



Ask a Librarian Gives Florida Libraries Something to Chat about

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Ask a Librarian, a statewide collaborative chat service, began in summer 2003 and has steadily grown, adding member libraries and expanding its service to patrons. Winter Park Public Library was one of the first public libraries in Florida to offer electronic chat and was a member of Ask a Librarian when it went live. Membership in the collaborative has offered our library a chance to work with librarians and citizens across the state while offering our own patrons expanded access to online information and reference resources.

Winter Park Public Library (WPPL) is a small municipal library serving a population of 27,000 residents in Winter Park, Florida. After two years of maintaining a chat service geared to local residents, we are now answering reference questions from across the state. The Ask a Librarian Collaborative, which has been in service for more than a year, has given our staff a new and exciting way to respond to reference queries. Using the most current electronic chat technology, we can now guide patrons to information resources no matter their location. A treasure hunter looking for a map of shipwrecks, a genealogist seeking a death certificate, and a student seeking articles about stem cell research are only a few examples of the many patrons who are finding fast, online answers to their reference questions. From the Panhandle to the Keys, Florida's libraries are joining together to create an expanding statewide chat service.

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The Ask a Librarian Collaborative

WPPL joined the Ask a Librarian Collaborative in its early stages, before the project went live. Started by the College Center for Library Automation (CCLA) and the Tampa Bay Library Consortium (TBLC), Ask a Librarian is funded by a Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant. It began operating in summer 2003. To introduce the idea to Florida librarians, project coordinators traveled throughout the state to present the service first-hand, explaining the software and demonstrating how the collaborative would benefit libraries. They also took the time to explain their selection process and why they chose Docutek over other software vendors with whom they had worked. After choosing Docutek, Ask a Librarian technical staff worked for more than a year with the vendor to customize the software for the collaborative. Once we had learned about the time and resources that CCLA and TBLC had put into the project, it was clear that Ask a Librarian would become a great resource for both libraries and patrons. After weighing the options, our librarians were willing to be part of the first wave of staff who would help launch the new service.

A free online service to Florida's 17 million residents, Ask a Librarian goes beyond the bricks-and-mortar library to give patrons remote access to trained information professionals. Though the collaborative service began with a mere fifteen libraries, it has now grown to more than eighty members, including academic, public, and special libraries scattered across every geographical region of the state. In its first month of operation (July 2003), Ask a Librarian handled just fewer than forty confirmed chat sessions. Powered by the addition of new member libraries, the service is now handling more than nine hundred sessions per month. It fielded 7,550 online reference queries in its first year.

The Florida Electronic Library

The Ask a Librarian service is part of a larger state initiative called the Florida Electronic Library. This state-funded plan





contains several projects meant to increase citizens' access to electronic information. Through the **Florida Electronic Library Web portal** (www.flelibrary.org), residents can use their local public library card to access a suite of sixteen Gale databases that includes articles found in general periodicals, health and business periodicals, and academic journals. In addition, there is a reader's advisory service and information geared specifically to students in grades K-12. The information contained in these proprietary databases is not freely available on the Web. Chat librarians are able to use these databases to respond to the wide variety of information needs they encounter.

In the future, the portal will also provide access to a metasearch engine capable of simultaneously accessing library holdings across the state, searching the state archives, and retrieving relevant information that Google and other commercial sites cannot access. In addition to these resources, Florida citizens will have access to a virtual library card accepted in any public library in the state. The idea of a statewide library card reinforces the philosophy that information needs should be met no matter the patron's location. To make Floridians aware of these new resources becoming available, the state launched the Florida Electronic Library with a demonstration of its Ask a Librarian chat service.

For the official launch in December 2003, WPPL was chosen to help Florida's secretary of state, Glenda Hood, unveil the new service to the public. To demonstrate the power of the new collaborative, Hood posed a question from a computer terminal on the west coast of Florida, engaging in a real-time chat with one of our reference librarians located in central Florida. Because of the advanced technologies involved in the launch, there was apprehension that the slightest glitch could cause the chat session to fail. To the relief of all, the demonstration was a success and helped generate positive public awareness for the new service. As state officials and journalists observed the launch from overheads and computer monitors, Ask a Librarian proved its ability to transform and improve reference services for Florida library patrons.

Background

Like many other public libraries, WPPL is always seeking out innovative ways

to provide patrons with timely, accurate, and useful information. Wanting to take advantage of the local community's high number of Internet-active residents, we initiated our first chat service in 2001. One of the first public libraries in Florida to offer a live online reference service, we have now accumulated more than three years of chat experience. Over the years, we have had the opportunity to test and use many different chat software applications, getting a hands-on feel for what works and what does not.

Chat technology has come a long way in the past three years. Earlier versions of chat software only allowed librarians to provide brief answers to patrons by typing them into a dialogue box or pushing a page from a Web site. Another drawback from those early days of chat was the inability to share proprietary databases with patrons online. Taking these limitations into consideration and wanting to offer more advanced features to patrons, we decided in the summer of 2002 to migrate to OCLC's QuestionPoint. This transition seemed to be the best way to further expand the collaborative opportunities we had enjoyed as members of OCLC's Global Knowledge Base. Although WPPL handled its own in-house chat service, the Global Knowledge Base gave the reference department the opportunity to forward more in-depth questions on to other institutions whose collections could better answer the question. This collaborative process also allowed our reference librarians to work on challenging reference questions from other institutions, responding to Florida-specific questions that could not be easily answered in other parts of the United States.

As well as collaborative advantages, QuestionPoint's new software introduced a number of chat features that seemed interesting. However, after testing the software, we realized that we did not necessarily need all of the new bells and whistles. Options such as Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), video, and application sharing were too advanced or involved to be of practical use. Many of these features require specialized equipment that many computer owners may not have, such as microphones, speakers, and Web cams. Unlike these less practical features, the ability to co-browse (sharing one browser screen simultaneously with a patron) stood out as an attractive tool for helping patrons find and use appropri-

ate online resources. Wanting to offer the ability to co-browse, we were let down by many of the newer versions we tested, and began to wonder if co-browsing technology was practical. Much of the functionality of previously tested software proved to be too clumsy and unforgiving for delivering the kinds of fast online answers patrons are seeking. Wanting to find a stable co-browse system and looking for more collaborative opportunities, we left QuestionPoint after one year to join Florida's new Ask a Librarian Collaborative.

New Opportunities, New Advantages

Joining Ask a Librarian allowed us to discontinue our previous in-house chat service. By making the switch, staff time dedicated to chat was reduced from sixteen hours per week to three. While decreasing the time needed to cover chat, service hours for patrons increased, with service now available from 10 A.M. to 10 P.M., Monday through Friday. The guaranteed year of LSTA funding was also a significant factor in the decision to join Florida's collaborative. From a budget perspective, the service would be cost-free for participating member libraries to initiate and maintain for the first two years, and possibly longer. The incentives to join Ask a Librarian also extended beyond basic subscription costs. Technical staff were already in place to maintain the software, troubleshoot problems, and answer questions. After the frustration our library had experienced with the lack of technical support from past chat vendors, this was an important point of consideration. With the budget cuts that public libraries have seen nationally and throughout the Florida, joining the collaborative would be the most cost-effective way to expand and improve electronic reference services to patrons.

Another benefit to becoming part of a large chat collaborative was that it gave WPPL's reference staff the ability to reduce chat responsibilities so that librarians could place more emphasis on other duties and projects. The department has a limited number of professional librarians to staff the reference desk. The previous chat service required librarians to monitor chat while simultaneously responding to patrons in person and by telephone. Covering chat four hours per day and only receiving a handful of ses-





sions per month did not make sense as far as allocating valuable resources and staff time to the service. Reducing the hours also permits librarians to cover chat away from the public, where the librarian can concentrate more easily on responding to virtual patrons. By simply logging onto a centralized Web portal, librarians can cover their shifts and handle basic administrative tasks, such as responding to e-mail questions, reviewing chat transcripts, and monitoring statistics. Practice sessions can also be carried out through the portal, allowing librarians to sharpen their chat skills and learn new features.

How it Works

A schedule containing assigned chat times is set up each month by the virtual reference coordinator and can be accessed through the portal. The coordinator tries to staff the collaborative desk with at least two information professionals and attempts to pair academic and public librarians together. Librarians can communicate while staffing the virtual reference desk by instant messaging back and forth. This communication is important because it allows librarians to manage incoming chats and tell one another if there are problems. As librarians accept patrons, they move from the queue and show up as an active patron. Once a librarian has accepted a patron, a small number one appears next to their name in the chat interface. This tells other librarians on duty who is in an active session. Librarians can accept more than one patron at a time, but only if the patron wait-time has been longer than five minutes and if the librarian accepting two patrons is comfortable juggling two chats at once. All librarians utilized to staff the collaborative desk must have completed a day-long training session that is handled regionally.

Since the beginning of the project, Ask a Librarian staff have traveled throughout the state to train and certify more than 580 library personnel. WPPL staff were trained in conjunction with other librarians from our area in a day-long session. During this meeting, trainers covered the basic operation of the Docutek chat interface, troubleshooting problems with the software, appropriate chat lingo, and standards of service. After an initial training session, monthly practice opportunities were made available online to reinforce chat proficiency.

Each library has one designated site coordinator who receives additional training. Before librarians are allowed to staff the collaborative desk, they must pass a competency test administered by the site coordinator. This test is used to verify whether librarians are able to carry out an effective chat reference interview, guide patrons through proprietary databases using co-browse technology, and quickly manage multiple windows to obtain online resources. Each library's site coordinator is then responsible for coordinating schedules and working with technical staff in Tallahassee to solve any software problems that may arise.

After being trained and learning the basic skills, we began to think about the possible complications of helping patrons from other libraries in a collaborative setting. Using a different catalog configuration than our own, searching unfamiliar databases, or locating information on a library's Web site could make even a simple request a challenge. Another concern was that public and academic library patrons would be using the service. Using a new technology to answer reference questions seemed like enough of an obstacle without adding questions that could be beyond the scope of the library's resources. Although the suite of databases provided by the state could be used to provide answers, it seemed logical that the academic resources provided by individual schools would best serve the students.

Collaboration

Our concerns stemmed from the need for librarians to be able to quickly navigate unfamiliar resources during chat sessions. Chat librarians must rely on strong research skills and a basic familiarity with online resources to assist patrons who may have little or no experience with such online tools. With all of the participating libraries providing online access to a wide range of electronic resources, librarians could not be expected to know how to navigate each one. In order to help patrons use other institutions' resources, each member library provides confidential access numbers and pins. These numbers are never revealed to patrons but can be used by librarians during chat sessions to gain temporary access to databases.

Docutek's co-browse feature makes it possible to instruct and guide patrons through a shared browser screen. Virtual

reference can be utilized to improve information literacy because of its ideal environment in which to demonstrate database research tools and help interpret results. It can also be used to help patrons navigate through the sea of information found on the Internet. With so many Web sites lacking substantial content, authority, and accuracy, this is the perfect opportunity to assist patrons in locating quality information in a virtual environment.

After we had chatted for a month and became more comfortable with the Docutek software, our trepidations began to ease. With each new academic patron, staff became more comfortable using other libraries' resources, realizing that the students using chat were desperate for assistance and that any help that could be provided was welcome. In working with the academic librarians, it became clear that they were hesitant when it came to helping patrons from a public library. With academic and public librarians scheduled to work together, librarians in the collaborative are learning to cooperate with their colleagues and to trust one another's work as information professionals. When a librarian cannot deliver the best response or feels that he or she cannot completely answer the question, the Docutek software provides the ability to transfer chat sessions to other librarians online or to the home institution's e-mail.

Challenges and Opportunities for Growth

For the network of librarians who staff the collaborative on a daily and weekly basis, this work requires a good deal of patience, and the ability to think and react quickly. Typing back and forth in a text box takes time and patience for both the patron and the librarian. In reviewing transcripts, it is clear that the reference interview, based on the information requested and depth of the response, takes longer than traditional assistance. Another issue at hand is that the anonymity of online chat may facilitate inappropriate behavior. Unfortunately, librarians in the collaborative have been baited and verbally abused by patrons on several occasions. Even with these challenges, the payoff for stepping out from behind the physical reference desk is that librarians are able to respond to information needs in a new and exciting way.





After its first year of service, the Ask a Librarian collaborative appears to be providing Florida's libraries with a viable solution to maintaining online chat. Within the collaborative, committees have been formed to address problems, operational issues, and goals. These committees help keep members connected and allow librarians to stay involved with the day-to-day aspects of the service. The Quality Assurance Committee is a good example of how members are working together to maintain a level of excellence. By reviewing transcripts each month, group members are able to monitor and evaluate the work of virtual librarians. This process ensures that questions are answered appropriately and helps identify problem areas. Each month, a "Best Transcript" area highlights a chat session that went particularly well and exemplifies the goals of the Ask a Librarian service. The other committees (Policies and Procedures, Marketing, and Knowledge Base) are still in the developmental stages but likewise promise to play important roles in the operation of the collaborative.

Successes

As public libraries look for ways to incorporate chat technology into their online reference services, large collaboratives provide a trouble-free way to get on board. The Florida statewide collaborative has provided WPPL with benefits we would not have had on our own. Unlike a large, multistate collaborative, the smaller state collaborative is on a more personal, manageable scale. It allows us to interact with our colleagues and network with librarians we would otherwise only meet at annual conferences. This broad network has strengthened Florida's library community and allowed us to improve access to information for the state's citizens. The service's average number of sessions per month continues to steadily increase, and the success of the collaborative can be measured by the growing number of participating libraries.

With renewed funding, Ask a Librarian is one of Florida's top initiatives. It was one of only three programs statewide to receive Exemplary Project recognition. State librarian Judith Ring

praised the service for "excellence in program planning, implementation and evaluation, with special emphasis on outcome measurement." Users of the service have also voiced their approval of Ask a Librarian. In a pop-up survey immediately following chat sessions, 75 percent of patrons felt their question was either partially or totally answered. Patrons using the service left the following comments in the survey:

This is the best resource that I have used in a long time, I wish I had known about it earlier in my academic career!! It is a priceless wealth of information!

It's just great to know that this type of service is available. Thanks.

I have been searching for something all day, and "ask a librarian" was finally able to help me. Thank you so much!

Based on these statistics and responses, it is clear that Ask a Librarian is making great strides in library services to Florida citizens. Now that's something to chat about. ■

ARTstor Announces Availability of Digital Image Resource

ARTstor, a nonprofit initiative founded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, announced that nonprofit educational and cultural institutions in the United States will be able to access its digital library starting this summer. The library is comprised of digital images and related data, the tools to make active use of those images, and an online environment intended to balance the interests of users with those of content providers.

ARTstor's Charter Collection will contain approximately 300,000 digital images from different cultures and disciplines, offering sufficient breadth and depth to support a wide range of noncommercial educational and scholarly activities; the collection is anticipated to grow to a half million images by summer 2006. Source collections include:

- **The Image Gallery:** A collection of 200,000 images of world art and culture corresponding to the contents of a university slide library, constructed in response to college teaching needs. Since the images have been cataloged with subject headings, they will be useful both to those in the arts and in many other fields.
- **The Carnegie Arts of the United States:** A widely used collection documenting aspects of the history of American art, architecture, visual, and material culture.
- **The Huntington Archive of Asian Art:** A broad photographic overview of the art of Asia from 3000 B.C. through the present.

- **The Illustrated Bartsch:** A collection derived from the art reference publication of the same name, containing images and data related to more than fifty thousand old master European prints from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries.
- **The Mellon International Dunhuang Archive:** High-resolution images of wall paintings and sculpture from the Buddhist cave shrines in Dunhuang, China, along with related objects and art from the caves that are now in museums and libraries in Europe and the United States.
- **The MoMA Architecture and Design Collection:** A comprehensive collection of high-resolution images representing the holdings of the Department of Architecture and Design of The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York.

Participation fees for ARTstor's Charter Collection are listed now at www.artstor.org. Thirty-five test institutions have had access to the software and image repository during the past academic year, including the Art Institute of Chicago; Harvard University; Hunter College; James Madison University; Johns Hopkins University; the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the National Gallery of Art; New York University; Pennsylvania State University; Princeton University; Sarah Lawrence College; Smith College; University of California at San Diego; Williams College; and the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.

For more information about ARTstor, or about participating in ARTstor, please visit www.artstor.org.

