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Assessing Reference and User Services in a Digital Age

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> Librarians participating in Oregon's collaborative statewide virtual reference project used an analysis of chat reference transcripts to evaluate librarian performance.
>
> KEYWORDS. Virtual reference, chat reference, evaluation, assessment, transcripts

> This study applied traditional categories used for classifying questions presented at reference desks to online reference services. Questions presented at Penn State's subject libraries were classified as 'Where Is,' 'Troubleshooting,' 'Policy and Service,' and 'Reference.' Definitions and examples were provided to the...

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there were differences in the proportion of questions by categories. This suggests that services have similar, yet distinct, functions and that the type of questions submitted differ between in-person and online and also between e-mail and chat.

KEYWORDS. Question analysis, classification schemes, reference services, e-mail reference, virtual reference

Listening to Our Users: System Migration and the Evaluation of Web-Based Library Services 37

Laurie Probst
Michael Pelikan

At Penn State, a "Tell Us What You Think" user feedback button on the Libraries home page provided a convenient mechanism for users to respond to our system migration and the changes they saw in The CAT, our library catalog. The immediate impact of the new system on our users was dramatic, and included strong criticism from a small, but vocal, minority. Within a few months, however, the complaints and comments about the new catalog moderated and the majority of the e-mail traffic coming into the library switched into questions about library services and requests for assistance.

KEYWORDS. Descriptors, system migration, evolution of user services, user studies, use studies, assessment and evaluation, MIS in libraries

Evaluating Virtual Reference from the Users' Perspective 53

Kirsti Nilsen
Catherine Sheldrick Ross

This article discusses the evaluation of virtual reference services from the user perspective. It is one outcome of a long-term research project, The Library Visit Study, which has been conducted in three phases at the University of Western Ontario for more than a decade. These studies have identified the need for, and essential components of, reference interviews and good reference behaviors. The third phase of this research focuses on the factors that make a difference to the users' satisfaction with their virtual reference experience and whether these are the same or different from the ones we identified as important in face-to-face reference. An examination of user accounts of virtual reference transactions indicates that the reference interview has almost disappeared. Among the reasons identified for staff failure to conduct reference interviews in the virtual environment are: the nature of written vs. spoken interaction; the librarian's perceived need to respond quickly in this environment; and the rudimentary nature of the forms used in e-mail reference. The article includes a list of behaviors that users identified as either helpful or unhelpful and concludes with some implications of the research for good virtual reference service.

KEYWORDS. Virtual reference, evaluation, reference interview, library user studies, field research

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As digital and chat reference services become established as another way to do business, many libraries juggle the delivery of consortial and local virtual reference services. Balancing services without overtaxing staff and resources presents a number of challenges. How, for example, do libraries staff more than one chat reference service in addition to traditional services? Or more critically, how are subject specialists used to their greatest advantage in a multi-type library service? This article explores the benefits and issues of offering service at the statewide and local level based on OSU's experience and describes how OSU responded to these issues.

KEYWORDS. Digital reference, chat reference, virtual reference, digital reference consortia, statewide reference services, multi-type library services, Oregon State University Libraries, L-net, Answerland

STANDARDS AND METHODS FOR EVALUATING VIRTUAL REFERENCE

Virtual reference offers some unique new opportunities for evaluation due to the richness of the transcripts and other automatically collected data. To put evaluation of virtual reference into context, however, libraries should view and evaluate virtual reference as part of the whole of a library's reference service. Holistic evaluation pursues an integrated approach to evaluating the total of a library's reference service.

KEYWORDS. Evaluation, reference services, virtual reference, e-mail reference, chat reference, integration

The Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library, as a county government agency, is required to follow a specific budget planning process in order to obtain funding for library programs and services. One tool of this planning process the "decision unit"-requires advanced planning and continued evaluation of potential and existing library services. Prior to receiving funds for any new service, performance measures must be established in order to measure the success of the service in relation to the public money invested. This article will look at the evaluation process built into the funding of the library's participation in a statewide virtual reference service and the implications for continuation and/or expansion of this service based on continued assessment.

KEYWORDS. Evaluation, assessment, digital reference, virtual reference, reference services

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Between October 2003 and July 2004, the Statewide Virtual Reference Project (a Washington State Library initiative funded by LSTA) developed the Virtual Evaluation Toolkit, or VET. The purpose of VET was to help libraries improve virtual reference services, with resulting increased awareness, usage, and customer satisfaction. VET includes three levels of evaluation tools with information on their implementation and examples of the use of results, along with a generic final report based on three test site evaluations (an academic, public, and special library). The complete manual is available on the Web in order to provide practical and meaningful tools and recommendations that encourage libraries to use them and also to report on their use.

KEYWORDS. VET: Virtual Evaluation Toolkit, virtual reference, service evaluation, evalution criteria, checklists, Washington State Virtual Reference Project

In spite of the explosion of interest in virtual reference and instruction, assessment of digital reference remains relatively uncharted territory in the library literature. What standards exist for online reference and instruction and how can they be used to assess the innovative new merged online reference environment at the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library? Led by co-unit heads from the former San Jose Public Library Main Branch and the San Jose State University Clark Library, the merged reference unit is a unique testing ground for perceived differences between public and academic reference service. Evaluation of both the online and the live merged reference environment is crucial and will be necessary to determine what is working and what is not. This paper will discuss plans for current and future assessment of digital reference including e-mail, live online reference, and online instruction.

KEYWORDS. Digital reference, assessment, online instruction, merged reference, joint libraries, e-mail reference, live online reference, QandACafe, 24/7 reference, TILT (Texas Information Literacy Tutorial)

The Assessing Quality in Digital Reference project is a first step toward understanding the cost of digital reference services in libraries. This article presents three mea-

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sures isolated by project participants as being most useful for their immediate needs: total cost of providing digital reference service, the cost of digital reference service as a percent of the total reference budget, and the cost of reference as a percent of the total library or organizational budget. In addition, it reviews selected outstanding issues in the ongoing question of how to determine the cost of reference services in libraries and offers direction for further study toward a general cost model for information services.

KEYWORDS. Digital reference, cost studies, information service evaluation, reference services standards

ASSESSING LIBRARY INSTRUCTION IN AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

In 2002, librarians at the Utah State University (USU) Libraries were awarded a grant to develop online tutorials. The major design challenge was to create tutorials specific to USU resources and students, including distance learners, while also making them flexible so that other Utah colleges and universities can adapt them for their own needs. The tutorials also needed to address the information behavior of a new generation of students accustomed to using computers and the Internet. While recent studies have begun to address some gaps in our knowledge of the information behavior of the Web Generation, we conducted a needs assessment to help us create a tutorial that more accurately addresses the existing knowledge and behavior of undergraduates at USU. We used multiple methods to determine the learning needs of our audience and to provide guidance for the design process.

KEYWORDS. Online tutorials, needs assessment, undergraduate students, information behavior

to patrons during VRS sessions is different than that provided during face-to-face reference. The Penn State VRS was used as a case study in this assessment. An analysis of a sample of archived Penn State VRS transcripts was conducted to assess the nature and quantity of instruction provided based on the presence of defined instructional elements incorporated in the sessions. The paper discusses

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the similarities and differences in approach to instruction during VRS and face-to-face reference, and how these relate to overall instructional services in academic libraries. The paper also reviews findings of some similar studies cited in the literature. The findings of this study indicate that there is a significant amount of instruction taking place during both face-to-face reference and VRS. Furthermore, the approach to instruction in both reference environments is very similar. However, the VRS system in use at Penn State (LSSI Virtual Reference Toolkit), because of its technological features and capability, has facilitated new and unique enhancements to instructive reference that are not available in face-to-face reference.

KEYWORDS. Virtual reference service–assessment, digital reference service–assessment, VRS–instruction, reference services–instruction, reference services pedagogy, e-reference

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