Article

The Role of Information Literacy in the Provision of Virtual Reference Services at the Enquiry Desk.

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Abstract

Virtual Reference (VR) tools are a useful means of allowing remote interaction between librarians and library users. This paper focuses on the use of synchronous VR tools and their potential for fostering information literacy. The use of chat software, co-browse and Second Life was surveyed and follow-up interviews were undertaken. Conclusions: The three tools investigated all have merits as ways of promoting information literacy within VR services at the enquiry desk, with chat being the most popular because of its stable and user-friendly nature, and the ease with which it can be integrated with other products such as blogs, webpages and co-browse tools.

Keywords

Academic libraries, User studies, Virtual learning environment

1. Introduction

Virtual Reference (VR) tools are a useful means of allowing remote interaction between librarians and library users. VR can be said to involve the use of computer and communications technology to provide a remote reference service. Academic libraries are doing this in many ways. Established asynchronous formats such as email and the use of web-forms are commonplace and expected by library users. Now, newer synchronous tools are beginning to make an appearance. This paper focuses on the use of synchronous VR tools and their potential for fostering information literacy. The VR tools examined assist in the support role of library staff when answering enquiries, providing new avenues to help users refine search strategies and deal with any barriers to using a resource effectively.

My thesis for the MSc Information Science at University College London examined the use of VR in academic libraries in the UK and Irish Higher Education sector (Beck, 2009). This research investigated the use of VR tools for providing enquiry resolution services. 166 Higher Education library members of SCONUL (Society of College, National and University Libraries) were surveyed, garnering 49 valid replies. Follow-up interviews were conducted with seven respondents who were found to be using these VR tools. The tools examined by this research were:

- *Chat software*: synchronous enquiry answering using chat software such as MSN Messenger or Meebo.
- *Co-browse*: interactive use and demonstration of online resources via shared remote access between librarian and patron.
- *Second Life*: an interactive virtual world in which a user creates an online representation of themselves and may interact with other users.

2. Chat software

Chat was the most widely used VR tool (Figure 1).

The subscription tool QuestionPoint was the most popular chat product, as this was selected by three out of the nine users who use chat.

Chat can be integrated into enquiry services in ways that support and promote information literacy. For example, one of the respondents mentions that they are investigating the use of a chatbox which appears within their library catalogue when a user performs an unsuccessful search. Another example

of this versatility is the integration of a chatbox within databases. This facility allows libraries to embed their own chatbox to assist with the

Figure 1

information needs of users within the resource itself (The Distant Librarian, 2010). These are excellent ways of using chat to capture dissatisfied users and to engage with them at their point of need with information literacy tuition, such as helping them to create a new search or to identify why their original search was unsuccessful.

Respondents were asked to rate the use of VR tools in enquiry services on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being 'Optional extra' and 5 being 'Essential'. Eleven respondents thought that chat was 'Essential' and three felt that chat was optional. It seems apparent that the ease of use and stability of modern chat products is giving this VR tool a high profile within reference service provision. Chat expands the support role of library staff by giving them a new means to help users develop effective search strategies. Respondents using chat did not report any problems that may disrupt the service. When asked about the likelihood of using chat software for VR in the future, the majority across all respondents felt that this was 'Likely' or 'Very Likely'.
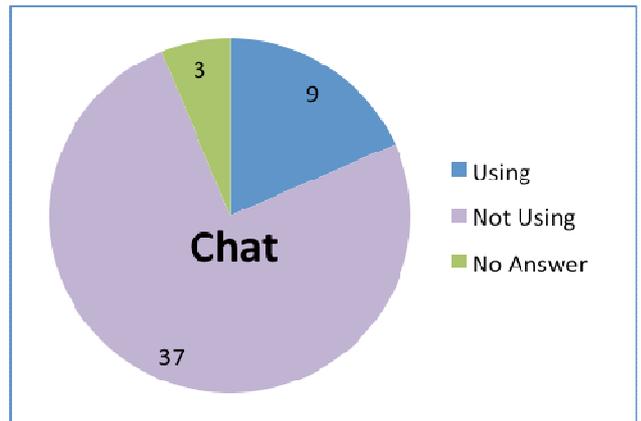
3. Co-browse

Co-browsing was less widely used than chat software. Of 49 respondents, three respondents indicated they were using this tool (Figure 2). Co-browse as an interactive teaching tool at the enquiry desk could have great potential in developing information literacy skills, providing a means for the librarian to guide a user in the development of their information finding and evaluating skills in a collaborative way. Graves & Desai (2006) corroborate this when examining the use of co-browse as an instructional tool whilst dealing with enquiries. Over 90% of their survey respondents felt that co-browse was a good way to learn. Co-browse supports users' active engagement with information by allowing librarian and user to

Figure 2

search within a resource simultaneously, while communicating using a chatbox, telephone, or Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) software.
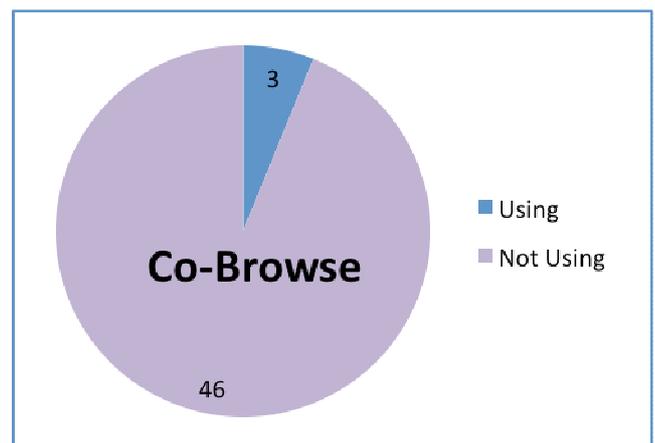
When asked how essential co-browse was at the enquiry desk, the majority of responses

gave a rating of 3 on the opinion scale, indicating that co-browse is not considered as an essential service when compared with chat. Given that only a very small section of the respondents were actually using co-browse, it can be argued that many respondents may be unaware of the difficulties underpinning the implementation of co-browsing.

Amongst the technical difficulties associated with co-browse the following emerged as the most problematic during the interview: incompatibility with browsers and websites, inability to synchronise with authentication processes, screen freezes, and system crashes. Two of the three respondents using co-browse reported that these technical problems deterred further use of co-browse software.

Some users have found ways to mitigate the problems associated with co-browse. For example, one respondent in the research identified designated databases co-browse worked well with and then provided co-browse support only for these databases. It is hoped that as co-browse continues to improve it will eventually support all the databases offered in a library setting. Libraries can have a role here in advocating for and supporting efforts to perfect and improve co-browse products. The majority of respondents in the survey sample stated that they felt it was 'Likely or Very Likely' that their institution would use co-browsing as a VR tool in the future.

4. Second Life

Similarly to co-browse, Second Life was not used by many respondents (Figure 3), and information gathered on the use of Second Life as a VR service was limited by the fact that no respondents using this tool were available for follow up interviews.

Webber & Nahl (2010) detail the use of Second Life for teaching skills of gathering and communicating information through virtual interviews, and list benefits for students such as 'creating useful services, tools, and professional activities in a novel information environment' (Webber & Nahl, 2010, p7). The Community Virtual Library in Second Life provides a free reference service staffed by qualified volunteers (CVL, 2010) and this virtual service shows the potential for the promotion of information literacy at the point of enquiry, although none of the respondents considered Second Life an 'Essential' tool at the enquiry desk.

Figure 3

One of the top problems identified by the Second Life users was staff time constraints. A staff member dealing with VR enquiries at the enquiry desk will usually be working with multiple applications on their PC, and will not have the time available to focus on just one enquiry tool such as Second Life. As Second Life is a program which requires dedicated use of a PC screen, this makes it unsuitable for simultaneous use alongside other applications and places unacceptable demands on staff time. Unlike with the previous two VR tools, the majority of respondents felt it was 'Unlikely or 'Very Unlikely' that they would use Second Life in the future at the enquiry desk.
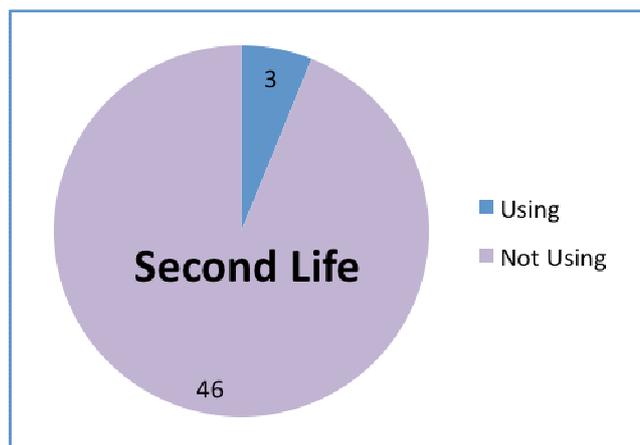
5. Conclusions

The three tools investigated all have merits as ways of promoting information literacy within VR services at the enquiry desk. For example, co-browsing encourages collaborative use of information, while the immersive environment of Second Life can foster the development of communicative and evaluative information skills. However, the study showed that chat is the most popular of the VR tools researched, because of its stable and user-friendly nature, and the ease with which it can be integrated with other products such as blogs, webpages and co-browse tools.

It should be stressed that chat does not have all the capabilities of more optimal tools which are better suited for developing a full complement of information literacy skills, such as co-browse, although chat can still approximate some of the collaborative facilities of co-browse, such as 'pushing' URLs to an enquirer within a chat session. Second Life is perhaps more suited to supporting information literacy via dedicated classes or embedded within an educational context. Co-browse has great potential which may be harnessed more efficiently if its technical problems can be addressed.

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