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Synthesis Interview with a Novelist:

The Information Search Process

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Abstract

According to Kuhlthau, the information search process involves Initiation, Selection, Exploration, Formulation, Collection, Presentation and the Assessment stage. The information search process can involve many different emotions in a non-linear fashion throughout the stages and varies person to person. The following interview maps the information search process of an experienced researcher and hopeful novelist.

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Grover's model for "diagnosing instructional needs of diverse learners" (Thomas, 2004, p.62), takes into account "differences in thinking and learning" (Thomas, 2004, p.62) when evaluating the information search process of an individual. After implementing Grover's diagnostic stage during the interview, it's been discovered that the information seeker questioned for analysis is an American, Caucasian female in the age group forty-five to fifty-four. This female seeker earned a BA in Business and a Masters of Library Science. She works as a librarian and has done so now for twenty-six years. Currently, she is also writing her first novel.

The interviewee is working on a Young Adult novel in which the protagonist is the son of actors. The information need discussed was her desire to learn about acting terms, the audition process for professional actors and to keep it modern. She was looking for historically accurate information. Her "goal is to obtain accurate, timely information in order for her characters to come alive" (T. Cline, personal communication, October 30, 2006).

After identifying her information need, she almost always begins with a search engine offered by the Internet. She made sure to mention that “it wasn’t always like this” for her, but “has found in the twentieth and twenty-first century that it is now her preferred beginning” (T. Cline, personal communication, October 30, 2006). She began by using Google Scholar for this information search.

For her first Google Scholar investigation, she searched for “twenty-first century acting terms”. Secondly, she searched for “actor’s experiences in the twenty-first century”. The search engine immediately led her to several directories of acting terms and articles that detail an actor’s experience.

It was the second Google search that prompted her to seek out any biographies about actors’ experiences. She decided to read “The Man Who Heard Voices”. It is a book that chronicles the creative process involved in M.N. Shyamalan’s latest movie.

The interviewee has several reasons for utilizing Google Scholar. She “finds the information up to date, quick, and a fantastic starting place for new ideas due to its consistent ability to reveal sources never considered” (T. Cline, personal communication, October 30, 2006). When using Google Scholar, she looks for current and consistent information from authoritative sources.

The interviewee expresses her initial emotions as expectant and excited. The primary emotion she feels during the information search process is that of

being overwhelmed. She exclaims, “the Internet has centralized and made available a tremendous amount of information that it places in front of me within seconds!” (T. Cline, personal communication, October 30, 2006). She then goes on to describe how immensely capable she feels and that she remained confident from start to end during this particular search. She very much enjoys the information search process and the challenges it can bring.

This particular information search did not have any barriers for her. Again, she says her reliance on search engines has eliminated many barriers. She “feel[s] completely adept at using search engines” (T. Cline, personal communication, October 30, 2006). Her explanation why is that “Google Scholar pulls a tremendous amount of information to the forefront, and from there many webs are created into different possibilities” (T. Cline, personal communication, October 30, 2006).

However, had the interviewee encountered any barrier then a librarian could have used Dervin’s neutral questions.

The librarian’s use of neutral questions can provide a framework, structure, and focus for the articulation of information needs while allowing information seekers to describe their situations, identify their knowledge gaps, and discuss their intended uses for the information sought in their own words. (Thomas, 2004, p.66)

Another common barrier for information seekers that the interviewee may have encountered had she visited a library is approachability. Radford's "results indicated that the librarians in her study exhibited nonverbal 'gestures,' such as eye contact, manner, and deference, to which library users were extremely sensitive" (Thomas, 2004, p.179). The two modes librarians can present are availability mode or the preoccupation mode. In order for a librarian to be approachable, one needs to obtain eye contact and have a cheerful disposition. (Radford, 1998)

As for her worldview, it is very much a mixture of non-Western and Western. It is said that "no group is monolithic" (Thomas, 2004, p.79). The interviewee is a Caucasian female and an American Citizen of Norwegian descent. According to J.A. Anderson, the non-Western or Western worldview affects the way a person learns, their cognitive style, values, and social orientation.

According to Kolb's theory of learning styles, there are "four different ways of learning or 'modes' as: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation" (Thomas, 2004, p.71). It is argued, "effective learners possess all four learning modes to some degree" (Thomas, 2004, p. 73). As an experienced researcher, the female interviewee definitely possesses all four learning modes and cognitive styles. However, her strongest learning mode is the Abstract mode as analyzing and reasoning. Her

process involved knowing exactly what she wanted and immediately and confidently researching the subject. She then quickly rationalized her results. This particular information search process revealed that her “learning emphasizes logic and thinking rather than feeling, favors analysis and quantification types of activities, and approaches problem solving in scientific and systematic ways” (Thomas, 2004, p.73). The interviewee is definitely an abstract conceptualizer.

As an abstract conceptualizer, she is also very left-brain. People who are left-brain learners “possess strong understanding of logic and prefer structure” (R. Baxa, personal communication, November 18, 2006). The left brain controls speech and language. Therefore, “left-brain people are great verbally and do well with written communication” (R. Baxa, personal communication, November 18, 2006). The interviewee is a writer and librarian who prefers email as her method of communication.

In addition to the modes of learning, “Kolb and Fry (1975) acknowledge the existence of four learning styles” (Thomas, 2004, p.74). Convergers, Divergers, Assimilators and Accomodators are the four types of learners. In researching her novel, the interviewee has demonstrated she is a Converger. As for Pask's problem solving orientations' theory, the interviewed novelist's search process reflects that of a serialist. Pask writes that "serialists ... reach understanding through an orderly process of sequential steps, identifying

constituent elements and focusing on specific details" (Thomas, 2004, p.75).

The interviewee has a very orderly process for her search. This is shown in how she first starts with a search engine, then picks from the first page of results, analyses and puts to use the information found. She ends the search immediately after finding enough information.

During the interview, she mentioned that she is "very logical" and "the time alone writing the novel is very enjoyable" (T. Cline, personal communication, October 30, 2006). Her information search process, as well as her desire to conduct the interview through a series of emails, has revealed that she is an intrapersonal person with strong logical-mathematical and verbal-linguistic skills. Gardner's multiple intelligences verbal-linguistic claims "special sensitivities and capacities for the sounds and meanings of words...", (Thomas, 2004, p.78) which manifests itself in writing. The logical-mathematical intelligence use "inductive and deductive reasoning, problem solving, sense of numerical order, discernment of patterns" (Thomas, 2004, p.78) and is abstract.

Given that each individual learns differently, Hensley addresses an important issue in how he applies "Kolb's model of the four learning modes in the library context, suggesting that reference assistance be provided in ways that reflect the learning style preferences of information seekers" (Thomas, 2004, p.89). Since the interviewee is an abstract conceptualizer, she enjoys working independently. Hensley advises that librarians provide "printed instructions that

analyze searching techniques and presenting resource options” (Thomas, 2004, 89) to the abstract conceptualizer. As for personal assistance, the librarian helping an abstract learner should aptly explain their reasons behind any suggestion and offer many options.

As for this interviewee, she did not seek out the help of the library. However, as a librarian it seems she did exactly what Hensley advises. She gave herself guidance for searching techniques that she has obtained throughout the years of librarianship.

There are at least five process models to choose from for learning and educating. These five are Kuhlthau’s model of the Information Search Process, Eisenberg and Berkowitz’s Big6 model, Joyce and Tallman’s I-Search model, Bates’ Berrypicking model and Fosters’ model.

Kuhlthau’s stages are task initiation, topic selection, topic exploration, focus formulation, resource collection and presentation. Kuhlthau’s model goes from ambiguity to specificity. Feelings are also accounted for and can be linear or non-linear. The emotions can range from anxiety, optimism, confusion, clarity, confidence and satisfaction. The behavioral level for Kuhlthau’s model goes from seeking relevant information to seeking pertinent information and moods can go back and forth from invitational to indicative. (Thomas, 2004, p.31)

The interviewee’s search method definitely relates to Kuhlthau’s model for information search process. Her task and topic were clear from the beginning.

Her feelings were non-linear, always positive and she was occasionally overwhelmed by the availability of information. According to Kuhlthau's own studies, the interviewee is an experienced searcher. For her, "the search process became a metacognitive device..." (Thomas, 2004, p.33). The interviewee was knowledgeable of the ISP stages and the problem-solving process.

Eisenberg and Berkowitz's Big6 Skills requires the researcher to define the task, select strategies, locate and access, use the information, synthesize and evaluate (Thomas, 2004, p.49). Although the interviewee is not a student involved in a student project, the Big6 skills can be seen in her process whether intentional or not. She utilized a very linear process which emulates the Big6.

Joyce and Tallman's I-Search model is different from the other models in that "the research topic is chosen by the students on the basis of special personal interest or personal connection" (Thomas, 2004, p.54). Other models assume the research topic or project has been assigned. The I-search model encompasses "Kuhlthau's emphasis on metacognitive activities" (Thomas, 2004, p.55) as well as "Murray's process writing model" (Thomas, 2004, p.55). I-Search begins by selecting a topic, then researching the topic, followed by using the information found, and then completing a research project. The interviewee relates to this process in how the idea and initiation of the project was all of her own accord.

As for the interviewee's searching strategies as a serialist, she mostly epitomizes Marcia Bates "berrypicking" search process. Bate's "has created a useful framework for information seeking by observing how successful searchers seek information" (Thomas, 2004, p.121). People engaged in "berrypicking" may not try to find an overview nor will they seek out multiple sources. Instead, a person using the "berrypicking" will search for "just enough' information to answer their specific information need or research question" (Thomas, 2004, p.121). The interviewee did exactly what Bate's model describes. She found "just enough" information for her very specific information need which she found by using one source.

Bate's also has idea tactics for information providers to utilize in helping the information seeker, whether a novice or an expert (Thomas, 2004, p.121). There are three groups for Bate's idea tactics. They are for helping a seeker think clearly, steer the direction and to be more creative. If the interviewee had used the library, a librarian would absolutely been able to use Bate's idea tactics to help her. Due to her left-brain, serialist, abstract conceptualizer approach; the interviewee would have benefited from mediating, consulting, wandering, breaking and changing. These tactics could have helped the interviewee to use both sides of the brain, be more creative, given her a chance to consult others as well as an opportunity to try a different approach to searching.

Ellis also offers a group of research strategies for beginning a search and locating sources. The steps Ellis recognized are “starting,’ ‘chaining,’ ‘browsing,’ ‘differentiating,’ ‘monitoring,’ and ‘extracting’ (Thomas, 2004, p.123). The interviewee did not follow Ellis’ description of a possible research strategy. However, she did follow Meho and Tibbo’s updated version of Ellis’ research strategies. Meho and Tibbo applied Ellis’ strategies to Web research. The two important strategies used by the interviewee during her research are verifying and information managing. The Web offers a tremendous amount of information that needs to be carefully selected from and verified for validity.

The interviewee spoke about these two issues during her interview. She mentioned, “sometimes deciding whether or not an information source from the Internet is valid can be a difficult task” (T. Cline, personal communication, October 30, 2006). As a librarian, she had heard about the five W’s. These questions are a great tool for any librarian helping a researcher using the Internet. The five W’s determine web site credibility. The five W’s are:

“Who wrote the pages?
 What does the author say is the purpose of the site?
 When was the site created, updated, last worked on?
 Where does the information come from?
 Why is this information useful to me?”
 (J. Chenot, personal communication, October 31, 2006)

Discussing the five W’s with a librarian can help verify a valid source from a weak source on the Internet.

The interviewee did not consult a librarian. However, she herself is a librarian. She chose to conduct an online search from her home office. The fact that a librarian chose to consult only the Internet for her information search without leaving the comfort of her home brings up an important issue. Information seekers are looking outside the library for their research. According to Anne G. Lipow,

There are many indications that reference service is in trouble: for example, as Internet use in a community goes up, a growing number of libraries are noticing a decline in circulation and use of its reference service; many library administrators believe the hype that search engines are a handy substitute for librarians; and reference librarians are finding it a daunting task to keep abreast of the new resources that appear daily on the Internet. (A.G. Lipow, 2002, para 1)

Libraries must address these issues, especially since not every researcher will be as experienced as the interviewee. Fortunately, libraries have already begun addressing the issue by having computer courses, offering information like the five W's, allowing access to electronic databases, offering Internet access and sometimes even wireless Internet access. By embracing the change in research during this information age, "the tactics and tools now available to us

are giving us greater flexibility and opportunity to be innovative in realizing our values and carrying out our enduring mission” (B. Baker, 2000, para7).

The interviewee discussed how the library has changed over the years. She remembers a time without Internet. Her favorite aspect regarding the Internet is convenience. She spoke about this “new level of convenience to information” (T. Cline, personal communication, October 30, 2006). She recognizes that it has indeed forever altered the way in which a library is operated. Businesses like Amazon, Google, and Yahoo are just a few of the examples of tools taking the place of the library. In several instances, the interviewee sounded similar to Barbara Gutek.

Gutek writes about how the library is “dependent on the customer, not them on us” (Thomas, personal communication, November 17, 2006). Gutek emphasizes that service should be customized by always asking what the customer wants. The customers of a library want “reliability, responsiveness, empathy, value, assurance and tangibles” (Thomas, personal communication, November 17, 2006). Today’s customer wants technology.

Gutek also writes about two service models. One is the professional relationship. A relationship where a bond has developed, the user’s feelings are accounted for and there is efficient service. The second model is the bureaucratic encounter. An “encounter has anonymity, loyalty to the organization, is uniform, franchisable and complete in itself” (Thomas, personal

communication, November 17, 2006). Much of today's information search can be classified as a bureaucratic encounter. The interviewee's method of finding information necessary to write her book completely relied on the bureaucratic encounter of Google Scholar.

Gutek suggests an updated model that involves "enhanced encounters, services keyed toward perceived needs and relationship marketing" (Thomas, personal communication, November 17, 2006). The interviewee also discussed how she herself is "relying too heavily on Google," and how she "may be missing out on better information found in her very own library" (T. Cline, personal communication, October 30, 2006) due to convenience and approachability.

In this new and exciting information age there are many ideas and suggestions for how the library can remain relevant to today's information seeker. Each library will find its own way to remain relevant to its own community. A few ideas are for libraries to evaluate the library experience, embrace new information technologies and to experiment creatively with technology so the future role of the library can define itself.

The interviewee suggested some ways in which a library can evaluate the experience of its customers. They are to "involve the patron, or customer" (T. Cline, personal communication, October 17, 2006). She says to, "ask the current users what would make their experience better, and ask non-users what experience would bring them into the library" (T. Cline, personal communication,

October 17, 2006). Libraries can set up advisory boards, create community panels, and develop guest lecture series on new technologies.

The interviewee later admits,

I hardly ever suggest to a patron in need to search Google. First, I lead them through a reference interview. I then evaluate where they are at in their research. It is then that I know what to do next.

(T. Cline, personal communication, October 30, 2006)

Each person involved in an information research process is at a their own level and learn their own way. It is up to librarians to diagnose where the researcher is in their process and to then lead the way accordingly.

Conclusion

The digital and information age is an exciting time for libraries and information seekers. Information is extremely accessible and information technologies are abundant. It is up to librarians to make sense of the overwhelming amounts of information and technology tools available for today's customer, while at the same time meet the needs of all types of learners. Librarians must learn to then package the information according to the users' needs. The future library will be a place people visit for assistance in deciphering the enormous amounts of information pulled from search engines like Google, and will hopefully add value to the patrons search process by accommodating each person appropriately.

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