Research Articles

Question Negotiation in the Archival Setting: The Use of Interpersonal Communication Techniques in the Reference Interview

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Abstract: Reference archivists currently lag behind reference librarians in their awareness of the subtleties and significance of reference interactions. This article focuses on the dynamics of question negotiation, a process by which the patron's initial query is clarified through the archivist's use of communication techniques in order to identify the patron's true information need, which often is not expressed in the initial query. Among the aspects of interpersonal communication considered are the use of paralinguistic elements of communication (pitch, stress, and volume of voice), the effect of verbal and nonverbal communication skills on the archivist-patron relationship, and the overall impact of this interaction on the archivist's effectiveness in serving the patron.

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BECAUSE HELPING RESEARCHERS TO find what they need is the major professional task of archivists, the inability to ascertain a need can be the task's greatest frustration. Most archivists have that one funny story to relate about the convoluted way a researcher presented his or her request. The stories usually end with, "If you can believe this, what the person *really* wanted was . . . ." Behind these amusing anecdotes lies a real problem, for most archivists have been vexed by unsuccessful patron-archivist interchanges many times in their careers. Some such failures may well be unavoidable, but research into the process of question negotiation offers hope for limiting the number of missed connections in the patron-archivist dialogue.

Question negotiation is a process in which the reference specialist communicates with the patron in a manner designed to clarify the patron's initial question and to identify the patron's exact information need. Beginning with a review of the literature, this article examines librarians' development of question negotiation techniques and argues that archivists need to adopt them and adapt them to the unique archival setting.

Review of the Literature

Although the process of communication between patron and reference specialist has long been at the center of archival practice, exploration of the theory of question negotiation has been carried on largely by librarians. To date, professional archivists have written far more about the peculiarities of the archival arrangement of records (a matter of intellectual access by the patron) than about the interpersonal exchange that takes place between patron and archivist prior to actual access to the original materials.

Since 1966, more than twenty studies of question negotiation or related aspects of the communication process have been published in the professional library literature. In an early analysis, Norma Shosid addressed the issue of interpersonal communication at the reference desk and concluded that "librarians are not always aware of what the user is trying to communicate."[1] In the 1960s, Robert Taylor coined the phrase "question negotiation" to mean "the process by which one person [the librarian] tries to find out what another person [the library user] wants to know, when the latter cannot describe his need precisely."[2] Subsequent articles analyzed various components of the interview process and emphasized the importance of studying librarian-user interpersonal communication. As research and theory development proceeded, notable contributions included those of Helen Gothberg on communication patterns, Virginia Boucher and Joanna Munoz on nonverbal communication, and Nathan Smith and Stephen Fitt on active listening at the reference desk.[3] By 1980, Gerald Jahoda had developed a model of the reference process as a series of decision-making steps by the librarian, beginning with receipt of the query and ending with submission of a satisfactory answer. His work, along with more recent publications by others, testifies to the enduring concern of librarians for studying the process of question negotiation.[4]

[1]Norma J. Shosid, "Freud, Frug, and Feedback," *Special Libraries* (October 1966): 562.

[2]Robert S. Taylor, "Question-Negotiation and Information Seeking in Libraries," *College and Research Libraries* 29 (May 1968): 179.

[3]Helen Gothberg, "Communication Patterns in Library Reference and Information Service," *RQ* 13 (Fall 1973): 7–14; Virginia Boucher, "Nonverbal Communication and the Library Reference Interview," *RQ* 16 (Fall 1976): 27–32; Joanna Lopez Munoz, "The Significance of Nonverbal Communication in the Reference Interview," *RQ* 16 (Spring 1977): 220–4; Nathan M. Smith and Stephen D. Fitt, "Active Listening at the Reference Desk," *RQ* 21 (Spring 1982): 247–49.

[4]Gerald Jahoda and Judith Schiek Braunagel, *The Librarian and Reference Queries: A Systematic Approach* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 2. See

In contrast, no articles that focus specifically on the question negotiation process have yet been published in the archival literature. In general, the topic of reference service in the archival setting has been slow to develop. Early articles on reference that appeared in the *American Archivist* typically described the variety of questions asked, the types of patrons (such as scholars, government officials, and genealogists), and the methods of preparing records and finding aids needed to provide the reference service.[5] T.R. Schellenberg, in his classic works *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (1956) and *The Management of Archives* (1965), discussed reference service as it related to access and use policies.[6] Despite his statement, "No matter how well finding aids are prepared, they cannot impart all the knowledge that is in the head of the well-informed archivist," he analyzed patron access primarily in relation to the arrangement and administration of records.[7] Such a viewpoint is analogous to suggesting that the library patron's use of books depends solely on the classification schemes used to arrange books on the shelves. Ironically, any practicing archivist would acknowledge that the archives user is far more dependent upon the archivist for access than the library user is on the librarian, because archival records require special handling, are stored in closed stacks, and can be retrieved and used only after communicating directly with the archivist.

Subsequent writings on the reference transaction in archives acknowledged reference service as the raison d'etre of archival repositories, but still gave only perfunctory attention to the importance of the reference interview. Ruth Bordin and Robert Warner, in their 1966 book *The Modern Manuscripts Library*, spent two pages on the process of orienting the researcher to the manuscript library. Although they stated that the interview "is an important vehicle for insuring a smooth relationship between library and research" and summarized the benefits to both parties of a successful orientation interview, they did not elaborate on the impact that interpersonal elements of communication have on satisfying the user's information need.[8] Consequently, they provided little help to the archivist in recognizing the multitude of possibilities for misunderstanding the researcher's needs, such as the researcher's inability to formulate and communicate her or his information need (a very common occurrence, especially at the nascent stage of research) or the archivist's inability to ask questions that may elicit the user's information need. Rather, they advise the archivist not to waste the scholar's time with "idle chit chat."[9]

More recent research has focused increasing attention on access issues. Frank Burke and Mary Jo Pugh's articles on subject access to archival records and William Saffady's on reference service to researchers highlight the differences between archivists and researchers in approach to access

also the more recent Elaine Z. Jennerich and Edward J. Jennerich, *The Reference Interview as a Creative Art* (Littleton, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, Inc., 1987).

[5]See for example, Margaret Pierson, "Reference Service in the Indiana State Archives," *American Archivist* 25 (July 1962): 341; and W. G. Orsmby, "Reference Service in the Public Archives of Canada," *American Archivist* 25 (July 1962): 345.

[6]T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975); *The Management of Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).

[7]T.R. Shellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 109, quoted in Mary Jo Pugh, "The Illusion of Omniscience: Subject Access and the Reference Archivist," *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982): 36.

[8]Ruth B. Bordin and Robert M. Warner, *The Modern Manuscripts Library* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1966), 101.

[9]Ibid.

of information in collections.[10] Because archivists tend to think of access by hierarchical arrangement and researchers by subject or personal name approach, both groups would agree that effective personal contact between the user and the archivist is essential to successful research. In 1984, Robert Tissing examined the components of the orientation interview and explained the importance of the communication between archivist and researcher. He emphasized the "externalities" of the interview, such as what it is supposed to accomplish, but did not address question negotiation per se.[11] One of the most recent works on archival reference, *Reference Services in Archives*, contains sixteen articles about reference services in various repositories. The majority of the authors make passing reference to the importance of the reference interview, but only two articles allude to the benefits to be gained from actively using question negotiation techniques: Anne Van Camp's on reference service in the Chase Manhattan Bank Archives and James O'Toole's on Catholic diocesan archives.[12]

Thus, although the reference interview has come to be seen by archivists as a central component of reference services, archivists have not yet adequately analyzed the interview process to determine how it affects the success of the patron's visit to the archives. Clearly, archivists have a great deal to learn on this point from the professional literature of librarians, for use of question negotiation enhances the orientation interview and can make it a much more successful communication transaction.

Question Negotiation Theory

The process by which patrons gain access to the information they need is a very complex one. It encompasses a social interaction that includes at least three parts: anticipation (advance role conceptions), action (organized and directed according to role), and termination.[13] The negotiation process is necessary, because it allows the patron to define the information need more precisely; this permits the reference specialist to match the actual need against finding aids and sources available.

Users of libraries or archives vary in sophistication; some are inexperienced, but many are highly skilled. Furthermore, in the case of especially intricate information needs, the inability to express a need accurately and succinctly can cut across lines of user experience, for a number of reasons. First, the human need for information, as formulated in the mind, develops gradually. According to Robert Taylor, there are four levels of information need.[14] The first is the visceral: a conscious or unconscious information need is felt by the person. The second is the conscious: the need is recognized, but it is ill-defined in the mind of the user. The third is the formalized: at this level the user can form a statement of the question. The fourth is the compromised: here the user's question is altered according to what the sources of information are expected to offer, even if the user does not actually know the extent or depth of the sources. In the compromised question, frequently encountered in

[10]Frank G. Burke, "The Impact of the Specialist on the Archives," *College and Research Libraries* 33 (July 1972): 312–17; Mary Jo Pugh, "The Illusion of Omniscience: Subject Access and the Reference Archivist," *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982): 33–44.

[11]Robert W. Tissing, Jr., "The Orientation Interview in Archival Research," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 173–178.

[12]Anne Van Camp, "The Paper Chase: Reference Service in the Bank's Archives," in *Reference Services in Archives*, ed. Lucille Whalen (New York: Haworth Press, 1986), 109; James M. O'Toole, "Reference Service in Catholic Diocesan Archives," in *Reference Services*, ed. Whalen, 153.

[13]Shosid, "Freud, Frug, and Feedback," 562.

[14]Taylor, "Question-Negotiation," 182.

the archival setting, the user's impression of the chances of gaining information shapes the research request. Take, for example, a seemingly simple situation. A researcher calls the archives and requests information about Professor Smith, a faculty member in the Sociology Department at the turn of the century. Because such a request fits easily within the collections of the repository and because it seems direct and well-formulated, the archivist could provide the researcher with an abundance of biographical information and feel satisfied that the request had been fully met. Suppose, however, that the researcher's topic is relief efforts after the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906, an activity in which Professor Smith took part. The researcher's initial question is a compromised one, formulated to match the researcher's logical assumption that the archives would collect papers of faculty members. The researcher did not elaborate on the overall information need because he or she did not suspect that the archives did, in fact, have documentation on student relief efforts. In such a case, the researcher, who must depend on the archivist for access to materials, might miss altogether the extensive documentation of earthquake relief efforts that is also a part of the archives' collections.

As the example of the compromised question suggests, when users approach the reference desk, they often experience several feelings prior to asking the question. If the patron has not had time to think through the request and the need is not well-defined, the user may not describe the information need adequately. Consequently, as Helen Gothberg noted, the question asked at the reference desk often "has little resemblance to the question that probably should have been communicated by the patron."[15] Ambiguity on the part of users is frequently rooted in feelings of uncertainty or fear of seeming ignorant.[16] Researchers can be overwhelmed by unfamiliar research environments. Unsure of themselves, they do not know how to behave and may derail the interview simply because they do not know how to present their information need. For example, the query, "Do you have any information on the history of the administration of the university?" would be a misleading question if the researcher's real need is information on post-World War II university-industry relations during a particular university president's tenure. Why would a researcher pose such a broad question, one that to a university archivist seems ridiculously broad? Several reasons might apply. First, the researcher often poses a broad question, believing that a large request will garner large results and ensure that the information need is fully met. The researcher may fear that asking a more direct question will limit the archivist's initial search, thus creating the potential for overlooking some sources. Second, as practicing archivists are only too well aware, most archival sources are not arranged and described in a way that is familiar to most researchers. Researchers unfamiliar with the professional jargon of the archives cannot articulate the request in terms of provenance or types of records. Third, the researcher may not have done secondary reading about the history of the university (perhaps it doesn't exist) and so cannot relate the information need to terms the archivist uses to tap into the sources.

Negotiating the question provides the opportunity for users to clearly state the research need themselves; it also discourages archivists from jumping to unwarranted conclusions. The latter can be particularly damaging due to the power/au-

[15]Helen Gothberg, "Communication Patterns in Library Reference and Information Service," *RQ* 13 (Fall 1973): 8.

[16]Diana M. Thomas, Ann T. Hinckley, and Elizabeth R. Eisenbach, *The Effective Reference Librarian* (New York: Academic Press, 1981), 96.

thority dynamic built into the reference encounter: librarians and archivists have effective control over the situation, because they have the power to provide the information.[17] Users are therefore put into a situation of being dependent upon reference specialists. For many people, this is an uncomfortable situation reinforced by the physical barrier of the reference desk. Uncertain to begin with, researchers may be exploited by insecure reference specialists who feel they must play a game of one-upmanship.[18]

Reference specialists need to be sensitive to these factors and realize that researchers who cannot adequately articulate their research needs should not be pegged as users who do not know what they want (as some professionals have jokingly commented). The formulation of an information need in the mind is a complex process that may still be developing during the negotiation process; in the meantime, patrons may ask questions that are much more simplified than the actual ones. The complexity of the process, added to the very real anxiety of patrons over asking for help and their reaction to the reference specialists' verbal and nonverbal communication, has an enormous impact on patrons' ability to articulate their needs. Patience, therefore, is a virtue for the archivist who must negotiate a request for photographs when the real need is for the personal papers of a particularly well-known photographer.

The objective of question negotiation, which is to determine the user's real query and to match that information need to the repository's holdings, is accomplished by analyzing the user's initial question, then posing questions to the user in order to elicit more information and to narrow down the real information need.[19] The patron begins the reference interview itself by expressing the information request; a successful interview depends on the ability of the reference specialist to analyze the request and to negotiate the question effectively.[20]

If the researcher's request is not entirely clear, the main orientation interview should be conducted with the question negotiation procedure and positive verbal and nonverbal communication techniques. As has been observed several times, persons at the beginning stages of historical research often do not have clearly defined ideas about the thesis of their research.[21] This thesis often develops during the research itself, sometimes changing the scope or depth of the research and thus calling for continued interaction between patron and archivist.[22] The interview should be conducted with skill so that the archivist can interpret the patron's research area and relate it to the archives' resources.[23]

According to Gerald Jahoda and Judith Braunagel, who developed a working model of the reference process in libraries, the first step in question negotiation is to analyze the query into component parts as "givens" (the subject) and "wanteds" (the information needed).[24] The "given" in the question, "Do you have any letters written by suffragists?" is "suffragists." The "wanted" is "letters." The archivist's objective is to determine if the patron's re-

[17]Barron Holland, "Updating Library Reference Services through Training for Interpersonal Competence," *RQ* 17 (Spring 1978): 209.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Jahoda and Braunagel, *The Librarian and Reference Queries*, 131.

[20]Geraldine B. King, "Open and Closed Questions: The Reference Interview," *RQ* 12 (Winter 1972): 158.

[21]William Saffady, "Reference Service to Researchers in Archives," *RQ* 14 (Winter 1974): 142.

[22]George Chalou, "Reference," in *A Modern Archives Reader*, ed. Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, 1984), 259.

[23]Robert Rosenthal, "The User and the Used," *Drexel Library Quarterly* 11 (January 1975): 97; Burke, "The Impact of the Specialist," 314.

[24]Jahoda and Braunagel, *The Librarian and Reference Queries*, 8.

quest—letters written by suffragists—is the actual need or if it is so broad that the query needs negotiation, which would be the case in a repository that collects heavily in nineteenth-century women's history sources. In this case, the archivist can negotiate the request by asking the patron specific questions to narrow down the possibilities. Questions going through the archivist's mind might include, "What does the user want to know?" "What is the user going to do with the information?" "Why does the user want to know?" and "How much does the user already know about the subject?"[25]

To find out, the archivist should use open-ended questions that require the patron to supply answers that can refine the patron's need.[26] These open-ended questions permit the patron to discuss his or her research project. Archivists should not jump to conclusions and shape the request (a practice that is very tempting and one that is easy to fall into), but should frame questions to allow the researcher to shape it. Each researcher has different preconceptions of what the archivist or repository can provide, such as type of information, amount of information, and format. These preconceptions may not coincide with the extent and character of the repository's holdings, with which the archivist is familiar. The result of question negotiation is that the researcher "alters the picture as he changes his question in response to feedback. . . [and] is forced in the negotiation process to place limits of time and size on his inquiry."[27] The patron may respond to the archivist's question, "Which suffragist are you interested in?" with "Susan B. Anthony. I'm writing a term paper on the influence of the Seneca Falls Convention on the development of the American women's rights movement, and part of my assignment is to use primary sources for documentation." In this case, the use of question negotiation prevents the archivist from missing the target and becoming impatient with the patron as a result.[28] Continued practice of the question negotiation procedure—identifying the givens and wanteds and posing effective questions to the user—will make the practice automatic. Realization that many social and psychological factors cause users to ask questions in the manner they do will help the archivist view the situation with patience and treat the patron with social grace and respect by being sincere and encouraging.[29]

Nonverbal and Paralinguistic Communication Techniques

The use of question negotiation techniques will certainly improve the quality of the reference interview. An awareness of several other aspects of the personal interchange between patron and reference specialist both before and during the negotiation procedure can further increase the success of the entire transaction.

How archivists say something can be just as important as *what* they say. Nonverbal communication—the exchange of information through nonlinguistic signs such as posture, facial expression, gestures, and other body movements—can have an enormous impact, positive or negative, on the patron's archival experience.[30] Helen Gothberg's study of the effects of the reference librarian's use of verbal and non-

[25]King, "Open and Closed Questions," 157.

[26]King, "Open and Closed Questions," 157; Jennerich and Jennerich, *The Reference Interview as a Creative Art*, 13; Catherine Sheldrick Ross, "How to Find Out What People Want to Know," in *Reference Services Today: From Interview to Burnout*, ed. Bill Katz and Ruth A. Fraley (New York: Haworth Press, 1986), 27.

[27]Taylor, "Question-Negotiation," 187.

[28]King, "Open and Closed Questions," 158.

[29]Thomas, Hinckley, and Eisenbach, *The Effective Reference Librarian*, 98.

[30]Boucher, "Nonverbal Communication and the Library Reference Interview," 28; Jennerich and Jennerich, *The Reference Interview as a Creative Art*, 10.

verbal communication on patron satisfaction revealed a strong correlation between use of positive nonverbal techniques and user satisfaction.[31] Her results showed that positive nonverbal communication—an attitude of caring for the patron evidenced by smiling, a relaxed posture of leaning toward the patron, head nods indicating understanding—resulted not only in an overall user satisfaction with the reference transaction, but also in an improvement in the user's own performance in negotiating the reference question.[32]

Self-disclosure, a technique in which the reference specialist reveals something about herself or himself to the patron (relevant to the patron's initial, unclear query) is another useful technique. In fact, according to researchers Nathan Smith, Mark Thompson, and Bonnie Woods, self-disclosure by the reference specialist can elicit self-disclosure from the patron, thus creating a natural avenue for continuing the negotiation process, and demonstrating that the user responds to openness; if made to feel comfortable, users will reveal information needs more completely.[33]

A third useful technique is active listening, discussed by Nathan Smith and Stephen Fitt. In active listening, the reference specialist confirms what is said by the patron by repeating the message. Especially effective when the patron is irate, embarrassed, or emotionally distraught, active listening allows the patron to *confirm* the reference specialist's interpretation of the message and gives the patron the positive feeling that the reference specialist understands and wants to help without letting the specialist predetermine the patron's responses. Paraphrasing a request can help ease an awkward situation by providing a transition to the user's next question or statement. For example, in response to a researcher's hesitant request, "Do you have sources on Victorian women?" the archivist could respond with, "You want to do research on women? We have several nineteenth-century collections relating to many aspects of women's lives." The patron might then respond, "Yes, that's right," and if encouraged with positive nonverbal messages, might go on to confide, "Actually I'm trying to begin research for a paper on the sexual attitudes of Victorian women, and I was told you have records pertaining to a sex survey conducted by a woman physician in the nineteenth century." Paraphrasing is not always necessary, especially when the patron's initial query is absolutely clear. But when the query is broad or ambiguous, active listening encourages the patron to restate the message, thus refining the information need and avoiding misinterpretation, in this case encouraging the patron to overcome embarrassment about a delicate topic of research.[34]

Nonverbal behavior can shape patron-specialist communication even before actual contact begins. As Boucher comments, the approaching patron, "will probably be intensely aware of the nonverbal cues being transmitted by the reference librarian—particularly his facial expression."[35] An atmosphere of unapproachability, unintentionally caused by the archivist's preoccupation with other duties at the desk, can give the novice—or even sometimes the experienced—user the impression that the archivist does not want to be interrupted. A preoccupied expression, caused by concentration on the task at hand, concomitant with a natural frown, which may be "ac-

[31]Helen Gothberg, "Immediacy: A Study of Communication Effect on the Reference Process," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 2 (July 1976): 128.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Mark J. Thompson, Nathan M. Smith, and Bonnie L. Woods, "A Proposed Model of Self-Disclosure," *RQ* 20 (Winter 1980): 164.

[34]Smith and Fitt, "Active Listening at the Reference Desk," 247.

[35]Boucher, "Nonverbal Communication and the Library Reference Interview," 29.

companied by a firmly closed mouth, giving the suggestion of determination not to be disturbed. . . all signal a supposed lack of interest in an access ritual."[36]

The reference specialist, therefore, should be well aware of the implications of nonverbal cues on the reference transaction. The ramifications of body language, the effects of which admittedly appear to be obvious, are sometimes not in the realm of the archivist's consciousness. Realizing that one is scowling or showing impatience or disinterest by avoiding eye contact is much more difficult than it would appear. Paralinguistic elements of the specialist's communication behavior, such as pitch, stress, inflectual patterns, and volume of voice convey immediate messages to the patron.[37] Impatience, boredom, indifference, lack of ease, dislike, and the placing of value judgements, revealed through the specialist's voice and gestures, are immediately picked up by the researcher. How would these negative messages affect the researcher's feelings of self worth in a situation that may already seem intimidating? What does a long drawn-out sigh or a smirk tell a user? What does a user feel when the archivist, impatient with an oft-asked question that shows the patron's "ignorance," plays a game of one-upmanship? Archivists need to be aware of the power dynamic inherent in the archivist-researcher relationship, which is perforce balanced in the archivist's favor. Anyone who has worked at a reference desk would agree that a situation in which a user is asking for information that the archivist can provide implies control of the situation on the part of the archivist.

Of course, the attitudes of researchers vary as much as the level of research experience they have had. Archivists often find themselves negotiating with researchers who are impatient or, for any of a variety of reasons, unwilling to provide information about their need that would allow the archivist to aid the researcher more directly. The researcher has power in the communication exchange, too, and should be obligated to negotiate with the archivist. Still, archivists can sense messages in researchers' behavior and should adapt their own behavior to encourage researchers and to make them feel welcome and valued as patrons of the archives. Archivists who are out of touch with the messages conveyed through nonverbal and paralinguistic phenomena "work against a meaningful dialogue with the user."[38]

Question Negotiation in the Archival Setting

As Mary Jo Pugh and Robert Tissing have pointed out, the archives patron is far more dependent on the reference archivist than the library patron is on the reference librarian.[39] In the library setting, the library's reference tools (indexes, abstracts, and guides) are carefully designed for easy access and independent patron use. In the archival setting, the reference tools used for access to manuscript material (finding aids, such as record group listings and inventories and registers to collections) can be used effectively by the researcher only after an interview with the archivist. In such a setting, the preliminary interview is mandatory, and it provides a perfect arena for the use of question negotiation techniques.

The researcher is particularly dependent upon the archivist on two different levels. On a procedural level, access to archival or manuscript material depends on a staff

[36]Ibid.

[37]Lopez Munoz, "The Significance of Nonverbal Communication in the Reference Interview," 222; Gothberg, "Communication Patterns in Library Reference," 9.

[38]Munoz, "The Significance of Nonverbal Communication," 223.

[39]Pugh, "The Illusion of Omniscience," 36; Tissing, "The Orientation Interview," 173.

member because collections are kept in closed stacks for security reasons. More fundamentally, the archival practice of arranging and describing records according to a hierarchical scheme based on office of origin and preservation of original order can pose problems for researchers. Officers or staff members who consult their own institution's archives benefit from the archivists' preservation of original order; but other researchers, who tend to approach their research from a subject-oriented perspective, often have difficulty relating their information needs to access based on organizational arrangement.[40]

In the strictly archival setting, the archivist not only understands the organizational order of the records, but has become familiar with the subjects covered by the records through experience of processing or providing access to those records. A patron who comes to a university archives with a request to see records relating to the history of academic freedom and faculty tenure at that university must depend on the archivist who knows that this subject is covered in depth in the president's papers and also in the records of the academic senate and of the board of trustees. Thus, the patron's subject approach must be mediated by the archivist:

> The archival system is predicated on interaction between the user and the archivist. Indeed, the archivist is necessary, even indispensible, for subject retrieval. The archivist is assumed to be a subject specialist who introduces the user to the relevant records through the finding aids and continues to mediate between the user and the archival system throughout the user's research.[41]

Because of this symbiotic relationship between researcher and archivist, even the most obvious (and therefore, routinely overlooked) aspects of researcher experience have an effect on question formulation and communication with the reference specialist. Many archives users are entirely new to archives research and do not know how to work with primary materials. Their relative inexperience renders them especially dependent on the archivist's assistance. Sometimes they expect the archivist to bring out extremely detailed indexes (which they assume will include references to their research interests, no matter how obscure), thus providing a shortcut to their own research. Many inexperienced researchers do not know that they must leaf through each folder of correspondence and memoranda themselves to find their perfect source of information. A continual interaction between the archivist and user is necessary to initiate naive users. Additionally, many inexperienced researchers do not understand the unique nature of the records and the security measures that must be taken. Their frustration at what seem to them arbitrary policies can be in itself a significant impediment to archivist-patron communication. Even experienced researchers need direction in using archival material, because unlike libraries, which use universal classification systems, each archives is unique. Although most repositories use basic practices for arrangement and description, the finding aids may be quite variant in scope and format from one repository to another. As a result, users cannot depend on past experience to orient themselves to the current situation.[42]

Furthermore, in the archival setting, archivists have a particular incentive for developing effective question negotiation skills: they are obliged to pay special attention to determining the *level* of research

[40]Burke, "The Impact of the Specialist on the Archives," *College and Research Libraries* 33 (July 1972): 314; Pugh, "The Illusion of Omniscience," 36.

[41]Pugh, "The Illusion of Omniscience," 36.

[42]Rosenthal, "The User and the Used," 97.

the patron wants to do. How extensive in time, scope, and depth will the patron's research project be? Determining during the orientation interview the extent of the information needed will often save the archivist, as well as the researcher, a great deal of time.[43] A researcher who states, "I need information on Stanford's relationship with Silicon Valley," may or may not need to consult the records of the president's and provost's office or the records produced by the office of the dean of the school of engineering. After negotiating the initial question with the researcher, the archivist may discover that a recent article about the topic in a campus newspaper suffices for that person's information need. Alternatively, another researcher, one just beginning research on a dissertation on Stanford University's relationship with the electronics industry, might ask the same initial question, but would need to enter into an extensive discussion with the archivist about the variety, depth, and scope of the sources available. During the interview, the archivist can describe the peculiarities of the arrangement scheme and describe the types of records available. Users at the beginning of their research benefit from the archivist's description of the sources. It is not too much to say that the outcome of the research project itself may be shaped by the character of the sources and the quality of the researcher-archivist communication.

Conclusion

The principal purpose of an archives or manuscript repository is to serve its patrons. The accessioning, arranging, and describing of records only provide the groundwork for this service. The archivist, the facilitator of access and the intermediary between the patron and the records, must be adept at using interviewing skills, foremost among which is question negotiation. Of course, not all questions require negotiation. Some user queries are to the point and can be answered quite straightforwardly. Still, many questions posed by researchers can not only be complex, but also ambiguous. Additionally, researchers may have difficulty articulating their needs, not an uncommon occurrence. Service to researchers thus requires patience and skill on the part of the archivist. Skill at conducting question negotiation can certainly aid in this service.

This is not to suggest that the reference archivist should become a mechanical robot, programmed to respond in certain ways to guarantee a successful reference transaction. On the contrary, the use of question negotiation is a natural communication technique that benefits both the user and the archivist. An awareness on the part of the archivist of the many complex forces influencing the patron's reaction to the research setting can allow the archivist to view the situation in a new light, with heightened respect and understanding for the user.

Given its importance, then, what can archivists do to prepare themselves to be effective question negotiators? The first thing, of course, is to take advantage of the research already conducted by librarians and introduced in this article. More important, however, we need to adapt the basic research on question negotiation to the unique setting of the archives. To this end, we need more research conducted by archivists. We also need to focus more attention on disseminating question negotiation techniques through conference workshops, in-service training programs, and classrooms. As many archivists have stated, service is the essence of the archival field, and any way we can improve that service to the patron deserves careful consideration.

[43]Sue E. Holbert, *Archives and Manuscripts: Reference and Access* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977).