Interpersonal Communication and Models of Information Seeking Behavior

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Interpersonal communication is often thought of as conversations between people who know each other well—friends, family members, neighbors, or colleagues. Another interpretation, one that I believe to be more inclusive, is that interpersonal communication is conversation between any two people. Even brief, one-time interactions can be examined through the interpersonal lens. When an environment of repeated such interactions exists, as in a library, then the research carried out on interpersonal communication has much potential for understanding and improving those interactions.

My focus today is on the ways that people communicate with others who are functioning within some type of professional role. Such situations include client-attorney interactions, patient-physician consultations, and patron-librarian dialogues. In these situations, both conversational participants behave themselves and toward each other in predictable ways. A great deal of research has been carried out about such situations, much of it in the area of physician-patient communication.

I plan to concentrate on four specific areas of research in communication between physician and patient, and to examine their potential use to librarianship. After that, I will switch my attention to an area of research already firmly entrenched in libraries, that of information seeking. Two models of information seeking behavior will be presented. Finally, I will explore the intersection between these two areas, attempting to define the implications of various information seeking models on interpersonal communication between librarian and patron.

Interpersonal Communication

Communication must be understood as a process, one that includes verbal and nonverbal behaviors, feedback, and reactions. It combines the current communicative behaviors with the relational history of the participants. Interpersonal communication is a complex and rich phenomenon, through which participants endeavor to achieve some goal or goals. Each person has a unique perspective, a communication style, a level of communication competence, and various communication experiences that guide her or his future communications.

Physician-patient communication researchers have looked at the individual characteristics that people possess, at communication style, and at outcomes of satisfaction and compliance. In terms of individual characteristics, researchers have found that a physician communicates differently with each patient, based in part on patient age, level of educational attainment, and income. [1] It would be surprising to

discover that such characteristics have no effect on librarian-patron communication, although librarians usually strive to provide equitable service and valuable information to all patrons regardless of individual differences. It is highly likely that patron age, education, and social status affect how that communication occurs. Such adaptation can be beneficial to the effectiveness of the communication, as long as the librarian has at her or his disposal effective and appropriate communication skills for different patrons. However, inappropriate adaptation to a patron's age, income, or social status may reduce the effectiveness of the librarian. Behavior based on stereotypes, such as automatically speaking loudly to an older person, will likely have few positive and many negative consequences for that interaction.

Another individual characteristic studied is locus of control. By locus of control, I mean that a person with a high internal locus of control believe that he or she determine outcomes, and a person with a high external locus of control believes that outcomes are contingent on another person, or fate. In the health setting, people with an internal locus of control need to take an active part in the responsibility for their health. On the other hand, people with an external locus of control become more anxious when physicians use a mode of communication that implies shared responsibility. These people may do better when the doctor assumes an authoritarian role. [2]

In libraries, a patron with a high internal locus of control will expect to retain control of the information search process. Such a person may have a strong desire to learn how to use various resources, with an eye toward becoming self-sufficient. This person may resent complicated or complex information systems and procedures that foster reliance on library staff. In the right circumstances, a high internal locus of control patron will appreciate what the librarian can teach her or him. In other circumstances, such a patron may develop her or his own information seeking strategies without taking advantage of the expertise available from librarians.

A person with a high external locus of control has the potential to become dependent on library staff for every information need. He may seek out librarians who will tell him precisely what to do or just provide the needed information, and resist strategies to teach him how to do it himself. He will be more likely to follow instructions and to put a great deal of weight in what the librarian says, when the librarian is acting, in accordance with his expectations, in a direct, authoritarian way.

There are other individual, or personality, characteristics that affect interpersonal communication. One such attribute is called "communication apprehension," which refers to anxiety caused by the anticipation of a communication situation. Sometimes called "speech anxiety," communication apprehension can occur in different settings-public speaking, large groups settings, in small groups, and in dyadic situations. Public speaking anxiety is the most common type of apprehension among Americans, but the phenomenon differs for each individual. Research has shown that people with high levels of communication apprehension have more negative feeling toward physicians than do people with low communication apprehension. [3] I have read one study that looked at communication apprehension as a factor in asking library staff for assistance, but because the sample was so small, it is impossible to draw any

conclusions. [4] It is possible, though, that people who are highly apprehensive about two-person communication will avoid such situations. Or, if they must talk with a librarian, their anxiety may prevent an effective exchange. Librarians may lower patron anxiety by providing a reassuring and relaxing conversational environment.

With all these individual differences that affect communication (and there are others not mentioned here), it is difficult to determine how to prepare for such differences. One strategy that many librarians employ when it comes to individual differences is to learn very quickly what characteristics about the patron are important to the communication. For example, if a patron has difficulty hearing, the librarian responds appropriately once that fact is known, but not before. In academic libraries, what the student knows about her or his subject, about libraries, and about how information is organized are important factors guiding a librarian's response to an inquiry. Such knowledge levels must be assessed quickly, though, because librarian student encounters are often so brief and there is little time to get to know the student. A wonderful talent of many librarians is the ability to accurately assess the patron's unique characteristics that will have an impact on the conversation. Such an assessment is made within the first seconds of the conversation, and is refined as the conversation progresses.

The second area of interpersonal research I want to talk about is communication style. This is defined as signaling verbally and nonverbally to the other person how the content of the words should be taken, interpreted, filtered, or understood. [5] Identification of the components of style differ from study to study. One widely-used research instrument in this area identifies nine dimensions of style—dominant, dramatic, contentious, animated, impression leaving, relaxed, attentive, open, and friendly. A person may exhibit behaviors that rank high or low on each dimension. Attentive and friendly generally go together and are opposite to dominant and contentious. Also, dramatic and animated are usually paired opposite to relaxed. [6] These dimensions are part of a person's personal style, and thus do not change very much from one encounter to another without conscious decision.

Communication style can be assessed by researchers using standard instruments, but it is important to realize that each participant in a conversation has perceptions of the other's style, too. Communication style, and perceptions of communication style, may affect the outcomes of a conversation. Patients, or library patrons, may respond more strongly to their perception of the style of the professional than to the information content of the conversation.

In one study of physician-patient communication, style was considered a matter of interpersonal involvement, communicative dominance, and expressiveness. The focus of this study was not so much how styles affected outcomes, but rather that patients differed in their perceptions of the physician's communication style. The different perceptions may occur because physicians alter their natural communication behaviors in response to individual patients.[7] This goes back to the idea of professionals adapting to individuals that they deal with.

Librarian communication style affects many aspects of patron perception. In one study, patrons responded more favorably to librarians with a warm communication style. A high level of warmth resulted in the highest competence ratings from both patrons and other librarians. [8] Style is a complicated issue for librarians, I believe, because the service-orientation of the profession implies that certain communicative behaviors will be displayed when interacting with patrons. For some people, such behaviors may conflict with their natural communication style. It may be helpful for librarians to know about the concept of communication style, and to assess their own styles using standard instruments. Such an understanding would facilitate the development of additional skills for effective communication because as librarians become aware of how they are perceived, they can consciously choose to employ certain communication behaviors.

Another area of research in interpersonal communication is outcomes, specifically satisfaction and compliance. How satisfied are people with the conversations they have? In the physician-patient setting, what communication factors affect patient satisfaction? Studies have shown that when physicians act an affiliative way, are more involved, are expressive, or use positive words, patients are more satisfied with the health care they receive. On the other hand, physician communication behavior that is dominant and controlling leads to patient dissatisfaction. However, patients anxiety mediates such results in that anxious patients prefer their physicians to be involved, expressive, and dominant. [9]

Satisfaction in libraries has received a lot of attention. Patron satisfaction is considered a valuable outcome, particularly when libraries move toward a customer service orientation. While there are many factors that affect satisfaction, such as the nature of the collections and the physical environment, I want to focus here on communication variables. The physician-patient research demonstrates the impact of physician communication styles. Similarly, satisfaction studies in librarianship have shown that warmth, self-disclosure, feedback, and immediacy increase patron satisfaction. [10] It seems reasonable to think that librarian adaptation to individual characteristics will also increase satisfaction.

A second outcome to consider is compliance. In the health setting, the importance of patient compliance with physician instructions is obvious and undeniable. It is also an area of great concern to physicians, and research is conducted to determine what. strategies are the most effective at ensuring patient compliance. A paradox of physician-patient interaction, one that illustrates the complexity of human behavior, occurs when patients choose not to comply-with instructions they seek.

What factors are associated with compliance? Compliance-gaining strategies are used by physicians to increase compliance, particularly task, informational, and personal strategies. [11] Communication features of composure, immediacy, dominance, formality, similarity, and receptivity on the part of the physician also lead to greater compliance. One interesting finding of many studies is that there is little relationship between satisfaction and compliance. [12] Patients who are very satisfied may still be non-compliant with physician instructions.

Compliance is an unknown variable in library research, yet it holds much potential. Persuasive communication, where one person is trying to alter the thoughts, feelings, or behaviors of another, does occur in libraries. A patron may wish to have the librarian order a particular book, or deliver some needed information. If these requests fall clearly within the parameters of service offered at that library, then compliance is not really an issue. It is when the patron and the librarian have competing goals that the situation gets interesting, from a compliance perspective. When a student wants information given to her or him, and the librarian wants the student to learn how to find such information, then each may employ compliance gaining as well as compliance resistance strategies.

Measuring patron compliance as an outcome can provide information that supplements the many satisfaction studies that have been done. In certain interactions, patron compliance is clearly an appropriate goal for librarians to have. A great deal of communication research on compliance-gaining strategies and tactics has been done, mostly in settings where people know each other personally, and in educational settings. It would be interesting and useful to adapt some of those studies to the library environment. It would also be informative to see how patron compliance or non-compliance affects eventual success (or lack of success) in the information seeking process.

What I have tried to do in this discussion of interpersonal communication is present some threads of research in the area of physician-patient communication and to suggest some implications of the research for libraries. Study of interpersonal communication is grounded in theoretical development and is part of an emerging social science, that of communication science. For three decades, researchers have been applying what is learned about interpersonal communication to the physician-patient environment and it is time to apply such knowledge to librarian-patron interaction as well. Individual characteristics, such as communication apprehension, communication style, patron satisfaction, and patron compliance, are all areas that deserve attention from librarians and library administrators.

Models of Information Seeking Behavior

I would now like to turn to an area of research that is well known to librarians—that of information seeking behavior. Understanding what library patrons want, how they attempt to fulfill an information need, how they make decisions about information sources, what their preferences are—all of this is of interest to librarians. Researchers look at this process in a variety of contexts. In the most general terms, we can think of people going through a process of information seeking when they "find themselves in situations where they must make a decision, answer a question, locate a fact, solve a problem, or understand something."[13] In an academic setting, students often have an information need created for them in the form of assignments to complete or exams to pass.

Several assumptions guide current research in this area. One is that people with information needs have a nearly limitless number of sources to which they may turn. The library is only one possibility—other places include another person or group,

governmental offices or other institutions, personally owned resources, and, increasingly, the World Wide Web. Additional assumptions are that information is subjective rather than objective, that people are active and not passive recipients of information, and that people's thoughts about the information seeking process should be studied. [14]

Early investigations into information seeking behavior were based largely on a systems perspective. Areas studied centered around patron use of a system, preferences for system displays, and success with the system. More recently, studies have focussed on the person (whom we cannot call a patron at this point, because they may never interact with a library). Various models have been developed to describe, explain, and predict information seeking, and I will briefly present two of those models to you. I have chosen one model that represents a very general approach, and one that is directly relevant to academic libraries.

James Krikelas has developed a model based on the elements of many user studies. [15] The model begins, as might be expected, with an information need, which is assumed to be consciously recognized by the person. One may choose to act upon the need, or to defer action until some later time, or forever. If action is deferred and the need is not yet clearly defined, the person may follow a path of general information gathering, which is defined in this model as activities in which information is "accepted and held in storage to be recalled upon demand." Examples of this type of activity include keeping up with the literature, or becoming familiar with systems or sources that may prove valuable in the future. Needs may also be deferred because they are not critical, or because the cost of meeting the need is higher than the cost of having the need go unmet.

Once a person decides to act upon an information need, they must choose an information source. Internal sources include one's memory, one's personal files, and direct observation. External sources may be chosen, also, including interpersonal contact and the recorded literature. Studies have shown that when people use external sources, they prefer interpersonal contact, possibly when they believe their sources to be knowledgeable and sensitive to the situation. People also show a strong preference for sources that are convenient or easy to access.

The final aspect of the model developed by Krikelas is that of information giving. It is recognized that for some people, such as academics, information needs may be created by the goal of shared or published communication. This goal can be considered a need-creating event.

The model is useful because it brings together so many elements of information seeking. It is clear that libraries play a very small role in the information lives of most people most of the time. If libraries seek to heighten their profiles, to be more customer oriented, or to prove their value to the community, than they may wish to elevate their standings in the source preference category. How can this be done? The answer may lie in closer examination of how sources are chosen. If convenience is important, how can libraries become more convenient, yet not lose all the structure and organization that makes them so admirably suited to their role as repositories of

the acquired knowledge of humankind? I believe this is a fascinating and very complicated question, if a bit off-track for this presentation, and I would refer those who are interested to a work by a reference librarian at the Library of Congress. His name is Thomas Mann, and he presents some interesting solutions in a book called Library Research Models: A Guide to Classification, Cataloging, and Computers.[16]

Moving on to the second model of information seeking, let me first say that this model has specific applications to the academic or school library setting. The model was developed by Carol Kuhlthau, who studied the processes students go through when writing term papers. [17] The unique aspect of this model is it's inclusion of affective dimensions, in addition to the more usual cognitive and behavioral dimensions. In Kuhlthau's model, people work their way through a series of stages. Initiation is the recognition that an information need exists and this task may be accompanied by feelings of uncertainty and vague thoughts about the information need. The second stage involves the selection of the general topic or approach. Optimism may be the dominant feeling as this stage nears completion, and actions center on seeking background information. Next is the task of exploration, which Kuhlthau identifies as "often the most difficult stage for users and the most misunderstood by intermediaries." The user becomes confused, doubtful, and uncertain. Uncertainty lies in two areas, that of learning about the chosen topic area, and that of using the necessary information systems.

Formulation is the fourth stage in this process. Here, the student focuses the project, based on information gathered and a growing conceptual understanding of the topic. Confidence and interest increase. The fifth stage is collection, where a concentrated effort is made to pull together relevant materials. These stages lead, finally, to presentation, when the search for information is completed and the problem resolved. The accompanying feelings are often ones of relief and satisfaction.

This model emphasizes information seeking as a process. It allows us to recognize that the three experiences of cognition, behavior, and affect are equally important to the person in the midst of information seeking. The explicit acknowledgment of the feelings that commonly accompany such a process offer insight into what students are experiencing as they work on term papers or other lengthy projects. It is clear that by giving closer attention to an experience not usually considered in libraries, that of emotion, the potential exists to provide added support.

Both models offer opportunities for librarians to be better informed about what patrons (and potential patrons) expect and desire in terms of information services. Using them, we can anticipate patron behavior and position ourselves to be more responsive to information needs. The models also offer an opportunity to apply what we have learned about interpersonal communication to achieve greater effectiveness.

I would like to come back, now, to the topic of interpersonal communication. We have seen in the Krikelas model that many people prefer direct contact when they seek external, as opposed to internal, sources. Krikelas suggests that people see librarians not as a source for personal contact, though, but as an intermediary between them and the recorded literature. If that is so, then our task is a large one. We must respond to

patrons in a personal way, and let them know that we are doing so. We must use all our interpersonal resources, including knowledge of locus of control, communication apprehension, and communication styles, to respond effectively. In the Krikelas model, people have preferences for their sources of information. If the library wishes to improve its ranking within those preferences, than it must take full advantage of the interpersonal contacts that come its way.

The Kuhlthau model establishes additional opportunities for incorporating awareness of interpersonal communication. To my knowledge, no one has investigated the relationship between the information search process and individual communication differences, but I think a bit of speculation is appropriate here. For example, if we know that a student is in the exploration stage of the information search, and therefore is very confused, and he or she exhibits signs of high communication apprehension, then we can see the potential difficulties in working effectively with that person. We may adapt our communication style, or provide a calm, reassuring environment in order to help the student through that phase. On the other hand, a person with a high internal locus of control, who believes that
outcomes depend on his or her own actions, will grow frustrated during the exploration phase. The best response to such a person may well be to establish credentials as quickly as possible in order to create a feeling of trust and a willingness listen to advice and suggestions.

In terms of communication style, a student who is normally dominant and contentious may grow more so during certain stages of the information search process. For example, as he or she enters the collection phase, attaining greater confidence, the dominant style may become more pronounced. People with an attentive and friendly style may not show their uncertainty or anxiety during the initiation stage, making it more difficult to respond adequately to their feelings as well as their questions.

In closing, I submit that the models of information seeking provide fertile ground for exploration and clarification of appropriate communication strategies. Certainly, the research on interpersonal communication in the physician-patient setting has much to offer librarianship. What insights are possible? I hope to have offered a few today, and encourage you to consider how interpersonal communication, in combination with information seeking models, can reveal new strategies for the provision of effective library service.

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