

## NEUTRAL QUESTIONING: A NEW APPROACH TO THE REFERENCE INTERVIEW

by  
Brenda Dervin and Patricia Dewdney

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### CAUTION:

This version of the paper is a pre-publication version. For final publication, some editorial corrections and changes have been made; however, the main points remain the same.

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One of the most important tasks of a librarian who acts as an intermediary between the inquirer and the system is query negotiation—determining what the inquirer really wants to know. This task has been described by Taylor as one of the most complex acts of human communication. [1]

Although courses in interpersonal communication are becoming more prevalent in education for librarianship, there appears to be no systematic approach to teaching librarians how to conduct the reference interview. One fundamental reason for this may be the lack of an appropriate theoretical model for teaching interview techniques. In essence, what is available to the educator is a great deal of common knowledge about traditional interviewing approaches plus a potpourri of humanistic alternatives documented in library science literature. [2]

The typical approach to interviewing attempts to match users to the resources. It builds on the user's first statement by asking a series of closed questions (i.e., questions which can be answered with "yes" or "no" or a specification of "this" or "that"). These closed questions are used to identify which of the system's resources the user needs and are typically arrayed along the dimensions of the system's storage and retrieval categories, such as subject or keyword, author, title, or format. In an empirically based study of the public library reference interview, Lynch discovered that librarians most frequently ask closed questions dealing with subject definition or bibliographic description. [3] Others have asked whether this traditional approach presents obstacles to finding out what users really want to know, and have recommended a variety of alternative approaches and techniques such as transactional analysis, [4] sensitivity training, [5] role theory, [6] active listening, [7] and the use of open questions. [8] Some very substantial research has been done by Jennerich, [9] Gothberg, [10] and Auster & Lawton [11] to determine the various effects of incorporating interviewing techniques derived from other disciplines into the librarian's communication behavior.

The fact remains, however, that neither the traditional nor alternative approaches takes explicit account of the nature of information, information-seeking behavior, and the goals of information services. While some basic communication techniques are clearly useful to librarians, the models from which they are drawn do not provide a coherent theoretical perspective for the

choice and ordering of techniques in an interview where the librarian needs to find out enough about the user's information need in order to make the system responsive to that need.

Recently, a promising conceptual framework has emerged from a thirteen-year programmatic series of studies developed to assess information needs and uses in a wide variety of contexts. [12] This paper describes that model and a related technique for interviewing library users: neutral questioning.

### **THE THEORY: "SENSE-MAKING"**

Since 1976, Brenda Dervin and her colleagues have developed and refined a set of theoretic premises and methodologies that are now grouped under the general label of "Sense-Making." [13]

Briefly, the approach posits that information-seeking and information-using occur when individuals find themselves unable to progress through a particular situation without forming some kind of new "sense" about something. The information needs are thus situationally bound. This would seem to make them unbearably unique and filled with all sorts of details too myriad for any professional to deal with reasonably.

However, Dervin (whose intent has been to develop a theory useful to practitioners) has proposed ways of looking at information-seeking and -using that direct both the researcher and the practitioner to relevant, universal aspects of the uniqueness. These aspects are characterized as universal because, while their particular natures vary from situation to situation, they are generically present in all sense-making situations.

The Sense-Making model isolates these universals by focusing on "movement through time-space," which underlies all information-seeking and -using situations. Information-seekers appear to be stopped in the "movement" and wanting to "move" again. The "movement" involved may be physical or cognitive.

Three crucial elements in the process are the *situation*, the *gap*, and the *use*. The situation refers to those events in a person's life that create the context for a lack of sense, or a gap, i.e., an occurrence that raises questions. The gap, seen only in the mind's eye, is translated into question form during the reference interview, and the answer to the question may be seen as a bridge across the gap. The third element of the model is the use that is made of the answer—what the seeker/user hopes to do after crossing the bridge. These three elements are specified in the Sense-Making approach as the *situation-gaps-uses model*.

In the model, all three elements are seen as separate but related elements of a triangulation of the sense-making process. Thus, for example, the gaps individuals face (i.e., the questions they have) depend upon the way in which they see the situation and how they are stopped. The kind of answers they want is dependent on how they expect to use or be helped by the answers.

The picture of information that emerges from these studies is fundamentally different from the more prevalent concept of it as a commodity: this postulates that information is an autonomous object that can be stored, accessed, and transferred. From the alternative perspective proposed

here, information does not have an independent existence but is rather a construct of the user. [14]

Information-seeking may therefore be better described as sense-making—the new sense that people make when they are attempting to progress through situations that arise in their lives. It follows that “information” that helps one person at a particular time and place may not help another. It may not help even that same person somewhat later, by which time he or she may view differently the situation that gave rise to the original question. Librarians are quite familiar with the question that appears to change even in the course of the reference interview.

Other researchers in information science also argue for the uniqueness of each information need and the subsequent implications for interviewing techniques. Donald Walker, discussing the assumptions underlying the development and evaluation of information retrieval systems, states that: “It is possible, of course, that even though people formulate similar queries, they would not find the same material relevant. Information is not intrinsic in the data. . . . Rather, the value for the user is a function of the way the data satisfy that person’s needs.” [15] Similarly, Douglas Zweig points out that the librarian needs: “a stance toward the client and a dynamic tool that will allow us to travel along with the client for a while so that we can see the problem in the same way as the client does.” [16]

An unpublished study by Dewdney suggests that experienced librarians see this constructivist model of sense-making behavior as intuitively reasonable. [17] In this study, which was designed to discover the librarian’s cognitive processes during a reference interview, seventeen public librarians provided detailed accounts of recent troublesome reference interviews. A content analysis of the accounts indicated that, in a successful reference interview (one in which the librarian felt that he or she finally understood the user’s need fully), the librarian tried to find out the situation behind the query and the intended uses of the information. Librarians reported that although they were reluctant to ask users such questions directly, they almost always found a description of the user’s situation and objectives to be extremely helpful for understanding the kind of information or material needed.

This study also indicated that even experienced librarians were at a loss to explain *why* such questions were productive. They lacked a theoretical framework and, moreover, frequently felt themselves lacking the skills for asking such questions of strangers in the brief time available during the reference interview. Instead, they reported that they relied heavily on nonverbal cues, past experience, and “instinct.”

What seems to be needed is a method of teaching librarians to use skills in an intentional and consistent way that many experienced librarians sometimes use anyway, but in an unconscious and haphazard way. Hence, this paper argues the usefulness of the neutral questioning technique, the interviewing strategy based on the Sense-Making approach.

### **WHAT IS NEUTRAL QUESTIONING?**

Neutral questioning is a strategy for asking questions during interviews where the professional needs to find out what the user or client really wants. The strategy was developed deductively from the core theoretical premises of sense-making and was tested inductively during thirteen

years of research. The term “neutral questioning” was first used by Dervin in 1981 to describe specific communication techniques taught at workshops for practicing librarians. The essence of the strategy is that it enables the librarian to understand the query from the user’s point of view.

For present purposes, the format of the librarian’s questions may be classified as closed, open, or neutral. Closed questions such as “Is this for a project?” or “Do you want American or Canadian authors?” limit the expected range of response to a “yes”/ “no,” “this” / “that” answer. Regardless of the interrogator’s intent, a closed question always restricts the freedom of the user’s response. For example, what if the user wants neither American nor Canadian, but Argentinean or Japanese authors? Or what if the query’s relationship to a school project is not the relevant aspect for the user? All closed questions involve a judgment already made by the librarian of what is relevant to the user. Frequently, the closed question also involves an attempt by the librarian to match the user to the more familiar parts of the system.

Open questions such as “Tell me more about topic X” allow users to respond in their own words and do not limit answers to the narrow range of choices presented by the closed question: open questions are invitations to talk. As such, they free themselves from the system-oriented constraints of closed questions. Their drawback is that they elicit conversation that is irrelevant as well as relevant to the interview.

Neutral questions are a subset of open questions. Open in form, they guide the conversation along dimensions that are relevant to all information-seeking situations. The neutral questioning strategy directs the librarian to learn from the user the nature of the underlying situation, the gaps faced, and the expected uses—i.e., the three elements of the Sense-Making model. Figure 1 lists some examples of neutral questions that assess each of these three elements. In all cases, the neutral questions are open in form and structured in content terms that invite the user to talk about specific elements—situations, gaps, uses.

**To assess the situation:**

- Tell me how this problem arose.
- What are you trying to do in this situation?
- What happened that got you stopped?

**To assess the gaps:**

- What would you like to know about X?
- What seems to be missing in your understanding of X?
- What are you trying to understand?

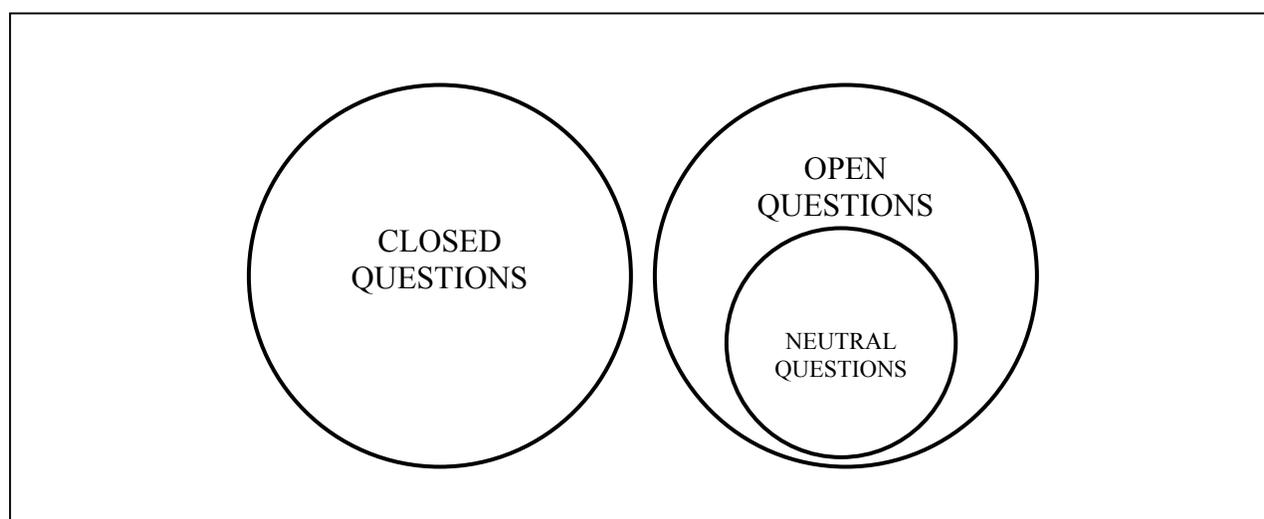
**To assess the uses:**

- How are you planning to use this information?
- If you could have exactly the help you wanted, what would it be?
- How will this help you? What will it help you do?

**Figure 1: Examples of Neutral Questions**

In essence, then, neutral questioning provides the librarian with a tool for controlling the nature of the reference interview. At the same time, the technique provides users with control—with the freedom to unfold their stories in a human way—and while helping the librarian to avoid premature diagnosis, allows users to retain control over the description of need and directs the interaction to the most pertinent aspects of the users' experience. Neutral questioning is therefore user-oriented rather than system-oriented and differs radically from traditional questioning that focuses on expanding or narrowing the subject, bibliographic details, or format of the material sought.

Figure 2 shows the relationship of the three kinds of questions—closed, open, and neutral—to each other. Examples presented in table 1 are hypothetical interviews that illustrate the differences. Example A illustrates the traditional use of closed questions, example B is a modification using open questions, and example C uses neutral questions.



**Figure 2: Relationship of Closed, Open, and Neutral Questions**

**Table 1:  
Three Types of Questioning in the Reference Interview**

In each case, the user's initial question is: "Do you have anything which gives details about large corporations?"		
A. Closed Questions	B. Open Questions	C. Neutral Questions
Do you want annual reports?	What sort of details do you want?	If you could tell me the kind of problem you're working on, I'll have a better idea of what could help you.
Are these national or international companies?	What do you mean by large?	What would you like to know about large corporations?
Are you looking for a particular company?	What corporations are you interested in?	Tell me a bit about how you plan to use this information.

It is not the intent of this article to propose that only neutral questions be recommended. According to the Sense-Making approach, communication strategies are themselves situationally based; different strategies are more likely to lead to certain consequences, and the wise practitioner selects strategies based on intent, watches closely to see how they are working, and modifies as necessary. Closed, open, and neutral questions are all options and all appropriate under different circumstances.

It is important to emphasize again, however, that closed questions restrict the freedom of the user's response. When asked too early in query negotiation, they always rest on assumptions the librarian has made. This is true when the focus of the question is on the system, as in these examples collected from practitioners:

*User: Do you have any books on Renaissance painters?*

*Librarian: Do you want examples of actual paintings or a biography?*

*User: Do you have any books on marriage?*

*Librarian: Do you want an illustrated or unillustrated manual?*

In the first example, the user really wanted to know how to translate the metric dimensions of a poster into inches. In the second, the young man wanted to know whether to wear gloves at his father's wedding.

Even when closed questions are used in an attempt to get to the heart of the user's situation, gaps, and uses, the assumptions behind them are often wrong and hence dysfunctional or even offensive, as in these examples:

*User: Do you have any comparisons of cars?*

*Librarian: Are you going to buy a car?*

*User: Do you have any information on herpes?*

*Librarian: Is this for a school project?*

There are many reasons why patrons' initial questions do not provide the librarian with good guidance to their real needs. [18] The reasons are less important than the fundamental understanding that the nature of the communication in the reference interview is such that the librarian needs to do everything possible to avoid assumptions based on initial statements, past experiences, or the user's appearance. Rather, it may help the librarian to think of the user's real query as hidden inside a room to which the user has the only key: to find the key, the librarian must use communication techniques. If the librarian uses communication techniques that are not addressed to the user's key, the resulting interview may be ineffective, i.e., unsuccessful in determining the real need, or inefficient (too lengthy).

No recipe that specifies which kind of question to ask can be provided in advance because the interview situation cannot be predicted. In general, however, neutral questions are useful early in the interview and prevent the librarian from premature diagnosis of the problem. Many

librarians may feel more comfortable starting out with open questions and following with neutral ones; closed questions may be helpful for verifying what the librarian has heard.

Once librarians become comfortable with using neutral questions, they may adapt them and find their own preferred versions. The wording may be changed, as long as the questions are directed at discovering the user's situation, gaps, and expected uses. For example, librarians often find it easier to reformulate the questions as statements which, as White recommends, provides a context for the user comprehension of the interview structure, e.g., "If you can tell me what you are planning to do, I may be able to find more materials"; or "I can suggest other sources if you give me a general idea of how you are planning to use this information." [19]

### **APPLICATION TESTS OF NEUTRAL QUESTIONING**

The concept and technique of neutral questioning has been introduced to over a thousand practicing librarians and information workers through continuing education workshops. In 1981, Dervin began teaching neutral questioning in "Turning Public Libraries Around," a series for California librarians. In all, she has incorporated the technique into eight workshops reaching some four hundred librarians. In 1982 neutral questioning appeared in workshops offered by the School of Library and Information Science, University of Western Ontario, and subsequently, under the sponsorship of the Canadian Library Association and other organizations, in a series of workshops designed by Dewdney and Catherine Ross. These workshops were adapted to the needs of over seven hundred public, special, and academic librarians.

As a result of the workshop experiences, Dewdney undertook as her doctoral research [20] a systematic comparison of the effects of training librarians in neutral questioning with microcounseling, an approach tested by Jennerich with M.L.S. students. [21] The results of this research, which utilized the tape recording of actual reference interviews to replicate Lynch's work, [22] will be available shortly.

In the meantime, informal feedback has been obtained from workshop participants through evaluation questionnaires. The response to the workshops has been, on the whole, enthusiastic. Librarians and other staff who deal with users' information frequently reported that their previous interviewing methods developed through trial and error. Perhaps for this reason, they find helpful the idea that a more systematic way of finding out what people want to know not only exists but can be learned.

The following are two statements from evaluation questionnaires in which workshop participants described what happened during the first week after training, when they tried using neutral questioning:

From a Canadian public librarian:

*The user asked for books on personnel management. I asked: "Could you tell me what you want the information for?" She said that she didn't get along with the people at work and thought if she understood how and office worked, she might do better. I was able to provide materials on interpersonal relations from a self-*

*help format book, and also referred her to [a local employment counseling agency]. She was delighted.*

From a public librarian in northern California:

*A person whose appearance was unlike that of our usual upper-middle-class patrons stepped to the desk and asked for a copy of The Black Stallion. I led him to the area where our books in high demand are kept and was about to say “They’re all out—can I put it on reserve for you?” when I blurted out instead, “What was it that you were going to do with it?” “Well,” he replied immediately: “My buddy and I have a bet and need to know the name of that horse in the movie—you know—Alexander’s horse.” I found the answer in no time, of course, and he was so happy he gave me a big pat on the back.*

In these examples, which represent common sorts of initial questions in public libraries, a literal answer would not have helped the users, given their situations and what they were trying to do. The neutral questions, even when awkwardly put as is sometimes the case when librarians are first learning a new skill, reveal that what seems like a routine query may sometimes mask a complex situation.

Librarians were also asked to report their difficulties with neutral questioning: very few reported negative responses to their attempts. Not all librarians, however, were willing to try neutral questioning on the job. Some felt it was “odd,” “unnatural,” or “awkward.” Others felt it would be useful only when the user was having obvious and extreme difficulties articulating the information need.

A certain amount of resistance to using neutral questioning is perhaps to be expected because it requires librarians to change the way in which they think of information. Zweizig has remarked that “one of the damaging assumptions of the field has been that our primary professional attention must be directed to the information store and not to the clients.” [23] Learning to use neutral questions successfully requires librarians to rethink the paradigm of “information as commodity.” Experiments with the workshop format have demonstrated that theory presentation is a prerequisite to effective use of the skills. Once librarians accept the theory, it also takes effort to change a habitual communication repertoire in which an interview begins with “Have you looked in the catalogue?” and ends with “Is that what you wanted?” A main concern of workshop participants has been that neutral questions will seem too prying and may offend the user. In the workshops, the distinction is made between the “why” questions that sound judgmental [24] and neutral questions that elicit the “why” but leave the user in control. Some of the most useful neutral questions generated in these workshops have been:

*What kind of help would you like?  
What have you done about this so far?  
What would you like this book to do for you?*

Another concern raised at the workshops is whether or not neutral questioning results in lengthier reference transactions. It is true that initially its use may cause the librarian to spend more time

on the query negotiation phase of the interview. Until librarians become comfortable with neutral questions, they tend to prolong the interview—a temporary training effect that decreases with practice. A few librarians with over two years' experience in neutral questioning have confirmed that this approach saves time in the long run because they don't waste time looking for what they guess is wanted rather than what would actually be helpful to the user. Librarians also have a wider range of resources at their disposal, as shown in the examples quoted earlier.

Perhaps more significant is the fact that neutral questioning uncovers needs that may be difficult or time-consuming to meet. As one trainee put it, "The trouble with neutral questioning is that they can tell you what they really want to know and then you have to find an answer. It's much easier to tell them where the 600s are, or that the book they asked for isn't in." The implications of this comment are enormous, raising important questions about the role of the librarian, the nature of library structures, and the relationship of libraries to other societal structures.

## CONCLUSION

It appears from the workshops and research in progress that librarians who are motivated to improve their communication skills *can* learn specific techniques for interviewing users in a way which results in more complete and pertinent descriptions of the user's information need, and that such descriptions enable the librarian to be more helpful.

Although most of the training to date has been done with public library practitioners, neutral questioning seems to be a potentially effective approach for librarians who work in highly specialized settings, including scientific and technical centers, information and referral centers, and children's services. There are clearly extensive applications to the presearch interview for librarians who work with online systems. Furthermore, Dervin's most recent and as yet unpublished work in medical and educational settings suggests that applications extend far beyond librarianship, since all professionals need to know what their clients really want and therefore all face the kinds of interviewing problems discussed in this article.

We need to know much more about the circumstances under which neutral questioning is most helpful, how users react to it, if librarians can maintain the posttraining levels of performance, and its effects on interview time and success. Research to answer some of these questions is underway and may result in the introduction of neutral questioning and its underlying theory of Sense-Making as a systematic component of the curriculum in library education.

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