215	233
Agreement to try what is suggested or to wait	452	3	455
Suggesting strategy or explanation in tentative way	26	59	85
Use of praise, admiration	49	1	50
Expressions of enthusiasm	60	20	80

Virtual Rituals: Applying Goffman's Face-Work to an Analysis of Live Chat Reference Encounters.

LRS IV, London, Ontario, Canada. October 10-12, 2007

Marie L. Radford, Lynn Silipigni Connaway, & Jocelyn A. DeAngelis Williams

<b>Rerepresentation of Nonverbal Cues</b>	<b>Users</b>	<b>Librarians</b>	<b>Total</b>
Use of ellipsis	207	277	484
Use of Punctuation or repeated punctuation for emphasis	203	87	290
Phrase abbreviations	22	3	25
Use of Emoticons	46	14	60
Spells out nonverbal behaviors	10	2	12
Use of alpha-numeric shortcuts	0	1	1
ALL CAPS	99	18	117
Alpha-numeric shortcuts	12	1	13
Asterisk	18	5	23
<b>Closing Ritual</b>	<b>323</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>423</b>
Invites to return if necessary	2	50	52
Makes sure user has no more questions	2	30	32
Offers to continue searching & email answer	0	8	8
Explanation of signing off abruptly	24	8	32

<b>Barriers</b>			
<b>Relational Disconnect Failure to Build Rapport</b>	<b>Users</b>	<b>Librarians</b>	<b>Total</b>
Robotic answer	0	6	6
Reprimanding	9	8	17
Limits time	0	13	13
Lack of attention or Ignoring question	0	8	8
Condescending	8	5	13
Ignoring Self-Disclosure	0	10	10
Misunderstands question	0	3	3
Inappropriate script or inappropriate response	4	12	16
Failing to offer reassurance	6	26	32
Mirrors rude behavior	2	0	2
Disconfirming	74	16	90
Ignoring humor	0	1	1
Impatience	45	3	48
Rude or Insulting	22	0	22
Use of Inappropriate Language	17	0	17
Failure or Refusal to Provide Information when Asked	10	12	22
Derisive Use of Spelling Out NV Behaviors	0	0	0
Mistakes	2	0	2
Goofing Around	24	2	26
Uses Jargon no explanation	10	6	16

Virtual Rituals: Applying Goffman's Face-Work to an Analysis of Live Chat Reference Encounters.

LRS IV, London, Ontario, Canada. October 10-12, 2007

Marie L. Radford, Lynn Silipigni Connaway, & Jocelyn A. DeAngelis Williams

Negative Closure			
Abrupt Ending	263	44	307
Disclaimer	0	27	27
Premature or Attempted Closing	4	17	21
Ignoring Cues that User Wants More Help	0	16	16
Premature referral	0	12	12
Sends to Google	0	8	8
Failure to refer	0	10	10

\* Totals are based on occurrences.

Note: Content of canned scripts pushed by librarians were not counted as occurrences for any categories.

**Example of Positive Face-Work, "The size of an Atom." (QP 275)**

1	U	hi i have a science question im not quite sure about. which are bigger (from say smallest to largest): and atom, chromosome, molecule, cell, and substance/chemical formula of a substance?
2	L	Patron's screen name: [Patron Name]
3	L	Hi [Patron Name], i'm reading your question now.
4	L	[Patron Name], can you explain "substance/chemical formula of a substance"? is that the size of a substance?
5	U	well, really just a chemical formula. like, is a chemical formula inside a cell, or is it made up of cells,? i wasn't sure about that one.
6	L	When you are talking about size do you mean measurement or weight?
7	U	measurement
8	L	Okay, I'm going to send a description about a size. I can help you with descriptions of each item, and from there you can determine which is smallest to largest...okay?
9	L	<a href="http://www.triumf.ca/EHS/rpt/rpt_1/node7.html">http://www.triumf.ca/EHS/rpt/rpt_1/node7.html</a>
10	U	ok
11	L	I just sent a description about an atom, did you receive it?
12	U	yes
13	L	Was the ifnformation helpful?
14	U	yes
15	L	Are you ready for another description? When we end this chat, you can add your email, and the links will be sent to you. They will also appear at the end of our chat.

Virtual Rituals: Applying Goffman's Face-Work to an Analysis of Live Chat Reference Encounters.

LRS IV, London, Ontario, Canada. October 10-12, 2007

Marie L. Radford, Lynn Silipigni Connaway, & Jocelyn A. DeAngelis Williams

*Example of Positive Face-Work, continued*

16	L	Also, to make sure I find the appropriate information, what grade level is this information for?
17	U	7th grade, yep im ready
18	L	<a href="http://www.ornl.gov/sci/techresources/Human_Genome/posters/chromosome/faqs.shtml">http://www.ornl.gov/sci/techresources/Human_Genome/posters/chromosome/faqs.shtml</a>
19	L	I just information about the chromosome. Please let me know when you receive it and if it is helpful, or too technical. :) thanks.
20	U	ok, i understand. a cell is bigger than an atom and a chromosome is smaller than a cell, but is it smaller than an atom?
21	L	hmmm...that is a very good question, let me see what i can find...
22	U	ok. thankyou
23	U	actually, i think i get it now. thank you for helping me!
24	L	Okay, would you still like descriptions of the rest?
25	U	maybe just whether an atom is bigger than a chromosme
26	L	<a href="http://antoine.frostburg.edu/cgi-bin/senese/searchglossary.cgi?query=molecule&amp;shtml=%2Fchem%2Fsenese%2F101%2Fglossary.shtml">http://antoine.frostburg.edu/cgi-bin/senese/searchglossary.cgi?query=molecule&amp;shtml=%2Fchem%2Fsenese%2F101%2Fglossary.shtml</a>
27	L	I just sent a description of a molecule. I'm going to look to see about atoms and chromosomes.
28	L	still searching...
29	L	i'm finding information about each, but not in relation to each other....i'm still searching...
30	U	ok
31	L	[Patron Name], I'm at a loss. I haven't found anything to answer your question. I could mark your question for follow-up and someone would get back to you within the next several days. When do you need your answer?
32	U	By tomorrow but i don't think it's vitally important. Thank you for trying
33	U	Patron ended chat session.
34	L	Your Welcome [Patron Name]. Good luck with your project, and I hope you find the answer.
35	L	<a href="http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&amp;lr=&amp;rls=RNWE,RNWE:2004-49,RNWE:en&amp;defl=en&amp;q=define:Chromosome&amp;sa=X&amp;oi=glossary_definition&amp;ct=title">http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&amp;lr=&amp;rls=RNWE,RNWE:2004-49,RNWE:en&amp;defl=en&amp;q=define:Chromosome&amp;sa=X&amp;oi=glossary_definition&amp;ct=title</a>
36	L	Set Resolution: Answered
37	L	Set Description: Homework

Virtual Rituals: Applying Goffman's Face-Work to an Analysis of Live Chat Reference Encounters.

LRS IV, London, Ontario, Canada. October 10-12, 2007

Marie L. Radford, Lynn Silipigni Connaway, & Jocelyn A. DeAngelis Williams

**Example of Negative Face-Work, "Mesopotamian Government." (QP 44)**

1	U	Can you find me information on Mesopotamian government?
2	L	[Please hold for the next available librarian. If you would like a transcript of this session emailed to you, please type your full email address now.]
3	L	[[Librarian Name]-MillVPL - A librarian has joined the session]
4	L	[Hello [Patron Name]...I'm looking at your question...]
5	L	it looks like your pc is not compatible with mine--we are unable to cobrowse, so I'll go to google to search. Have you looked for infomation there?
6	U	yes
7	L	well I found an excellent link on the google page...you can put into google's search bar : Mesopotamia +government and look at the links they provide...
8	U	can you send them to me
9	L	if we could cobrowse we could look at the links together...but you can do the search yourself, yes?
10	L	Mesopotamia +government
11	L	buhler.usd313.k12.ks.us/prosperity/meso3.html
12	L	www.kidsnewsroom.org/elmer/infoCentral/ frameset/civilizations/meso/gov/
13	L	oi.uchicago.edu/OI/MUS/ED/TRC/MESO/law.html - 14k -
14	U	I have already searched there and that really doesn't help me
15	L	It would be much easier for you to do the google search I showed you so you could click on the links and read the conten as you go along...
16	L	why not?
17	L	Can you describe your needs a little for me?
18	L	[Patron Name]...are you there?
19	U	Well I want to know how the government ran and just a little information on Hammurabi
20	L	okay...let me look at one of the links I sent you...
21	L	The Laws of Hammurabi are the longest and best organized of the law collections that survive from ancient Mesopotamia. King Hammurabi, who ruled from ... oi.uchicago.edu/OI/MUS/ED/TRC/MESO/law.html - 14k
22	L	this link answers your questions--you need to look at this site--can you do that?
23	U	no
24	L	do you know how to use google?

Virtual Rituals: Applying Goffman's Face-Work to an Analysis of Live Chat Reference Encounters.

LRS IV, London, Ontario, Canada. October 10-12, 2007

Marie L. Radford, Lynn Silipigni Connaway, & Jocelyn A. DeAngelis Williams

*Example of Negative Face-Work, continued*

25	U	yes
26	L	www.google.com
27	L	so what happens when you type in the search bar: Mesopotamis +government?
28	L	Mesopotamia
29	U	can you connect me with [Librarian2 Name]
30	L	hold on...
31	L	I don't see anyone with that name--just different libraries. You could log out and come back in again if you like?
32	U	Can you contact me with anyone from the Porter Ranch Library
33	L	I'm going to go on to another person if you don't want to continue--I need to have a little input from you...
34	L	I'm sorry, where is that library--in the LA area?
35	U	yes
36	L	I see Thousand Oaks...but not Porter Ranch...
37	L	you can log out and come back in again...if you like
38	U	can you try the west valley regional
39	L	I'm going to log out now--you can request that when you come back in--I only saw Thousand )aks...
40	L	oaks
41	U	what
42	L	Try the links I sent you...you can get the information you need---goodbye and come again!
43	U	what
44	L	Note to staff: COMP [[Librarian Name]-MillVPL - user has closed this session]
45	L	Chat Session Ended.