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Getting the Most out of Lnet

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Getting the Most Out of L-net

*by Sue Kelsey &
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Sue Kelsey and Caleb Tucker-Raymond.

A great way for kids to connect with librarians outside of the school building, including at their local public library and future academic institutions, is with L-net, Oregon's statewide reference service. Last year, L-net received over 30,000 visitors asking questions over live chat and e-mail, and the vast majority of users were kids.

Unfortunately, not all of those kids got answers. With only two or three librarians online at any given time, classrooms visiting L-net—as part of an assignment or just by chance—can easily overwhelm the service. We, a public librarian and a school librarian, got together to explore several strategies to help more people have successful interactions with L-net.

First, we worked with a classroom teacher to introduce students to L-net as a formal part of an assignment. A 6th grade teacher was planning a world culture re-

search project and agreed to have L-net be a resource for the students, in addition to the print and internet sources already chosen. Specifically, the assignment was to select a world culture, develop five questions to ask about that culture, research those questions, and to present one aspect of the culture in class using a poster, PowerPoint or other visual aid.

Second, we created accounts on the L-net Web site so that each classroom's conversations with online librarians would be saved in one place. We assumed that students would want to refer back to their conversations, and wondered if they would mind sharing the transcripts with each other. L-net can send a chat transcript to a student if they provide an e-mail address, but we knew that many of the students would not have them. To save time, we created one account for each class. Students would identify their own work by

entering a screen name when they started a chat.

Third, we notified L-net librarians of the assignment by e-mail and included a link to a page with age-appropriate resources for librarians to use when they helped the kids. We encouraged librarians to suggest more resources for referral using a comments field on the assignment page. Though assignment pages are viewable by everyone, only librarians can comment.

The day of the assignment, the teacher reviewed research steps and developed questions with students, and then came to the library. The school librarian (Sue) presented resources on world cultures before introducing L-net and handing out an L-Net "How-To" sheet with a class username and password. The class picked a question for a practice chat that all viewed using an InFocus projector. Choosing the question as a group and then going through the reference interview with the online librarian helped students see the process they would be going through when they contacted L-net individually. They also got to practice evaluating the Web site suggested by the L-net librarian and see how much time that might take within the chat.

Since only a few L-net librarians might be available at any time, the librarian had set up three computers as L-net stations with a white board "sign-up" next to them so that students could sign up for the next available L-net computer. Students were reminded that they would get a chance later to contact L-net if they didn't get a chance during this first research session.

Students were very enthusiastic about using L-net, in fact it was hard to keep it limited to no more than three students using L-net at one time. The first day, 3–6 students were able to have an L-net chat in each of the three classes. Those who were able to connect with an online librarian right away, and who had clear, specific ques-

tions and previous "chat" experience, were those who seemed to feel most successful.

Between the three classrooms, 105 questions were submitted to L-net in a little over one week. One of the classes submitted 66 questions, the second 28 and the third just 11 questions. For 56 of the questions submitted, the student never connected with the librarian. L-net was simply too busy, even when the activity was limited to three students at a time.

In the 49 sessions where students connected to librarians, students spent an average of 11 minutes in session with the librarian. The longest session was 28 minutes. Resources from the World Wide Web were shared with students in all but one of the sessions.

After the assignment had been going for a few days, L-net staff (Caleb) visited the school to get feedback from students using L-net, and was lucky enough to observe some students using it as well. Though

Tips for librarians working with kids online

• Kids often read and type slower than adults.

• They can't see you and they want to know about you.

• It's okay to ask a student's grade, if the question is part of an assignment, or to talk to a teacher.

• Offer to show the student how you found resources for them.

students were frustrated when they couldn't connect, they liked the idea of getting personal help from a faraway person on the internet. One classroom suggested that L-net add more staff by recruiting librarians from all over the world.

Students' technology skills varied greatly. All students typed using the 'hunt and peck' method, some as slow as eight words per minute. After receiving Web resources from the librarian, one student was observed writing the links down, to check later at home. She was either unsure how links worked or lacked the confidence to click on them without being expressly told. Other students were more adroit, typing up to 20 words per minute and able to keep the conversa-

tion with the librarian going in one window while evaluating resources in another.

Students' language skills varied also. Their questions were well thought-out, but not always grammatically correct: "how is the famous greeks?", "Do mimes come from Italy?," "do ierland have a king or queen" and "just what is kabuki anyway?"

To use L-net well with a whole class, plan enough time with the classroom teacher for library sessions covering research skills, questioning skills, demonstrations of L-net and time for students to go online no more than two at a time for at least 15 minutes.

Finding time for everyone to use L-net individually might be the hardest part. The best project will be one where students can use many different sources and have several days access to computers so that they can have their chance with L-net. Remember, all 30+ students cannot use L-net at the same time, so having several options during research is critical to success.

Contact L-net at least two days ahead of time, preferably a week. L-net staff will alert librarians about your assignment, and, if you like, set up accounts for your students to store their conversations.

Finally, define success. The most important thing to the students we observed was that they received individual, personalized help. If students have the opportunity to chat with a librarian and have learned about one more resource to help them grow into citizens and scholars, your assignment was successful. ❧

Introducing students to L-net

- Teach to one small group at a time.

- Make L-net your teaching partner; use it for individual students' reference questions that need very specialized information.

- Teach students how to use multiple windows or tabs on their computer.

- Set up a practice login session first to familiarize your students.

- Contact L-net staff at www.oregonlibraries.net/alert to tell them about your assignment.

For More Information
L-net www.oregonlibraries.net

Assignment alert
www.oregonlibraries.net/alert

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