

Chat widgets as student/librarian communication tools



Danielle Dennie
 Concordia University Libraries

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Introduction

Librarians are always looking for new and innovative ways to provide reference services. Alongside traditional means (in person, telephone, and email), libraries have been experimenting with virtual reference chat software, instant messaging, social networks (eg. Facebook), texting, and soon, tweeting¹.

Although instant messaging (IM) reference services have been used by libraries since the early 2000s, in the last few years, libraries have also been adding instant messaging chat widgets to their library webpages (see Figure 1). Chat widgets are short pieces of code, inserted on a webpage, that allow anyone who navigates to this page to chat with whoever is manning the chat widget. These widgets are useful for patrons who do not have an instant messaging account, or do not want to add the library or a librarian as a buddy in their IM account.

There are many articles evaluating virtual reference (VR) services using proprietary software (eg. QuestionPoint) or instant messaging. But there are few articles that investigate the use and usefulness of chat widgets for chat reference. A study at California State University's Fullerton Pollak Library² found that twice as many questions were received through the chat widget (which was added to their "Ask a Librarian" webpage) than through their QuestionPoint service. A similar study with Novanet Live, a collaborative virtual reference service of Canadian universities in the maritimes,^{3,4} showed that a chat widget, offered alongside a VR option, received 22% more chats. When the VR software was dropped in favour of the chat widget, there was a fivefold increase in virtual reference questions. This was no doubt due to the fact the widget was inserted on many pages of a libraries' websites.

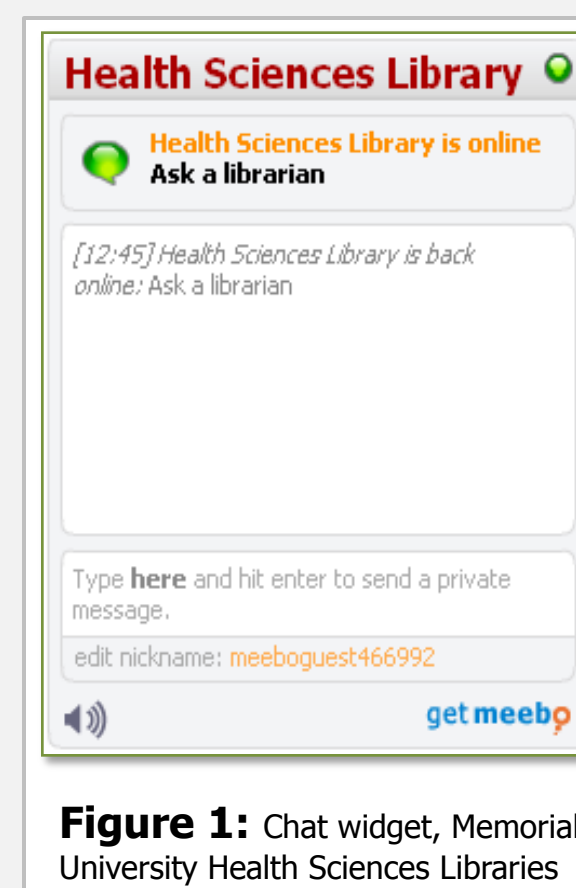


Figure 1: Chat widget, Memorial University Health Sciences Libraries

To date, there have not been any studies describing the use of IM or chat widgets by individual librarians, despite the fact that many subject librarians have inserted chat widgets on their subject guides to provide individualized assistance to patrons who seek subject specific consultations. There have been a few studies describing the use of instant messaging by university professors as a way to offer virtual office hours for their students,^{5,6} but the results of these virtual consultation services have been varied. Therefore, this study was initiated in order to investigate the use of chat widgets by subject librarians to see whether chat widgets are as popular for individual consultations as they have been for general reference services.

Methodology

A survey was designed to measure the use of chat widgets by subject librarians. The survey consisted of 11 questions (see Appendix) and was created in SurveyMonkey. Some of the questions were designed in order to compare the results with previously reported data on virtual reference services in libraries. These questions included length of time connected to chat widget, frequency of chat widget questions compared to other consultation methods (in person, email, telephone), types of questions received through the chat widget (ready reference, instructional, directional, etc.), and types of users of the chat widget. Other questions were specific to this study and could not be compared with other literature on virtual reference services. These include questions about which subject guides have chat widgets and demographic questions.

To find participants, two methods were used. First, messages were sent out on four library listservs: Canadian Library Association (CLA) listserv, Digital reference listserv (DIG_REF), Web4Lib listserv (hosted by WebJunction), and ALA's Library and Information Technology Association (LITA) listserv. Second, LibGuides' Community site (<http://libguides.com/community.php?m=i>) was used to identify libraries which had created subject guides using Libguides software. This software easily allows librarians to insert chat widgets on their subject guides. These subject guides were examined and a total of 213 subject librarians were identified as having chat widgets. Individual emails were sent to the 213 librarians asking them to complete the survey.

From June to July 2009, a total of 138 librarians responded. For the analysis, librarians that had been using the chat widget for less than 6 months were removed, since many commented that they had just installed the widget. Also, nine other respondents were removed since it was clear that they answered on behalf of their library's general virtual reference service, and not based on their own personal chat widget. The final number of respondents was 99.

Results

The **general findings** indicated that 59% of librarians who responded to the survey were Millennials (b. 1977 – 1990) or Gen X (b. 1965 – 1976). The majority of the subject guides that had a chat widget were Math-Science-Engineering (20%), Social Sciences (20%), and Humanities (20%). The majority of librarians (69%) reported advertising the chat widget, either during a workshop (33%) or using multiple methods (31%) (eg. workshop + faculty emails). Most librarians (69%) were connected to the widget for 20 hours or more per week. The majority of respondents (71%) had infrequent chat consultations, occurring only on a monthly or less than monthly basis.

Hours: Librarians who were connected longer hours to the chat widget receive more weekly or daily chat questions (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Weekly or Daily consultations vs number of hours connected to chat widget

	0-19 hours	20-29 hours	30+ hours
In person	62%	68%	79%
Chat	8%	25%	54%
Email	86%	70%	64%
Phone	52%	37%	35%

Advertising:

Librarians who advertised using multiple methods were connected longer hours to the chat widget (Figure 3) and received more weekly or daily questions through the widget (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Number of hours connected to chat per week

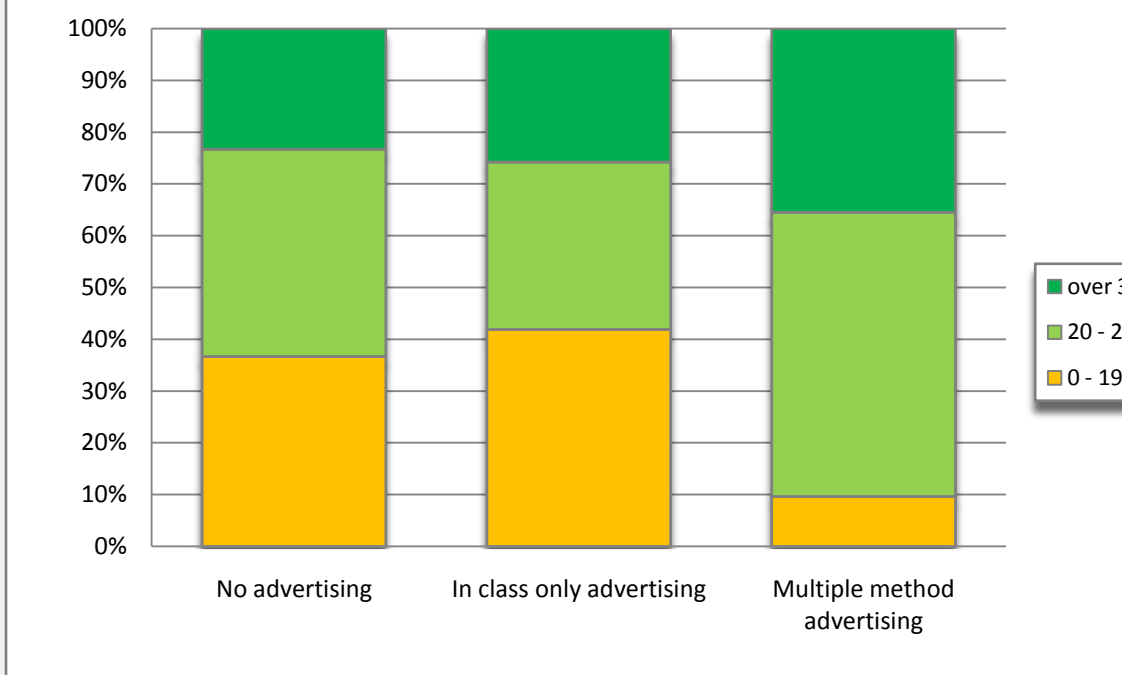
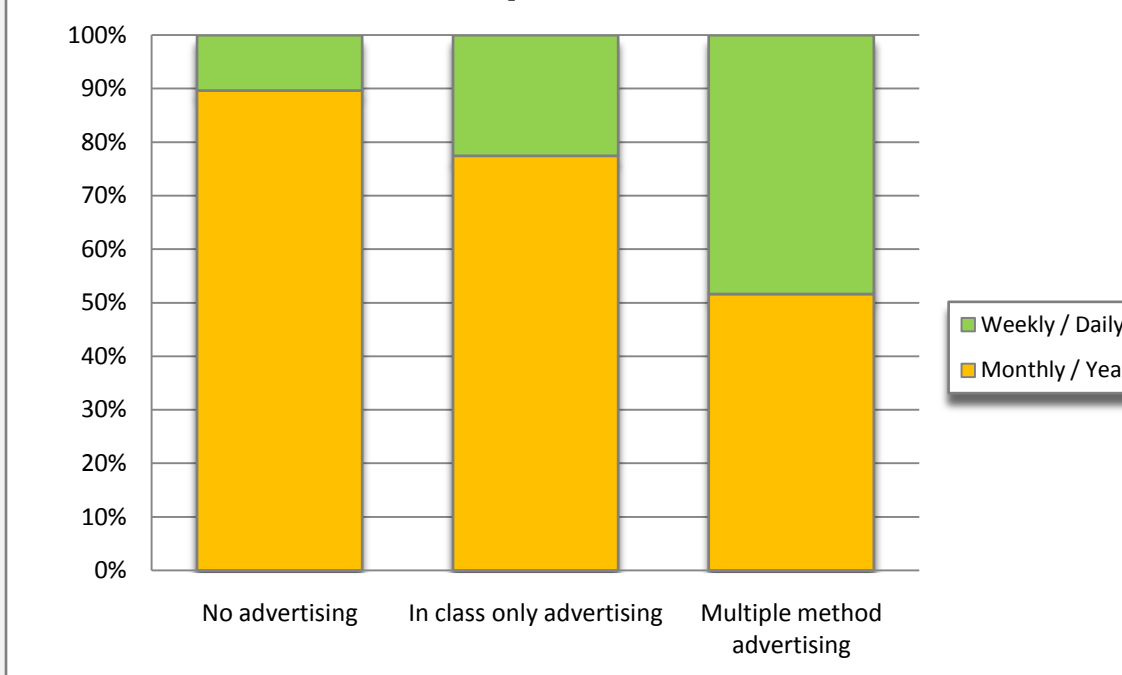


Figure 4: Frequency of chat questions



Age groups:

Although Millennials reported advertising their widgets more than other age groups (82%), Millennials and Gen X librarians spent more time connected to the chat widget per week (Figure 5) and received more chat consultations per week (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Number of hours connected to chat widget per week

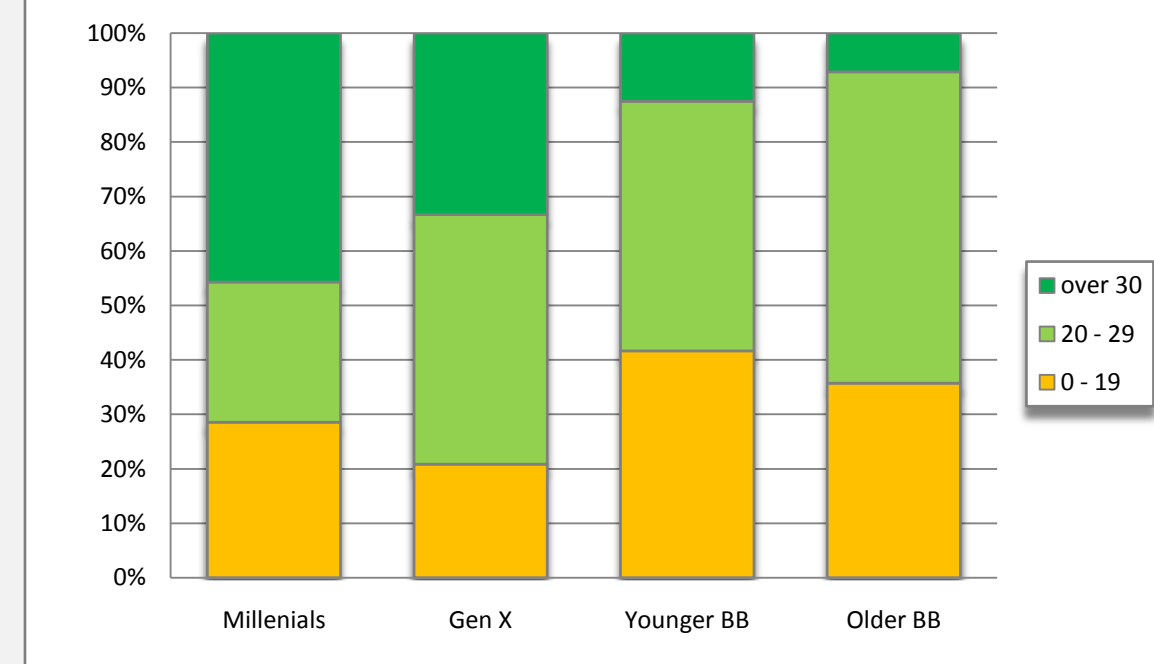


Figure 6: Consultations performed weekly or daily

	Millennials	Gen X	Young BB	Older BB
In person	74%	54%	63%	92%
Email	70%	56%	65%	93%
Chat	39%	33%	13%	15%
Phone	9%	41%	48%	57%

Subject librarians:

Social sciences librarians were more likely to advertise their chat widgets using multiple methods (Figure 7). Social sciences and Humanities librarians were more likely to receive weekly or daily consultations through the chat widget than Science and Engineering librarians (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Did you advertise the chat widget?

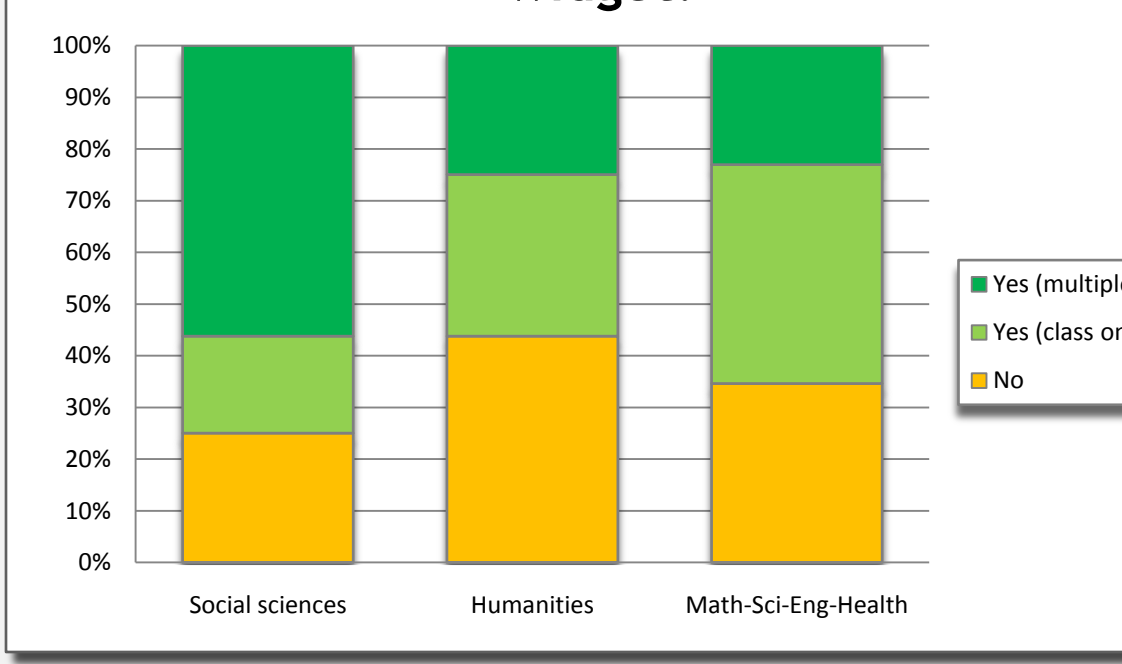


Figure 8: Consultations performed weekly or daily

	Math-Sci-Eng-Health	Social Sciences-Humanities
In person	63%	73%
Email	63%	86%
Chat	12%	43%
Phone	52%	37%

Discussion

There are general trends that emerge from the results. Specifically, a chat widget on a subject guide would be a welcome and useful consultation method for patrons whose librarian is a Millennial or Gen X social sciences librarian who works long office hours and who engages in frequent outreach to faculty and students.

But on a more general note, chat widgets are an excellent tool to reach out to students who may not otherwise contact a subject librarian. Furthermore, in a focus group study at Milner Library at Illinois State University,⁷ looking at reasons why their chat reference wasn't used by students, the librarians found that the students' ideal form of reference was to have a "personal librarian". The authors of the study concluded that "[e]mphasizing the personal touch may be key if our patrons are to feel comfortable asking questions regardless whether at a desk or by telephone, e-mail, or IM. (...) Perhaps we could more effectively reach our patrons through a decentralized IM service by (...) encouraging students to IM the librarian assigned to serve their department." Embedded chat widgets on librarians' subject guides may be a step towards this personalized service that students seek.

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Appendix: Survey

The purpose of this study is to learn about and compare usage of IM widgets on online subject guides from different North American academic libraries. For those libraries whose subject guide IM widgets are connected to the library's general chat reference service, please abstain from answering this survey. For those librarians who use IM but do not have a widget, please abstain from answering this survey. This short survey should take no longer than 5 minutes to complete and you are free to disregard any questions. Individual results are confidential and data from this study may be published.

1. Which embedded IM widget(s) is on your subject guide(s)?
 Chatango Digby Libby360 Library360 Meebo Pligo Wimo Other (please specify)

2. The IM widget is embedded on which subject guide(s)? (eg. chemistry subject guide) (open ended)

3. How long has the IM widget been on your subject guide(s)?
 0 - 6 months
 7 - 12 months
 12+ months

4. Did you advertise the widget to your community (students, faculty, others)?
 Yes
 No

5. If you answered "Yes" to question 4, how did you advertise the IM widget? (open ended)

6. If you answered "No" to question 4, why did you not advertise the IM widget? (open ended)

7. On average, between the start of September 2008 and the end of April 2009, how many hours per week were you available through your IM widget?
 0 - 9
 10 - 19
 20 - 29
 30 - 39
 over 40

8. On average, between the start of September 2008 and the end of April 2009, how frequently did you receive questions by:
 Less than 1 per month
 1-3 per month
 1-4 per week
 1 per day
 More than 1 per day
 Don't know / Not applicable

9. Between September 2008 and April 2009, how often did the following groups use the IM widget to contact you?

	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't know / Not applicable
Undergraduates					
Graduates					
Faculty					
Other / Unknown					

10. What type of questions were asked through the IM widget? (based on De Groot et al. 2005. *College and Research Libraries*, 66(5):436-54)

	Frequent	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't know/Not applicable
Directional: General questions regarding location of services, policies, collections (where are the books?), and materials (where are the journals?), hours, directions					
Ready reference (factual): Questions that can be answered quickly (do you have this book, do you have this journal), simple fact look-up					
In-depth/mediated: Questions not easily answered (where can I find normal results of a liver enzyme test, history of race in American political system, relationship of crime to expansion of cities and suburbs, etc.)					
Instructional: Questions requiring some form of instruction to answer (How do I use X database, doing an article on X and need journal articles?)					
Technical: Difficulty accessing a resource, KPF problems, browser problems, etc.					

11. Demographics
 a) Where do you work:
 USA Canada Other
 b) What is the size of your institution?
 Less than 1,000 1,000 - 4,999 5,000 - 9,999 10,000 - 14,999 15,000 - 19,999 20,000 - 24,999 25,000 +
 c) What is your gender?
 Male Female Other
 d) What is your age group?
 20-24 25-29 30-34 35-39 40-44 45-49 50-54 55+

Thank you for taking the time to answer this survey! For more information, please contact danielle.dennie@concordia.ca