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What's Next For Statewide Digital Reference

Caleb Tucker-Raymond
Multnomah County Library

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by Caleb Tucker-Raymond

*Statewide Digital Reference
Project Coordinator
Multnomah County Library*

E–Reference Services

- *Create a collaborative online reference service that is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.*

The Oregon Statewide Digital Reference Service launched in the spring of 2003. In our first nine months, we received over 3,000 questions and are starting to see how important digital reference can be. We have learned a lot—especially that we don't know it all yet—but are excited about expanding the project and having more librarians learn with us.

The new service was jump-started in January 2003 with funding from a Library Services and Technology Act grant through the State Library. Our charge is to meet and expand the mission of a previous effort, Oregon Reference LINK, which was to provide an efficient and effective reference service for Oregon citizens through library-to-library collaboration. The new charge expands the Reference LINK second level reference service to link patrons directly to librarians.

Digitally connecting patrons with librarians was the easy part. All we had to do was put up some links to the service on our home pages and library patrons found their way. Learning to communicate effectively and professionally with these patrons has been much harder, because the only tools we have are the keys on our keyboards.

This feels like a new challenge, but some digital reference services have been around for over a decade. When we describe digital reference (or virtual reference) as a reference service that uses online tools to connect patrons with reference staff, we are talking about e-mail services, Web forms, and live chat services. What's new in digital reference is the awareness that there is a real demand for this service and that, as librarians, we need to provide the consistently high quality service that our patrons expect.

Luckily, our own standards of quality may be more stringent than what our patrons actually expect. We have received high marks from digital reference patrons who chose to complete our satisfaction survey. Of 435 respondents, 87 percent said they would use the service again, although only 75 percent indicated they were satisfied with it.

There is room for improvement and the focus should be on honing our digital reference communication skills. A cursory study of our service's digital reference transactions shows that participating reference librarians engage in a reference interview only about half of the time. Although the interview may not seem necessary for each and every question, it's clear that using one always results in a more professional reference transaction. And it's one of the marvelous things that librarians can do that Google cannot.

The trouble doesn't come from the quality of our staff, but from the medium we are using. In the fast-paced chat environment, we often forget to smile, or so it would seem to our patrons, who can only interpret our demeanor through the words that we type. Likewise, it is easy to misinterpret what a patron has written, especially when you are juggling windows on a computer screen and simultaneously trying to answer a reference question.

To tackle these challenges, the Digital Reference Service needs to provide training for Oregon librarians on the practice of digital reference, not just on how to use the software for the statewide project. Digital reference should be a transferable skill, and every reference librarian should know the basics. After all, if it's a valuable service to offer, it's a valuable skill for us to learn.

Offering every Oregon librarian the opportunity to learn these new skills is a

tall order, but we are prepared to expand the service by including every library that wants to participate in the statewide service as a provider. With increased demand for the service, we'll be able to provide more service hours, schedule more librarians during busy times, and call on subject experts more frequently. Currently only about 20 individuals get the opportunity to staff the Statewide Digital Reference Service each week.

At present the Statewide Digital Reference Service is geared towards very general reference questions. By offering more specialized services (or sub-services) for particular subject areas, geographical regions, the various Oregon consortia, or specialized patron groups, digital reference will expand and increase the demand for staff. The opportunities for increased digital reference in Oregon are only limited by the effort we give.

We invite all Oregon libraries—academic, public, and school—to consider participating in the Statewide Digital Reference Program. Your staff will learn, first-hand, digital reference skills, your library's patrons will benefit from local expertise, and your library will contribute to a valuable collaborative statewide service.