"Screenagers" and Virtual (Chat) Reference: The Future is Now!
New Jersey Association of School Librarians, Long Branch, NJ, October 29-31, 2006
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Abstract: Today's 12-18 year old members of the Millennial Generation have been referred to as "screenagers" because of their affinity for electronic communication via computer, phone, television, etc. screens (see Rushkoff, 1996). These young Millennials are at home in the instant messaging and chat environment. It is well known that their communication and information seeking behaviors are distinctly different from those of other age cohorts and radically different from the baby boomer generation. Libraries are providing Web-based virtual reference services (VRS) such as QandANJ as alternatives to traditional face-to-face (FtF) reference services to meet the information needs of virtual as well as FtF library users. This paper presents the revealing results of an international study of communication and information seeking including a series of three focus group interviews with 12-18 year olds and analysis of a random sample of 431 live chat reference transcripts drawn from an international population. Unexpectedly these focus group participants have revealed that they use IM for socializing and collaborative homework, yet perceive library VRS differently then these other virtual encounters and also express a preference for face-to-face encounters with librarians. Additional results will be presented with implications for librarians working with young people.

Power Point Slides and handouts for today's presentation will be available at the Seeking Synchronicity project Web site: **http://www.oclc.org/research/projects/synchronicity/**

Radford Relational Dimensions Category Scheme

FACILITATORS
    Greeting Ritual
    Deference
        Agreement to Try what is Suggested
        Apology
        Asking for Other to Be Patient
        Expressions of Enthusiasm
        Suggesting Strategy or Explanation
        Thanks
        Polite Expressions
        Praise, Admiration
        Self-Deprecating Remarks
    Rapport Building
        Familiarity
        Humor
        Interjections
        Offering Confirmation
            Approval
            Empathy
            Inclusion
        Offering Reassurance
            Encouraging Remarks, Praise
            Enthusiastic Remarks
        Repair Self Correction
        Seeking Reassurance, Confirmation Self Disclosure
        Self Disclosure
            Admitting Lack of Knowledge At A Loss
            Explaining Search Strategy
            Explaining Technical Problems
            Offer Personal Opinion Advice Value Judgment
        Use of Informal Language
            Alternate Spelling, Abbreviated Single Words
            Lower Case
            Slang Expressions
        Representation of Nonverbal Cues
            ALL CAPS
            Alpha-Numeric Shortcuts
            Asterisk
            Phrase Abbreviations
            Spells Out Non-Verbal Behaviors
            Ellipsis
            Emoticons
            Punctuation or Repeated Punctuation

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<u>Radford Relational Dimensions Category Scheme</u>

<u>FACILITATORS (Continued)</u>

<u>Closing Ritual</u>
       Explanation Signing Off Abruptly
       Invites to Return If Necessary
       Makes Sure User Has No More Questions
       Offers to Continue Searching & E-Mail

<u>BARRIERS</u>
    <u>Negative Closure</u>
       Abrupt Ending
       Disclaimer
       Failure to Refer
       Ignoring Cues That User Wants More Help
       Premature or Attempted Closing
       Premature Referral
       Sends To Google
    <u>Relational Disconnect Failure to Build Rapport</u>
       Condescending
       Derisive Use of Spelling Out NV Behaviors
       Disconfirming
       Failing to Offer Reassurance
       Failure or Refusal To Provide Info
       Goofing Around
       Ignoring Humor
       Ignoring Self-Disclosure
       Impatience
       Inappropriate Script or Inappropriate Response
       Lack of Attention or Ignoring Question
       Limits Time
       Mirrors Rude Behavior
       Mistakes
       Misunderstands Question
       Reprimanding
       Robotic Answer
       Rude or Insulting
       Inappropriate Language
       Jargon, No Explanation

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Recommendations for Facilitating Interpersonal Communication in Chat Reference

General Notes
- Always remember that your interpersonal skills and experience are transferable to the chat environment.
- There is a general misunderstanding that interpersonal niceties are not important in chat or virtual settings. Interpersonal dimensions are present and vitally important in virtual communication.
- The large majority of time spent in virtual interactions is spent in the searching process, not in interpersonal exchanges.

Greeting
- Give a personal greeting after the script (can be a quick "Hi!")
- When reading user's initial question, look for any self-disclosure or indications that the user is seeking reassurance (Can you help me?) and provide appropriate response.

Strategies for Building Rapport
- As appropriate, be willing to self-disclose, to provide information about yourself, to use "I" statements. This can mean:
  o Offering personal opinion/advice/value judgment (e.g., I think that you will have more success if you do X; or I have used this strategy before and it works!)
  o Admitting lack of knowledge (e.g., I don't know what you mean, could you be more specific? I have not heard of this term before, can you tell me what it means?)
  o Ask for confirmation as needed (e.g., Is this what you mean?)
- Acknowledge user self-disclosure (e.g., I'm sorry you're not feeling well and are unable to travel to your library, let me see how I can help. Then, at the closing, "feel better soon!")
  o Be empathetic when users self-disclose difficulty or frustration. (e.g., It is frustrating when our technology doesn't work!)
- Include user in search process (e.g., Let's try this; We'll look here first; Would it be ok if we…)
- Indicate your approval as appropriate (e.g., That's great! or Good for you!)
- Offer reassurance when users indicate that they are tentative, or unsure of how to proceed. Realize that they can be fearful of your disapproval (if, for example, they have poor computer skills).
  o Use encouraging remarks, praise, and enthusiastic remarks as appropriate.
  o Humor also can be reassuring, as can the use of self-deprecating remarks (I'm not the world's best speller either!)
- Mirror the level of formality/informality of the user
  o If they use informal language, feel free to be less formal (as appropriate).

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- Be deferential and respectful of all users.
  - Use polite expressions as appropriate (e.g., please, thanks, you're welcome, etc.).
  - Apologize as appropriate (e.g., use sorry, unfortunately, or oops).

Compensation for Lack of Nonverbal Cues
- Mirror the user's style. If they use shortcuts, acronyms, abbreviations, and emoticons (smileys), feel free to do so also (as appropriate).
- If you are not comfortable using emoticons, you can spell out nonverbal behaviors or use interjections (e.g., hmmm, oh, ha ha, grin).
- Use repeated punctuation for emphasis (e.g., !!!, or ??),
- Be careful when using ALL CAPS, this may seem like a reprimand or like shouting (e.g., Don't EVER …).

Closing
- Always give a personal closing (can be a quick "bye!")
- In the closing, as in the greeting, be sure to respond to self-disclosure, enthusiasm, or polite expressions. (E.g., if the user says: "This is a great service!" Don't just send them the scripted closing, give an appropriate response like "Glad you think so, thanks!")
- Avoid premature closing, make sure you have answered users question(s) completely. Ask if they need anything else before closing.
- Look for subtle cues that the user wants more help. (e.g., "Well, thanks for your help" is one example, the "well" may indicate that they are settling for what you have provided, but really want more.)

Relational Barriers To Be Avoided
- Avoid robotic answers.
- Avoid sending an inappropriate script (e.g., a welcome script half-way through).
- Don't ignore user self-disclosure or use of humor. If the user makes a joke (even if it is lame!) respond with a ;-) or ha!
- Avoid failing to offer reassurance when the user seeks it.
- Don't ignore parts of questions or additional questions.
  - When dealing with a several part question let the user know that you will take the questions in order.
  - If busy, indicate that you will start with question one, and may have to answer the others by email.
- Avoid being condescending or disconfirming.
- Avoid negative closure
  - Premature Closing – make sure that you have answered all questions.
  - Abrupt ending – let user know you are going to close.
  - Disclaimer – don't indicate that question is unanswerable or problematic before checking, many things previously unavailable may now be accessible. Provide a good referral if you are unable to answer question.
  - Never ignore cues that user wants more help, even if it means asking them to wait while you help others.

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Checklist for Encounters with Rude/Impatient Users

- Remember you have skills and experience in dealing with rude/impatient people in face-to-face encounters – these skills can be just as effective in virtual encounters.
- Don't "mirror" rude behavior; this only provokes further rudeness.
- Be polite and professional at all times.
- Resist the urge to reprimand or admonish users for rude behavior or FLAMING, again this only provokes more rude behavior.
- Avoid jargon or language that will create a barrier or send the message that you are blindly following the rulebook.
- Apologize to the user as appropriate, this does not mean that you are accepting blame.
  - An apology can diffuse potentially rude behavior on line.
  - E.g., I'm sorry that you had to wait so long; our service is very busy today.
  - E.g., I'm sorry that I can't help with your request this time, please visit your local library for that information.
- When users are impatient (Hurry, hurry!), let them know realistically how long you think that the search for the information they need will take. If you think it will take more than a minute or so, let them know. Present alternatives and let them know how long they will take.
  - E.g., I know you are in a hurry, but this will take about 4 to 5 minutes. Can you wait?
  - If they can't wait, apologize (e.g., I'm sorry I can't answer your question quickly, but I can email that answer to you within 2-3 days).
- If the user complains about library service or another chat librarian, thank them for bringing their concern to your attention and promise to follow-up. Regard a complaint as a gift, as a way to improve service.
- Don't be condescending to a person with a "simple question." Sometimes parents are helping their children with homework and you may insult them. Treat all users with equal courtesy and respect.
- Realize that the rude users are in the minority, but understand that you will encounter one now and then.
- Don't take rude behaviors personally, sometimes users are stressed by deadlines and other life problems and their rudeness and impatience usually has nothing to do with you or your service.

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