Reference Interview: Theories and Strategies

As I was exploring the strategies for successful reference interactions during this week, Doherty’s reference dialogue theory and Dervin and Dewdney’s neutral questioning approach have resonated with me the most.

Focusing on the online reference services’ specifics and challenges, Doherty calls for departure from the traditional, functional view of the reference interview as “an outmoded, patriarchal, and often privileged form of doing business” driven by the “a priori assumption of the effectiveness of the interview as a way to elicit the appropriate question in order to provide an accurate response” (2006, p. 99). In his effort to reframe the reference interview as a reference dialogue, the author emphasizes the missing aspect in the reference interview discourse—a critical theory aspect, drawing particularly from the critical education theory and the social interaction aspect of sociocultural learning theory, as it is reflected in constructivist practice. I think Doherty’s idea of applying the four interaction types as they are defined in the interaction theory—Learner-Content, Learner-Instruction, Learner-Learner, and Learner-Interface—to the online reference service, where the library user (learner) interacts with the librarian (instructor)—is very clever, especially as the Learner-Interface interaction relates to the online reference environment.

Of particular value to reference service, in my opinion, is Doherty’s observation on the power of Freire’s dialogue as it is placed in a sociocultural learning discourse, where “each member is sharing expertise through collaborative as opposed to cooperative interactions that lead to a dual construction of shared knowledge”—essentially, a form of constructivist pedagogy (ibid., p 106). In the collaborative reference interaction, both librarian and patron learn from each other during the reference interview, or reference dialogue, in Doherty’s approach: “Instead of assuming that a user does not know what information is needed, the interaction could be a dialogue of equals wherein the librarian assumes the more empowering role of partner as opposed to information guru” (ibid., p. 107).

Whereas I feel that Doherty’s reference dialogue concept is equally pertinent across all steps of the reference interview process, I find Dervin and Dewdney’s neutral questioning approach—conducting the reference interview in a way that allows the librarian to understand the query from the user’s viewpoint—especially relevant to the second step of the reference interview, when a reference librarian negotiates the user’s question in order to determine the kind of information needed, how much information is needed, the intended use and the degree of sophistication of the information in question, and finally, the limitations, if any, of that particular user. Whereas traditional reference interview uses both open and closed questions, neutral questioning technique favors the open questions, in particular as they relate to Dervin’s sense-making model. “Neutral questions are a subset of open questions,” the authors explain (Dervin & Dewdney, 1986, p. 508). Open questions allow users to respond in their own words and therefore are free from constraints imposed by closed, system-specific and terminology-driven, questions. “The neutral questioning strategy directs the librarian to learn from the user the nature of the underlying situation, the gaps faced, and the expected uses,” Dervin and Dewdney point out (ibid., pp. 508-509).
In summary, I find direct correlation between Doherty’s reference dialogue theory and Dervin and Dewdney’s neutral questioning approach, in that both are grounded in the dual construction of shared knowledge, as it relates to the social interaction aspect of the sociocultural learning theory. This observation brings Doherty’s point home: modern theoretical framework needs to be transformed from the functional outlook on the profession to more critical perspective: "Without an underlying critical theory of librarianship (more specifically, of online reference services) or ways of developing such as theory, librarians tend to fall back on traditional functional methods such as the reference interview and seek ways to bring it to the online medium, even when it is not appropriate to do so" (2006, p.107).

References


Hi Perlita,

You are making an excellent point here, that in a successful reference interview, librarian and patron create a search strategy and they are equal partners in hashing out the question(s) to be addressed. “The neutral questioning strategy directs the librarian to learn from the user the nature of the underlying situation, the gaps faced, and the expected uses,” Dervin and Dewdney explain (ibid., pp. 508-509). The authors’ neutral questioning approach—conducting the reference interview in a way that allows the librarian to understand the query from the user’s viewpoint—is especially useful to the second step of the reference interview, when a reference librarian negotiates the user’s question in order to determine the kind of information needed, how much information is needed, the intended use and the degree of sophistication of the information in question, and the limitations of that particular user.

Overall, I feel that Dervin and Dewdney’s neutral questioning strategy, along with Doherty’s take on the reference interview as a reference dialogue, fit very well with Emlborg and Pratt’s contact zone theory. If “the reference interview is, in fact, the ultimate contact zone” (Emlborg, 2006, p. 62), and the contact zone as a social space “where cultures, meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt, 1991, p.34), then dialogue is the most effective strategy to handle the reference interview, in my opinion. The dialogue strategy, using the neutral questioning approach, provides librarians with the unique opportunity to allow users to frame their own responses and emphasize what is important from their perspectives, and therefore, to have their culture, language, and individual identity recognized during reference transactions.

References

