



Classic

Communication is the Key Skill for Reference Librarians

A review of:

Taylor, Robert S. "Question-Negotiation and Information Seeking in Libraries." College & Research Libraries 29.3 (1968): 178-94.

Reviewed by:

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Abstract

Objective – To better understand the question negotiation process in libraries both in intermediated and in self-help situations. To achieve a richer understanding of the relationship between library users and library systems in order to establish a research agenda and inform librarian education.

Design – The first part consisted of qualitative research involving interviews. The second part consisted of a diary study.

Setting – Special engineering libraries in the United States and a university campus (Lehigh in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania).

Subjects – The participants in the interviews were special librarians. Special librarians were selected because they have more specialized knowledge and respond to more substantive questions in greater depth than do public and academic librarians who emphasize instruction and who encounter staffing restrictions that prevent them from spending too much time on each inquiry. Detailed information on the selection of the individual participants is not provided.

The participants in the diary study were twenty undergraduate students who were enrolled in an information science course.

Methods – The interviews were open-ended and unstructured. The interviews lasted sixty to ninety minutes and were taped. No

information is provided on transcription or analysis methods or paradigms.

In the second part, the students were given a reading assignment on information seeking. They then had to select a search topic and document the steps they took, decisions they made, and resources they used to answer the question. The participants were asked to analyze their original question, the type of answer required, and decisions they made in the process. No details are provided on the analysis of the diaries.

Main results – Taylor found five filters required for search definition:

1. Determination of subject;
2. Objective and motivation;
3. Personal characteristics of the inquirer;
4. Relationship of inquiry description to file organization;
5. Anticipated or acceptable answers (183)

These five filters provide general information necessary for the search definition. These types are not mutually exclusive and may occur simultaneously.

In the diary portion he found:

1. All participants consulted other people including librarians and fellow students;
2. None considered the library as a whole;
3. All inquiries required multiple sources; all answers were synthesized from multiple sources;
4. Participants were familiar with library research: they used the classification schedule to search, used subject headings, and used indexes or tables of contents.
5. Question or research problems changed as a result of information found

Conclusion – Question negotiation is a dynamic process which requires feedback and iteration to come to a conclusion. The librarian's job is to work with the inquirer to understand the information need and then to translate the negotiated need into appropriate search strategies.

The author suggests that library school reference courses be updated to include instruction related to communication and negotiation in addition to the instruction on resources. He suggests more emphasis on questions instead of commands; that is, a cooperative process to determine what information is needed and how to best fulfill the need instead of assuming the inquirer "knows exactly what he wants, can describe its form (book, paper, etc.) and its label (author and title)" (191).

To aid self-help situations, the author recommends better subject description of resources and inquiry-oriented instead of object-oriented systems. He suggests building better query negotiation into self-help systems. At minimum the system should request the user state his objective, if for no other reason than to force the user to reflect on or analyze his question. Help should be available at the time of need, and this can be offered through technology instead of through staffing.

Commentary

This article provides inadequate information to judge the appropriateness of the research methods or validity of the study. No information is provided on how the participants were chosen or how those choices may have influenced the results. No details are provided for how the data were analyzed. Only a few quotes are used to support the author's conclusions. This is, however, a summary report. The full technical report has been scanned and is available online through the Defense

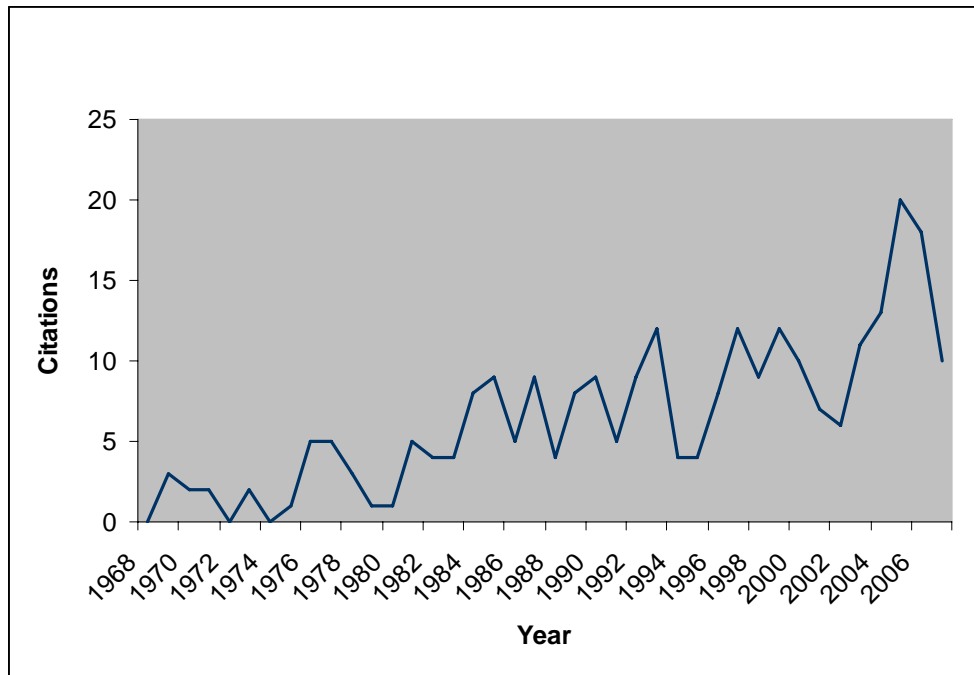


Figure 1: Citations of Taylor's Article, 1968-2007

Technical Information Center (Taylor, Question-Negotiation 88).

Some of the results of this study seem obvious now, after decades of qualitative studies of information behaviour; yet, this article has had tremendous influence, showing a steep upward trend in the number of citations received per year (see graph below). Evidence of this article's influence can be found in articles by Belkin, Oddy, and Brooks on the Anamolous States of Knowledge (ASK) model and many other models of human information behaviour. More recent articles citing this article discuss interactive information retrieval, virtual reference, query analysis, and relevance, among other topics. In part, this influence is due to parts of the paper not based on the actual research. For example, this paper is frequently cited for its discussion of the "four levels of question formation," i.e.,

1. the actual, but unexpressed need for information (the *visceral* need);
2. the conscious, within-brain description of the need (the *conscious* need);
3. the formal statement of the need (the *formalized* need);
4. the question as presented to the information system (the *compromised* need) (182)

This listing appears in Taylor's earlier work on question analysis where it is credited in part to another author. The levels are presented in the 1968 article to describe the necessity of negotiating back to the conscious need instead of taking the compromised need as given, especially if the need is expressed in writing.

Despite all of this, the paper's continuing relevance and importance cannot be understated. Beyond the objectives of the research mentioned above in the summary,

Taylor clearly had a larger goal: to enable transformation in order to ensure continuing relevance of the library in times of dramatic changes. He foresaw the communications changes and the drastic impacts these would have on how libraries and librarians serve their patrons. He suggested that libraries could respond to these challenges by withering away or by undergoing a gradual transformation. He aimed his work at enabling this second option and he was successful. This paper has been tremendously influential both in generating new research streams, in training practitioners, and in designing systems.

Unfortunately, there are some valuable lessons in this article that have not been learned: how to improve library signage, how to provide help where and when needed using feedback and iteration, the importance of stressing the reference interview and question negotiation

processes in library school, and so forth. This article should be mandatory reading in library school and professional librarians should re-read it annually.

Works Cited

- Belkin, Nicholas J. "Anomalous States of Knowledge as a Basis for Information Retrieval." Canadian Journal of Information Science 5 (1980): 133-43.
- Taylor, Robert S. "Process of Asking Questions." American Documentation 13.4 (1962): 391-6.
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