

Name

Professor

Course

Date

Critical Analysis Essay

Article Summary

In *Virtual Reference Training: The Second Generation*, author Lynn Westbrook seeks to expand the librarian's understanding of the potentials and challenges within today's increased familiarity with, and reliance upon, virtual technologies. Initially and briefly remarking upon the earlier impact and integration of digital reference systems, with a necessary nod to the reality that a "hyper-evolution" characterizes the processes of assimilating these systems, Westbrook loses little time in methodically reviewing each phase of how modern technology may be employed by librarian and patron to achieve the desired results.

The author commences by discussing how "library anxiety", or the unease experienced by patrons due to unfamiliarity with the environment or a fear of being perceived as ignorant, is very much a reality in cyber assistance. Westbrook then proposes how "scaffolding" is the best approach in accommodating the patron's needs, as it provides pivotal links within the process of determining need, accessing the correct information, and fulfilling the patron's request. This expansive treatment is carried through in every step, concluding in Westbrook's views on securing mutually successful closure.

Critique

Most evident, certainly in the opening sections of Westbrook's article, is the author's emphasis on the psychological components in action when a patron turns for help in digital referencing. Not unexpectedly, these elements parallel traditional library experience; people are fearful of asking for aid because they do not wish to betray ignorance, and they typically are uncomfortable in the informational environment. These concerns translate to the online experience, and Westbrook correctly stresses the librarian's need to anticipate and diffuse them: "Unlike face-to-face transaction, in virtual reference, there are few clues outside of text that can be used to create agreements" (Lankes, 24), and the author acknowledges the need for the librarian to acquire the "cyber language" skills vital to facilitating the interaction.

Here, however, as well as in every phase of the process delineated by Westbrook, there is an almost excessive reliance on technically psychological definitions and terminology. With all due respect to Westbrook's obvious foundation of scholarship, she very nearly eviscerates her own designs through undue stress. For example, she addresses the "library anxiety" alluded to somewhat at length, and this is indeed a viable concern. Nevertheless, her presentation of this relatively ordinary aspect to information exchange renders it something on the order of a disorder. The condition, if it may be called such, exists and has been well-researched: "The Library Anxiety Scale...notes five dimensions...: barriers with staff, affective barriers, comfort with the library, knowledge of the library, and mechanical barriers" (Fisher, 236). It seems, however, that Westbrook's technical emphasis on the subject conveys a degree of difficulty not necessarily warranted, and less so in terms of digital referencing.

To Westbrook's greater credit, she devotes a proper amount of attention to the inherent dilemmas presented by the digital component within modern information exchange. There is, in fact, throughout the article an evident sense that the author understands the complexities involved in all cyber communication, and specifically how they relate to those of the digital librarian and patron. For example, and most effectively, Westbrook draws the example of how email is generally perceived to isolate that perception in regard to online research. As is documented, people tend to conclude that a slow email response indicates lack of interest, in either social or commercial interactions; with the digital librarian and patron, a greater awareness as to the efforts required by each must be in place, and reinforced by the librarian, to diffuse this potential misunderstanding.

Furthermore, moving through the phases of the contact, Westbrook addresses issues not immediately evident and, again, relates them appropriately to ordinary online experiences. For instance, she points out that thirty-eight percent of the average Internet user's time is marked by frustration, and she sensibly notes how this affective momentum may carry into the digital research experience. Most commendably, Westbrook concludes her article with a less technical, and more accessible, emphasis on how the digital librarian's awareness of the issues surrounding the patron's approach must serve to enhance the interaction, as well as generate optimum results.

Conclusion

Despite an analytical and technical tone perhaps off-putting, Lynn Westbrook's article is a meticulously researched and immensely valuable resource for the digital librarian. Moreover, it serves the patron nearly as effectively, in providing information regarding pitfalls and challenges they themselves can better negotiate.

In a very real sense, it is a new world for today's reference librarian, as the technologies have created variations on traditional challenges, and ones that must be met from new perspectives. It is likely that the skilled librarian is aware of much of what Westbrook sets out, either as difficulties already encountered and never properly defined, or as issues sensed as on the horizon. By carefully moving through each phase of the patron/librarian interface in digital environments, Westbrook offers an assortment of procedures which can only serve to ease the entire process. The article should be required reading for any reference librarian adapting to the demands of the digital age.

Works Cited

Fisher, Karen E. *Theories of Information Behavior*. Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc., 2005. Print.

Lankes, David R. *New Concepts in Digital Reference*. San Rafael, CA: Morgan and Claypool Publishers, 2009.

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