

## **Ask a librarian - the Macquarie experience**

### **Perri-Lee Sandell & Philippa Hair**

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Ms Sandell is an Academic Outreach Librarian for Psychology and Linguistics attached to the Science and Technology Team. She is particularly interested in the application of new technologies to Reference Services.

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### ***In the beginning***

Old ideas about university study requiring students to attend the campus for lectures, research and study are changing rapidly. Not only are many courses offered online either in part or in whole, but technological advances have made it possible for students to get access to resources off-campus.

Easier access does not mean that students want to dispense with the help and mediation of a librarian. Reference assistance is still needed and it seems inappropriate for this to be available within the library building only.

Macquarie University Library is a stimulating place in which to work where innovative ideas from staff are encouraged. In this environment, we conceived a plan to offer an online (virtual) reference service which would be independent of physical location and operating hours and which would meet the need of students choosing to work off-campus.

We researched the services offered by other institutions, read every relevant paper we could, contacted people offering similar services for feedback and investigated the software which would make it all possible. Within Australia, no one was offering the kind of service we envisaged - we wanted a more interactive service using screen sharing (co-browsing) and an audio facility (Voice over IP). Essentially we would be pioneers.

### ***The next steps***

Our service was to go beyond email or chat. We saw this as essential because of what screen sharing and Voice Over IP can add to the reference experience. Screen sharing allows the instructive demonstration of catalogue and database use. An audio facility enhances communication and helps the librarian to detect misunderstandings.

Amongst the software considered in late 1999, NetMeeting stood out. It offered the desirable screen sharing and audio facilities, it was free and it was easy to download. Apart from a new PC with headphones, no expenditure on equipment was necessary for the library. There were no costs either for

participating students, but they did need a relatively new PC with a soundcard and headphones.

There were of course costs absorbed by the library, such as the time of the staff members who developed the service, who operated the service, who trained others to operate the service and the cost of advertising brochures.

In publicising the service, the link from the library homepage was considered to be essential. Later links were also added from two other sites for students.

Because of the need to keep the service manageable without the addition of extra staff, it was decided to limit the initial promotion of the service. The first target audience was Distance Education students for whom assistance with reference and research needs was difficult.

The hours of operation were to be limited also to two afternoon sessions per week. To compensate for the limited hours of operation, an existing underused email service was enhanced and promoted. It is accessible 24 x 7, and provides responses within 24 hours except on weekends.

Approval for a trial was given and the service was offered from August 2000.

From the beginning the number of calls to the virtual reference service has been small. On the other hand, the use of email reference service has rocketed. Why were our students choosing the email service rather than the virtual reference service?

Our first evaluation of the progress of the trial identified the following difficulties

- The trial commenced just before the Olympic period and many students were on holidays
- The hours of operation were short and not easily remembered
- The target group could be less IT competent and less ready to try something new

We responded to the factor we could do something about and extended the hours of operation to the five weekdays between 1pm and 5pm. It was obvious that the ideal hours would include weekends and nights, but current staffing constraints make this impossible.

In addition and to the extent that we could squeeze time to do it, we distributed revamped brochures around the campus aimed at the wider student body. Librarians teaching computer skills were asked to promote the service in their sessions. An innovative third version of the advertising brochure was produced and widely distributed.

Since these activities did not result in a significant increase in usage of the service, we evaluated the service for the second time and used the 'listservs' to find out what the experience of other services have been. We were not surprised to find that other libraries overseas providing similar

services had not exactly been overwhelmed either.

One problem revealed from listserv discussions suggested that there was reluctance among students to download software before using a service. We have investigated software that does not require this such as Livehelper. However they do not offer one of the most prized features - screen sharing.

### ***What of the future?***

- The email service has taken off which indicates that there is a need for a reference service of this nature. However students are not using the virtual option and we ask if this could be because email is familiar and accessible?
- We feel that the students' reluctance to download the software is real, but we feel that this could be overcome. In the short term this would be by live demonstrations and burning NetMeeting to CDs, and in the long run by emerging products such as (LSSI?)
- Students have not been adequately educated about the exact nature of what is offered. Is our promotion material couched in terms too technical? Would students still choose the email version if they knew how much more the virtual service could deliver? We plan focus groups with students to test understanding of the service and their perception of its usefulness.
- We have great faith in the future of virtual reference, but are we ahead of our time?