New directions in online client support: a participative model

Victoria University Library offers client support in traditional ways: we aimed to investigate new ways of managing patron enquiries in the context of web 2.0 technologies that use participative or collaborative models.

We conducted a literature search and survey of Australian university libraries to determine how libraries in Australia and overseas were providing online client support. The survey revealed that most used online reference help tools to push information out to the user community, as opposed to being used for collaboration/discussion. Chat, SMS and instant messaging are being used, but in much smaller numbers. Griffith University was the only university using online forums – one for library help, the other for IT help. Deakin was the only university using Facebook for submission of reference questions.

An investigation into client support in industry revealed businesses are establishing online communities to cultivate relationships with their customers. Organisations recognise the value of an online community to provide an interactive online environment for discussion of products and related topics. Clients exchange questions, offer ideas and suggestions, and share tips and tricks. Online communities also enable businesses to share information with their customers and provide a mechanism for customers to exchange information and experiences among themselves. Benefits for the organisation include marketing new services as well as obtaining valuable feedback on products.

Educators have recognised the value of students collaborating and supporting each other online. The use of online discussion in university education is now commonplace. At Victoria University, teaching staff have encouraged peer to peer collaboration through the use of discussion boards on Blackboard and customised online forums.

VU Library plans to establish an online forum on the library web page, initially for a 12-month trial period. The primary aim of the forum is to enable clients to seek advice and provide advice to each other on library related topics. The forum will be offered in conjunction with the library's existing support services. While staff may moderate the forum, there will be no obligation for moderators to respond to every discussion – integral to building a participative community. Staff may only need to participate where an initial query goes unanswered. The forum will be asynchronous, as opposed to real-time chat.

As outlined above, online discussion forums are commonplace in a variety of sectors and increasingly in education. It is likely that the majority of Victoria University students would be familiar with the protocols of communicating in an online discussion forum. The experience in the business and education sectors is that users of online forums provide valuable support to each other. In addition an online forum would provide an additional means of communication between library clients and the library, and can be implemented with relatively small cost to the organisation.

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So you think you can Google?

That's the tagline we've been using to lure students into our library training sessions. As new librarians who have spent the last 18 months as Graduate Librarians at the University of Adelaide, we wanted to address the view among library users that Google is best. We have developed and facilitated library training aimed at undergraduate students: those who dare spend a little under an hour learning more about Google – strengths, limitations, plus some handy tips and tricks.

We chose to highlight the good resources they can find using Google, as well as those they will never locate – the PowerPoint slide that gets the best reaction is an image of a huge iceberg with '7-30%' looming above, demonstrating how little Google finds. We start by showing our students some Google operators which help them go beyond the typing-my-assignment-question-into-Google approach. We then move onto the advanced Google screen and guide them through using these options. We also highlight that, despite the fact that it is handy, they need to be careful when using Google Scholar and explain the reasons why. We work hard to persuade students that there are better sources out there, beyond the holy Google grail (we also manage to give the library and our databases a big plug!). However, we know that no matter what we tell them, students still generally prefer Google, so our aim is to help them be smarter searchers.

Google training has proved the most popular of all the sessions we began to run in the second half of 2009. Attendees have been undergrads, postgrads, PhD students, academic staff, and library staff. We also offer sessions in RSS and library databases (which consistently don't get the same numbers as Google!). We have also had interest from other libraries that are keen to know what we are telling our students about Google. As well as being useful for students, we both love presenting these sessions. Our managers and colleagues have been very supportive and are keen for us to keep training students to search intelligently.

The way we market our library sessions is heavily influenced by web 2.0. Traditionally, training in our library has been promoted through posters, flyers, and word-of-mouth. These new sessions are publicised on our library blog and are also pushed to fans of our library Facebook page, reaching nearly 1400 people. We have had several comments from our Facebook fans indicating that they 'like' our sessions.

We think it is important for libraries to create sessions that address developments in technology. We know that our students are Googling in ways we'd prefer them not to, but it's a great way for us as librarians to go where our students are going. Teaching Google has also allowed us to reach students who don't seem to be regular library users. We will continue offering our Google session in 2010 and as new librarians we are excited that Google and other technology is changing the face of library instruction.

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