

“Why Is The Sky Blue?” : Implementing a Collaborative Virtual Reference Desk Project

Linda Frederiksen, Access Services Librarian
Washington State University Vancouver
Vancouver, WA

Kitty Mackey, Reference Librarian
Clark College
Vancouver, WA

Nicole Campbell, Reference Librarian
Washington State University Vancouver
Vancouver, WA

Roxanne Dimyan, Reference Librarian
Clark College
Vancouver, WA

In July 2002, the Washington State Library awarded LSTA grants to sixteen libraries in the state. Participating institutions included academic, public, and special libraries. The intent of the grant was to encourage collaboration between different library types and to enhance remote access to library resources and services through electronic methods. At Washington State University Vancouver and Clark College, the \$29,000 demonstration project grant is being used to develop a cooperative virtual reference desk service that benefits students at both institutions. The WSU Vancouver/Clark College project involves use of “24/7 Reference” software which provides librarians with the ability to offer reference and instructional assistance to students in an online chat environment. By using the Internet to offer real-time and interactive assistance to students, regardless of location, librarians see an additional mode of access to library resources and services.

Before actual work on the project could begin, many decisions had to be made. What would be the scope of the service? Who would be the primary clientele? How would privacy and confidentiality of user transcripts be handled? What sources would be used? Who would staff the virtual reference desk? What competencies would be required of those staffing the desk? How would the grant award costs and donated time be shared? When would the service be offered? How would students access the service? What technological requirements would be required on both the librarian and user sides?

From the grant award date until the first day of service, tasks accomplished included: software purchase and vendor training, customizing web pages and integrating the new software into current pages, programming scripts and messages, training and scheduling staff, determining a schedule, deciding on policies and procedures and extensive testing of the software. A great deal of grant-related documentation is also required by all stakeholders involved in the project, with quarterly reports due to the Washington State Library tracking costs and activities. During fall term, the WSU Vancouver/Clark College virtual reference desk was open 7 days per week, 21 hours per week, with 8 librarians and reference assistants participating. Our goals during this period were accomplished as we became familiar with the software, finalized interagency agreements and gathered data to help determine how the remainder of the project would proceed.

Some of the issues encountered during this initial phase of the project included patron authentication, software troubleshooting, and use of the service. Because we did not advertise the virtual reference service during this phase, usage was at first disappointing. Following creation of brief course assignments by Clark librarians, however, activity began increasing. The

next phase of the project will include more marketing and assessment. The four major areas for assessment will include management of questions, profiles, site content and statistical reports.

Since this is a new service for both our institutions, we are also looking at the development of quality standards or best practices related to digital reference. Examples of quality standards for virtual reference include: accuracy, satisfaction, courtesy, repeat users, awareness of the service, cost, question completion time, and accessibility.

During the remainder of this demonstration project we will be gathering data that will help us evaluate the use and non-use of the service and also create online help guides. A priority of the project was to encourage libraries in different areas and of different types to build consortia and share resources. Some of the questions we will be answering at the end of the project are:

- Why did we decide to participate in the demonstration project and why did we decide to collaborate with each other?
- What do we hope to gain from this collaboration that could not be attained otherwise?
- How well did we--libraries of different types, sizes and differentiation--work together?
- How was commitment to collaboration obtained from administrators or funding sources?
- What are the barriers, conflicts and tensions experienced in collaboration?
- What political issues are raised by collaboration?
- Does collaboration change the balance of resources?
- What incentives to collaborate exist apart from grant funds?

Overall satisfaction with the service is good, from both the librarian and the student perspective. The software works well. The ability to chat and co-browse integrates well with traditional reference and provides another avenue for instruction that is not bound by geographic location.