A Tale of the Failure of the Grand Vision of Virtual Reference, BWDIK

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My 14 year-old daughter chats with several friends at once using instant messaging (IM). At the same time she gets curious about how to speak Hawaiian and starts teaching herself from something she finds on the web. She has a bunch of songs on her iPod without titles and artists and she turns to Google to find the lyrics.

The first time I met Anne Lipow, that daughter was a few weeks away from being born. I was attending one of Anne's "Rethinking Reference" workshops and I had the privilege of sitting with Anne at lunch. No doubt because I was so obviously pregnant our discussion turned to her own daughter, who at that time was in library school. I met Anne several more times at conferences over the years and her warmth and insights were always inspiring.

Anne challenged us to think about reference in different ways. Instead of the student coming to our physical desk we could reach out and provide help to students wherever they were located. Many of us took up the torch and started working with software to provide virtual reference (VR). Virtual reference software offered features such as chat, co-browsing, session transfer and management tools. Today many libraries are using instant messaging to provide help, while others are still struggling with VR software

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that doesn't work well and isn't familiar to our users. In other words, I think Anne had the right idea, but many libraries went down the wrong road and are only now getting to the place where our students live. Today that's IM.

Re-reading Anne's work is either inspiring all over again or depressing. Inspiring because she is such a passionate advocate for service and depressing because many of the issues she raised have not been solved. In this article I would like to chronicle the history of virtual reference at the University of Winnipeg, identifying where we made mistakes and suggesting what we can learn from them. The University of Winnipeg is a predominately undergraduate university in Canada with less than 10,000 students.

We signed up with HumanClick in 2001. HumanClick is commercial software not specifically designed for libraries. But it was easy for us to setup and use, it was cheap, and it was simple. Students clicked on the "Live Help" button on the Library web pages and databases, and a chat window opened. Library staff could send text and links to the student but we couldn't push pages and we couldn't co-browse. The service was relatively successful. For example, in March of 2002 we had over 200 chats. At the time we discussed using IM, but it wasn't as popular as it is today, we didn't want our users to have to install software, and multi-platform applications were just being developed.[87]

After using HumanClick for a year we wanted to enhance our service with a system that could offer more features such as co-browsing. We believed we could offer a better service if we had the ability to take over a student's browser and demonstrate the often arcane and complicated interfaces we have on offer. We also wanted to partner with other libraries so we could offer the services for longer hours and share costs. This was an utter failure. The software often didn't work, our users were not familiar with the experience of someone else controlling their computer, and (in hindsight) it wasn't necessary. The software was also expensive and difficult to use. Cooperating with other libraries never got off the ground mainly because many of our questions were idiosyncratic. Because of our successful

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[87] Tyson, Jeff and Alison Cooper, "How Instant Messaging Works," http://communication.howstuffworks.com/instant-messaging.htm.

experience with HumanClick we knew it was not the concept of virtual reference that had failed, but our implementation.

Our next solution was the open source software, Rakim, developed by Rob Casson at Miami University in Ohio. Rakim worked very well for us for several years, offering chat, the ability to push pages and basic management functions. We designed a "Live Help" logo that looked like a life preserver (and somewhat like a Campino candy), put the logo all over our web pages and in as many of our databases as possible, and promoted the service by giving out "Lifesaver" lollipops. Our Live Help service using Rakim was successful, but in the last few years we've seen a drop in use. Last year we piloted Meebo (a multi-platform IM service), and as one of our student reference assistants writes: "Having worked with both Rakim and Meebo, I would recommend the library to go with Meebo . . . Meebo has much less technical problems and is more user-friendly. Especially the user can see that UWLiveHelp is typing while UWLiveHelp is typing in Meebo. This is a very important feature to both the user and the librarian."[88]

In 2003, Anne Lipow wrote a history of virtual reference from the perspective of 2020.[89] While her vision is compelling, I don't think it is viable. "The future of reference" opens with a typically provocative statement:

> "If the truth be known, as a place to get help in finding
> information, the reference desk was never a good idea."[90]

Anne bluntly lists some of the contradictions in our physical reference desk. Contradictions that we have lived with for so long we no longer see. Perhaps because she knew her own life would soon end, she was able to see the contradictions more clearly. She optimistically writes that there is "no doubt that point-of-need library reference service will thrive. It will no longer be an afterthought but will take center stage as the user's point of human

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[88] Rachel Zhao, http://blog.uwinnipeg.ca/virtualstaff/ .
[89] Lipow, Anne Grodzins, "The Future of Reference: Point-of-Need Reference Service: No Longer an Afterthought," *Reference Service Review*, 31(1):31-35.
[90] Ibid., p. 32.

contact with the library and world of information."[91] The article then goes on to describe a service in 2020 where you go to "mylibrary.info", when "live service is chosen, you are greeted by a staff member of your home library . . . or research library anywhere in the world", and questions are "assigned to a librarian on duty according to a computer program that distributes the load fairly."[92] From the vantage point of 2007 we will never get there, and (IMHO) even if we could it is not where we need to be. In the dangerous world of prediction I would toss the dice of technology and user preferences and shift the focus from point-of-need to point-of-use. Where are our students learning? What is the quality of the contact between librarian and student that we should be striving for? One simple step is adding an image link to a subject librarian's IM to every course in a campus's course management system (CMS). Students are often required to use a CMS and it is the quality of the contact between student and faculty (in this case substitute librarian) that leads to student success.

I think the vision in Lipow's article is too reliant on our users "going to" a library link, too much based on a large complicated network of libraries and too much focused on complicated, feature-rich software. In a footnote in the article, Anne writes:

For several years chat technology remained an option but, as software such as CUseeMe and NetMeeting became more reliable and even voice conversations were able to be captured in text, in most libraries, chat faded away. Clients who preferred writing their question used asynchronous Web forms and e-mail services.[93]

I greatly admire Anne Lipow for bravely making this prediction, but when I see my teenager using IM, I don't see it going away soon! I think if Anne were here today she would ask us, "If every student has an iPhone, what should library services look like?" It is up to us to question our assumptions, experiment and know how our users are communicating to come up with the

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[91] Ibid., p. 34.
[92] Chickering, A.W, and Gamson, Z.F. "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education," *AAHE Bulletin*, 39(7) (1987): 3-7. The first principle is "Good Practice encourages student-faculty contact".
[93] Op cit., p.35, foonote number 7.

solutions that work today. It is up to us to be as courageous as Anne was and stop doing what doesn't work and "show that:

- the MLS makes a difference;
- we have updated our definition of constitutes professional work;
- we keep up with changes in the information industry;
- we provide equivalent service to people who do not (or will not or cannot) come into the library;
- we are responsible for the design of structures and content of our information services, but we are not necessarily the ones to be the front-line providers; and
- our instructional programs are effective."[94]

Anne's work will continue!

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[94] Op cit., p.34.