No More Lone Rangers: Setting the Research and Education Agenda for Collaborative Information Work in Virtual Environments

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ABSTRACT
In this Wild Card session, a team of facilitators will lead an open forum to formulate research and teaching agendas around the concern of collaborative information work.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
H.4.3 [**Information Systems Applications**] D.3.3 [**Programming Languages**]: Communications Applications

General Terms
Human Factors,

Keywords
Pedagogy, Communities of practice, Computer-mediated communication, Social networks, Virtual environments, Reference, Collaboration

1. INTRODUCTION
In the last decade, libraries and information centers have formed virtual reference collaborative organizations including statewide, national, and academic consortia. Yet, individual professionals still answer questions primarily as solo operators. Due in part to the economic downturn that reduces available human and other resources, virtual and physical service desks are increasingly staffed by one person. Other models pull the staffing of virtual reference services into offices and away from the reference desk. The old model of on-the-job, over-the-shoulder, apprenticeship learning that was effective in the past is lost with solo staffing or when reference is conducted from the librarian's office or home desktop. These changes in staffing models could increase isolation from peers.

2. REFERENCE AS COLLABORATION
2.1 Importance of Collaboration
Reference as a truly cooperative effort has great potential (see Radford & Vine, in press). It can improve the answers provided to library users by making specific expertise more readily available. Subject specialists are eager to answer more complex questions in their primary areas, so staff satisfaction can also be improved in collaborative situations. Education of new librarians and staff can be enhanced through enabling learning in a real, on-the-job setting that allows for modeling of research strategies and behaviors and point-of-contact feedback.

2.2 Tradition to Innovation

Traditional staffing models, in existence for more than 50 years, stubbornly persist despite the opportunities presented by today's highly networked world and despite evidence that sophisticated library users want more access to subject specialists and are willing to wait if necessary (Radford & Connaway, 2005-2008). How much are librarians using the collaborative tools (including Web 2.0 applications) available to share expertise among subject experts? Are these tools used for real-time collaboration around a question or as static information exchange? What is required beyond these tools to move library practitioners to a collaborative model both within and across organizations?

2.3 Collaboration as a Norm

In 2006, Pomerantz wrote about "collaboration as the norm" in reference work, citing the history of double-staffed reference desks, telephone and in-person referrals, and contemporary collaborations in the form of online discussion lists and "question-swapping consortia." These are all important ways of obtaining answers to a user's question. What is noticeable in the online collaboration examples is that they lack the synchronous involvement of multiple librarians. Is a mere referral to another librarian or information center a true collaboration? McKenzie (2003) reported on users' perceptions of collaborations between library staff, with many users noting positive outcomes. Quinn (2001) explored ways of fostering cooperation. Both Quinn and McKenzie focused on physical reference desks with multiple information professionals. This, however, is a disappearing model. Can the profession move beyond the hand-off model and use online tools and virtual environments that provide a richer learning environment not only for clients, but also for information professionals?

3. GOALS OF THIS FORUM

This interactive forum will discuss opportunities and challenges for formal and informal work collaborations across different virtual information environments, including live chat reference, Instant Messaging and Text Messaging services, and virtual worlds such as Second Life. Together, participants will identify an agenda for research into the collaborative work of information professionals.

In order for collaboration to be an ingrained behavior, enculturation into this model needs to start early in the professional career. How can iSchools better promote collaboration not only in formal team environments, but also for less traditional information and question sharing? If the client's question is our ultimate concern, information professionals must give up a personal sense of ownership of a question at times, but be rewarded with higher user and personal satisfaction when their subject expertise is tapped by others. How do we encourage students to both learn to be skilled researchers and to be willing to ask for assistance?

There is a growing body of research on the effectiveness of virtual teams in the global corporate world, but this model has not yet taken hold in library environments. How large and fluid can a work team be? Can teams or partnerships be encouraged to form dynamically and across organizations? The public and academic library environments are non-competitive, so why does a "Lone Ranger" mentality persist (Radford, 2009)?

These are among the critical questions to be posed by the facilitators, who have conducted extensive research in the areas of virtual reference, hybrid reference models, and virtual collaboration in higher education. Additional questions and the development of directions for research and action will emerge from the participation of the forum attendees.

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