

The Virtual Librarian

Reference enters the 21st century

By Amy Levine

photo by Brant Bender



Yasmin L. A. Morais, cataloging librarian at the University of the District of Columbia, shares her experience implementing and improving virtual reference at Georgetown University's Law Library.

Program E-2: "Chat 2.0: Renovating Virtual Reference"

Presenters: **Sara Sampson**, coordinator and speaker, Georgetown University Law Library; **Yasmin L. A. Morais**, speaker, University of the District of Columbia.

Academic reference librarians are interested in innovative new ways of making services known and accessible to patrons, especially students. Sara Sampson and Yasmin L. A. Morais explained the study and process they used to renovate the virtual reference services at Georgetown University Law Library.

Sampson also explained the changes she made to the law library's virtual reference service as a result of the study's findings. Sampson was an engaging speaker and expressed her thoughts and findings in a clear and inspired manner. The audience could clearly see her enthusiasm for reference and her wish to create a reference service of the highest quality. Even despite technical issues that left her without a PowerPoint presentation (and her car!), Sampson had no trouble conveying her expertise and analysis.

A Closer Look at Questions

The library's virtual reference originally began as a pilot project in January 2005 but was later expanded to Live Help in spring of that year. At the time of the study, Morais was the resident librarian at Georgetown University Law Library. She explained that it was customary for the resident librarian to conduct a study, so she decided to look into the content analysis of the questions asked by patrons using chat reference.

Morais and Sampson began the content analysis study by looking at every 10th transcript of the chat reference questions and corresponding answers. They studied the transcripts for user type (student, faculty, or alumni) and by query type (ready reference, extended reference, technical, or policy questions). The findings showed that students used chat reference more than faculty and alumni. Students asked 64 percent of all reference questions and asked the most questions in all other query types as well. Faculty members asked more about topics in which they had prior legal knowledge (such as requesting an item by citation) and also had more technical questions. Sampson and Morais tracked the geographic location of the questions by looking at the network where the chat originated. Interestingly, many students asked questions from within the library via virtual chat but chose not to approach a librarian in person.

Sampson noted that the findings were useful in configuring staffing at the reference desk. She had previously thought that many policy or directional questions were asked. If that were the case, a circulation librarian might be needed to staff the reference desk to answer those types of queries. By looking closer at the questions' content, however, she concluded the true nature of the questions made them suitable for a reference librarian to answer. Only 10 percent were circulation-related questions.

Sampson concluded that staff needed continued training in the sophisticated chat reference software in order to take full advantage of all the tools it included. Sampson also exclaimed that "we are asked really tough questions!" While this seemed to be something she had always known, the study proved that the reference questions submitted were very challenging. Sampson discovered that no one person in a reference department knew everything about the contents of the collection or the law itself. There were times when the answers were just plain wrong. Sampson took these wrong answers and used them as training

examples in meetings for the reference staff. She also has newer librarians go through the transcripts as a way for them to learn how to answer questions. As a result of the Sampson and Morais study, the librarians are now required to participate in "small teach-ins" lasting five to 10 minutes on topics of their choosing.

This simple but effective method allows librarians to teach each other the information they know individually.

Challenges and Solutions

Sampson described the differences between chat and in-person reference. The physical cues given as we communicate in person are missing in chat—for example, you can't tell in virtual chat if a person is joking. In addition, virtual patrons cannot see

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whether the librarian is occupied answering multiple questions at the same time. As a result, librarians make an effort to tell the patron on chat whether there will be a delay in helping them.

Sampson also implemented a unique way to assign a reference librarian to watch for chat questions coming through. She decided that chat could be staffed from a librarian's own office. The librarians pass around a stuffed animal in the likeness of a bulldog named Jack who lives on the campus nearby. The librarian babysitting Jack also answers any chat questions that are submitted.

Through this study, Sampson and Morais found out that some questions are too instructional or too in-depth for chat. In response, Sampson implemented a research consultation program to address this issue. Students can have research learning sessions with a reference librarian by appointment. Sampson envisions expanding chat in the future to include the use of webcams to answer questions that require instructional responses.

It was very clear that both of these speakers know their work thoroughly. It was also clear that they used what they learned to improve reference services. I highly recommend the audio program for interested readers to hear the interest, passion, and knowledge conveyed by Morais and Sampson. This is an excellent program that will inspire librarians concerned about improving reference service as a whole and being accessible to patrons through forward-looking methods. ■

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