Reference Interaction Assignment

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I posed my reference question to the AskNow service through San Jose Public Library, identifying myself as a public library user (not an SJSU student) at 9:00p.m. (Pacific time) on Monday, April 7th. On Tuesday, April 8th, I posed my question at the reference desk of the Santa Clara City Library at about 12:00 noon.

The question I typed to the AskNow service was: Hi! I'm trying to find some information on the 2007 Scrabble championship. Where and when it took place, who won, against what opponent, final scores, and what the prize was. After about 3 minutes I was greeted by Alex, who typed hi Fern and continued with: My name is Alex, and I'm a reference librarian with the QuestionPoint chat service. Your librarians have asked our librarians to staff this service when they are unavailable. I'm reading your question right now to see how I can help you...

Alex gave me the official Web site of the 2007 World SCRABBLE® Championships and asked if I had seen that site. He also told me how to open the site if clicking on the link did not work. After looking at the site I told him that it answered most of my questions, the where, when, winner, and prize but did not supply the name of the opponent or the final score. Alex asked if I had a library card to access the library databases and possibly find a news article. I answered honestly that I hadn't thought of that and that I did in fact have a library card. I asked him if he recommended a particular database. Alex typed the link to Articles & Databases: SJPL Remote & Branch Users and recommended the Gale PowerSearch. He typed that he didn't find any other databases freely available and that he hoped the articles lead to something. He did not ask me if I knew how to access or use the database. Alex concluded the interview by saying he
would forward my question to my library and they would follow up with me via e-mail. He thanked me for logging in, wished me happy researching, typed bye, and logged off. My reference interaction with Alex lasted 15 minutes.

As promised, at 9:30 a.m. the following day I received an e-mail from Barbara Evans, reference librarian at the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library (although the originating address was AskALibrarian@oclc.org). She wrote that she found a link on the World Scrabble Championship website that lists the rounds of play and the final page of each round displays the final score. She provided both the link to the Web page and the information I requested, listing the final score of both the winner and his opponent in the three final championship games of the 2007 Scrabble World Championship. I was pleased with being instructed on how to find this information on the Web site as I did not find it when exploring the site on my own.

The Central Park branch of the Santa Clara City Library has more than 80,000 square feet of floor space, a sizable popular and reference collection, over 100 computers for public use, and WIFI connections for personal computers (Santa Clara City Library, n.d.). It is well lit, seems to be adequately staffed, and in my opinion is one of the most pleasant and well stocked libraries in the San Jose area.

I approached the reference desk which was manned by one librarian at noon. The librarian looked up and waited for me to talk and I posed the same question to him: Hi, I’m trying to find some information on the 2007 Scrabble championships – where and when they took place, who won, the opponent, the prize, and the final score of the game. He replied okay and started typing on his computer. I did not know what he was typing or what sites he was using. While he was searching another patron approached
the reference desk and although he looked up he did not address her. The phone rang twice and the librarian ignored it. After a few minutes, he turned the computer screen towards me and showed me the information he found at infoplease almanac which provided the dates of the championship, location, and winner. He too pulled up the official Web site of the 2007 World SCRABBLE® Championships which again provided the basic information. He tried to pull up additional information by clicking on players but that provides rudimentary information about the player and not any of the games played. He then clicked on the link for games which gives a hyperlinked list of all the games played. He pondered aloud that the last three games listed are probably the finals since they are the same players in all three games (and I noted that they said f1, f2, and f3). He clicked on one of the links and said, “Didn’t have the score, did it? Must be the score somewhere.” He then returned to the home page and clicked on the commentary link which gives a hyperlinked list including all the games and before and after the tournament. By clicking on the link for final round 3 we retrieved the additional information – the name of the opponent and the score for that game. The scores for the additional two final rounds were on the commentary page of each game. This interaction also took about 15 minutes after which I thanked the librarian and went on my way.

The 2007 World Scrabble Championship took place in Mumbai, India on November 9-12, 2007. The grand prize of $15,000 went to Nigel Richards of New Zealand after he beat Ganesh Asirvatham of Malaysia in three rounds. The game scores were:

Round 1: Nigel Richards 412, Ganesh Asirvatham 316

Round 2: Ganesh Asirvatham 371, Nigel Richards 400
Round 3: Nigel Richards 499, Ganesh Asirvatham 468

I feel very comfortable in online environments and often prefer them over face to face so I enjoyed the virtual reference experience. One advantage of virtual reference is that you can access the service at anytime and from anyplace. If you are woken from a deep slumber in the middle of the night with an urgent information need, you can chat with a reference librarian right then and there. Traditional reference forces the user to go to a specific place at a specific time in order to access the information they need.

I also appreciated receiving the transcript of my reference transaction via e-mail so I could easily return to the Web sites discussed. Having a written record of our conversation allowed me to be fully present in the reference transaction instead of scrambling to write down what was being said and ensuring that I was correctly recording URLs.

In the virtual reference experience I felt that I had the full attention of the librarian – there were no outside distractions. In the face to face transaction although the librarian dealt only with me, the ringing telephone and approach of an additional patron left me wondering (and a bit stressed) if the librarian would answer the phone or give his attention to someone else before we were finished.

Although in virtual reference I had to provide my name and city (e-mail is optional) both virtual and face to face reference are readily offered to all. In neither circumstance was I asked to provide a library card before accessing reference services.

While the virtual reference transaction I experienced did have closure when my face to face transaction did not, it ended abruptly and I did not immediately have all the information I requested. Although the additional information was provided in a follow up
e-mail the next morning (only nine hours after my initial contact) I felt a bit like I was being tossed to the wolves when left with the suggestion to search the database for news articles and having the librarian sign off soon after. Although the librarian asked me if I knew how to access the databases he did not ask if I knew how to actually use an online database. The face to face transaction did not end with formal closure. I was not asked if I had all the information I needed or told to come back if I wanted more help but I did leave the reference desk with all my questions answered. A reference interview did not take place in either transaction, and I wasn’t asked any clarifying questions.

Lack of a reference interview is consistent with Nilsen’s findings (2006) in her review of 261 face to face reference transactions and 85 virtual transactions at the University of Western Ontario in Canada. Forty nine percent of in person transactions and 80% of virtual transactions did not include a reference interview. Only 37% of face to face encounters and 27% of virtual encounters included closure in which the librarian tried to ascertain if the user’s question was answered and suggested the patron return for additional help. My virtual encounter did include the librarian’s comment that he hoped I would find what I was looking for and the promise of additional help via e-mail. An additional finding of the Library Visit Study (Nilsen, 2006) is that in both virtual and in person reference transactions about 37% of patrons are handed unmonitored referrals in which they are merely pointed toward a Web site or a reference collection in the library and left to scrounge for the needed information on their own. This occurred in my virtual encounter with the librarian giving me an appropriate Web site and a database and leaving me with a cheerful “happy researching.” According to this study many of the
problems observed in face to face reference have transferred to virtual reference and improvement is needed in both modes.

I felt that the face to face interaction was more collaborative than the online reference transaction. In the virtual reference I was given a Web site which provided some of the information, offered another avenue to explore, and told I would be contacted via e-mail. I could not see what the librarian was doing or what sites he was accessing. In the face to face procedure, I felt like the search for information was more of a partnership instead of my being spoon fed resources. The librarian turned the monitor towards me and we explored the same Web site I had previously encountered in my virtual transaction. I was able to see what links the librarian clicked on and when he voiced uncertainty (it didn’t have the score, did it?) I was able to make suggestions on where to go next.

One problem with chat reference as stated by Kern (2003) is that the user doesn’t know what the librarian is doing and sometimes leaves the transaction prematurely. I found this to be true as when I first logged in to AskNow it took a bit of time for the service to connect and I wasn’t sure what the status was, tempting me to close the window and start over. During the transaction itself this could be averted by cues such as in instant messaging (IM) when you are told that the other user is typing a message or by co-browsing where the librarian’s workspace is shared and the user can actually see what the librarian is doing. This would also allow instruction by the librarian, reduce unmonitored referrals, and improve user satisfaction.

I feel that as we progress we have a tendency to blame the new technology for the problems we encounter when many of the problems are present in both the old mode (whether it is print resources or face to face reference) and the new (electronic catalogs
and databases, virtual reference in all its formats – e-mail, instant messaging, chat).

This seems to be the opinion of the articles I perused and I particularly liked Kern’s view that libraries must reaffirm their philosophy of service and strive to achieve it no matter the mode of contact.

References


Appendix A (Chat transcript)

Your chat transcript with a librarian at SAN JOSE PL (CAAsk)
Date: 20:59 2008/04/07
Question ID: 3405454
Chat Transcript: Hi! I'm trying to find some information on the 2007 Scrabble championship. Where and when it took place, who won, against what opponent, final scores, and what the prize was.
[Librarian 21:01:59]: Librarian 'Alex (24/7 Librarian)' has joined the session.
[Librarian 21:02:17]: hi Fern
[Librarian 21:02:27]: My name is Alex, and I'm a reference librarian with the QuestionPoint chat service. Your librarians have asked our librarians to staff this service when they are unavailable. I'm reading your question right now to see how I can help you...
[Librarian 21:02:33]: let me see what I can find for you...
[Librarian 21:03:05]: have you seen this site?
[Librarian 21:03:16]: If the page doesn't come up on your screen, try copying & pasting the link to a new window.
[Librarian 21:03:37]: i'm opening the site now
[Librarian 21:05:03]: thanks. that seems to answer the where, when, winner, and prize but i can't find the opponent and scores though i'm still looking
[Librarian 21:05:50]: did you click on Players?
[Librarian 21:06:36]: yes. it gives the player information but no information on games played at this championship or against who
[Librarian 21:08:02]: hmmm... do you have a library card to look in the online databases? I wonder if it would be possible to find a news article about it.
[Librarian 21:08:21]: yes i do. i didn't think of that.
[Librarian 21:08:57]: do you know how to access the library databases from home?
[Fern 21:08:59]: would you suggest a particular database?
[Fern 21:09:09]: yes i do
[Librarian 21:09:20]: let me see which ones you have at SJ...
[Fern 21:09:29]: ok thanks
[Librarian 21:11:38]: I think I would try the first one -- the one that says Articles... Gale Power Search
[Fern 21:12:15]: alright i'll give it a try
[Librarian 21:13:33]: I'm not finding anything else available for free online.
[Librarian 21:13:38]: I hope the articles lead to something
[Librarian 21:13:49]: if not, I'll have to forward your question to your library and we'll get back to you via email.
[Fern 21:14:17]: okay, i'll see if i can find something in the database
[Librarian 21:15:18]: and I'll ask your library to follow up with you
[Librarian 21:15:23]: thanks for logging in and happy researching
[Librarian 21:15:24]: bye!
[Librarian 21:15:26]: Librarian ended chat session.
[Librarian 21:15:28]: Referred from: Chat Transcript to Shared Followup
Please take a moment to fill out a survey at:
http://www.questionpoint.org/crs/servlet/org.oclc.ask.PatronSurveyForm?&language=1&type=chat&qid=3405454