

“The library is a good source if you have several months.”
Making the Library More Accessible
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With the widespread availability of the Internet and the many options that are available for the discovery and delivery of information, individuals do not choose the library first as a source of information. In order to make the library relevant in the current information environment, it is necessary to better understand how and why people search and access information in various situations.

Two research projects, both funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and in-kind support from the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), and one each funded by in-kind support from The Ohio State University (Dervin, Connaway, & Prabha 2006) and Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, (Radford & Connaway, 2005) studied the habits and needs of library users and non-users to identify characteristics for informing library system and service development. Both studies included focus group interviews as part of a multi-method research design to identify how and why individuals seek and use information. This discussion will report the findings of the focus group interviews conducted for both projects and the semi-structured individual interviews conducted for the sense-making study.

Eight focus group interviews were conducted with seventy-eight college and university participants - thirty-one faculty, nineteen graduate students, and twenty-eight undergraduate students. Fifteen of these participated in semi-structured interviews to identify how and why they satisfy their information needs. Nine focus group interviews (two with virtual reference services (VRS) librarians) with ninety-one participants were conducted to evaluate VRS.

Although focus group interview data cannot be generalized to an entire population, the technique has been used extensively in library and information science research and practice (Powell & Connaway, 2004; Connaway, 1996). The methodology is frequently used to identify perceptions and attitudes of a target population, to learn more about a subject or topic, and to get input from hard to reach groups (Powell & Connaway, 2004; Connaway 1996).

Several trends emerged from the analysis of the focus group interview data. These findings will be discussed and can be used to influence the development of the next generation of library online catalogs, retrieval systems, and services, including VRS.

The themes identified in the focus group and semi-structured interviews provide information on the quality and effectiveness of interactions between users and information and how libraries can use this information to develop services and systems. The findings have implications for the development of reference services, information literacy programs, and library systems as well as the design of physical space for libraries.

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