So What Do They Ask?
Analyzing Content of Digital Reference Transactions

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Academic libraries have long provided reference service through multiple means. The UC-San Diego Library offers in-person, phone, chat, email, and text reference services. Unlike reference questions asked in-person or by phone, online tools like QuestionPoint facilitate greater understanding of the questions asked by storing transcripts of these transactions. With the goals of determining the most frequent topics of user inquiry via chat, text, and email reference services and the number of non-library questions asked, the UCSD Library conducted an assessment of the content of 1,758 chat, text, & email questions asked by campus affiliates via QuestionPoint via its digital reference services from January through March 2011. It focused on the content of questions asked, excluding assessment elements like volume, response time, accuracy, user satisfaction or demographics, and question timing. The poster presented at CARL 2012 outlined characteristics of UCSD's digital reference services, assessment details, similarities & differences between the services, topics of most frequently posed questions, and project outcomes.

Transcript analysis can have many uses and its findings should be shared findings widely with library staff, so multiple departments can benefit from the insight. Findings can inform writing or updating canned scripts to respond to inquiries, highlight frequent questions for addressing in staff training & user instruction, promote resources & services about which user's seem unaware, and support adjustment of staffing types & levels based upon complexity of questions typically asked. They can also inform the development or enhancement of webpage & publication content addressing common questions. Finally, the findings can help libraries work with consortial chat service partners to improve their staff's ability to respond to questions specific to your institution.

The UCSD project produced several general observations, some of which are mentioned here. As is commonly seen, the project showed user confusion over lack of access to online journals directly from publisher/association website or through Google and user problems searching for articles in the OPAC without understanding the difference between the OPAC and online databases. Findings showed heavy use of JSTOR for a user's every research need, with users having little understanding of how to choose databases for different topics. Strong user preference was seen for electronic access to known items of interest; many users had little time or patience for interlibrary loan or a visit to the library.

Several recommendations came out of the analysis, including expanding information on alumni privileges and for visiting researcher use of Special Collections. Adding detail to ILL & requesting book/article webpages was recommended because of the frequent referrals there, as was ensuring that hours, locations, study spaces, & other basic information is easy to find on both the mobile & traditional websites. Better promoting of the mobile website and multiple general purpose databases was also recommended.

Tables showing the top 5 question categories for each service, the percent of each service's inquiries related to various topics, and more specific details of each service are available from the author on request (kgoodson@ucsd.edu).