Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Undergraduate Students Can Provide Satisfactory Chat Reference Service in an Academic Library

Keyes, K., & Dworak, E. (2017). Staffing chat reference with undergraduate student assistants at an academic library: A standards-based assessment. Journal of Academic Librarianship, 43(6), 469–478. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2017.09.001

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Citer ce compte rendu

MacDonald, H. (2018). Compte rendu de [Undergraduate Students Can Provide Satisfactory Chat Reference Service in an Academic Library / Keyes, K., & Dworak, E. (2017). Staffing chat reference with undergraduate student assistants at an academic library: A standards-based assessment. Journal of Academic Librarianship, 43(6), 469–478. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2017.09.001]. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice, 13*(2), 112–114. https://doi.org/10.18438/eblip29414

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A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – To determine whether undergraduate students can provide quality chat reference service.

Design – Content analysis of undergraduate student, professional librarian, and paraprofessional staff responses in chat reference transcripts.

Setting – Academic library.

Subjects – 451 chat reference transcripts.

Methods – Chat reference transcripts from May 2014–September 2016 were collected. Five categories of answerer were coded: librarian in the reference department (LibR), librarian from another department (LibNR), staff without a Master of Library Science (staff), staff with a Master of Library Science (+staff), and student employee (student). A random sample of 15% of each category of answerer was selected for analysis. The answerer categories were collapsed to librarians, staff, and students for the results section.

Four criteria were used to code chat reference transcripts: difficulty of query, answerer

behaviour, problems with transcript answer, and comments from coders. Coding for difficulty was based on the READ scale (Reference Effort Assessment Data). Answerer behaviour was based on The RUSA Guidelines (Reference and User Services Association). Behaviours assessed included: clarity, courtesy, grammar, greeting, instruction, referral, searching, sign off, sources, and whether patrons were asked if their question was answered. All coding was done independently between the two researchers, with very good interrater reliability. Data for variables with disagreement were removed from the analysis. The chi-square test was used to analyze the association between variables. Analysis also included patrons' ratings and comments about their chat experience. Content and tone were assessed for each patron comment.

Main Results – Answerer behaviours showed a significant difference between groups for 3 of the 10 behaviours assessed: courtesy (p=0.031), grammar (p=0.001), and sources (0.041). The difference between groups for courtesy was: staff (88%), librarians (76%), and students (73%). Grammar was correct in most transcripts, but there was a significant difference between the answerer groups: librarians (98%), staff (90%), and students (73%). There was a significant difference between groups that offered sources: librarians (63.8%), staff (62.5%), and students (43.8%).

There was no significant difference between the answerer groups for the other seven behaviours. Overall, 31% of transcripts showed that answerers asked if a patron's query was answered or if they needed further help. The analysis showed that 79% of transcripts were coded as clear or free of jargon. Greetings were found in 65% of transcripts. Instruction was indicated in 59% of transcripts. Referrals were offered in 27% of all transcripts. Of the transcripts where searching was deemed necessary, 82% showed evidence of searching. A sign off was present in 56% of all transcripts. Transcripts with noted problems were deemed so because of lack of effort, being incomplete or incorrect, having no reference interview, or the answerer should have asked for help.

There was no significant difference between answerer groups with respect to problem questions.

Of the 24% of patrons who rated their chat experience, 90% rated it as good or great, and no significant difference was found between answerer groups. Question difficulty was coded 50% at level 0-2 (easier), 39% at level 3 (medium difficulty), and 11% at level 4-5 (more difficult).

Conclusion – Undergraduate students are capable of providing chat reference that is similar in quality to that of librarians and staff. However, increased training is needed for students in the areas of referrals, providing sources, and signing off. Students do better than librarians and staff with greetings and are more courteous than librarians. There is room for improvement for staff and librarians offering chat services. Tiered chat reference service using undergraduates is a viable option.

Commentary – Bravender, Lyon and Molaro's 2011 paper asked "Should chat reference be staffed by librarians?" They found that non-librarian staff provided a cost effective alternative to librarians. Keyes and Dworak take this one-step further and ask whether undergraduate students can provide quality chat reference service. The authors provide extensive background information on reference services in academic libraries, tiered reference and chat service models with undergraduate students, and assessing chat reference quality.

This commentary uses the CAT critical appraisal tool (Perryman & Rathbun-Grubb, 2014) to guide the appraisal. The authors clearly state their objective and explain the impetus for this study. After their library changed chat reference platforms, a decision was made in July 2014 to include access services staff as answerers. In the fall of 2015, undergraduate students were added to the roster. The data collected was from May 2014 through September 2016. It may have made more sense to present the data starting from the date all answerer groups were involved in

the chat service, especially as this paper focused on the student group.

The results were presented in several tables with clear explanations. For the most part the presentation of the results was logical and easy to follow. However, there were a few inconsistencies. The abstract stated that 451 transcripts were analyzed, but the results talked about 454 (minus 68) transcripts. The layout of Table 6 was unclear, as the first line in the table appeared to be a header when in fact it was actually data similar to the rest of the table. For the behavioural variable "searching," the data in Table 6 was not consistent with the results section. The p-value in Table 6 was 0.040, but in the results section the p-value was 0.099. This is problematic, as the significance threshold used was $p<0.05$. The numbers for the behavioural variable "sources" were different in Table 6 and the results section as well.

Although there were some issues with tables matching the results, the methodology was solid and well executed. This methodology can be used by libraries to analyze their own chat reference services to identify strengths and weaknesses and improve training. The authors' conclusions were grounded in the evidence presented. This study provides evidence that undergraduate students are capable of providing chat reference services. Administrators and reference department managers may want to consider the benefits of students working in roles more traditionally filled by librarians. Meanwhile, reference librarians will want to consider how their roles continue to change and what this means for the profession.

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