Virtual Reference Evaluation and User Preference for Reference:

An Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction and Scope

The following bibliography covers the topic of evaluating virtual reference services and how these services relate to users. Many of the articles describe details of how to perform evaluations to find out which types of virtual reference services are being used and whether or not they are meeting the needs of their users. Some of the articles also discuss the advantages and disadvantages offered by each type of virtual reference service and reasons why people may or may not be using them. All of these articles were written between 2002 and 2009 and touch upon issues that are relevant in most libraries. The issue of whether or not to include virtual reference services, which forms of these services to include and which form best suits the needs of a particular library’s patrons, are concerns being dealt with in many of today’s public and academic libraries.

Description of User Group

Virtual reference is a reference service initiated electronically, where users employ computers or other internet technology to communicate with librarians without being physically present. (Nilsen, 2004, p.2) The various delivery technologies permit users to submit questions for reference assistance via the internet from the convenience of their home, office, or some other location without having to come into the library. Thus, users can request information from the library irrespective of time, space or distance. (Hodges, 2002, p.158) Digital reference is an important service that supports learning and promotes intellectual inquiry. Digital reference service has national and international visibility and serves the public good by providing value added information in a timely manner. (Hodges, 2002, p.157) How traditional and virtual reference services will be used by the next generation of students remains an area open to inquiry and research. (Cumings, 2007, p.81)
Literature Review

At the core of reference services is the user with an information need presented in the form of a question to the librarian, which results in a question-negotiation process between the user and the librarian in order to clarify that need. (Hodges, 2002, p. 158) The ultimate goal of a user’s search for information is to bridge a gap between their internal cognitive state and external reality in order to make sense of the world in addressing some issue or concern in their life. (Pomerantz, 2006, p.352) The questions being asked of today’s academic reference librarian tend to speak to broader user needs, are more complex, and require more effort and interaction between the user and the librarian. (Iton, 2009, p.357) With increasing availability of computers and internet access both within libraries and in modern society at large, online services have become among the most heavily used service libraries offer. (Pomerantz, 2006, p.350)

Although patrons still need reference services, the nature of those needs have changed. (Meert, 2009, p.72) One of the principle reasons for providing virtual reference is to increase access to the knowledge and skills of the reference librarian. To stay relevant to the needs of the 21st century student, academic libraries have gone into cyberspace and maybe the librarian has to meet the student there. (Lee, 2009, p.95) Emerging technology and the growth of information have fueled a change in reference services and are changing the roles of the reference librarians. (Hodges, 2002, p.158) It is important to establish the extent to which reference libraries need to adapt their existing skills to meet the demands of the virtual reference environment. (Lee, 2009, p.96) There is an expectation that the information provided will be in electronic format so that the whole raison d’etre for providing reference in the virtual mode will have to make decisions as to whether they are going to recommend the most appropriate or the most convenient source to the users. (Iton, 2009, p.359) Responsive and proactive online customer service has become imperative for libraries. (Clements, 2009, p.393) Most librarians agree that it is important to provide service to users who are not physically present in the library when they require assistance, and that this need increases as online resources increase. (Meert, 2009, p.72) Many librarians view the move to online chat reference as a way to boost shrinking reference numbers while reaching remote users. (Johnson, 2004, p.237) But there is an anxiety among librarians that incorporation of an online chat reference system may produce an unmanageable onslaught of patronage. (p.238) Staffing, interpersonal communication and quality of service within and between institutions are a few additional concerns they have. (Meert 2009, p.73) But if they are to retain their role as “intermediaries” librarians need to position themselves where their customers are and where the knowledge is. (Clements, 2009, p.394)

We have seen the emergence of a generation of new students who have grown up “native” in a technologically intense world. (Granfeild, 2008, p.44) Users for whom
being online is second nature might prefer the anonymity and freedom of the virtual reference environment to the experience of face to face encounters. (Naylor, 2008, p.343) Chat reference can be a beneficial tool in an environment where users are comfortable with the technology and are willing to accept the level of interaction that it demands. It is also very useful for users with hearing impairments or language challenges and provides a sense of anonymity that other reference services may not provide. (Leykam, 2007, p.3) Virtual reference services might appeal to users who avoid asking for assistance in libraries due to the attraction that there are online options for seeking information on their own. (Naylor, 2008, p.343) Some of the advantages of using virtual reference include, the ability to share screen and co-browse making chat service a valuable tool in many library environments, allowing both user and librarian to explore a question and potential answers in real time. (Leykam, 2007, p.3) Chat also provides users with an interactive reference experience, no matter where they are located, in a relatively quick and dynamic fashion. (p.3) Virtual reference encounters have the ability to produce an artifact-complete transcript of the session for users to refer to at a later time. (Radford, 2006, p.1047) While there are many advantages of online chat reference, unless the user population is aware of the service, its benefits and capabilities will largely sit idle. (Johnson, 2004, p.238) With the advantages also come the disadvantages of this type of service. Unless they have much experience using chat to communicate with friends, users may find the whole process quite intimidating. (Nilsen, 2004, p.10) Virtual reference requires both the library staff member and the user to type out there responses. This is time consuming, and causes anxiety at both sides. (p.14) Also, Written messages provide no verbal cues and tone of voice is lost. (p.14) Virtual interaction is a “fleeting encounter” with little opportunities for relationship development. (Radford, 2006, p.1047) Most participants in these studies agreed that reference service should be consistent, immediate, personal and high quality. (Naylor, 2008, p.348) Having a personal touch was important for many users of reference services.

One of the primary arguments advanced for providing reference services in the virtual mode is the need to take advantage of the technology to recapture a lost user base of savvy internet users. (Iton, 2009, p.359) Following developments in both computer technology and the changing needs of their customer base, library services are concerned about services remaining relevant to the needs of their users. (Clements, 2009, p.393) With a steady increasing collection of digital material, the need for customers to come to the library has declined and the availability of library material on the web is ubiquitous to the point that there is rightfully a concern about the “invisible library.” (p.394) As with any service, especially a new service, ongoing assessment and marketing efforts of the service after implementation are vital. (Cummings 2007, p.82) The questions of whether chat reference is beneficial enough to users to justify the costs of offering it and how valuable it is to users in fulfilling their information needs, have been primary concerns
for libraries providing the service. (Pomerantz, 2006, p.350) Evaluation of chat reference services is important, given the mixed response that such services have received from both librarians and users. (p.351) Evaluating chat reference services from the users perspective and exploring users feedback on their use of the service, constitutes one solution to gauge the value and utility of the information provided by such a service to users. (p.351) New methods highlight the need for research focused on understanding client and staff behavior and impact on issues of satisfaction and success. (Radford, 2006, p.1047)

As academic librarians continue to adapt to meet the needs of new student populations, traditional service points have also evolved. (Cummings, 2007, p.81) Web based library reference services have emerged as vital alternatives to the traditional face to face or telephone reference encounter. (Radford, 2006, p.1046) The internet has created a culture in which users now expect to have access to whatever help they require without the need to avail themselves of traditional reference questioning. (Iton, 2009, p.359) Virtual reference offers the possibility of efficient and speedy responses to the reference queries. (Nilson, 2004, p.15) Development of new online services is not just a means of keeping up with technology but a concerted effort to provide the fullest learning opportunities using content and modes of delivery that complement each other. (Clements, 2009, p.394) Libraries not only need to keep up with these new evolving reference services but they need to continue to evaluate those services. Evaluation tells us whether a project is effective with respect to the goals and objectives of the organization and whether allocated resources are efficiently used in terms of the service. (Hodges, 2002, p.159)

Bibliography

Entry 1:

Abstract: Purpose--The purpose of this paper is to report on a project to implement a virtual reference service for the Library Consortium of New Zealand (LCoNZ). Design/methodology/approach--The process of choosing the most appropriate software and implementing the service are outlined and discussed in the context of recent findings about similar services in academic libraries. Findings--Because of the rapid development in social networking software and use, open source software is chosen as the most appropriate option. The overarching principle need to include a focus on enhancing the learning experience. Practical implications--The lead library is able to implement the
service at two sites initially, with a minimum of systems support. Improvements to the software are already planned. The main shift for the library is in how the service needs to flex to accommodate customer expectations and needs. Originality/value--This paper examines the implementation of an instant messaging reference service in the context of online learning and student learning experience. It discusses reasons why university libraries need to keep forging online opportunities for meeting their customers' needs. (Published Abstract)

**Annotation:** This article discusses the importance of librarians being able to meet patrons where they are and offer assistance without them having to come into the library. The author evaluated proprietary software versus instant messaging. Also discussed were the pros and cons of each of these types of virtual reference service to distinguish which service would be most effective for its users.

**Search Strategy:** I selected LISTA (Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts) because of the amount of articles it contains relating to libraries and information technology. This was an initial search within this database so I used a keyword search approach.

**Database:** LISTA (Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts)

**Method of Searching:** Keyword searching

**Search String:** “Virtual Reference” OR “Digital Reference” AND “Academic Libraries”

Search Options: Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals

Publication Type: Academic Journal

Filter by Publication Date: 2000-2010

**Entry 2:**


**Abstract:** This study examines the use of chat in an academic library's user population and where virtual reference services might fit within the spectrum of public services offered by academic libraries. Using questionnaires, this research demonstrates that many within the academic community are open to the idea of chat-based reference or using chat for some loosely defined "research purposes," but this openness does not necessarily result in high levels of use. The primary purpose of this study was to determine whether the lack of virtual reference use could, in part, be explained by students' preference for
competing methods and technologies for obtaining reference assistance. This study
demonstrates a pattern that suggests chat-based reference does not compete well with
other methods of providing reference service. (Published Abstract)

Annotation: This article discusses a study, conducted by Washington State University,
which found that students preferred seeking reference help face to face as opposed to
using chat reference services. Studies were also conducted which assessed why students
did not use the chat reference feature and found that many did not know about it or they
weren’t using it because of the limited hours of access. Many of the chat features today
have longer hours of accessibility and many are available 24/7.

Search Strategy: I chose to search using Dialog in the ERIC database because it covers
the subject of information resources. I used a narrowing and keyword searching
technique.

Database: Dialog: ERIC

Method of Search: Keyword Searching

Search String: ? s dt=journal articles

S1  659735  DT=JOURNAL ARTICLES

? s (virtual or digital or chat) and reference

5073  VIRTUAL
6628  DIGITAL
741  CHAT
28133  REFERENCE
S2  538  (VIRTUAL OR DIGITAL OR CHAT) AND REFERENCE

? s s1 and s2

659735  S1
538  S2
S3  343  S1 AND S2

? s academic or university

145705  ACADEMIC
135175  UNIVERSITY
S4  251798  ACADEMIC OR UNIVERSITY

? s s3 and s4

343  S3
251798  S4
S5  120  S3 AND S4
Entry 3:


Abstract: This exploratory study investigated the help-seeking preferences of library users at two large urban universities in Toronto. Reference desk and virtual reference users were compared in terms of their perceptions of the options now available for obtaining reference help. The premise for the study was based on the assumption that a reasonable exposure to newer reference services, such as chat and email, had occurred, therefore allowing for an examination of emerging preferences for different types of services. Surveys were distributed to both reference desk and virtual reference users asking seven core questions exploring use and preference for reference services as well as habits and preferences for study location (in library, off campus, etc.). The results suggest that the reference desk continues to be the most popular method of getting help in the library, but virtual reference satisfies a niche for users who prefer to work outside the library. Those who use virtual reference tend to perceive their options for getting help differently from other users. Virtual reference users do not perceive virtual reference as a novelty or as a marginal service, but see it as a significant service option. In addition, the results show that virtual reference services may have a special appeal to graduate students since graduate students seem more likely to conduct their research outside the library. The study concludes with recommendations for planning and for future research.

(Published Abstract)

Annotation: This article compares which methods of reference, in person or virtual, graduate and undergraduate students prefer. Like the article by J. Cummings, this study noted the importance of awareness of virtual reference services and its link to usage.

Search Strategy: I chose to search Web of Science because it offers databases that cover the subject of information science and has useful refining options.

Database: Web of Science

Method of Searching: Keyword searching

Search String: Virtual AND Reference (topic)

From 2005 to 2010 (timespan)

Refine: Information Science & Library Science (subject area)

Refine: Article (document type)

Entry 4:

Abstract: The World Wide Web has emerged as a powerful tool to enhance navigation and communication over the Internet. Within the past few years, numerous Web-based digital reference services have been established by libraries. The goal of this study is to identify user needs as reflected in the queries they submit to these services. The study is user-centered and seeks to evaluate digital reference services from the users' perspectives. To address these issues, the paper examines digital reference questions received at a large university library in the Southeastern United States (SeU) from January to March 2001. Content analysis and descriptive statistics are used to analyze the data. Findings suggest that questions received by the digital reference service simulate questions received by traditional reference services; that digital reference service reaches only a small segment of the target population; and that the question submission form needs to be redesigned to better identify and prevent the loss of valuable user information. If the library is to succeed in delivering digital reference service and in defining the roles of reference librarians, it must enhance the quality of service to users in order to have a sustainable, competitive advantage in the provision of information in the digital realm. (Published Abstract)

Annotation: This article evaluates digital reference and discusses advantages and disadvantages to using this type of service. The author describes what types of questions to ask in order to perform a useful evaluation, details of how one libraries study was executed and the results of that study.

Search Strategy: I selected Web of Science because of its ability to browse related articles, topics related to libraries and information science and narrowing capabilities.

Database: Web of Science

Method of Searching: Keyword Searching

Search String: Topic: (Virtual OR Digital OR Chat) AND Reference AND Assess*

Refine by:

Subject Area: Information Science & Library Science

Document Type: Article

Timespan: 2000-2010

Entry 5:

**Abstract:** The Internet is the research tool of first choice among today's library users. Libraries are responding by introducing a number of Internet-based reference services to meet the needs of these techno-literate users. Focusing on an academic library in the Caribbean, this article discusses the issues that privilege traditional over virtual reference and examines issues such as student information research skills, the physical format of the collection, levels of staffing, and the role of culture. (Published Abstract)

**Annotation:** This author discusses libraries in the 21st century and the types of questions and interactions that occur as well as user preferences in reference services. The author goes into detail about virtual reference and how it might affect students learning abilities, the pros and cons of using this service and the types of questions being asked.

**Search Strategy:** I chose to use Dialog to search the Library Literature and Information Science database because it contains articles pertaining to library services.

**Database:** Dialog: Library Literature and Information Science

**Method of Searching:** Keyword Searching

**Search String:** ? b 438

? s (virtual or digital or chat) and reference

3632 VIRTUAL
6851 DIGITAL
178 CHAT
10228 REFERENCE

S1 788 (VIRTUAL OR DIGITAL OR CHAT) AND REFERENCE

? s academic or university

7705 ACADEMIC
33439 UNIVERSITY

S2 36576 ACADEMIC OR UNIVERSITY

? s s1 and s2

788 S1
36576 S2

S3 256 S1 AND S2

**Entry 6:**


**Abstract:** Reference librarians have converted a significant portion of library resources to electronic format and are now beginning to move the reference interview itself to the
electronic environment. This study consisted of a survey carried out at two four-year public universities in the South Atlantic region. The survey inquired about university affiliates' awareness of, use of, and interest in reference services, with a particular focus on online chat reference (synchronous digital reference). Survey respondents reported strong prior use of face-to-face reference and a desire to use this service first when pursuing research topics. Awareness and use of the online chat reference service at each institution was comparatively low, but respondents forecasted the service would be among the most heavily used in ten years. (Published Abstract)

**Annotation:** This article describes both advantages and disadvantages of chat reference and some hesitations users have about using this service. This author, like a few others, emphasized the correlation between awareness of the service and the amount of usage. This study compared the preferences of reference services among small and large university library users to find out which was the most preferred method.

**Search Strategy:** I selected Web of Science because of its ability to browse related articles, topics related to libraries and information science and narrowing capabilities. I found this article by browsing related articles to the Naylor article.

**Database:** Web of Science

**Method of Searching:** Browsing

**Search String:** View related articles to “Why isn’t our chat reference used more? Findings of focus group discussions with undergraduate students” by Sharon Naylor.

**Entry 7:**


**Abstract:** Virtual reference in an Australian academic library was examined using qualitative and quantitative analyses of email and chat transcripts. Forty-seven chat transcripts and a matched sample of email were analysed to examine questions of usage, question type, the reference interview and communication processes involved with these interactions. Results show that the usage of synchronous virtual reference in this example is very low with a call rate of approximately one call for every four hours of availability. Email and chat show similar usage rates when hours of availability are taken into account. Chat enquiries tended to have higher proportions of research and reference enquiries. Email questions tended to have a higher proportion of administrative questions. Techniques of the reference interview are used far more frequently in chat than in email transactions. Chat and email transcripts were compared quantitatively using various
metrics including duration and total word number. The average call length for a chat transaction was 22 minutes. Barriers to communication within a virtual environment are discussed. (Published Abstract)

**Annotation:** This article evaluates virtual reference services by various quantitative and qualitative methods. The author describes awareness of the service to be an important factor in usage of virtual reference services. This article also sheds light on the effects virtual reference has on communication barriers, the correlation between population size and usage of the service, the amount of time spent and immediacy of using this type of service.

**Search Strategy:** I chose to search through Dialog using the Dialindex category INFOSCI since it covers a range of Library and Information Services databases.

**Database:** Dialog: Dialindex/INFOSCI

**Method of Searching:** Controlled Vocabulary Searching

**Search String:** B INFOSCI not 35

```
? e virtual reference

? s e3, e45, e47, e48

92  VIRTUAL REFERENCE
1  VIRTUAL REFERENCE LIBRARIAN
2  VIRTUAL REFERENCE LIBRARIANS
1  VIRTUAL REFERENCE LIBRARIES
S1  96  E3, E45, E47, E48

? e virtual reference service

? s e3, e4, e8, e9, e10

34  VIRTUAL REFERENCE SERVICE
1  VIRTUAL REFERENCE SERVICE EVALUATION
23  VIRTUAL REFERENCE SERVICES
20  VIRTUAL REFERENCE SERVICES (LIBRARIES)
2  VIRTUAL REFERENCE SERVICES: ISSUES AND TRENDS
S2  80  E3, E4, E8, E9, E10

? s s1 or s2

96  s1
80  s2
S3  175  S1 OR S2
```
**Entry 8:**


**Abstract:** The desire to cater to users' needs with new and faster technologies drives development in virtual reference at many libraries. While many articles illustrate the benefits and quality of synchronous chat and IM reference, there remain numerous libraries that use e-mail reference as their only virtual service. Using data collected over a four-year period, the authors assess the value of a commercial reference tool at a mid-sized academic library to evaluate whether the current virtual reference service meets user demand. Time, use, cost, staffing, and community needs are addressed in an effort to improve e-mail reference in the current environment. (Published Abstract)

**Annotation:** This article discusses an evaluation of reference services performed at an academic library to find out whether user demands are being met by these varying types of services. Evaluation was based on use patterns of students and faculty, response time, staffing, cost and availability of alternative tools. The author noted that many factors can affect the usage of reference services such as time of day, week or year, number of questions, and time spent on the reference question. He also mentioned the pros and cons of email and chat reference and why they aren’t being used as much as in-person reference services.

**Search Strategy:** I selected LISTA (Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts) because of the amount of articles it contains relating to libraries and information technology.

**Database:** LISTA (Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts)

**Method of Searching:** Keyword Searching

**Search String:** “Virtual Reference” AND “Academic Libraries”

Search Options: Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals

Publication Type: Academic Journal

Filter by Publication Date: 2000-2010

**Entry 9:**

Abstract: Academic libraries have experienced growing demand for 24/7 access to resources and services. Despite the challenges and costs of chat reference service and consortia, many libraries are finding the demand for these services worth the cost. One key challenge is providing and measuring quality of service, particularly in a consortia setting. This study explores the quality of service provided in one academic library participating in a 24/7 chat reference consortium, by assessing transcripts of chat sessions using in-house reference quality standards. Findings point to both similarities and differences between chat interactions of local librarians versus consortia staff. (Published Abstract)

Annotation: This article differs from others because it discusses an evaluation of a virtual reference service in which librarians from different libraries can answer questions for patrons that aren’t a member of their library system. This article described why people are hesitant to use virtual reference services and how to assess a “successful” interaction. The study evaluated patron’s satisfaction by type of question being asked and whether there were differences in satisfaction if the librarian was from the patron’s library or worked for another.

Search Strategy: I chose to use Dialog to search the Library Literature and Information Science database because it contains articles pertaining to library services.

Database: Dialog: Library Literature and Information Science

Method of Searching: Keyword Searching

Search String: ? b 438

? s (virtual or digital or chat) and reference

3632 VIRTUAL
6851 DIGITAL
178 CHAT
10228 REFERENCE
S1 788 (VIRTUAL OR DIGITAL OR CHAT) AND REFERENCE

? s academic or university

7705 ACADEMIC
33439 UNIVERSITY
S2 36576 ACADEMIC OR UNIVERSITY

? s s1 and s2

788 S1
36576 S2
S3 256 S1 AND S2
Entry 10:


Abstract: Despite early reports of patron enthusiasm with chat reference, usage of this service has been disappointing at some academic libraries, including our own. To probe why students have not used our chat reference service more, we conducted in-depth focus group discussions with upper level undergraduates on our campus. We questioned participants—all nonusers of chat reference—about their research behaviors and their reference service preferences. Responses suggest users desire both a variety of reference services and more personalized reference services. We discuss implications for how we deliver chat reference. (Published Abstract)

Annotation: This study focuses on why students were not using the chat reference service offered by their university library and to find out what their preferred method of reference service is. The author found that many students feared lack of privacy using virtual reference services, fear of asking “stupid” questions, and wanted personalization with their reference transactions. Some reasons for using the service included immediacy and convenience. There are many strengths and weaknesses for each form of reference, but one of the most important factors for the use or non-use of chat reference, was unawareness of the service.

Search Strategy: I selected Web of Science because of its ability to browse related articles, topics related to libraries and information science and narrowing capabilities.

Database: Web of Science

Method of Searching: Keyword Searching

Search String: Topic: Virtual Reference AND Academic Libraries

Refine by:

Subject Area: Information Science & Library Science

Timespan: 2000-2010

Entry 11:

Abstract: This paper discusses the methodology and reports on initial findings of a study examining the perceptions of users of digital reference services. It is part of a long-term research project, The Library Visit Study, which has been conducted in three phases at the University of Western Ontario for more than a decade. Phases One and Two examined perceptions of users who approached physical reference desks in libraries with reference questions. Phase Three of the research considers reference encounters at virtual reference desks and compares users’ experiences at the physical reference desk with experiences at the virtual reference desk. The findings suggest that, from the viewpoint of the enquirer, the virtual reference desk suffers from the same problems as the physical reference desk: inadequate reference interviewing, referral to alternative sources without a subsequent check on their suitability, and a lack of follow-up to determine satisfaction in general. (Published Abstract)

Annotation: This article discusses a three phase study on the comparison of virtual reference and physical reference, advantages and disadvantages, and the reasons why patrons use each. The author also describes what constitutes as a reference interview and the important aspects that users expect when using reference services whether virtual or physical.

Search Strategy: I selected Web of Science because of its ability to browse related articles, topics related to libraries and information science and narrowing capabilities. I found this article by browsing related articles to the Cummings article.

Database: Web of Science

Method of Searching: Browsing

Search String: View related articles to “User preferences in reference services: Virtual reference and academic libraries” by J. Cummings.

Entry 12:


Abstract: The questions of whether chat reference service is beneficial enough to users to justify the costs of offering it, and how valuable it is to users in fulfilling their information needs, have been primary concerns for librarians providing the service, for library administrators managing the service, and for funding agencies paying for it. The present study combines a traditional evaluation of the user's satisfaction with the reference encounter, with details of the user's information use and the user's motivation
for using the chat reference service. This evaluation study assesses the effectiveness of chat reference service in meeting users' information needs. (c) 2006 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. (Published Abstract)

Annotation: This author performed a study on the virtual reference service from two perspectives, the user and the library. The article describes the types of evaluations performed for each perspective, the methodology of the study, the results and suggestions for possible future research on the topic. This study gives a holistic assessment of chat reference services and describes the best techniques for evaluating this type of service.

Search Strategy: I selected Web of Science because of its ability to browse related articles, topics related to libraries and information science and narrowing capabilities. I chose to perform an author search because I had found other articles by this author relating to digital reference.

Database: Web of Science

Method of Searching: Author Searching

Search String: Author: Pomerantz, J AND Topic: Reference

Entry 13:


Abstract: Synchronous chat reference services have emerged as viable alternatives to the traditional face-to-face (FtF) library reference encounter. Research in virtual reference service (VRS) and client-librarian behavior is just beginning with a primary focus on task issues of accuracy and efficiency. This study is among the first to apply communication theory to an exploration of relational (socioemotional) aspects of VRS. It reports results from a pilot study that analyzed 44 transcripts nominated for the LSSI Samuel Swett Green Award (Library Systems and Services, Germantown, MD) for Exemplary Virtual Reference followed by an analysis of 245 randomly selected anonymous transcripts from Maryland AskUsNow! statewide chat reference service. Transcripts underwent in-depth qualitative content analysis. Results revealed that interpersonal skills important to FtF reference success are present (although modified) in VRS. These include techniques for rapport building, compensation for lack of nonverbal cues, strategies for relationship development, evidence of deference and respect, face-saving tactics, greeting and closing rituals. Results also identified interpersonal communication dynamics present in the chat reference environment, differences in client versus librarian patterns, and compensation strategies for lack of nonverbal communication. (Published Abstract)
**Annotation:** Author Radford, cited in many articles pertaining to methods of information seeking, discusses a wide variety of issues faced by libraries offering virtual reference services and things to consider when dealing with those issues.

**Search Strategy:** I came across this article while performing a search in Web of Science, which I chose to search because it offers databases with articles pertaining to information science.

**Database:** Web of Science

**Method of Searching:** Keyword searching

**Search String:** Virtual AND Reference (topic)

- From 2005 to 2010 (timespan)
- Refine: Information Science & Library Science (subject area)
- Refine: Article (document type)

**Conclusion and Personal Statement**

Creating this bibliography was something completely new to me and taught me a lot about the topic of virtual reference. I had some familiarity with the topic prior to performing this research, partaking as both the librarian and end user in various virtual reference services. One of my classes at Drexel had me use both chat and email reference and introduced me to these new services and made me want to further research the topic and how it has been perceived by other users. Many of the articles I read about taught me some of the advantages and disadvantages of these types of services. I, however, have also come up with my own conclusions and thoroughly enjoy both chat and email reference services. I found that I rarely encountered the disadvantages mentioned in the articles but greatly benefited from the advantages such as quick response, receiving a copy of the entire interaction (to go back to at a later time), the ease of being able to get
help while at home, relief of the anxiety I face when feeling like I am bothering someone with a question and much more. I was very surprised to read that people were so hesitant about using virtual reference services, but also found that one important reason people were not using this service was because of the fact that they had no knowledge of it. If I hadn’t learned about these services in my class, I don’t think I would have known about them either. If people are made aware of the service I believe it will become a more popular and effective way to receive help. I have a greater appreciation for being able to communicate and learn through the use of the internet, especially with me being an online student. I think virtual reference service is the next step for many academic and public libraries to take part in as a way to reach their technologically evolving patrons and community.