Seeking Synchronicity: Revelations & Recommendations for Virtual Reference

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Seeking Synchronicity: Evaluating Virtual Reference Services from User, Non-User, & Librarian Perspectives

- Funded by IMLS, OCLC, & Rutgers University
- Four phases:
  - Focus group interviews
  - Analysis of 850 QuestionPoint live chat transcripts
  - Online surveys
    - 137 VRS Users
    - 173 VRS Librarians
    - 134 VRS Non-users
  - Telephone interviews
    - 76 VRS Users
    - 100 VRS Librarians
    - 107 VRS Non-users
Why Not Virtual Reference?

What we learned from non-users:

- Preference for FtF service
- Do not know it exists
- Unknown or unfamiliar format
Lack of Knowledge that VR Exists
VR Non-users Online Survey

“I’ve never used this type of service and never knew it was available—that’s probably why I never tried it.”

(Millennial)
Introduce & demonstrate online alternatives during in-person reference sessions, library use instruction classes & library programs.
Two Views of What’s Effective:
Positive Factors in VR Experiences

Users:
- Convenience
- Comfort with service
- Accuracy

Librarians:
- Ability to leverage complex & specialized knowledge
- Positive attitudes, responses, & feedback
- VR tools & hybrid communication modes
Two Views of What’s Not Effective: Negative Factors in VR Experiences

Users:
• Abrupt, dismissive answers
• Grumpy, ill-informed or uninterested librarians
• Poor wrap-up

Librarians:
• Convoluted & confusing questions
• Rude, impatient &/or disappearing users
• Unrealistic expectations
“I was on the site at 2 or 3 in the morning and it felt personalized. I don’t know, I felt like I was the only person the other person had to talk to and they took the time out.” (User)
Mode for Developing Best Relationship: VR Users & Librarians

“I Can Develop the Best Relationship with a Librarian/User In”

Online Survey

137 VRS USERS
175 VRS LIBRARIANS

- FtF
- Chat

VRS Users

- 70%
- 22%

VRS Librarians

- 86%
- 7%
Making Personal Connections: VR Librarians

Opportunity to Make Personal Connections with Users in Live Chat
Online Survey

175 VRS LIBRARIANS

- Excellent 13 = 7%
- Very Good 35 = 20%
- Good 67 = 38%
Talkin’ bout Generational Differences: Positive Perceptions of VR

Baby Boomers & Millennials:

- Appreciate quick, on-target responses
- Value those “who know their stuff”
- Convenience
- Appreciate personable & friendly exchanges
- Would recommend to others
Positive Perceptions of VR: Millennials

- Immediacy
- 24/7 late-night & weekend availability
- Convenience
- Co-browsing
- Personalized interfaces
- Would recommend VR
- Less intimidating than FtF reference
Why Millennials May Not Use VR

- Fear technology complicated
- Fear of annoying, overwhelming, or pestering
- Trust their own abilities
- Believe they don’t need assistance
- Don’t know it’s available!
Why Older Adults May Not Use VR

- Preference for FtF & personal relationships
- Comfort with library & find it convenient
- Lack experience with other reference methods
- Lack of computer skills & slow typing speed
- Don’t know it’s available!
Intergenerational Recommendations

• Promote VR by marketing & word-of-mouth
• Reassure teens that questions are welcome
• Involve users in VR development
• Encourage users to enter library phone numbers in cell phones for quick reference help
Critical Incident Technique (CIT)

- Flanagan (1954)
- Qualitative technique
- Focuses on most memorable event/experience
- Allows categories or themes to emerge rather than be imposed
Critical Incident Technique (CIT)
VR Users’ & Librarians’ Questions

- Remember 1 specific successful VRS interaction
- Remember 1 specific unsuccessful VRS interaction
- Describe each interaction
- Identify factors that made interactions successful or unsuccessful
What’s Effective: VR Users Value

- Knowledge and accuracy of answers/information
- Positive attitude
- Communication skills
What’s Effective: VR Librarians Value

Relationships with VR Users Who:

- Approach with willingness to explain needs openly
- Are agreeable to receiving help
- Demonstrate ordinary politeness & common courtesy (e.g., use please & thank you)
- Admit lack of knowledge
What’s Effective: VR Users Value

Relationships with VR Librarians Who:

- Offer opinions/advice
- Explain search strategy
- Are less formal (e.g., use chat speak)
- Encourage users during reference encounter
- Use personal greetings
- Let users know when search will take time
- Warn users before signing off/disconnecting
Users who are:

- Impatient
- Rude or insulting
- Unreceptive to suggestions
Unsuccessful VR experiences entailed:

- Abrupt session ending
- Limiting time of session
- Sending users to Google
- Reprimanding user
- Failing or refusing to provide information
Recommendations from CIT Findings

- Positive attitude crucial
- Provide specific & accurate answers
- Take your time
- Pay attention to “close”
- Always be pleasant & polite
What’s Effective: Importance of Query Clarification

- Found to boost accuracy
- Use variety of clarifying questions
- Expect clarifying questions from users
- Use follow-up questions to verify needs are met
What’s Not Effective

- Using “closed” questions in online interactions
- Not clarifying reference questions
Convenience Factor Important

- Ease of the Web
- Online full-text journal articles
- 24x7 availability
- Search engines
Barriers to Convenience

- Difficulty of library systems
- Print articles
- Limited hours, distance to library
Recommendations to Boost Convenience

- Deliver resources 24/7
- Integrate library tools in popular sites
- Provide links & reminders
- Make interfaces more like web browsers
- Accommodate different & personalized discovery & access preferences
- Offer multiple service modes
- Provide opportunities for collaboration
New! Longitudinal Comparison
Question Types & Accuracy

Live Chat Transcripts 2004-2006 (QP1)
- Total QuestionPoint & 24/7 = 651,687
- 850 randomly selected (550 QP & 300 24/7)

Live Chat & Qwidget Transcripts 2010 (QP2 & QW)
- 6/2010 to 12/2010
- Total QP2 & QW = 296,797
- 560 randomly selected (350 QP2 & 210 QW)
Types of VR Questions

- Subject Search
- Ready Reference
- Procedural
- No Question
- Holdings
- Research
- Inappropriate
- Directional
- Reader’s Advisory
Query Type: 2004-2006 vs. 2010

- Subject Search: 35% (2004-2006) vs. 30% (2010)
- No Question: 5% (2004-2006) vs. 0% (2010)
- Holdings: 10% (2004-2006) vs. 5% (2010)
“These are the typical ready-reference or data queries that require only a single, usually uncomplicated, straightforward answer...Who? What? When? Why? Where?” (Arnold & Kaske, 2005).

- Who was Bentonville, NC named after? (QP1 - 147)
- How do I cite a political talk show in MLA format? (QP2 - 013)
- Who won the world cup game between South Africa and France? (QW - 024)
• How accurate are VR librarians/staff in answering ready reference questions?

• Do we see the 55% rule in effect?

(Hernon & McClure, 1987)
Accuracy: 2004-2006 vs. 2010

- Correct: 90% (2004-2006, n=180) vs. 70% (2010, n=168)
- Incorrect: 10% (2004-2006, n=180) vs. 30% (2010, n=168)
- Other: 0% (2004-2006, n=180) vs. 10% (2010, n=168)
A Simple Way to Increase Accuracy

• For 2004-2006, accuracy would rise from **78% to 90%** if VR librarians only...
  - Answered **specific question** asked!

• Seeking Synchronicity urged VRS librarians
  - Before pushing a general info page **make sure** it has **specific & exact** answer to user’s question!

• 2010 sample included far fewer with this error accuracy **90%** (perhaps b/c of recommendation?)
Conclusions

- It’s all about the relationships
- Death of ready reference exaggerated
- To boost accuracy
  - Clarify question
  - Answer specific question
- Convenience is the hook
- Generational differences come into play
- Marketing matters
Cyber Synergy: Seeking Sustainability through Collaboration between Virtual Reference and Social Q & A Sites

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References

http://www.oclc.org/reports/synchronicity/default.htm


QUESTIONS?

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