
ASSISTing you online: creating positive student experiences at the University of Wolverhampton



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The University of Wolverhampton launched ASSIST, its virtual reference service, in November 2006. Since then, learning centre staff have provided online interactive help with over 3,500 enquiries. The impact of the service is currently being evaluated as part of the university's commitment to 'creating positive student experiences'.

VIRTUAL REFERENCE

The term 'virtual reference' can be used for any electronically mediated enquiry service but now more often refers to synchronous chat. Such services developed from the emerging call centres of the late 1990s, and have been offered by increasing numbers of academic and public libraries in the United States and elsewhere over the last ten years. British public libraries have co-operated in operating the 'Enquire' service since 2005. In 2002, some UK universities participated in a project with OCLC (the Online Computer Library Center) to trial their QuestionPoint software for running an asynchronous e-mail-based service,¹ but few went on to use the online chat facility. By 2006, only a handful of UK academic institutions had experimented with virtual reference, and the University of Wolverhampton was therefore one of the first to give its students the opportunity to chat online to a librarian. Using QuestionPoint and staffed by librarians and assistants, ASSIST now operates for sixty hours per week during term time. (See Figure 1.)

WHY CHAT?

Virtual reference provides our students with an alternative means of contact, seeking to make learning and information services (LIS) more accessible and approachable. Students can contact us from wherever they are – at home, at work and even on holiday – as long as they have an internet connection. ASSIST is open late into the evening, after our learning centre helpdesks have closed.

When we started the service, we had particular groups of students in mind who might benefit, those:

- living at a distance from university
- balancing work and study
- with caring responsibilities
- with disabilities
- with hearing or other communication difficulties
- on placement, such as nursing or teaching.

We were also aware that some students might be intimidated by the library environment and reluctant to ask questions at the enquiry desks. Virtual reference would provide anonymity, an informal environment and a risk-free way to seek help. In addition, we felt that online chat would blend with our other electronic services, providing a coherent virtual experience for students and helping to promote our electronic resources.

We have used a variety of methods for promoting the service, including posters, leaflets, logobugs and pens, but we realise that the most important way to reach our target groups is to create a strong web presence and to have simple access into the service. Last year OCLC introduced a 'Qwidget' (see Figure 2), which could be placed on any web page to provide a quicker and easier way in to chat. This has been very successful and has increased usage of ASSIST. We are hoping to raise the ASSIST profile still further in a current project to redesign the LIS website. Learning centre staff have been enthusiastic advocates of the service, not just to students but also to academic staff. As well as telling their students about the service, many lecturers have used it themselves and found it a convenient way of accessing help at home or at their desks.



Figure 1. The user's view of an ASSIST chat



Figure 2. The 'Qwidget' (far right): an alternative way to chat

EVALUATION

A key concern throughout the two-year development phase of ASSIST, and also now that it is embedded, is about how we assess whether we are doing a good job. What criteria are appropriate for judging the success of the service? How can we tell if we are reaching the people we set out to help?

QuestionPoint provides three facilities to help with evaluation of the service:

- transcripts of all completed chats available online
- an exit survey, to get a quick response from our patrons at the end of their chats
- a range of statistical information.

Monitoring of chat transcripts was an important way of assessing the quality of the service in the early months, and allowed us to identify effective techniques and to advise against unhelpful practices. This was controversial, as librarians were not used to their enquiry work being closely inspected. However, as time has gone on, we have seen the positive benefits of using transcripts to share knowledge and good practice, and to assist

collaboration in helping students. Some librarians were also alarmed by the exit survey, which sent an e-mail to the librarian with immediate feedback from the student, but once we realised that this was almost always positive, and often included an appreciative personal comment, a QuestionPoint e-mail became the affirmative high point of the day!

We have made some use of the extensive statistics provided by QuestionPoint. However, we have avoided setting quantitative targets for the service, and have preferred to focus on achieving a steady increase in usage. This is sometimes difficult to judge because of fluctuation in demand during the academic year, as can be seen in Figure 3, but the general pattern is one of year-on-year growth. It is important to continue to promote the service to new students, to improve its visibility on the university website and to keep up our high service standards, to ensure that growth is maintained.

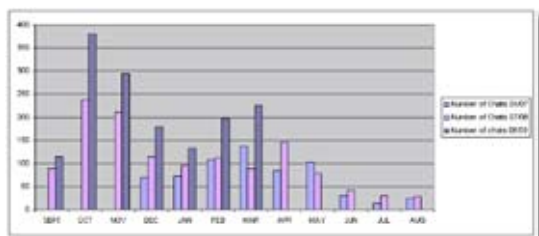


Figure 3. Numbers of ASSIST chats per month, December 2006 – April 2009

I conducted a more extensive evaluation of the service in 2007, as part of an MSc project.² This involved a detailed analysis of chat transcripts, a follow-up survey of ASSIST users, an LIS staff questionnaire and interviews with librarians, with the aim of comparing results from the different methods and arriving at a strategy for continuing evaluation of the service. The work of Marie Radford in the United States was inspirational here,³ and she has since worked with Lynn Silipigni Connaway on the international 'Seeking synchronicity' study on evaluating virtual reference services.⁴ It was clear that ASSIST users had a very positive view, and particularly valued the ease, speed and convenience of the service and the friendly response of librarians. Librarians themselves were more cautious about the impact of ASSIST, generally feeling that online chat was necessarily inferior to face-to-face enquiry. The analysis of transcripts suggested that there was room for improvement in chat technique and in the quality of answers, but comparison with the user survey pointed to the fact that the chat experience was valued on a more subtle interpersonal

level, and that this could compensate for technical shortcomings. There was evidence of a 'wow' factor: students were impressed simply by the fact that we offered such a service. Did this point to a concern that, once online chat became taken for granted, quality issues would come more to the fore? While the study provided real grounds for confidence in the value of the ASSIST service to students, clearly we could not rest on our laurels and should continue to seek improvement. Recommendations from the evaluation project included regular user surveys, a continuing programme of analysis of sample chats and further research, with student input, into good chat technique. Unfortunately, with the termination of the project phase and the lack of further funding, we have been unable to carry out formal chat analysis, and now do little more than a quick check for any obvious problems. As yet, it has not been possible to carry out more research. This would be an area where collaboration with other universities could be helpful, to produce guidelines for etiquette and technique suited to the UK higher education environment. A useful beginning has been made in pooling UK virtual reference experience and expertise in academic institutions by the 'virtual enquiry project' conducted by Edinburgh Napier University and Carnegie College, Dunfermline.⁵

We have conducted two further user surveys, in the spring of 2008 and 2009. These have been a very valuable way of measuring user satisfaction, and of gaining an understanding of students' perceptions of ASSIST.

ASSIST SURVEY 2009

This year's survey covered chats during the period 1 February to 21 March. There were 413 chats altogether:

- 115 conducted using the Qwidget (no e-mail address captured)
- 298 remaining, with 199 distinct e-mail addresses
- 4 undeliverable e-mail addresses
- 195 students surveyed.

The survey was conducted electronically using Surveyor software. Students were sent an e-mail asking them to participate and providing a link to the survey. As an incentive, we offered a prize draw for a voucher from a well-known bookshop to those students who provided an e-mail address. The survey was otherwise anonymous.

Although reminders were sent, and the deadline extended, the response rate was disappointing, with only 73 complete replies received (37%). In previous years, we had achieved a 50% rate. This might reflect the reduced time available to me this year to monitor the progress of the survey, and also the difficulties of timing the survey so that students were able to complete it before the Easter break. It may also be a sign that the 'wow' factor is reducing: ASSIST is now a part of our regular service and generates less comment.

I am also aware that more than a quarter of our chats were conducted using the Qwidget, and we have no way of contacting those students. The Qwidget provides a quicker and easier way to chat, but is potentially inferior in several ways:

- The librarian does not usually know the user's name, so cannot use it in chat (rule number one of friendly chat etiquette!).
- Web pages cannot be 'pushed' – web links do not automatically display in the user's browser.
- We do not usually obtain an e-mail address, so the user does not receive a transcript and we cannot follow-up with further information.
- The chat appears in a small box and can be difficult to read.

Without student feedback, it is impossible to know if these factors are significant or whether users accept the limitations as a trade-off against convenience. Chat transcript analysis would provide a way of comparing Qwidget chats with others, and ensuring that the service provided is of a similar quality. This might point to a need for additional training for librarians in specific techniques for Qwidget chat.

POSITIVE STUDENT EXPERIENCE?

While exercising due caution about the limited response to the survey, can we draw any conclusions from the results? The questionnaire was based on those used in previous years, but with a stronger focus on the way students experience our services. What contribution does ASSIST make to creating a positive student experience, of learning and information services in particular and of the wider university learning environment in general?

As in previous years, the survey provided assurance that we are providing a high-quality service:

- 86% rated the service excellent.

- 97% said they received accurate information and advice.
- 46% received more information and advice than they expected.
- 100% said the chat software was easy to use.
- 100% considered that the librarian was friendly and helpful – 85% said 'very'.

There was space in the questionnaire for optional comments, and I was pleased with the number of respondents who chose to add these, giving insights into the experience of chat from the students' point of view:

'I got the feeling like she had all the time in the world to help me out.'

'She was extremely helpful, chatty and informal, which made me feel comfortable, at ease and free to ask for as much help as I felt necessary.'

'Efficient, but I felt she could have gone into a little more detail with regard to my query.'

'Remained professional even when I proclaimed my love for her when she'd sorted my problem :)'

'Understood my query well (even though I was rambling on a bit).'

One of the new sets of questions for this year was intended to gauge the less immediate effects of ASSIST on student attitudes and behaviour, and brought quite remarkable results. Respondents could answer 'less', 'no effect' or 'more' to each of six descriptions, and many chose the positive option:

- 90% are more likely to use ASSIST again – confirmation of user satisfaction.
- 45% are more likely to ask a librarian for help – presumably now that they know how friendly and helpful we are!
- 19% are more likely to visit the learning centre (and only 4% less likely) – despite librarians' fears that ASSIST would encourage students to stay away.
- 58% are more likely to use electronic resources – reflecting one of the initial objectives of the service.
- 53% are more confident using learning centre services – a positive knock-on effect for LIS as a whole.
- 42% are more confident with studying – ultimately the most pleasing result of all.

Returning to the objectives for the service with which we began the virtual reference project three years ago, does the survey provide evidence that we are reaching those we hoped to help? Of the students who responded to the survey, 91% said that they visited one of the university campuses at least once a week, and 87% said they visited the learning centres (libraries) regularly. While these are large percentages, it is worth noting that 13% of ASSIST users do not use the learning centre on a regular basis, and that one in ten of our users will not be on campus in the course of a week. These students may have had minimal contact with LIS before using ASSIST. In addition to this, there is evidence that we are helping those for whom time is short, and ASSIST provides a much more convenient way of getting help when and where they need it. Two-thirds of our users are at home when they chat to us, while 14% are at work and 5% in halls of residence.

One set of survey questions asked respondents about their choice to use ASSIST rather than face-to-face, phone or e-mail enquiries. Urgency was a strong factor: 47% said that they were at home with an urgent question, while 84% preferred ASSIST to e-mail as it would give an immediate response. 27% commented that it was difficult to get into the learning centre. Some expressed a preference for online chat: 34% said they would rather chat than talk on the phone, while 9% liked to chat online rather than face-to-face, supporting the idea that some prefer the anonymity of chat. Again, respondents made good use of additional comments, which pointed to other factors, such as being at work and unable to use the phone or it being late in the evening. It was also clear that many preferred to use an online service because it integrated with working on the computer; this was presumably a strong factor for the 9% of respondents who had used ASSIST in the learning centre. Here are some of their comments:

'I was at home, finding things difficult, and decided it was the quickest and easiest way.'

'It gave me freedom to ask as many questions as I wanted without any reservations. Face-to-face, I may get the feeling I am wasting the person's time/ asking stupid questions and I would want to get it over with.'

'I was at work, and it's difficult for me to get to the learning centre in the opening times.'

'ASSIST is brilliant in that it supports me [at home] in the environment where I can work best.'
'It was 7pm in the evening and I was 49 miles away.'

'ASSIST allowed me to copy and paste useful links, and I knew all journals sourced for me would be on a transcript sent to my email.'

'I was working on the computer and it enabled me to continue with my work whilst waiting for assistance.'

'ASSIST lets both parties work out together how the problem can be solved.'

IN SUMMARY

Evaluation of the ASSIST service suggests that it performs a valuable role in helping students. There is evidence that it enables LIS to reach more students and to provide more convenient access to enquiry services. This year's survey gives an encouraging indication that ASSIST is contributing to the creation of positive student experiences at the University of Wolverhampton, and bringing benefits in raised confidence and awareness of resources and services. For ongoing success, we need to ensure that we evaluate the service regularly and effectively, and act on the results, to maintain and improve standards. The introduction of the Qwidget has shown the advantage of continuing innovation, and we should carry on looking for new ways to make our services more easily available and accessible to students.

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- 4 'Seeking synchronicity: evaluating virtual reference services from user, non-user, and librarian perspectives', available at <http://www.oclc.org/research/projects/synchronicity/>
- 5 For the virtual enquiry project see <http://www.virtualenquiry.net>