User Experience as Professional Development: Transforming Services through Collaborative Assessment

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This paper examines the outcomes of a qualitative transcript analysis conducted by librarians at the George Washington University in order to evaluate the library's instant message (IM) reference service. While this study met the intended goal of identifying strengths and challenges in service delivery, the most significant result was the transformation of service perceptions and delivery through an innovative professional development process.

George Washington University Libraries (GWU Libraries) comprises three libraries, which serve distinct patron groups in geographically distributed locations. Gelman Library, located in the heart of Washington, DC, is the largest of the three libraries and serves a diverse population of 9,700 undergraduate students and 12,400 graduate students. Eckles Library, located on a satellite campus in northern DC, primarily serves a residential freshmen population. A third library located in suburban Virginia serves graduate students in the sciences, education, engineering, and business. As a result, the GWU Libraries instant message (IM) reference service must meet an array of needs.

At its inception, the Gelman Library IM service was staffed primarily by librarians, who logged in to the service at appointed times from multiple locations. Extensive training was provided for librarians, many of whom were unfamiliar with IM technologies. At the Eckles Library, student workers staffed the IM service in addition to full-time librarians. While the student workers needed minimal instruction on IM software and procedures, they were not fully trained to provide reference services. To meet this training need, the IM Group adapted portions of the reference training procedures designed for incoming librarians. The student workers were taught how to conduct a reference interview, navigate key databases, and locate various formats of periodicals. Since Eckles Library has a combined service desk, student workers learned about circulation policies and procedures, as well as strategies for dealing with difficult patrons. The most critical aspect of student training was developing an understanding of when and how to refer the patron to the appropriate subject specialist.

For the first two years of the IM service, evaluation was limited to quantitative measures: number of IMs received, time of day, librarian response time, etc. This quantitative data was compiled through a manual process of archiving and data entry using spreadsheets. Staff members saved each transaction,

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deleted identifying patron information, and assigned a transaction type: Reference, Directional or Other. Those questions answered by student workers were subject to periodic review by their supervising librarian, who would address concerns as needed. While these processes were useful for gathering statistics, they provided minimal information about the actual or perceived quality of the service.

As a result of this lack of formal review, ongoing training was directed by perceived rather than measured services challenges. In an attempt to improve customer service, the reference department developed a series of best practices for the delivery of reference services in a virtual environment. The IM Group contributed chat etiquette guidelines, including recommendations about capitalization and tone. A series of guides and videos were created to answer frequent questions. While these efforts led to service improvements, they did not address the lack of a formal review process.

In 2007, the IM Group initiated a comprehensive evaluation to assess the quality of the service being provided. As a rule, quantitative data collection is a fairly straight forward and non-threatening process. However, qualitative evaluation is often subjective and can create hierarchical situations in which one version of "quality" is chosen and applied over another. In this case, there was a strong desire to develop an inclusive system of evaluation rather than a top-down model. The following is an account of that process.

Growth of IM Services

The library literature is replete with articles on IM as a customer service tool. Much discussion occurred as libraries began experimenting with free IM tools such as AOL and MSN Messaging instead of subscription chat services such as 24/7. As noted by Gaspar and Palacios-Wilhelm,[1] challenges with browser compatibility coupled with the variety of security protocols on students' computers served as an impetus for switching to software that students already used.

It was immediately evident that patron usage would increase with the move to software familiar to the digital generation. The Reference and User Services Association (RUSA)'s 2004 *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services* were elastic enough to address practices with the new tool,[2] but the growth of these services raised questions about how reference service would translate to

IM. Fennewald compared the questions librarians answered via the Virtual Reference Service (VR) to those asked via email or during an in-person transaction.[3] His findings indicate that there are key differences: in his study, the majority of questions at a physical reference desk were directional, whereas the majority of VR queries were reference questions. Moreover, the reference questions posed in person were more likely ready reference, while the preponderance of questions posed virtually were strategy-based. The literature reflected this shift to focus on best practices. For example, Hyde and Tucker-Raymond encouraged a change in tone and recommended that librarians "send a welcome message immediately to the patron".[4]

Desai and Graves conducted a study to determine if students learned from IM.[5] Since IM was designed for brief interactions between friends, it was unclear if patrons would welcome an extended interaction that included instruction. Their findings, however, indicated students welcomed instruction and considered IM a learning tool and recommended that instruction should be a part of IM practices. Moyo conducted a similar study at Penn State and her findings confirmed that instruction via IM was growing.[6]

With the development of standards and best practices came the need for service assessment. Pomerantz, Mon, and McClure thoughtfully discussed various approaches to IM evaluation.[7] They noted that designing a survey is challenging and response rates are often low. In Hyde and Tucker-Raymond's study, librarians evaluating Oregon's VR service confirmed this: only one in five patrons filled out the survey, so they moved to transcript analysis.[8] The standards proposed their article serve as useful guidelines for evaluating IM reference services and have directly informed the rubric for this study.

Much has been written about analyzing chat transcripts. This is an outgrowth of the evidence-based practice movement in librarianship. Luo's overview of articles focused on IM assessment provides an excellent bibliography.[9] The discussion continues in current literature: librarians at Texas A&M University Libraries examined transcripts using RUSA's *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers*.[10] Their study determined that patron's assumption of speed and point of need challenges the usefulness of the guidelines for an IM service. They stressed, however, that courtesy and knowledgeable answers are the critical factors.

The Study

Service assessment presented a challenge for the IM group. Several evaluation methods were considered, but all presented potential pitfalls. "Secret shopper" evaluations could provide a snapshot of individual interactions, but this could be perceived as hostile by the professional service providers used to more direct forms of evaluation. Patrons using the IM service could be asked to fill out a quick survey after an IM transaction, but this would require the service provider to push the survey and the patron to complete it. As noted in the literature, surveys capture a low percentage of participants; in addition, there were concerns about whether this approach would only capture positive feedback. A transcript analysis project addressed many of the concerns raised by these other forms of assessment. The use of existing data expedited Institutional Review Board (IRB) review and the launch of the project. Random sampling ensured that no one day, time, or service provider was targeted. Anonymous transcripts protected the privacy of both patrons and service providers.

The four-person research team identified three areas for the transcript analysis: whether the transaction was reference or directional, presence of instruction if applicable, and thoroughness of answers. These areas of concern were compiled into an evaluation instrument,[11] which the research team then used to code ten percent of transcripts from the previous two years (n=150). Each team member coded a quarter of the sample group, then exchanged with another team member, so each transcript was coded twice. If disagreements arose during the coding process, team members would discuss them individually or as a group in order to build consensus and ensure consistent coding.

The process of negotiating the evaluation instrument proved to be the most interesting outcome of this project. The research team discovered that the classification of a transaction as reference or directional required clarification. RUSA clearly defines both types of questions;[12] however, the research team found that the definitions did not always translate easily to online transactions. Walking an IM patron through the process of logging in to an online resource would seem to be "an information contact that facilitates the logistical use of the library," as would helping a patron locate a stapler. Neither of these examples strictly involve "interpretation… in the use of one or more informa-

tion sources," to quote the RUSA definition, but the former certainly entails "knowledge, use, recommendations… or instruction." Is this type of transaction the IM equivalent of pointing? Or is it more substantive? Similar questions were raised about the presence and quality of instructional techniques in IM transactions. The quantitative elements—response time, transaction duration, presence/absence of multiple questions—presented no controversy.

The Workshop

The process of negotiating the evaluation instrument informed the development of a transformative professional development workshop conducted with IM service providers. There is a dearth of literature linking transformative learning and libraries. Education literature, however, has included elements of this perspective since John Dewey published *How We Think* in 1910[1.3] His assertions about the role of reflective thinking in learning remain foundational.

Patricia Cranton offered a list of elements necessary to foster transformative learning in students or professionals: self-directed learning, critical reflection, and collaborative inquiry.[14] Taylor asserted that the collaborative inquiry, or dialogue, is particularly important for articulating assumptions and problems.[15] Zellermayer and Tabak likewise urged professional development built on reflection and forming a community of inquiry. Their study of pre-service teachers' development indicated that collaborative discovery was critical in changing assumptions about classroom practice.[16] Orland-Barak examined a professional development program in Israel and noted that "divergent dialogues" enabled knowledge construction among participants.[17]

Designing and conducting professional development workshops for peers often involves concerns similar to designing and conducting service evaluations. Workshop participants may be resistant to being trained by their peers, especially if the training involves criticism of current service norms. If those providing training lack the authority to mandate changes, workshop recommendations may not be taken seriously. If workshop content is not immediately applicable, it is often forgotten, resulting in resentment and frustration for those who designed and conducted the workshop.

With these concerns in mind, the research team felt that the transcript analysis process presented an

ideal framework for professional development. This methodology is consistent with a training workshop described by Ward, in which graduate students worked in groups to assess chat transcripts and evaluated them based on a checklist.[18] By reviewing and reflecting on anonymous transcripts, participants would be able to evaluate both positive and negative aspects of the service. A moderated discussion could direct comments to the areas that the research team identified as problematic. Rather than feeling critiqued by colleagues, participants could draw their own conclusions about the strengths and weaknesses of the service. These conclusions would be bolstered or challenged by a dialogue with a community of colleagues. Finally, by allowing participants to encounter real service challenges and brainstorm solutions, the workshop content could be directly and immediately applied to day-to-day responsibilities, resulting in greater retention.

In the email announcement for the workshop, the research team gave participants a homework assignment: all participants were asked to review a selection of transcripts that included both positive and negative examples of IM transactions using the instrument used in the research process. They were asked to complete this assignment before the workshop and to be prepared to discuss their findings. On the day of the workshop, participants were organized into groups, then asked to collaboratively review a new transcript. Once all groups had reviewed their transcripts, additional handouts designed to prompt discussion were distributed. As a large group, participants discussed overall impressions of the transcripts they reviewed.

Although the research team found their own discussions transformative, they were pleasantly surprised by the quality and thoughtfulness of the workshop discussion. Participants readily identified problematic aspects of the service: for example, long delays between the patron's first message and the librarian's reply were deemed unacceptable. As in the research group's discussions, participants disagreed on the exact nature of both reference and instruction in the IM transcripts, but agreed that more could be done in both areas. For perhaps the first time, participants considered the impact that their IM interactions might have on a patron's impressions of the library. Feedback following the workshop was positive and review of later transaction logs showed more regularity in greetings, instruction, and closing.

Conclusion

Transformative learning grows from the thoughtful application of three core tenants: self-directed learning, critical reflection, and collaborative inquiry. This approach to learning has already resulted in innovations in higher education and scholarly communication; as illustrated in this process of evaluation and education, it offers similarly transformative effects for academic libraries. Too often professional development sessions are task oriented, and session goals focus on discrete behaviors. This may be appropriate when introducing a new technology or interface, but it is not conducive to fostering clear communication skills. Often the structure of training sessions implies a deficit in the practice or knowledge of participants. Whether participants elect or are required to attend, they bring background knowledge to the session. They have established a set of practices and perspectives that inform their behavior, and these practices and perspectives should serve as the foundation for new knowledge. When planners value the background knowledge that participants bring to the session, they demonstrate respect for the participants.

As a result of this evaluation, the research team learned much about service perceptions and standards. These lessons informed planning for the workshop, but the learning continued as the research team realized they had developed an effective way how to guide a professional development workshop. The tenets of transformative learning were applied in such a way that participants were able to control their own learning. A pre-assignment invited reflection and conversation at a personal pace. Participants and presenters gathered for the workshop to engage in collaborative inquiry and challenge assumptions about service delivery in a virtual space. Participants drew on the existing sense of community and mutual respect to candidly discuss issues and examples from the patron perspective. This rich discussion enabled participants to share personal practices and consider alternative methods proposed by their colleagues.

Appendix: Evaluation Rubric

1. Transaction ID:

2. Transaction Type:
   - Reference (proceed to question #4)
   - Directional (proceed to question #4)
   - Dropped (proceed to question #3)

3. Who was responsible for the dropped transaction?
Responsibility for dropped transaction is determined by response time. After answering this question, proceed to submit.
   - Patron (0–3 minutes)
   - Librarian (4+ minutes)

4. Presence or absence of greeting:
   - No greeting
   - Greeting

5. Response time:
   - 0–4 minutes
   - 5–9 minutes
   - 10–14 minutes
   - 15+ minutes

6. Transaction time:
   - 0–4 minutes
   - 5–9 minutes
   - 10–14 minutes
   - 15+ minutes

7. Presence or absence of reference interview:
   - Not applicable
   - Not applicable (directional question)
   - No interview
   - Provided abbreviated questions
   - Provider asked relevant questions
   - Provider asked relevant questions and restated the research question for clarification

8. Presence or absence of instructional techniques:
   - Not applicable
   - Not applicable (directional question)
   - No instructional techniques
   - Partial instruction given
   - Provider explained his/her strategy

9. Presence or absence of referrals:
   - Not applicable
   - Factually incorrect referral
   - No referral or incomplete referral
   - Referral present but unnecessary
   - Referral with directions/follow-up

10. Resources:
    - Not applicable (directional)
    - No resources given
    - Print (including media resources)
    - Electronic (licensed resources, including the library catalog)
    - Online
    - Multiple resource types given

11. Quality of Resources:
    - Not applicable (directional)
    - Inappropriate
    - Adequate
    - Resource meets patron's expressed need
    - Resource meets patron's expressed need and offers additional options

12. Were multiple questions asked?
    - Yes
    - No (proceed to question #13)

13. Presence or absence of a closing statement:
    - No closing
    - Closing
    - Closing with confirmation that question has been answered or needs have been met

14. Overall impressions:
    - Positive transaction
    - Negative transaction
    - For review

15. Notes

Notes

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11. See Appendix.

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13. Dewey, John. *How We Think*. Boston, MA: Heath, 1910.

14. Cranton, Patricia. *Professional Development as Transformative Learning: New Perspectives for Teachers of Adults*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1996.

15. Taylor, Edward. "Fostering Transformative Learning." In *Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace, and Higher Education*, edited by Jack Mezirow and Edward Taylor, 3–16. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009.

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