



Does Generation Google REALLY Need Us?

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Abstract:

Searching for information really is pretty easy; relevance ranking really is pretty good. Do library users really need much more?? Eight years of biennial surveys at the University of Hong Kong continue to demonstrate that students undervalue instructional services provided by librarians, despite increased efforts and emphasis in this service area. Analysis of data from North America, Australia and Hong Kong show that these increased efforts are not unique, with attendance at formal library instructional sessions rising steadily in recent years. At the same time, reference enquiries from these jurisdictions show dramatic declines. On the other hand, the University of Hong Kong has increased reference transactions over these years, and the Hong Kong Baptist University Library also appears to be bucking the trend - as instructional sessions increase with a renewed focus on setting the groundwork for continued interactions, "real" reference enquiries have increased quite dramatically and are holding steady. Is Hong Kong simply an anomaly, an "outlier"? Or is a new shift upon us?

Background

Academic libraries face many hurdles in the current economic, technological and resultant political climates. Library directors deal with these challenges and must seek to prioritise their ever diminishing resource base: both human and financial. In this respect, the situation in Hong Kong bears many resemblances to other parts of the world. Yet the Hong Kong higher education sector is different and is currently facing some interesting challenges. Not least among these is the move from a 3 year undergraduate curriculum to a 4 year one. The 8 government funded institutions of higher education will each enjoy an additional intake this coming academic year, effectively increasing the student enrolment by one third.

Most of our academic libraries have not seen any significant and sustained funding directed in support of this additional student influx. The pressures felt by the additional intake will be deep and far reaching impacting on our physical premises, our collections and our services. Within finite budgets, serious prioritization of resources will be essential.

As we look at trend data, local and comparative, coupled with our own usage and survey data, library managers begin to develop an understanding of where priorities should lie in the allocation of resources. But understanding data and any inherent trends isn't always so easy or clear cut.

Through an investigation into our two organizations, The University of Hong Kong (HKU) and the Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU), we will explore similarities and differences between our institutions as well as with trends from other parts of the world, notably North America and Australia.

Who needs a reference service?

The Association of Research Libraries Annual Statistics Service Trends in ARL Libraries, 1991-2010 (2011) highlight a 60% reduction in reference transactions over that period. Over the same period participants in group presentations and the number of group presentations increased by 138% and 82% respectively.

In Australia, the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) Statistics (2012) reveal similar, although not as dramatic, trends. From 2000 to 2010, reference transactions reduced by 49.5% whereas over the same period participants in group presentations and the number of group presentations increased by 76.6% and 50.2% respectively.

User perceptions

The North American decline in reference statistics correlates with other survey data. For example, the most recent Educause Center for Applied Research (ECAR) analysis of the MISO (Measuring Information Services Outcomes) survey (MISO, 2011) reveals that, compared with the 2005 results, the 2011 results showed a decline in importance of "reference services" for both faculty and students. In fact, for faculty, out of the 57 services surveyed "only one—library reference services—is declining in importance" (Consiglio, et al, 2011). Interestingly, however, for faculty, library instruction has grown in importance and reflects the trends witnessed in the ARL and CAUL statistics. The ECAR analysis of the MISO Survey explain this trend as "services that are more tightly integrated into the curriculum may hold higher value for faculty than leaving students to consult a reference service point on their own".

Similar trends from the MISO Survey faculty responses can also be seen in students. Students placed an increased degree of importance on library research instruction, with a corresponding decline in importance of library reference services. As the ECAR analysis report suggests "these trends may encourage library directors to ... reconsider services ..." among other things.

Many recent studies also show that though students may undervalue and underuse library resources and services, their research skills are unsophisticated and their ability to critically interact with the world of information around them is quite low-level (Connaway & Dickey, 2010; ERIAL, 2012;Head & Eisenberg, 2012). Can we really trust our users to tell us what they need in all cases? Do they know what they need? Shouldn't higher education aim to raise our students' expectations and enhance their abilities, not simply satisfy or play to them at their low levels?

It is misdirected to try to analyze academic library users' perceptions of library services in a "library vacuum", independent of the educational context. Is it not a common sense notion that student use of academic Library resources and services is intricately tied to the curriculum? Students value library instruction when that instruction is valued by the faculty, and relevant to the work that students are expected to produce. If students are required to attend an introductory library workshop, but there is no explicit connection to the work that they must produce, and no assessment of their considered searching for and critical use of appropriate resources ... it is not surprising that they will simply use Google, find a few articles, write their papers, and see little value in that library workshop. When librarians and the use of library resources are embedded into curriculum, questions increase and

learning occurs; when they are not, students will “make do” or “satisfice”. When students are actually graded on their research planning outlines or when their assignment is to compare alternative news sources to mainstream sources, these are instances when students will see the direct value of a well-designed, well-timed library workshop focusing on their actual needs.

The Hong Kong situation

So what is the situation in Hong Kong? Are there similarities in trends identified elsewhere? In Hong Kong where consolidated statistics for the 8 government funded higher education institutions have only been captured since 2003/04, similar trends that are visible in North America and Australia can be identified but they are far less dramatic. From 2003/04 to 2010/11, reference transactions reduced by 12.6% whereas over the same period participants in group presentations and the number of group presentations increased by 5.2% and 15.2% respectively.

Contrary to these trends, the University of Hong Kong (HKU) Libraries witnessed a significant increase in reference transactions of 23% over the past 8 years. At the same time, presentations and the number of attendees remained relatively static. Undergraduate students see little importance in library instruction at HKU. In a 2004 survey they placed “library courses/workshops/instruction” last in terms of their importance out of 30 library services and facilities. In 2010, they did the same. Faculty showed similar responses placing it second last in 2004 and last in 2010. In the same surveys, reference services consistently ranked in the upper third in terms of importance. What is the significance of these results?

Hong Kong Baptist University’s (HKBU) Main Library reveals an interesting shift over similar years at their Reference Desk. Over the past 7 years, though overall enquiries (both reference and directional) show a steady decline from year to year resulting in an overall 15% decrease, true reference transactions reveal an interesting dip and then rise. There is a 31% decrease from 2004/05 to 2007/08 and then a 42% increase from 2007/08 to 2010/11. The same pattern can be seen in the ratio of true reference questions to overall questions. In 2003/04 reference questions made up 27% of all questions, in 2007/2008 this dropped to 23%, but this began to increase after 2008 and in 2010/11 reference questions made up 31% of overall questions. Overall enquiries are down, but reference questions have returned to their 2004 numbers and are now a higher percentage of overall questions than ever before.

As for presentations and the number of attendees, HKBU had an increase of 42% and 31% respectively over the past 8 years, with a dramatic increase occurring in 2008/09 with a new instructional focus at HKBU – the same year that true reference questions began increasing again. This must be more than mere coincidence. HKBU’s new instructional program had two factors that we believe resulted in more reference questions. First, our introductory workshops focused less on “covering everything you need to know” and more on “here are 3 things to get you started, and use our great service to help you with all your other questions as they arise – and they will, it’s OK”. Second, our new presentations were highly course/assignment integrated with strong faculty support and collaboration. Students saw the value of the service and were encouraged to use it.

Counting, Counting ...What to Count?

We all know that statistics are a snake-y sort! It isn’t just about the numbers, and we need to make room for a qualitative assessment of our services as well. There is currently a disconnect between how we support learning and what impact measures we are using. What has more meaning? – we answered 10,000 questions or these are the 10 ways we supported students in their learning:

- Of those 10,000 questions ... 2343 were significant learning experiences e.g. more than answering a quick question, troubleshooting a fulltext link – how do we track this? User-identified? Librarian judgement?
- guided assignment creation for Course XXX (do we count that as 1 or as 1200 as 1200 students did it and 1000 actually learned from it)
- populating eLearning environments with resources, referring students to the relevant resources on a course by course, assignment by assignment basis – we used to do this at “The Desk” – it’s reference service for a new era, and it just may have greater reach and greater impact than ever (and we can count how many click-throughs came via this path)
- creating a series of 2 minute screencasts for just in time learning – again, don’t come to desk for me to tell you, just watch this (and we can count the views and the length of time they viewed)
- collaboration with other departments on academic honesty, co-curricular learning, service learning and exchange programs – what role do library “services” play here?

Library instruction and research help (reference) services should parallel the trend in higher education on emphasizing the importance of lifelong learning; on not teaching

the current state of affairs, but preparing students for the future state. Our old library instruction approach was “here is everything you will need to know” but we changed this to “here are 3 things; you will have many questions as you go along; here are the ways you can ask those questions and learn when and how you need to.” So “questions” in the library will remain, but they will be of a different nature as tools become easier but the vagaries of information become more complex. The 2011 & 2012 Horizon Reports (Johnson et al, 2011, 2012) note sense-making and assessing credibility of information as key capabilities that students will increasingly need. We should anticipate that students will struggle less with discovery/access and more with sense-making in a constantly changing information landscape, critical use of information, and managing the deluge wisely.

How can we become more visible to students as information educators/coaches?

First, we must answer THEIR information questions, instead of focusing on what we think they should learn or how we think they should undertake research. We must respect their preferences for searching for and interacting with information, share our expertise in that world (surprise them), and guide them to use that information wisely. This will require a shift on the part of faculty as well. What is wrong with ensuring that all students know how to use Google well to find information in their fields, and especially to assess and use that information wisely? With new discovery systems quickly becoming ubiquitous in libraries, exploring Google alongside such systems would be an enlightening exploratory exercise for students (Coco, 2012).

Conclusion

Search is easier today than ever before, especially with new discovery systems placing almost all library resources behind one simple search box, with easy options for limiting and accessing fulltext. Reference librarians should rejoice in the fact the questions about how to FIND information will continue to decrease – that’s the boring part of reference work. We can now shift our focus to supporting our users in evaluating and using information in critical and creative ways. The problem is that we are just “a bit behind the curve” – we continue to show students how to find information, when they can actually do this on their own quite well. Once we shift our instructional sessions towards sense-making, evaluation and use of information, expect an increase in these kinds of questions coming to librarians. Our users simply don’t know we can help in this area.

So, is it likely that university libraries in Hong Kong will relocate resources from reference desks to other service areas or from classroom instruction to other areas?

The answer is a resounding “yes”, and “no”. Traditional methodologies of user support and metrics for analysis, while familiar and preferential for some, will continue to decrease in their significance as curricula evolve, as information and methods of accessing information change and as user expectations and information competence develop. Library directors need to be cognizant of their local environments, to understand and cautiously respond to user trends and preferences and at the same time create changes to ensure that services are directed to where they will have the highest impact on learning.

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