
Preface and Acknowledgments

This book is written for researchers and educators exploring a class of activities that can be labeled as “intermediation services,” a term that encompasses a variety of interpersonal question-answering scenarios. In addition to researchers, the findings reported in this work will be of interest to administrators and practitioners in institutions that provide question-answering services to a user community, as well as students who are preparing to undertake such duties. The specific context for the research presented here is reference service in public libraries. We, the authors, believe that the factors found to influence the quality of service in this study can inform our understanding of many different information environments outside the public library.

Given the large number of variables that affect the dynamic, complex social interaction that occurs during the reference transaction, the concept of attempting to map and measure the reference process is daunting if not impossible. The subtitle of this work refers to the more conventional approach to understanding the reference transaction. Essentially, many practitioners comment that they learned little about the process of question answering in graduate school, and most of what they know about the reference work was acquired on the job. In short, we almost rely on an apprenticeship model to pass on the “craft” from one generation of professionals to the next. Without necessarily criticizing the importance and value of experiential learning in this area, which we do believe is essential to gaining mastery, this work is an attempt to advance understanding of the question-answering process, also known as intermediation, by describing a model of the reference transaction supported by empirical evidence that is capable of predicting service outcomes from a given set of conditions.

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