Chat widgets as student/librarian communication tools

Daniele 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), librarians have been experimenting with virtual reference chat widgets, instant messaging, social networking sites (eg. Facebook), texting, and soon, tweeting.

Although instant messaging (IM) reference services have been used by librarians since the early 2000s, in the last few years, librarians 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 Library 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, 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.

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 professionals as a way to offer virtual office hours for their students, 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.

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 (30%). The majority of Millennials (69%) reported advertising the chat widget, either during a workshop (33%) or using multiple methods (31%). 70% of Gen Xers had advertised a chat widget, most librarians (69%) were connected to the widget for 20 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 received more weekly or daily chat questions (Figure 2).

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 weekly chat consultations (Figure 6).

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 more weekly or daily consultations through the chat widget than Science and Engineering librarians (Figure 8).

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).

Discussion
There are general trends that emerge from the results. Specifically, a chat widget on a subject guide would be a welcome addition to the 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, 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 “strengthening 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.

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 Survey Monkey. 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 (read reference, instructional, directional, etc.), and types of users of the chat widget. Other questions were specific to the 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 librarians (DSG_REFL), 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=) 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 guides 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, one 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.

Acknowledgements
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Cited references

Appendix: Survey
The following questions were used to evaluate the utility of chat widgets:

1. A) Where do you work:
   A) School Librarian
   B) Academic Public Librarian
   C) Research Librarian
   D) Collection Development Librarian

2. The IM widget is embedded on which subject guide(s)?
   a) Health
   b) Social Science
   c) Education
   d) Library Science
   e) Math

3. What is your gender?
   a) Female
   b) Male
   c) Other

4. What is your age group?
   a) Undergraduates
   b) Graduates
   c) Faculty

5. How many hours per week do you spend with a chat widget?
   a) 10-19 hours
   b) 20-29 hours
   c) 30+ hours

6. How many reference questions do you receive per week?
   a) Over 100
   b) 50-100
   c) 25-49
   d) 10-24
   e) Less than 10

7. Did you advertise the chat widget?
   a) Yes
   b) No

8. On average, between the start of September 2008 and the end of April 2009, how many hours do you spend with a chat widget?
   a) Under 20
   b) 20-49
   c) 50-99
   d) 100 or more

9. Between September 2008 and April 2009, how often did the following groups use the IM widget?
   a) Students
   b) Faculty
   c) Administrative Staff
   d) Undergraduates
   e) Graduates

10. How many chat requests do you receive per week?
    a) 25 or more
    b) 10-24
    c) 5-9
    d) 1-4
    e) Less than 1

11. What is your favorite chat reference software?
    a) MeeboMe
    b) Chatango
    c) 33.im
    d) Other

The survey was created using Survey Monkey and was distributed via the library’s listservs and LibGuides.

Image 31x1782 to 186x1998
Image 60x758 to 808x1716
Image 906x740 to 2880x2334