

Assessing reference and user services in a digital age

Ed. by Eric Novotny

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This indexed monograph has been published simultaneously as *The Reference Librarian*, numbers 95/96, 2006.

This collection of articles has been divided into three sections:

Library case studies and research results

Standards and methods for evaluating virtual reference

Assessing library instruction in an online environment.

In the first section, *Library case studies and research results*, Loree Hyde and Caleb Tucker-Raymond write about *Benchmarking librarian performance in chat reference*, Joseph Fennewald gives an analysis of in-person and online questions in an article titled *Same questions, different venue*. Laurie Probst and Michael Pelikan explain a method used by the Pennsylvania State University Libraries to evaluate their web-based services under the title, *Listening to our users* and focus on changes after a system migration. Kirsti Nilsen and Catherine Ross do the same for the University of Western Ontario Library in an article titled, *Evaluating virtual reference from the users' perspective*, and discover that the reference interview has almost disappeared. They conclude with some implications indicated by the research on good virtual reference services. The section is concluded with an article by Ruth Vondracek entitled, *Balancing statewide and local reference service*.

The evaluation theme in the case studies of the first section is being carried through to the second section, *Standards and methods for evaluating virtual reference*, by M. Kathleen Kern in her article titled, *Looking at the bigger picture: an integrated approach to evaluation of chat reference services*. Money matters are dealt with in *Budget planning and performance measures for virtual reference service* by Andrew Breidenbaugh and *Costing Reference: issues, approaches and directions* by Melissa Gross and others. *The Virtual Reference Toolkit* (a complete manual is available on the Web) is discussed by Buff Hirko.

The third section, *Assessing library instruction in an online environment*, consists of only two articles. Wendy Holiday and others focus on online tutorials in *Instruction in a virtual environment* and Lesley M Moyo discusses the similarities and differences in approach to instruction during virtual reference service and face-to-face reference, and how these relate to overall instructional services in academic libraries in her article titled *Virtual reference services and instruction: an assessment*.

All articles are practical and include valuable instruments, lists of evaluation measures, sample surveys, focus group questions and observation techniques. A summary and keywords are given for each article as well as a bibliography. Authors are affiliated to American or Canadian academic or public libraries or library schools. The monograph is therefore not suitable for the reader interested in e-reference assessment developments and viewpoints in Europe and the rest of the world.

Setting the North American prejudice aside I found the articles extremely useful and thought provoking and would recommend the monograph to South African librarians with a special interest in the evaluation of e-reference services. For example, the resolution of the dilemma of dealing with information literacy in e-reference services is explained in the last section in the article by Lesley M. Moyo, *Virtual Reference services and instruction: an assessment*. Moyo argues that in practice virtual reference has turned out to be just as good an environment for individual library training as face-to-face reference. Depending on software features, eg. co-browsing capabilities, individual library training can be enhanced in the virtual reference environment. Moyo provides a list of the library training benefits of virtual reference services (VRS) on p. 217 and ends the section by saying: "VRS as an instruction tool holds a lot of promise in addressing one-on-one instruction needs, as well as instruction needs of students at a distance". She mentions that a list of attributes of an "instructive reference" session was developed in 2003. At the same time library training statistics at Stellenbosch University Library and Information Service was corrected by adding the number of individual training sessions. Moya

mentions that the experience of Pennsylvania State University Libraries was that most reference questions ended up as time-consuming one-on-one training sessions because information literacy in an electronic environment implies a level of competence to utilise various technology tools and resources. At Stellenbosch we experience the same shift and this should be true for most other South African university libraries.

My conclusion is that the editor and contributors have succeeded in pointing out practical e-reference developments and experiences and in providing answers to a multitude of reference assessment questions. This useful publication brings us closer to the development of standards by which libraries may assess their individual performances in a larger context. I do hope that bodies like ARL, CAUL, SCONUL and locally, CHELSA, responsible for drafting quality measures, will take note of these developments in adopting new and changing outdated standards.

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