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Perspectives in Human Communication and Library Reference Services

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Abstract
Effective communication though at times tends to be far-fetched given the seemingly complex inter-play of some factors. However, it can be attained in a typical library reference situation. For instance, from the moment a message is conceived, passed across and well received with little or no interference or distortion, effective communication would have taken place. This paper discusses related issues in the light of conceptual framework of communication. It discusses related studies, communication elements, factors to effective communication and other prevailing issues within the perspective of reference and information services. Barriers to effective communication in relation to library services are mentioned including suggestions to alleviating such situations.

Key words: information, interaction, discourse, communication process, contact.

Introduction

Library work is generally service-oriented and involves a lot of contact between staff and patrons who contact the library for information need, or to utilise other forms of services. Large libraries often have designated sections to cater for duties relating to reference services. Experience in library work has shown that reference services generally are often broad-based, spanning beyond a designated unit to other aspects of personalised services offered directly to a library patron or user (Philip, 2018). Amidst these, the world of technology has permeated relatively all spheres of library services and it is being envisaged that providing services 'behind a desk' may no longer guarantee quality service, except to reflect patrons' expectation of communicating with them through digital means (Dempsey, 2011). Nonetheless, in every kind of library, a lot of communication takes place from administration and other forms of formal communication, to interacting with patrons and colleagues, particularly as pertaining to reference services. Communication plays an important role in enabling the staff to know about the internal information managed by the academic library in particular (Bats, 2012). This helps them in utilising and transforming the knowledge gathered into increasing the quality of the library's services, states Blessinger and Hrycaj (2013). In this regard, Marshall and Scott (2005) in Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, succinctly explain that communication is simply the process of

establishing meaning. Essentially, one of the attributing factors to the success of any organisation such as a library is on communication. Employers therefore expect good communication skill from their personnel states Heinrichs and Lim (2010). This might not always be the case, as Hicks (2017) for instance noted a problematic lack of communication between library users and librarian. It follows that not only being able to communicate with others is required, but more importantly to establish the feeling of being heard. Littlejohn and Foss, in Encyclopedia of Communication Theory (2009), document that humans are social animals, and to help fulfill our social needs, an understanding of communication is vital. This paper therefore anchors on this submission and stems from this author's two decades of experience in library reference and reader services, with initial background in the field of communication arts.

Conceptual Framework

Reference service is the library's public service where professionals provide library users with direction to library materials, advice on library collections and services, and expertise on multiple kinds of information from diverse sources. Bailen and Graftein (2005) define reference service as personal assistance provided to library users seeking information to help them gain access to and use collections. Fundamental to these activities is communication process between the library patron (user) and staff who administer services.

Way back in 1967, a communication theorist named Watzlawick declared that 'man cannot *not* communicate'. Communication can be defined as the process of transmitting information and common understanding from one person to another. It stems from the Latin word 'communicare' which means to share, or *communis,* meaning *common* (Keyton, 2011). The central thrust of human communication is about mutually understood symbolic exchange. Littlejohn and Foss in Encyclopedia of Communication Theory (2009), therefore established that the root word for communication is *communicatus*, meaning symbolic expressions of thoughts and feelings. It defines communication in simple terms as the transfer of information, on how people in relationships talk to one another, why they select the messages they select, and the effect the messages have on the relationship and the individuals. It is response of human beings to stimulus, which follows that a response or reaction e.g. to an incitement, indicates the occurrence of communication by reason of cause and effect. Even a seemingly inconsequential issue such as being indifferent to an issue, is equally a response indicating some form of communication has taken place.

The outcome, or how effective is yet another issue. For instance, deep thoughts within one's self (intra-communication) can follow, to the involvement of another person(s) being inter-personal communication, or discussion among group of persons (group communication) and so forth. For this reason, communication is rather a cyclic and dynamic process. Transactional communication takes the form of interaction between two or more people whereby actions either

verbal or non-verbal, go on almost at the same time. The transactional stand point holds that all behaviours are communicative, which is quite instructive to the reference service provider (staff).

To other scholars such as Muhamedi and Ariffin (2017), communication is the transmission of ideas. This is furthermore elaborated by Partridge and Hallam (2004) as the ability to exchange feelings, ideas and information with others. It consists of the two key aspects being verbal (oral and written) and non-verbal (actions, deeds, attitudes and so forth). Partridge and Hallam continues on oral communication as involving the use of human voice to effectively articulate a message to an intended audience. Written communication involves using text or graphics to effectively transmit a message to an intended audience. Again communication is a transaction whereby opinion, facts, messages, and so forth are passed across from a message sender, to a receiver.

Communication in a formal work system such as library can be termed as organisational communication. It can be from a superior to subordinate (downward) e.g. correspondences, job instructions, notices, memos/ letters, acknowledgements, reports, reprimands, feedbacks and the like, as directed by official procedures. The essence is to foster goals and services of an organisation. Communication can also occur from staff to their superiors (upward communication) though this often depends on the extent of open-door policy in operation. The flow of message between colleagues is horizontal communication which occurs during day-to-day interaction e.g. grapevine information, informal discussions, and so forth. Whatever is the level of interaction and contact, to establish meaning and understanding is the crux of these engagements. This is the essence of communication, with the aim of not just being purposeful, but effective. Consequently, effective communication occurs when the 'signal' as intended by the sender corresponds is perceived and responded to by the receiver such as when a staff or user passes across his/her message.

Considering the pattern of reference service in a library, one finds that the regular process whereby a staff goes into dialogue with a library user with the intent to answer questions, or to guide in locating a source, borders on the manner of communication. Crux of the matter is to foster understanding and meaning. In other words, the person's believe system and mindset is consequently influenced in having them understand what is being passed across.

Studies in Communication and Library reference services

The transactions between a staff who offer library services and the patrons, is a function of communication. Its paramount role in human interactions has propelled scholars to examine same in the light of library services, particularly as pertaining reference services. Haddow's (2012) study as a case in point was on attributes for reference librarians. The outcome of the study showed that aside from professional knowledge, verbal communication and customer service skills were important. Edem (2005) in a study on reference services in some academic libraries reported that attitude of a reference librarian which is an aspect of non-verbal communication, plays an important role in reference process. It added that attitude can discourage a reader from searching for information and might affect the quality service rendered

to them. A similar assertion is relayed by Akor and Udensi (2013) who studied the functions of interpersonal communication in rendering reference services in university libraries. They found that the communication skills of the reference librarians were inadequate due to language barrier, stereotype and semantic barrier. This was in addition to the reference library user's low communication skill. Some recommendations were proffered to enhance the communication skills of reference librarians and their patrons for better service delivery. One of such was that the reference librarians must demonstrate a high level of dexterity in interpersonal contacts and communication. Gaby (2012) in a study on important skills for reference librarians found that generic skills like verbal communication and customer service skills were important.

Noting the importance of one-to-one communication, Agbi (2018) indicated in a survey that virtual team members favoured video conferencing to other ICTs with reason that it is the closest form of the face-to-face in a virtual environment. In other words, it provides a level of information quality as face-to-face communication. Kwasik (2002) studied the technological change connecting with serials librarians. It was found that the traditional skills were the most frequently mentioned as a requirement, followed by communication skills as a second place.

Gerolimas and Konsta (2008) conducted their study of 200 job advertisements by collecting data from the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and the United States to investigate qualifications and skills required of a modern librarian. The findings indicated that communication skills were one of the highest ranked, followed by experience. Lynch and Smith in Nonthacumjane (2011) equally conducted a content analysis of 220 job advertisements from American academic libraries. They found that oral and written communication skills were the most important. Others attributes were flexibility and creativity.

Tripathi (2014) notes that it is relatively not easy to offer personalised services in a large library, therefore good communication strategies are important for effective library-user relationship. Neerputh, Leach and Hoskins (2006) therefore consider the following as necessary for two-way communication skills: an understanding of human behaviour, interpersonal relationships and a positive and confident professional behaviour/ style.

Other reports on the other hand, have relayed findings on communication issues which were not so plausible. Knoer (2011) for instance points out that the open public atmosphere of reference desk seldom give patrons privacy, which in turn contributes to the reluctance of them being forthcoming with their information needs. Knoer continues that such situation might equally be heightened by reason of the many customer service responsibilities which librarians have e.g. long queues and many other patrons to attend to. Philip's (2014) study on some students/ library users in four faculties in the University of Uyo Town campus, found that shyness, fear of being criticised by a library staff, low grammatical ability among other factors, constituted expressive communication challenges particularly when they are in contact with a staff for assistance. Findings from this study corroborate a study by Baron and Strout-Dapaz (2001) who reported related issue regarding language barriers and how to communicate with students. The nature of reference and information services as found, oftentimes involve engaging users in a brief

dialogue for the purpose of comprehending an enquiry in order to meet specific information needs, or to create awareness of information products and services.

The various findings discussed thus far, points to the fact that communication is a sine-qua-non to library work in general. Whereas the emphasis on quality service output often dwell on factors such as staff professional qualities, the foregoing issues on communication in library reference work, indicate its unrefuted relevance in human aspect of reference and information services. It is equally established that communication by users and staff in particular, can be affected in various ways. In which case the reference staff, who renders services, plays the sensitive role of ensuring that staff-user interaction become effective with the end result of user maximising the use of library and its resources. Engaging users in a brief dialogue for the purpose of comprehending an enquiry in order to meet specific information needs, or to create awareness of information products and services, is a function of effective communication.

Elements in Communication Process

Communication models were originally designed mostly for face-to-face human interaction, that is, from one person to another in a two-way process. The Shannon–Weaver model of the mid 70s, (Bates, 2010), which has been cited variously by scholars, was also anchored on this. Earlier in 1954, Wilbur Schramm designed one of the first models of face-to-face human communication depicting this assertion.

In communication process, the originator of a message such as a reference librarian can initiate useful information from the library to its members e.g. on 'New arrivals' or to other library staff members as in the case of official communication. The librarian involved in reference services who passes the message across in this instance, becomes the sender on behalf of the library. A library user/ patron can also initiate a message by tendering a request for a need to be met. The receiver is a person (or staff) who receives the message from the user. Lunenburg (2011) explains that the sender encodes the idea by selecting words, symbols, or gestures with which to compose a message or information which can take the form of verbal, nonverbal, or written language. The message is sent via a medium or channel (the carrier) e.g. e-mail or hand-written, telephone, a print notice, face-to-face conversation, telephone call, social media platform, and so forth. The receiver tries to make meaning of what is received (i.e. decodes the message/ information). In the course of the communication process, noise can set in, which is what obstructs or distorts the message. Lastly, the receiver ideally responds to the message by giving a reply, taking an action or reaction, or simply giving an answer in accordance to how the message was received by him or her. This is feedback, which enables the message-sender to decipher whether the message has been received and understood as intended. In 1960, communication scholar David Berlo coined the term *SMCR* to describe this type of linear model, denoting the components of sender (speaker or source), message, channel, and receiver (Lunenburg, 2011).

Outcome of the interaction can indicate positive or negative reciprocity. In a reference interaction as case in point, the outcome might be users indicating interest in New arrivals

publicised by library, or show dis-interest to utilise same because the user misrepresented the librarian's additional gesture of giving direction by pointing without any further assistance!

Essentially, there has to be synergy in the process to warrant effective communication, while proactively engaging stakeholders in open communication. Hence, Dale's 'cone of experience' developed in 1946 by Edgar Dale and revised in 1969, is based on a model which posits that the experience or understanding of persons involved in the communication process must overlap as each participates in communication process. That is, person(s) who are part of the communication process, filter and try to gain understanding of the message (from abstract to concrete) in order to make meaning of what the other tries to pass across.

Barriers to effective Communication Process

It has been severally reiterated that communication is the process of exchanging information, either through words or action. Much of what is communicated borders more on manner and tone of message conveyance, rather than the message. During the discourse, there are factors which impede, distort communication or alter information being transmitted. These factors are termed as 'noise' in communication and are also labelled as barriers. Examples are: distractions, gazing, interruptions, task pre-occupation, personal bias, hostile or unfriendly attitude, different perceptions of a message, task-preoccupation, language barrier, lack of confidence and more.

Other kinds of barriers generally identified during communication process are:

***Language barriers*:** this can occur in the course of sentence or word construction (semantics / syntactic) or of signs and symbols (semiotics) being misrepresented. Not being able to convey a message or certain information due to language constraints is a usual occurrence, especially among foreigners visiting a library. Such has often been the experience encountered by this author when visiting libraries of other nations, though would often be overcome using meaningful gestures, key words, a translation app, or with the aid of an English-speaking library staff! Importantly, words and sentences need to be simplified for better understanding.

***Socio-cultural barrier*:** When persons from different cultures meet, manner of message presentation and reception can constitute 'noise' by reason of cultural differences, pending extent of adjustment and adaptation by parties involved. This can also be affected by the manner in which message is relayed. For instance, while certain cultures appreciate exuberance, assertiveness or display of emotions as a case in point, others are of conservative background. A reference librarian taking cognisance of these factors and armed with this understanding would not be taken aback by what would have seemed like a non-conformist attitude of any kind.

***Physical noise/ barrier*:** message e.g. voice-over can suffer alteration during transmission. Actual noise when a message is being relayed is apt to hinder flow of communication. This is a factor to consider when citing a library and reasons why libraries endeavour to maintain silence.

Constant movement of people and items in a shuffle is apt to hinder reading and research purpose in the library.

***Psychological/ emotional barrier*:** what goes on in a person's thoughts can suppress their level of comprehension or reception towards a message. A case in point is a staff probably overburdened with family affairs and does not accord a user rapt attention, or a library user feeling incapacitated, hence not forthcoming when approaching a staff. This might be as a result of a failed academic endeavour, tiredness, lack of confidence, boredom, being pre-occupied with thoughts other than what the user came for in the library, and so forth.

(Burleson, 2003) and Burleson (2006) talks of skillful functional communication in which persons must know how to produce messages that convince, inform and comfort others sensitively. Library outreach for instance is geared not only to inform but to convince and persuade.

Librarians involved in reference and information service taking cognizance of this, are more likely to achieve success personally, professionally and organisationally.

Judging from daily life encounters among people generally, the foregoing holds true for human thinking and perception which varies according to people's dispositions and background. Following this expectation, both parties in interaction can only have meaningful communication where the one to assist (reference staff in this instance) shows empathy towards a patron in need.

Approaches to Effective Communication for efficient Library Reference Transaction

The primary function of a reference librarian of any library is answering user query. Communication in this instance being conversations that occur between a staff and a library patron plays a crucial role in functioning of direct reference services in the library. Reference librarians have inherent obligations to provide information service to support the educational, recreational, personal and economic endeavours of their user communities as appropriate to the missions of the library.

Communication involves deliberate sharing of ideas, feelings and the message to convey meaning. The interaction which occurs when a library user meets a reference service staff, to the point when the contact is conclusive is tapered with communication. During such moments, what is said, the approach and manner of communication, conveys meaning and carries weight particularly for the librarian adjudged by the user. It has therefore been attested by experts that the tone of voice and body language accounts for a greater percentage of communication. In this regard, moods, facial expressions and tone of voice can easily be discerned especially in face-to-face contact. To say to a patron 'how may I help you?' with an attitude that suggests the contrary, rather infers poor communication.

The ability of the librarian to translate a users' query and respond to same with a given reference source is the hallmark of reference service. Familiar queries which set communication in motion during reference transaction, often open with the what, why, where, and so forth kind of questions by an enquirer e.g. why do I need to register to use the libraries? Where do I locate government publications? What is the meaning of special collections?

Dempsey (2011) however notes that "trends over the years have shifted away from 'static' reference service that is, sitting at a desk awaiting a question, to a more blended, mobile, and adaptable model of helping patrons". In this regard, most libraries operate e-reference service either in real time (synchronous), or delayed (asynchronous). Asynchronous platform more often conceals verbal or oral expressions, facial countenance and mood which generally accompanies instant voice messaging and chat reference service. The effectiveness of communication therefore on virtual interactive platform real-time, is equally of utmost importance other than networking tools. This explains why etiquette and other forms of responsible behavior on e-media platforms are constantly being canvassed for and promoted. Good expression while conducting reference interview eases users' anxiety, be it face to face or through electronic platforms e.g. emails, phone and chat text/ social media. Whatever the platform, cordiality is required as this reflects even in tone of voice. Edem (2005) advised that there must be genuineness in the reference librarians' words, behaviour, feelings and attitudes. There must also be an empathetic understanding of the readers' question and positive welcoming attitude towards the reader. Odade (2012) posits that communication plays cogent role in other forms of reference activities such as library publicity/ marketing, exhibitions, media talks, notice/bulletin boards, signage, SDI/CAS and public information desk. Librarians interact not only with users within the library domain, but reach out to other colleagues and members as aforementioned in order to keep the abreast of what the library has to offer. Boss (2004) in this regard, takes cognisance of communication requisite in the aspect of teaming with colleagues within the library and beyond. A previous IFLA president Elen Tise remarked that library and information professionals become active in advocacy by actively promoting libraries through effective communication with stakeholders on library and facilitating innovative information delivery (Tise, 2009).

The reference librarian conveys a mutual relationship with users and appears welcoming in order for the users to find it easy approaching the reference desk. Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) (2013) of the American Library Association established five major behavioral guidelines, for successful reference and information transaction. Specifically, it recommended the staff to have and exhibit the following essential attributes: Approachability, Interest, Listening/ inquiring, Searching and Follow-up, in that order.

From the fore-going, the following practical tips (by this author) can be considered towards effective communication and conduct during staff-user interaction:

1. Maintain friendly disposition e.g. to offer a handshake as appropriate, though with respect to social practices obtainable in the area.
2. Smile and appear welcoming irrespective of the work pressure. Remember that first impression during initial contact can convey a lot.
3. Have eye contact with person being communicated with to show attention in what is being discussed, but not to stare as this can connote unpleasant disposition.
4. Lean slightly forward and avoid folded arms which suggest indifference or lack of concern.

5. Pay attention during the time of brief contact with a patron by avoiding other engagements as much as possible (even answering calls).
6. Inquire about patron's initial information search experience before the contact and after, to determine extent of success, or not.
7. Tone down on library jargons, but aim at communicating for understanding and clarity.
8. Avoid portraying hopeless situation when particular information source is not found. Rather suggest alternative and follow through where referral is resorted to.
9. Endeavour to remain calm even when challenged by a supposedly irate patron.
11. Clarify a request when necessary by re-echoing words to ensure accuracy e.g. 'you mean quantum theory…?'
10. Generally, use non-verbal prompts appropriately to avoid being misunderstood.
Lastly, Bronstein (2011) add that as a part of communication skills, librarians have to be good listeners to fully understand their patron's information needs.

Ideally, strategies for effective communication in library reference work are inexhaustible, as they depend on a given situation at hand. But the forgoing being listed based on author's experience and observation over the years, can accord some level of good practice. For effective communication to take place from the fore-going, the librarian needs to pay attention and consciously demonstrate concern, support and acceptance, while eschewing presumptions as much as possible.

Conclusion

This paper dwelt on communication issues in relation to the library's reference services. It established that communication regarded simply as the exchange of information between individuals or group, is required in library user services. Effective communication is a sine qua non for library-user interaction and has become one of the determining factors for efficient performance of reference and information services. Brun (2010) and Summers (2010) sum up that every person's communication skill affects both personal and organisational effectiveness. Communication is important to working efficiently and is required to maintain contact between the library staff themselves and their users. This is in addition to the ability to communicate verbal and non-verbal messages effectively for successful reference interaction, and to accomplish goals. It is equally important to establish environment that can support this and enhance performance through suitable channels such as websites (for interactive ones), emails services and mobile services as technologies have influenced the scholarly community.

Contemporary library work requires effective communication between user and staff based on the service nature of the work. This is upheld by the fact that reference librarians have to communicate most of the time with others which in turn influences how they (users) think and react about a given situation. The nature of services requires training for effectiveness in using appropriate and easy communication. In this regard, leaving the library patron with delight should be every librarian's working philosophy, while temperamental reactions should be under check to the barest minimum.

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