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Why Collaborate?

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At the 2011 Oregon Virtual Reference Summit in The Dalles last June, we invited five students from The Dalles Middle School to talk about how they find and evaluate information online. One hundred library staff from all over Oregon and from all types of libraries got together in a room to listen to a group of middle-school students, and everyone learned something. I think it is one of the most impressive things L-net has done.

L-net, Oregon's statewide reference service, is fully funded by a grant from the Oregon State Library through the Library Services and Technology Act. Thirty-nine libraries work together to serve everyone who lives, works, or goes to school in Oregon. Since 2003, we have had upwards of 300 people at more than 50 Oregon libraries contribute to answering over 168,000 questions. You (yes, you!) can connect to a librarian 24 hours a day, seven days a week, by live chat or e-mail on your computer or text messaging on your phone. And in addition to the centralized L-net service, every library in Oregon can use our open-source software to provide virtual reference services on their own or in collaboration with other libraries, for free.

All of this is wonderful, and it has happened because Oregon libraries have come together to collaborate. More important than the outputs of a collaborative service, though, are the outcomes. We explore the present and future of reference services together, we identify and share best practices and tools, and most of all, we recognize that each library's patrons and stakeholders are not divided into neat and separate categories. Our communities intersect, and so should our library services.

The reason for people involved with L-net to learn about kids and how they use—or don't use—libraries is simple: More than 50 percent of the patrons visiting L-net are students, and they usually come to ask for help finding resources for school assignments. L-net struggles with this because so few of us are youth librarians in our "regular jobs"—you know, the ones where we work with patrons in person, inside of our storied buildings.

We don't always know what to expect from kids, or what they expect from us. Technology and the skills required to use it can exacerbate the situation. If you send a student a link in live chat, will she click on it or copy it down by hand to look at it later? Anonymity online can also provide all kinds of entertainment for a bored teenager (or adult). But a bigger problem with online anonymity is that never seeing anyone's face means you also don't get the satisfaction of seeing kids learn and grow.

So L-net struggles with this, and we talk about it a lot. It began with the name itself; when it launched in 2003, L-net was called Answerland. Many people still feel that "Answerland" is a better name than "L-net." (Most names, I admit, would be better than the one we've got now.) But the problem with the name, as some members of our community saw it, was that it was a great name for a kid-focused service. And while we had two school libraries involved at that time—The Dalles High School and Winston Churchill High School in Eugene—many of the public and academic library partners at the time were vocally opposed to serving kids. The name, they said, was too much like "Disneyland" and "Candyland"—two lands for kids, but not one fit for "our patrons."

So what has changed since then?

In 2001, the Oregon Library Association Vision 2010 Committee called for a 24/7 collaborative online reference service. In their "Call to Action," the Committee identified three risks: doing nothing, doing too much, and not making the best use of our resources (Vi-



sion 2010 Committee, *A Call to Action for the Oregon Library Association*, OLA Quarterly, v. 7 no. 3 Fall 2001, http://data.memberclicks.com/site/ola/olaq_7no3.pdf, p. 21 accessed 6/30/2011).

Virtual reference, as we know it, was dreamed up in the late 1990s as a response to the huge surge in demand for information that the Internet helped create. Libraries imagined they could bridge the gap between the poor results that people got for themselves with search engines and the authoritative resources found in libraries. We thought if we stepped in to answer questions online, everyone would finally recognize libraries as the sage and impartial freedom-loving institutions that we are.

We were wrong. Google had other plans, as did almost everyone else. The Internet provided the opportunity for “disintermediation,” or the cost savings that result when we do not pay people to provide customer service. This has done a lot to change what people expect from business, and not always in a good way. In cautionary tales about the future of reference service, librarians are often compared to travel agents.

But I don’t think we were wrong to make ourselves available to connect with patrons online. Yes, if we didn’t offer live chat, e-mail, and text messaging, some of those patrons would come to us in person, and some would call us on the phone. But many patrons wouldn’t come to us at all.

The volume of questions we get that require the expertise and resources of a research library is very low compared to the ones we get for middle-school homework help, navigating library catalogs, and seeing if the library is open. None of these are bad questions for libraries to be answering, but it’s not exactly how we imagined that people would use online reference. As it turns out, offering to help patrons by live chat, e-mail, and text messaging can’t reverse the trend of people relying more and more on the Internet to find information; it is simply excellent customer service.

People still do ask difficult reference questions, but they are most pleased to get assistance from a thoughtful and caring expert. They tell us we save them time, that they were unable to convince the Internet to give them the information they needed on their own, or that they can’t come to the library in person.

Online anonymity also gives some the courage to ask things they would never dare to broach in person. It isn’t just that old biddy behind the reference desk beaming judgment from behind her glasses that patrons find intimidating; it’s the fact that baring your soul to anyone, even a professional who swears to confidentiality, is risky. Talking anonymously to a stranger online can help a teen learn about a rare medical condition that is affecting a sibling, or a divorced parent who wants to better understand Oregon’s child-custody laws. Libraries change lives, even online.

We did the right thing by collaborating. If we are going to ensure consistent use of and support for libraries in every community and on every campus in Oregon, it makes no sense for each of us to come up with solutions on our own. The Vision 2010 Committee wasn’t explicit about this, but collaboration is a key tactic for making sure libraries move forward in the best possible ways.

Oregon libraries initially benefited by collaborating on a statewide virtual reference service because it was more cost-effective and efficient than having each library staff its own service. Commercial software for customer-service-oriented chat was expensive, and companies charged by the simultaneous user or “seat.” We could only have as many librarians staff-



ing the service as we had seats. If a seat cost \$3,000 per year and 20 libraries each wanted a seat, it would cost a total of \$60,000. A better use of funds was to pool our resources and purchase a small number of seats together.

When we started we were not very busy. We had a few hundred questions each month, as opposed to up to a few hundred each day now. In the summer of 2003, if 20 libraries operated their own services individually, at least 19 of the librarians assigned to those desks would be idle—not helping patrons, not learning, and not challenged. It was much more efficient for each library to contribute a few hours each week to a collaborative service. That way, everyone got the benefit of a full-time service, without needing to pay the staff to deliver it. It is still a good deal.

A less obvious but still tangible benefit of collaborating on any new library service is that each library doesn't have to figure out every detail on its own. On L-net, by sharing anecdotes and reviewing transcripts of sessions, librarians learn from each other about techniques and resources for delivering better service. In addition, we started Answerland with teams of people working together to identify best practices for online reference, promote the service, deliver training, evaluate success, and untangle librarians and patrons from restrictions on licensed databases. L-net is a great service because each institution contributes both to delivering the service and to the support structure around it. In turn, each library is boosted by the collective experience of the group.

The day-to-day challenge of collaborative virtual reference is that patrons are rarely connected to someone from the library they frequent. How can a librarian in Scappoose help a patron at Oregon State University? As it turns out, it's not that complicated, because while each library has its own collection strengths, library resources are organized in about the same ways wherever you go. Library policies and contact information are listed on library Web sites, and if a patron can't find the "way to order books from another library," staff from any library can find the interlibrary loan page right away.

Beyond that, we developed specific tools to address this issue. We keep "policy pages" for each library, so librarians have quick access to resources and information to help any patron. We can also follow up with a patron by e-mail, so a patron with an account or tricky database question can get local help if necessary.

An early thought was that librarians could pretend to be on staff at the patron's local library, so the local library would get all the credit for the great and innovative service. The ruse worked for general information—"When and where is the 50-mile-long garage sale on the Coast?"—but fell apart when a patron needed to know why a book they returned wasn't checked in. When the same patron asked both of these questions, and found out only the second time that the librarian was elsewhere, I can only imagine the betrayal they felt. The best practice turned out to be to tell the patron right away and very simply, "I am not at your library, but I can still help."

Collaborating on a service online is good for Oregon library staff as well. By serving a more diverse set of patrons a few hours a week, librarians move beyond their comfort zones and open themselves to learning. L-net staff repeatedly say that their experience online helps them deliver better service in person.

The fact that we serve each others' patrons also makes it possible to help those who aren't served by a library at all. As of today, 4 percent of Oregonians are not served by a pub-



lic library (Oregon State Library, *Extending Library Service to the Unserved Grant Program*, <http://www.oregon.gov/OSL/LD/grants/ExtLibSvcToUnserved.shtml>, accessed 6/30/2011), and the services available to those of us who are served can vary wildly. L-net serves those unserved patrons—not in huge proportions, and only online, but we’re able to do so because we start with the idea that every person is welcome to use the service, and any patron might. It’s less important to find out who a patron is and where she lives than it is to make it as easy as possible for her to ask a question.

This is where kids come in. Regardless of the name we chose, kids, and especially middle-school students, have found virtual-reference services compelling. I have some theories about this. Perhaps they are not yet rebellious enough to reject the instructions of a teacher or school librarian who suggest the service. Perhaps they are being given research assignments for the first time. Perhaps they are thrilled to get one-on-one attention from an adult. Perhaps they are developing the skills to use computers, to interact socially, and to explore the world.

Whatever the reason, I’m starting to wonder if the only thing that would have stopped them from coming would have been a cutesy name, something that made it really clear that libraries were all about kids. Those same kids, just beginning to understand that they’ll have a role in our communities as adults, might have passed us by.

We have opened our virtual doors as a group of libraries committed to serving all patrons as well as possible, especially kids, because we understand that our service populations are not static and impermeable, and that everyone has need of the library. The same middle-school students speaking to a crowd of librarians also use the public library, today and in the future. We hope they will go to college and use their college libraries. Maybe, if we’re really lucky, they’ll even become elected officials or wealthy philanthropists. I am certain, though, that those kids will remember that librarians took the time to listen to their voices, in the interest of doing a better job of serving people like them.

When libraries collaborate, we create, among all of our various groups of patrons and staff, a shared experience of just what that word “library” means. From that basis, we have the opportunity to shift that definition so that it continues to positively impact and resonate with the communities we serve.

I know L-net does a great job, and that it has been positive for both Oregon libraries and their patrons. But it has been 10 years since the Vision 2010 *Call to Action* was written, and the more time goes by, the less comfortable I am at pointing to it as a mandate for L-net’s continued existence and use of state resources. We must examine and prioritize even our successful services, or risk the inertia that Vision 2010 warned us to guard against.

How do we know we are asking the right questions? How do we know we are working on the right problems? Partly, we trust that other capable people are working on other problems and that everything will get done. Partly, we work on the problems that can be addressed with the tools we have. And partly, we rely on broad and in-depth visioning processes to help figure out where we fit in.

I am glad to read that collaboration is a strong aspect of OLA’s new Vision 2020. Collaboration lets libraries build and deliver services together that we couldn’t dream of doing on our own. 

