

## Ten Years of Library Reference Services: Reflections on the Past and Speculations about the Future

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### Introduction

One of the authors of this paper graduated from library school in 1993, just 10 short years ago, and the other in 2001, quite recently. We each come from a unique perspective. Much of what we do in the library has changed in the past ten years, but much has also stayed the same. Librarians are still trying to find the information that patrons need, but how we go about finding that information can be radically different. In this paper, we will review some of the major changes in library services in the past ten years, the impact of those changes that we are still feeling today, and some exciting new developments. Our focus is on library issues and trends that are impacting community colleges in general and Durham Tech in particular.

### CD-ROMs

In the early 1990's, CD-ROMs were the popular computer products. Librarians were amazed at their large storage capacity. Entire indexes were placed on CD-ROMs, which allowed for rapid and far more complex searches than paper indexes. In a 1992 graduate technology class, students were singing the praises of CD-ROMs. The professor wisely stated that time would tell if CD-ROMs would have a lasting impact on library research. At one point, CD-ROM towers were a fixture in many libraries. With the rise of online databases and their enormous storage and searching capabilities, CD-ROMs are nearly gone or play a much smaller role in library services.

### Electronic Databases

The move to full-text online databases has provided library users with vast amounts of information. While no one would want to return to paper indexes, new problems have arisen with the new technology. The most basic issue with online databases is that users must have access to an online connection. According to a U.S. Census Bureau study in 2000, 51% of American households had computers and 42% had Internet access (U. S. Census). While those statistics are encouraging to those promoting remote access to online databases, the households without computers or Internet access are the demographic groups typically served by community colleges. With a significant portion of the population without access to a computer at home and a greater need for students to have access to a computer for research, community colleges will need to provide funding for computers for their students.

### Database Searching

Another challenge posed by the online full-text databases is the amount of information available. With paper indexes and even with CD-ROM searching, there were a limited number of articles that the researchers could find in their own libraries, even on very broad topical searches. With the rise of huge full-text databases, students can frequently find thousands of articles on a topic. If they do an Internet search, they might have hundreds of thousands of hits. In a study tracking student users on a Georgia library system similar to NCLIVE, researchers found that the system made seven cognitive demands on the students. These skills included interpreting search results and refining searches (Fitzgerald). In another study undertaken in 2002, graduate students were asked to accomplish three simple search tasks using the Internet. Only 15% of the students were able to complete all three tasks (Nachmias and Gilad). Librarians are trained in the use of techniques to develop and to refine search strategies. The question for librarians and educators is when and where these strategies should be taught. Even if these skills are now taught in elementary and high schools, those of us working with large populations of adult learners know that students were not taught these things 10 or 20 years ago. Steven J. Bell, a library director at Philadelphia University, points out in an interview with

*The Chronicle of Higher Education* that database vendors need to “think creatively about what we (the vendors) can do to make the databases more appropriate to the needs of student researchers” (Carlson). While we can hope for that goal, our students need to be taught skills for effective searching

The Georgia study also identified that students must be able “to assess the relevance of articles found to their own information problem” and “to evaluate in a critical way the quality of the information provided by the items”(Fitzgerald). When faced with massive amounts of information, the evaluation of this material becomes vitally important. Again, the issue is who should teach them these skills and when. Bell points out that “instead of automatically searching 5,000 things, I could search just 500 that are very appropriate to my topic” (Carlson). Having the vendors do a better job of selecting the resources in the databases is part of the solution. The reality is that no matter how good the database is students still need to develop the skills to critically evaluate the information that they find. If students are using the Internet (and many are), these skills are even more vital. As librarians, we wrestle with what our role should be in this process.

### E-mail Reference

In a recent survey of academic libraries from the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), 99 percent offered e-mail reference (Tenopir 38). The Durham Tech Library offers e-mail reference services and has seen e-mail reference requests soar in the past year. There is a link to the library e-mail from the web page, and we get messages several times a week. Two years ago, we may have gotten one or two messages a month. We are glad to offer this type of service, but we become frustrated from time to time. In the library literature, there is a phenomenon known as the “invisible patron with minimal information,” which we encounter often in our email requests (Tomaiuolo and Packer). Often there will be no signature attached to the request, no subject line identifying if this is a valid request (tricky to determine in this “Spam Age”), and such sparse information that it can be difficult to work from. It really helps when we know a little about the person and which course they are taking.

Determining if the patron is an adult high school student or an upper-level nursing student alerts us to the type and depth of information he or she might need.

E-mail has been criticized for posing barriers to aspects of traditional reference encounters. Coffman and McGlamery state, "Patrons often do not receive the same immediate response, and librarians cannot as easily conduct the reference interview that is so often necessary to accurately determine users' needs" (Coffman and McGlamery 66). These types of situations illustrate the limitations and difficulties involved with e-mail reference. Many of our initial responses involve our librarians simply asking further questions of the student before beginning work with the question. Some larger libraries have had to set up a separate service area, away from the public services desk, for answering e-mail and telephone questions. We have not reached that point at this time. With more students in online classes using the library remotely and more students becoming more technologically savvy, the library may need to think about issues such as this one.

### **Virtual Reference/ Digital Reference**

In the ARL survey mentioned earlier, 29 percent of academic libraries offered real-time virtual reference services in 2001 (Tenopir 38). Real-time reference tools include chat software, instant messaging software, and more complex collaborative browsing software (Kasowitz, Tenopir 39). Chat software allows patrons and librarians to communicate interactively with messages sent back and forth. Two of the major companies producing simple chat software are AOL's Instant Messenger and Human Click (Kasowitz, Tenopir 39). Still in the early stages of development and use, there is a trend within libraries to experiment with, offer, or think about offering, this type of futuristic live virtual reference. Some of the more advanced software allows librarians to not only chat with patrons, but to "co-browse the Internet by 'pushing' web sites to the client's computer" (Hoag and Cichanowicz).

Although the benefits to patrons and librarians seem high, there are many issues that are inhibiting smaller libraries from providing this type

of service. At this time, the price of virtual reference software is still relatively high. Determining whether students and faculty have the patience to learn a tool like this would take some research, as would the evaluation process of various types of software. Also, training librarians to use the software would be time consuming. The on-going technical support required would be an additional barrier (Kasowitz, Tenopir 39). Also, going back and forth between actual walk-in patrons at the desk and real-time virtual patrons would be difficult. On the other hand, allotting staff to work entirely with “virtual patrons” would require more funding and more staffing, unlikely to be obtained in smaller college and university libraries. A brochure for a North Carolina workshop on virtual reference called “It’s Not Your Grandma’s Reference Anymore” came across our desks this week. These services are definitely being offered in our state. However, it may take a collaborative effort among a variety of North Carolina colleges and universities jointly sharing virtual reference software before the Durham Tech library will have the opportunity to engage in this type of reference service.

### **Conclusion**

As librarians, we understand the increased responsibilities that result from the complexities of the Information Age. The challenges that come with delivering information electronically are enormous. We have witnessed many changes throughout the past ten years and will come to terms with many more in the future. It is very important to keep up with library trends; however, we cannot let technologies take precedence over the quality of service we provide to our students, faculty, and staff.

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