



Evidence Summary

Content Analysis of Reference Transactions Provides Guidance Regarding Staffing of Library Service Points

A Review of:

Bishop, B. W., & Bartlett, J. A. (2013). Where do we go from here? Informing academic library staffing through reference transaction analysis. *College & Research Libraries*, 74(5), 489-500. Retrieved from <http://crl.acrl.org/content/early/2012/05/07/crl-365.full.pdf>

Reviewed by:

Annie M. Hughes
Reference Librarian
Wilson Dental Library
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA, United States of America
Email: amhughes@usc.edu

Received: 22 Feb. 2014

Accepted: 25 Apr. 2014

© 2014 Hughes. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons-Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike License 2.5 Canada (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/ca/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly attributed, not used for commercial purposes, and, if transformed, the resulting work is redistributed under the same or similar license to this one.

Abstract

Objective – To identify the quantity of location-based and subject-based questions and determine the locations where those questions are asked in order to inform decision-making regarding optimal placing of staff.

Design – Content analysis of location-based and subject-based reference transactions or transcripts collected using LibStats at 15 face-to-face (f2f) service points and via virtual services.

Setting – Virtual and f2f service points at University of Kentucky (UK) campus libraries.

Subjects – 1,852 location-based and subject-based reference transactions gathered via a systematic sample of every 70th transaction out of 129,572 transactions collected.

Methods – Using LibStats, the researchers collected data on location-based and subject-based questions at all service points at UK Libraries between 2008 and 2011. The researchers eliminated transcripts that did not include complete data or questions with fields left blank. If all question fields were properly completed, identification and coding of location-based or subject-based questions took place.

Usable transcripts included 1,333 questions that contained sufficient data. For this particular content analysis only the question type, reference mode, and location of question were utilized from the data collected.

Unusable transactions were removed prior to content analysis, and reliability testing was conducted to determine interrater and intrarater reliability. Interrater reliability was high (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .87\%$) and intrarater reliability was acceptable (Cohen's $\kappa = .880$).

Main Results – From the usable transcripts, 83.7% contained location-based questions and 16.3% were subject-based, and a little over 80% of location-based questions and 77.2% of subject-based questions were asked face-to-face (f2f). Of the location-based questions, 11.5% were directional questions and many of these questions were related to finding places inside the libraries. "Attribute of location" questions related to library services and resources, such as finding an item, printing, circulation, desk supplies, and computer problems, made up 72.8% of total question transactions. Researchers found that subject-based questions were difficult to categorize and noted that other methods would be needed to analyze the content of these questions. Professional librarians and library staff are better equipped to answer these questions, and the location where the question asked is irrelevant. The researchers addressed the issue of where questions were asked by recording the reference mode (chat, e-mail, phone, or f2f) and location service point at UK Libraries. Overall, 79% of questions were asked f2f, rather than via chat or e-mail. Researchers think that this is due to a lack of marketing efforts regarding those services, noting that most questions were asked in the system's large main library, which also receives the most subject-based questions.

Conclusion – This study can inform the UK Libraries system as to where their resources are most needed and allow for more strategic decision-making regarding staffing. The study could also prompt development of a mobile application to answer location-based questions, though more investigation is

needed before moving forward with development of a mobile app. Due to the findings of this study, UK Libraries will deploy their professional library staff to locations where subject-based questions were most frequently asked. Because staffing of libraries is one of the "most expensive and valuable resources," academic libraries can use this method to validate their current staffing strategies or justify the allocation of staff throughout their systems (p. 499).

Commentary

While the researchers have published on this topic in other instances, it is surprising that they do not focus their literature review toward desk staffing and service point allocations in academic libraries. They do cite articles in their introduction related to their research questions, though the literature review is focused primarily on mobile technologies such as mobile applications, QR codes, and augmented reality. These topics have less to do with the research questions at hand, and so it is odd that they discuss mobile applications and augmented reality in their larger review.

The authors do not provide sufficient background as to why they are conducting the study, nor do they provide a description of their current staffing or service model. We know that the staff exist at various service points within the library, but more information about their location, the setup of the service points (e.g., whether physical service points have a separate circulation desk/reference desk or a reference office) would be helpful.

The authors of this study clearly state the limitations of their data collection. Collecting complete data at busy service points proved to be a challenge when using LibStats. The researchers put forth that simplifying data collection and increasing training on systems used for collection would be a future approach. The UK Libraries system also plans to implement the LibAnswers product by Springshare, which will allow for recording of f2f transactions, telephone, e-mail, text

message and chat transactions and which also provides a FAQ section that allows patrons to instantly access location-based and subject-based answers. The researchers plan to replicate this study using data gathered via this new system.

The researchers report that a mobile application could help to answer location-based questions, such as finding physical items, which would allow for staff to stay at their service points instead of abandoning their stations to aid a patron. The researchers do indicate that without further study they are speculating regarding the use of mobile applications.

One major outcome of this study is that 80% of questions asked at desk or virtual service points were location-based questions, not subject-based or reference questions. The implication here is that professional librarians

or reference librarians are using their skills to answer directional questions rather than focusing on the more complex reference questions for which they were hired. In this case, the use of a tiered reference service whereby staff or library student workers triage questions at key services points and then pass on more complex questions to a reference librarian would be ideal.

Overall, the article provides evidence that location-based questions are asked most frequently at various service points throughout the library and that subject-based questions, while asked less often, require a skilled professional to answer them. This type of study can inform library administration about how to go forward with staffing allocations as well as introduce technologies that provide anytime, anywhere service to alleviate the volume of location-based questions.