



ONLINE DATABASES

What Chat Transcripts Reveal

By Carol Tenopir

CHAT REFERENCE PROVIDES NEW ways to interact with patrons. Research by Marie L. Radford of Rutgers University (mradford@scils.rutgers.edu) and Lynn Silipigni Connaway of OCLC (connawal@oclc.org), supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, will replace suppositions about how chat conversations progress in ways satisfactory to both patrons and librarians. They are conducting focus group interviews, online surveys, and telephone interviews of virtual reference service (VRS) users and nonusers and VRS librarians. They also plan to examine over 1300 anonymous transcripts from chat services. Rapport-building, deference, and identifiable beginning and closing “rituals” all have a place in virtual reference. And as with face-to-face reference, some patrons and librarians are better at it than others.

Radford and Connaway reported on a sample of 300 transcripts at the 2006 Association for Library and Information Science Education meeting. They find that chat reference conversations are full of interpersonal “relational facilitators” and “relational barriers.” Facilitators improve communication, while barriers have the opposite effect. (For more on the research, go to the project web site at www.oclc.org/research/projects/synchronicity.)

Relational facilitators

Although both librarians and patrons work on rapport-building, librarians do it more often. Words such as *thanks* and polite conversational fillers build trust between two people engaged in a remote but intense interaction. Rapport-building includes providing information about oneself, offering reassurance, using humor and informal language, and demonstrating interest or approval. Greeting ritual expressions are a good starting point for rapport; librarians make three to four times as many as patrons. Unscripted greeting rituals (e.g., “Hi, Pat, your question is interesting. Let me see what I can

find.”) elicit more positive interaction from patrons than seemingly robotic and cold prewritten scripts (e.g., “Welcome to our chat service. The librarian is reading your question now.”).

Deference, the most common behavior by patrons, might reflect the balance of power between questioner and answerer, but it is also the second most common behavior by librarians. Deference is shown by the use of thanks, praise, apologies, or expressions of courtesy or respect for the other’s experience, knowledge, or point of view.

Positive closing rituals are important, whether or not the needed information

The other most common barrier is what Radford and Connaway call “relational disconnect,” whereby the two partners in the conversation just don’t understand each other, and rapport fails. At their worst, these conversations can go up in flames fast, with SHOUTING (all caps) or impatience (“hurry up” or “why is it taking so long”) that degenerates into abusive language. Finally, the librarian ends the interaction abruptly with a robotic script inviting the user to return when more patient or with a more appropriate question. More often, however, the patron feels that the librarian is not understanding or not provid-

Rapport-building, deference, and beginning and closing “rituals” all have a place in virtual reference

has been found. Although Radford and Connaway’s analysis cannot measure the ultimate result, positive closing rituals help determine whether or not a patron returns to chat reference.

In a face-to-face or telephone reference transaction, nonverbal clues (body language or tone of voice) can provide positive (or negative) feedback. Chat relies on representations of nonverbal clues. Emoticons such as smiley faces, common abbreviations like lol (laughing out loud), and use of boldface type or punctuation are the most common. Both librarians and patrons use them to move the conversation forward and supplement traditional rapport. When a librarian initiates such interaction, the patron often follows. An ellipsis (...) used by the librarian is an effective cue to the user that more is coming.

Relational barriers

Naturally, chat reference interactions are not always positive. Closing problems are the most common for both groups, but nearly twice as many of these (including the brusque departure of the “disappearing user”) come from patrons.

ing useful information, even after ritual positive expressions (reassurances of trying to help). Relational disconnect may lead to negative closure, but transcripts show that patrons have negative closure or problems with closing four times as often as disconnect.

Improving success

There is good news: positive relational facilitators outnumber relational barriers in chat transcripts by a ratio of 9 to 1 for librarians and about 3.5 to 1 for patrons. When informal, nonverbal, unscripted, positive interactions are initiated by the librarian, chances for a positive interaction and positive response from the patron increase.

A successful reference interaction relies on both good conversational skills (like face-to-face interactions) and a good answer to the question. Radford and Connaway looked at chat reference, but their analysis can help improve any interaction between librarian and patron.

Carol Tenopir (ctenopir@utk.edu) is Professor at the School of Information Sciences, University of Tennessee, Knoxville