Communication: Maybe A Two-Way Street

Jerold Nelson is an assistant professor emeritus at the School of Librarianship at the University of Washington in Seattle (“UW Faculty”). It’s a strange title, but that he was able to stay at the University of Washington, certainly a desirable location, from 1973, when “Faculty Awareness and Attitudes Toward Academic Library Reference Services: A Measure of Communication” appeared in *College & Research Libraries*, until the present suggests that he has earned respect at his school. Nelson received his PhD from the University of California at Berkeley in 1971 and must have begun teaching at the University of Washington at around that time. I’m guessing that he wrote “Faculty Awareness” in order to gain promotion at his school; his motivation might be what Babbie would call “involuntary” (44).

Babbie would also ascertain that the main purpose of “Faculty Awareness and Attitudes” is explanatory, rather than exploratory or definitional (126). Nelson poses the question of why faculty members—his units of analysis—do not take advantage of the services offered to them and to their students at university libraries. Deductive reasoning leads Nelson to his hypothesis, that faculty members do not take advantage of available library services because they are unaware of them. The reason faculty members are unaware of these available offerings, Nelson postulates, is because of ineffective communication between faculty members and librarians.

Nelson’s supporting evidence comes from the results of his self-administered survey of 1,067 full-time faculty members at six institutions in the California State college and university system. Chief among his reasons for believing that poor communication leads to a lack of faculty understanding and appreciation of library services is his finding that “the number of
people who approved of a service was larger than the number who had known the service was already available” (Nelson 273). At University A, for example, 64 percent of full-time faculty members are aware that instructional bulletins and handbooks exist at their university’s libraries; 87 percent, on the other hand, have a “favorable attitude” toward these items. Additionally, 74 percent of faculty members at University A are aware that their university libraries provide library instruction for classes; 81 percent have a favorable attitude toward such instruction. Nelson makes a cognitive jump at this point, hypothesizing that, because faculty members approve of a certain service, they would utilize it, or encourage their students to utilize it, if they knew it existed at their institutions.

Nelson chose to conduct a cross-sectional, one-time study of the faculty members. Alternatively, he could have done a longitudinal study, to see if in fact the faculty members’ knowledge of or beliefs about reference services changed over time. Nelson surmises that it is significant that associate and full professors are more aware of library services than instructors (270). However, there are reasons beyond length of time affiliated with a particular institution that full professors might be more aware of available services than junior faculty members; for example, librarians might be more willing to perform services for high-ranking professors than they would for temporary instructors. Nelson could also have done a panel study, observing the same group of tenure-track faculty members as they advanced through the ranks, or he could have done a cohort study, for example, studying different groups of assistant professors at different times.

Nelson could have used an in-person or telephone survey, which might have increased his response rate but been expensive (at least as far as time is concerned), and the questioner him- or herself might have been more likely to have affected the subject’s responses. The 1992 edition
of *The Practice of Social Research* does not discuss email or Internet surveys. While less expensive even than regular mail surveys, email surveys might prove biased by limiting the sample to those faculty members who regularly read their email.

Nelson’s excellent response rate from his faculty-member subjects encourages confidence, although he might have done well to expand his experiment geographically (since it is possible that faculty members and librarians in the California State system differ somehow from their nationwide counterparts).

Nelson could also, of course, have chosen to do field research. He could have taken the role of a complete observer, watching and noting interactions between librarians and faculty members at reference desks, or as a complete participant, discussing real research needs with librarians. As a participant observer, Nelson could have ascertained whether librarians readily divulged the existence of certain services to faculty members in conversation, or whether such topics tended not to come up in discussion. If the faculty member asks about a particular service, for example, does the librarian mention other related services that might also be of use?

I’m thinking of a friend of mine who sells shoes at Dillard’s department store. Her ShoeU training manual tells her that when a customer asks to try on a shoe, she should bring out four pair of shoes: the shoe the customer requested, the same shoe in a different color, a similar but more expensive shoe, and a completely different kind of shoe. Librarians tend to eschew such aggressive and rote sales techniques, but by doing so are they in fact missing opportunities to provide necessary instruction to their patrons?

Nelson could have divided his subjects, or a smaller selection of subjects, into a control group and an experimental group. Working with his subjects in groups could assist Nelson in ascertaining whether faculty members are open to instruction regarding reference services—
whether Nelson’s hypothesis that faculty members don’t utilize certain services because they are unaware of them is valid. A control group of faculty members, for example, might receive no library education, and the experimental group might receive structured instruction about the library’s available services. In this way, Nelson could learn if specific instruction actually makes a difference in what faculty members (a) believe the librarians can offer; and (b) are likely to utilize or to require for their students. Pre-testing and post-testing of the control and experimental subjects could show whether library instruction changes the views of the faculty members toward the library’s services.

It would be instructive to see Nelson’s actual questionnaire. There is a certain artificiality to any experimental situation, because of the impossibility of knowing if the circumstances surrounding the experiment have affected its outcome. For example, it is quite understandable that most faculty members would respond favorably to the concept of receiving answers to factual questions over the phone. As even some responding faculty members pointed out, however, the appeal of some library services would diminish if they had to be paid for out of funds budgeted for needs perceived as more compelling (Nelson 273).

In addition, having “a favorable attitude” in general of the library’s providing, say, answers to specific questions over the phone (as 71 percent of surveyed faculty members do) is one thing; utilizing the service yourself or encourage students to do so is rather another. Nelson might reasonably have asked how often a faculty member who knew about and approved of a service actually used or encouraged others to use it.

Additionally, as far as I can tell, Nelson’s questionnaire does not record the number of respondents who claim knowledge of a particular service but do not have a favorable attitude toward it. Of the total population of faculty members surveyed, for example, 36 percent know
that it is possible at their institutions for librarians to provide answers to “factual questions requiring a search.” For some reason, 31 percent of the total have an unfavorable attitude toward this service. It is not clear how many respondents, among the 31 percent group who disapprove of librarians providing answers to “factual questions requiring a search” actually know that the service is available at their libraries, and whether that knowledge would influence their opinion.

In his Summary of Attitude Responses to Individual Services, Nelson lists three categories of attitude (favorable attitude, unfavorable attitude, no response) to each item on his list of library services. The narrower Likert categories (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) could have been useful in helping Nelson understand just how important certain library services to the subjects. The questionnaire might also have distinguished between providing bibliography services to faculty members and to undergraduates in introductory courses. It would also be fruitful to know whether the questionnaire actually uses the “vertical file” phrase, which is likely to be obscure to most users.

Nelson’s nominal definition of communication suggests a one-way road. Communication between faculty members and librarians is successful, Nelson hypothesizes, if librarians successfully explain to faculty members the services they can provide. Nelson operationalizes the concept of “communication” by measuring how aware faculty members are of services offered by libraries and whether faculty members know that unavailable services really are, in fact, unavailable.

A more general definition of communication is the exchange of meaningful information or ideas among two or more living creatures. My operational definition of communication as it relates to the exchanges of ideas between faculty members and reference librarians is actually more quantitative than qualitative. Looking for indicators of meaningful communication, I
would ask both librarians and faculty members how often and how long librarians and faculty members speak to one another about their research or teaching-related subjects. I would note whether the communication was via email, telephone, or in person, and who instigated the communication.

Before studying the quality of communication between librarians and faculty members, it is important to establish whether, and how much, it occurs at all. Only after measuring the amount of communication that occurred between academic librarians and faculty members would I begin to try to ascertain the quality and effectiveness of that communication.

Nelson’s study attempts to measure how successful academic librarians have been in getting a list of available library services into the hands of faculty members. This is a deceptively simple topic that I believe ought to have been further broken down into smaller studies with fewer variables. Using a more natural and reasonable definition of “communication” than Nelson’s, a faculty member could easily have a high level of communication with a librarian and at the same time not know all the services provided by the library. Additionally, scholars in different disciplines might have very different needs for library support—a mathematician, for example, might have little reason to peruse a handbook describing available library services, or to send her students to the library for a tour and yet make much higher use of interlibrary loan services than a nursing educator. Nevertheless, the mathematician could not be considered to be ignorant of what the library had to offer.

Jerold Nelson’s research question is an important and challenging one: why don’t patrons take more advantage of the full range of services libraries have to offer? Unfortunately his operational definition of communication diminishes the number of possible conclusions his hypothesis is able to draw. Finally, Nelson seems to have squandered a wonderful opportunity,
given the excellent response rate he received to his questionnaire mailings, to provide real answers to this question.
Works Cited

