Lifting the Veil: Analyzing Collaborative Virtual Reference Transcripts to Demonstrate Value and Make Recommendations for Practice
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Research Question
The BMCC Library offers 24/7 Chat reference using QuestionPoint from OCLC.

How is the service being used?
Using an extended transection analysis, this project looked at description, questions of value, and considered practice recommendations.

The Context
Borough of Manhattan Community College is a large (4,024 degree seeking students) urban community college. In Tribeca (a few blocks from the World Trade Center), students have wide ranging gifts and abilities and come from a diverse background. BMCC is a collaborative virtual reference service supporting commuter students that often have complicated lives. https://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/library taxpayers

The Research Design
I received an XML file from QuestionPoint containing the transcripts that were generated by our students. That XML file was converted to a series of Excel Spreadsheets.

I did complete read-throughs of the transcripts, looking at topics, outcomes and learning from the data. The second read-through contributed a “discipline list.”

I have done a partial third read-through, looking at lenses of correctness, and applying an instructional benchmark.

Literature Review


Ground Theory Analysis was a really helpful introduction to how to look at the data.

I began by transcribing every single word of data, including the form field. The same goes for queries. A full transcript.

The Data Set
In 2013 there were 828 transcripts generated. Almost 20% of the transactions take place outside of library hours.

Class or Subject of Assignment

Judging Quality

*Provide professional level search assistance.
*Provide context and motivation to the patron when they lack source material or are seeking a broad, basic discussion of the topic.
*Provide enough guidance so the patron can increase the work themselves (focus on what the topic should look like, as well as the "3D plot.")
*Provide ongoing links (whether internal or external) that can be used in the future.
*Provide the reference librarian with feedback on the effectiveness of the reference transaction.

Quality Benchmark

AND YET!

*Like any reference practice, there are some chat reference questions for which the best answer is information.
*Many transactions that were answered with information felt like the instruction would have been more appropriate.
*In a three month sample just over 50% of the transactions did not meet the instructional benchmark criteria, but it was really hard to say that any were wrong.

The group includes 432 transactions that were not error or reduction in take-up.

Major Conclusions

To be shared with the Community of Practice
A number of patrons have English fluency issues. It’s hard to calibrate, because the linguistics is subtle.
Do we want to be more careful about checking for understanding?

One of the benchmarks of the GP transaction is that the student receives a transcript. Do they really?

About 5% of transcripts have identifiable types in the email address. 19.80% of the transcripts and with “Patron in no longer connected.”

The patron does not receive a transcript when this happens.

We need to talk a lot more about best practices.

Many chat reference transcripts are enriched with more information and less instruction.

The use of the policy pages is also critical.

Most of the true errors of fact that I spotted were problems that could have been prevented by reading the policy pages.

Judging Quality

Gratitude:
Approximately 70% of the transcripts included some expression of gratitude to the service.

Signs of Technical Problems for the Students

Pervasive password problems
Logic problems showed up in 17.4% of the transcripts.
How good is our patron Internet service?
Can we make any conclusions from IP Addresses?
Symptoms include complaints of slow Internet, sessions that crashed.

I will be reading current transcripts to see if this has changed.

My instinct is that we have not had as many password problems recently.

Next Steps

*Continue to explore the data.
*Look for an opportunity to report out to the QuestionPoint Community.
*Create an executive summary for campus stakeholders.
*Explore Spring 2015 transcripts to see if some of the technology issues have cleared up.

English 101 and 201, and Speech 100 are major required “Gateway” courses at BMCC.

The Library also has a textbook collection that generates a lot of traffic.

Collaboration across time zones and using a back up service.

About 30% of our questions are being answered by “QP Backup.”

Many are being answered by our colleagues at CUNY.

Many of the other libraries (although not all) are from the west coast.

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