

*Face-Work in Chat Reference Encounters.*  
Library Research Round Table, ALA, New Orleans, LA, June 24, 2006  
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**Abstract**

Synchronous virtual reference interactions are complex interactions fraught with the possibility of misunderstandings or miscommunications due to constraints in the live chat environment including a paucity of nonverbal cues. Nonverbal cues provide a major channel for conveying relational (affect) aspects in face-to-face (FtF) communication. 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 live chat reference.

This study reports results from an analysis of 226 transcripts randomly selected from OCLC's QuestionPoint service during eighteen months (January 2005-May 2006) from a population of 263,673. In addition, results from a series of seven focus group interviews with librarians, users, and non-users of live chat reference are also discussed.

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 encounters (Chelton, 1997; Radford, 1999). 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 focus groups with VRS non-users and users, respondents reported fear of appearing stupid when interacting with librarians, plus graduate 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). Previous research also (Chelton, 1997; Radford, 1999).

Transcript analysis also reveals that expressions of affect, such as deference, are important to the success of chat reference encounters and that 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 repairs when there is a miscommunication (with an apology, explanation, or self-correction), and using self-deprecating remarks. They also engage in chat versions of interpersonal rituals such as greetings and closings. 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.

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**Radford Chat Reference Category Scheme Relational Dimensions ©2006**  
**Analysis of 226 Transcripts**

<b>FACILITATORS</b>	<b>Librarians</b>	<b>Users</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Greeting Ritual</b>	89	33	122
<b>Deference</b>			
Agreement to try what is suggested or to wait	2	79	81
Apology	28	11	39
Asking for other to be patient	82	3	85
Expressions of enthusiasm	5	8	13
Suggesting strategy or explanation in tentative way	9	8	17
Thanks	56	126	182
Use of polite expressions	92	36	128
Use of praise, admiration	0	7	7
Use of self-deprecating remarks	0	5	5
<b>Rapport Building</b>			
Familiarity	4	1	5
Humor	0	5	5
Interjections	21	31	52
Offering confirmation	17	25	42
Approval	6	5	11
Empathy	8	5	13
Inclusion	69	2	71
Offering reassurance	60	31	91
Encouraging remarks praise	41	2	43
Enthusiastic remarks	9	6	15
Repair self-correction	11	14	25
Seeking reassurance confirmation self-disclosure	119	84	203
Self disclosure	16	103	119
Admitting lack of knowledge at a loss as to where to search	21	29	50
Explaining search strategy	21	1	22
Explaining technical problems	32	9	41
Offering personal opinion advice value judgment	80	6	86
Use of informal language	17	16	33
Alternate spelling abbreviated single words	33	33	66
Use of all lower case	6	48	54
Use of slang expressions	9	8	17
<b>Closing Ritual</b>	56	90	146
Explanation of signing off abruptly	2	7	9
Invites to return if necessary	27	0	27
Makes sure user has no more questions	44	1	45
Offers to continue searching & email answer	12	0	12

**FACILITATORS** *continued*

<b>Rerepresentation of Nonverbal Cues</b>	<b>Librarians</b>	<b>Users</b>	<b>Total</b>
Phrase abbreviations	1	5	6
Spells out nonverbal behaviors	0	1	1
Use of ALL CAPS	9	7	16
Use of alpha-numeric shortcuts	1	0	1
Use of ellipsis	43	24	67
Use of emoticons	3	7	10
Use of punctuation or repeated punctuation for emphasis	35	37	72

**BARRIERS**

**Negative Closure**

Abrupt ending	20	92	112
Disclaimer	14	0	14
Failure to refer	2	0	2
Ignoring cues that user wants more help	9	0	9
Premature or attempted closing	7	1	8
Premature referral	4	0	4
Sends to Google	3	0	3

**Relational Disconnect Failure to Build Rapport**

Condescending	2	1	3
Derisive use of spelling out NV behaviors	0	0	0
Disconfirming	13	20	33
Failing to offer reassurance	8	1	9
Failure or refusal to provide information when asked	3	4	7
Goofing around	1	4	5
Ignoring humor	1	0	1
Ignoring self-disclosure	9	0	9
Impatience	0	8	8
Inappropriate script or inappropriate response	14	0	14
Lack of attention or Ignoring question	8	0	8
Limits time	7	0	7
Mirrors rude behavior	1	0	1
Mistakes	0	1	1
Misunderstands question	2	0	2
Reprimanding	3	4	7
Robotic answer	6	0	6
Rude or insulting	0	2	2
Use of inappropriate language	0	3	3
Uses jargon no explanation	5	0	5

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