This article by Carol Collier Kuhlthau discusses the process of how people search for information and the ways those librarians and information professionals can help in aiding that process. The first section talks about how and when a librarian decides to step into ask of a patron or user needs help is based on the “uncertainty principle”. This thought is “based on a principle of uncertainty encompasses the holistic process of seeking and using information from the perspective of the individual user” (128). One of the main thoughts that struck a chord with me is that a librarian must be able to know when “it is helpful to intervene and when intervention is unnecessary” (128). Knowing this will help all librarians be able to pick out patrons who may be struggling in searching for material while others may not be struggling.

The next section discusses the idea of zones of intervention. Theses as Kuhlthau writes, “that area in which an information user can do with advice and assistance what he or she cannot do alone or can do only with great difficulty” (129). With this concept, there are five zones. In the first zone, the patron has themselves figured what the problem is and what information needs be searched for. In the other zones (two through five), the patron may not know exactly what the problem is or what information they need to search for so it is the librarian’s job to figure it out (129). In using different zones, the patron may have “increased self-awareness of the search process may be learned and applied to other new situations of information seeking” (130). Along with five different zones, there are also five different levels of both mediation and education. In the last level of education, the librarian becomes a “counselor” and it is this level that is the discussion of the next section (131).

The lead into the third section of the article talks about a study in which a college student was followed through both their undergraduate, graduate, and finally careers. The women in the study talked about how learning how to search in high school really prepared her for college and I completely agree with this. She also talked about how a women name Sara helped her: “when I asked Sara to do it [search for something], I will give her some key words and she will say ‘well what about this and what about that and let me see what I come up with’ and she will play around with it and then she will get back to me” (133). It would be really awesome if every library could do this for each patron but it is just not feasible. Especially in the way today’s economy is, most libraries have to cut budgets and hours just to stay open.

Finally Kuhlthau talks about the role of the librarian as a counselor and the strategies that could be employed to help patrons in the search process. These include “Collaborating, continuing, choosing, charting, conversing, and composing” (135). Each of these strategies addresses a different need(s) in the search process. They all make sense except for conversing. This does not make sense because shouldn’t the librarian be talking to the patron throughout the process? One of the very good points that Kuhlthau makes is that “counselors need to respect users’ choices and anticipate individuality in the choices made in the search process” (137-138).

I thought it as a very good article overall and I really liked some of the ideas about how to help patrons/people search such as journaling and making charts to see where a search is going. This would be especially helpful for K-12 students, as well as freshman and sophomores in college. There were, however, some issues. The major one that I mentioned above is the idea of using conversing as a strategy for helping patrons search more effectively. In my mind, this should be happening from the moment the patron greets the librarian and continue all the way through the process. The other issue that I had with this article is the fact of having a librarian help a single person out. The way the article is written, the process seems like it would be really drawn out and frankly, most libraries do not have that kind of time, money, or resources to spend a lot of time that the article makes it seems like they would need. Other than that I think most librarians could gain a lot of reading this article as well as implementing some of the strategies into their working life.

Source: Kuhlthau, C. C. (2004). Zones of intervention in the process of information seeking. *Seeking meaning: a process approach to library and information service* (pp. 127-144). Westport: Libraries Unlimited.