

Critical Thinking, Task Definition and the Reference Interview

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Critical thinking skills are a major part of the learning experience, and students soon learn that making sense of vague assignments is part of a college education. Considering that many college students are not only facing more complex and vague assignments, but also living on their own for the first time, it is obvious there is a great deal of uncertainty that comes along with college life.

In my course on adolescent literature, I like to give some vague assignments that require reflection and thought. Students develop thinking and reasoning skills while trying to establish the exact criteria and meaning of the assignment and learning important content. An example of this type of assignment is to write a paper on the use of adolescent literature across the curriculum. Prior to introducing the assignment, I discuss with the class about how adolescent literature supports and enhances core content in the subject area curriculum.

I purposefully make the assignment seem open-ended; in reality, I am looking for the use of adolescent literature and its impact on content area, which the student should infer from class discussion. I've observed many ways that students navigate through this uncertainty, including asking the librarian for help, questioning the professor, or just guessing. As you may imagine, the last option is the least desirable scenario.

While uncertainty can be built into the assignment, I also find that vagueness arises when a student does not know what he or she needs to complete a task. One real-life example of this occurred recently when a student approached the reference desk asking for help with an assignment. When asked what the assignment was, the response was "biology." Well, the topic of biology is a huge subject, and it was necessary to determine exactly what information about biology the student needed.

Task Definition (Big6 #1) is an essential first step when working with college students and their information needs, particularly when they are struggling with uncertainty. To lead both the student and myself out of uncertainty, I asked him a few probing questions, which addressed the sub-questions of Task Definition. These questions are:

1.1 Define the information problem

1.2 Identify information needed in order to complete the task (to solve the information problem)

After a brief conversation and a few questions, it became clear the student's topic was actually much narrower than he originally indicated. The student was actually assigned a research paper on the hellbender. To satisfy your curiosity, a [hellbender](#) is a large, and may I say ugly, salamander found in North America that favors large, rocky-bottomed streams (U. S. Department of the Interior, 2002). Hellbenders hide under rocks in the daytime and eat small fish during the night. After that reference encounter, I learned all I would ever need to know about hellbenders, and the student got the information he needed to eliminate his uncertainty.

There is a huge difference between a research paper on biology and one on the hellbender. One is a topic so broad it could never be covered in a single assignment, while the other is far more manageable. Once we established the assignment was one the student could do in this lifetime, the information seeking strategies became clear and the student went merrily on his way toward discovery.

Establishing Task Definition Through the Reference Interview

Although the story of the hellbender may be a bit extreme, it is no exaggeration that it is often necessary to help college students identify and clarify their information needs. To this end, reference librarians conduct a reference interview, a set of questions that help to draw out the information need when it is unclear. One does not always know the exact question or questions that will be needed, as one question can lead to an answer, which in turn, leads to further questions. The questioning process, which is sometimes lengthy, detailed and circular, is an important step in Task Definition.

The Reference and User Services Association of the American Library Association defines a reference interview as “an information contact that involves the use, recommendation, interpretation, or instruction in the use of one or more information sources; or knowledge of such sources, by a member of the reference or information staff” (2004, pg 1). In other words, successfully assisting a student in Task Definition involves the student working toward identifying his or her information needs and the reference librarian participating in the same process through questioning and feedback.

The process of Task Definition can also be impacted by the type of information product the assignment demands. For instance, if a research paper is the expected outcome, the librarian may identify specific databases in the information seeking strategy portion of the process as the information contained in a database will better meet the demands of a research paper. A presentation, on the other hand, may require statistics or diagrams contained in alternative reference materials such as Web sites.

Conducting Your Own Reference Interview

While my experience is from the world of academic libraries, a librarian in any setting can employ the tools of the reference interview to help a patron establish Task Definition. I find the following list of questions particularly helpful:

- What is the topic of your project?
- Why is the information needed?
- What class is it for?
- What is the length of the assignment?
- What resources have you already checked?
- What type of project are you conducting? Research Paper? Presentation? Speech?

Please keep in mind this list is not a script. Just like the Big6 itself, a reference interview is a flexible, iterative process that adjusts to meet any information need.

The reference interview is conducted in a positive manner, with the librarian exhibiting communication skills that are friendly, pleasant and encouraging. Allowing the student to state their information need in their own words, then rephrasing the question provides feedback and assists with Task Definition. Often the use of open ended questions allows the student to clarify the need in their own mind. One of the most important aspects of the reference interview is listening skills. In order to assist students with Task Definition, the reference librarian must listen to, and attempt to identify information needs.

Successful Task Definition is the beginning of any information task in and out of the classroom. Information is part of our world, and a large part of the daily life of the college student. To continue with the information problem-solving process, students need to continue the Big6 – in my next column, I will address Information Seeking Strategies. Until next time, may all your steps be Big6 steps!

Reference List

RUSA. (2004, July 27). [Definitions of a reference transaction](#). Retrieved April 24, 2005.

United States Department of the Interior. (2002, September 30). [Hellbender](#). Retrieved April 24, 2005.