Interview with an Information Seeker

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An Interview with a College Information Seeker

Topics and methods used for information seeking vary widely from person to person. Whether it is a student researching for an assignment, someone searching for a new job, or a consumer deciding what is the best product to buy, they all go about their search differently. This study explored the thoughts and actions of a college student researching and writing a paper for a class assignment. By interviewing an information seeker and comparing the findings to the theories in the text, one can have a clearer view of how these ideas can be applied and even provide options for expanding assistance in the library environment.

During the interview, neutral questioning was used to allow the seeker to describe the search process she used in her own words. The questions were open-ended to allow the subject to describe what she did without indicating whether the information was right or wrong. When asked to describe what kind of learner she is, such as visual or auditory, she responded by saying she is a visual learner, she tends to think in pictures. That being said, when asked to diagram her thoughts and steps during the information search from the time the assignment was given to when the information search was complete, the subject said this method was familiar to her because it is similar to the way she thinks about problems and projects much of the time.

First the seeker discussed what prompted the need of her information search. The student was assigned to perform a writing response required by a professor of an Arthurian Literature class. Although the assignment was simple according to the initial requirements, the student ended up using it as a class presentation later on. The topic selection for the students’ response had to do with a personal interest and prior experience related to the topic. The student had been assigned to read the book titled Njals Saga, and for her project she decided to read the Norwegian translation of the book. When reading the two versions she found some discrepancies in the translation from Norwegian to English. Her findings led her to perform additional research to find out the reasoning behind the different translation. The student had studied Norwegian in prior years, and used her interest in the language to tailor the assignment to fit her interests. This fits with what Kuhlthau discusses in chapter five of Seeking Meaning, in how “when given the opportunity, [students] designed topics that were meaningful to them,” (Kuhlthau, 2004).

Once she chose the topic, the only person the student discussed it with was the instructor in order to get approval and focus for the project. After she created a preliminary thesis for her search she worked on finding her resources. During the search her methods of information gathering included using the library catalogue to search for and locate books and articles on her subject. She also searched the web and bookmarked sites she felt had useful and reliable information. The researcher analyzed the material she found by examining the date of publication to get the most recent information. She also researched the background of the novel’s translator to determine the reliability of the translation in question. She felt that this was important to consider what experience and background the translator had before moving forward with her reading.

The interviewee said she experienced no barriers during her search; as the information search progressed she was able to tie her findings together to allow her to develop her thesis and move forward with the assignment of writing her paper and creating a presentation related to it. There was no need for consulting with library staff because the student felt the technology at the library, particularly the online catalogue and its search system, allowed the researcher to find the information on her own.

Although the assignment and subsequent information search described above was relatively simple, in looking back on the information behavior models one that stands out as being relevant in this situation is Johnson’s Model. Johnson’s model describes “antecedent factors that motivate a person to seek information” (Case, 2008). Of the four personal relevance factors mentioned in the model, direct experience and salience applied the most in this example. The fact that the student in question had previous experience studying the Norwegian language, in addition to having studied oversees, led her to take an assignment from one class and link it to another of her interests and studies. During her reading, the subject found discrepancies in the translation of the novel, which prompted an information search to discover possible reasons behind such discrepancies. If she hadn’t had sufficient background knowledge in Norwegian to fully understand what she was reading, it would have been more difficult to pick out the relevant information she needed for the project.

Another model that should be discussed in this example is Krikelas’ Model. In the discussion of this model, Case explains that “Krikelas’ model was prescient in emphasizing both the importance of uncertainty as a motivating factor, and of the potential for an information seeker to retrieve an answer from his own memory or those of nearby persons,” (Case, 2008). In the case of the information seeker wanting the find more information about the discrepancy in the translation of the works, part of the information she needed was already a part of her memory the knowledge and understanding of the Norwegian language. In fact, it was because of her background knowledge of the subject that she noticed the text differences in the first place and led to the follow up research to get answers to her uncertainty.

During the interview, the seeker was asked about how she felt about their information search at different points in the search process. Questions included those such as “Where there any points in your search where you became frustrated in your information search?” and “Did you need help knowing where to go to find information relevant to you topic?” The seeker responded that the search process went smoothly after she knew what her thesis was. It provided her with a focus for her research which helped to form her paper. This process relates to the Bystrom and Jarelin model and their analysis of how a researcher’s view of task complexity plays a part in how information seekers operate as they analyze their search needs and how they approach it (Case, 2008). This was a research assignment for a class, similar to those the student had performed in the past. For the student, she did not see this as a complicated task to undertake, and knew from previous experience with similar tasks how to go about performing this one. Already having what the author refers to as a “mental model” for the search she was starting on (Case, 2008), the seeker was able to relate to what needed to be done fairly quickly, and had no trouble completing the research. Similar to how the author described this motivation in his studies, the student in this example used her previous education relating to her chosen subject, experience in researching, and her good attitude and motivation (high because of the personal interest factors described earlier), to go about her information search. All of these factors played a part in how her information search yielded results in her finding information that satisfied her needs.

In performing this interview and analyzing it by comparing it to models discussed in the text, the exercise helps to show how the models relate to how people think about the research process and how they perform the process involved in information seeking. While a librarian was not consulted as part of this particular library search, further examination of the reasons behind this revealed that a consultation was not necessary due to the search technology provided by the library. The library which the seeker utilized for her research provided a user friendly online search tool which allowed the seeker to locate material in the library relevant to her project. Therefore, the search was able to be completed free of outside consultation. This shows how technology allows people to be more self-sufficient as they access materials within the library. However, this will not always be the case. Not everyone is adept at using technology, and it is those patrons, as the library integrates more material online and in computer systems, who will require help from the librarians. Therefore, librarians will need to be familiar with the variety of online tools the library uses in order to teach patrons how to use the tools to find their materials. Possible areas of assistance could include how to use methods of online searching to either narrow or broaden the scope of information requested in order to find what a seeker is looking for. While some may see the use of online tools as taking over the jobs of librarians, others can see them as new tools that must be understood in order for them to be used to their potential.

By examining the thoughts and methods used by an information seeker during an information search, one can see in action how the various models discussed by Case work in a real life situation. Having a better understanding of how information users think and the methods utilized to find information for everyday tasks allows librarians to help patrons find the information they are looking for to help them fulfill their information needs. Although librarians may not always examine a patrons reasoning behind their searches as closely as was done for this interview, exercises such as this one allow information professionals to gain feedback on how an individual’s research process works, and how they can adjust their services to fit user needs. This will be especially helpful as more technology continues to be integrated into how people use and access information.

References

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