



*Using Evidence in Practice*

**Point of Need Reference Service**

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**Setting**

The University of Northern British Columbia is a small, research-intensive university located in Prince George, British Columbia. Staffed by 7 full-time librarians, the Geoffrey R. Weller Library is the sole library on campus, serving just over 4000 full and part-time students.

On average, librarians conduct 105 information literacy (IL) sessions annually, reaching just over 2,000 students per year. Classes are taught in a variety of disciplines, but generally present librarians with only one opportunity to teach students “everything” about the research process in 60 minutes or less. The courses Arts 101 and Arts 102 present

instructing librarians with the unique opportunity to teach four 90 minute sessions. These IL sessions and subsequent assignments comprise 20% of the student’s overall course mark.

Arts 101 and 102 both serve as introductions to the critical thinking, research, writing, and life skills each student needs to successfully complete their degrees. All UNBC students are permitted to enrol in these courses, but for students registered in the Northern Advancement Program (NAP), they are required. The NAP acts as a transitional year for First Nations students and students from rural and remote communities entering their first year of university. It bridges the gaps between their life experiences and academic

culture. The goal of the program is to ensure and enable student learning and success (Northern Advancement Program, Program Objectives, n.d.).

Prior to the start of classes in the Winter term of 2009, librarians met with instructors to discuss the upcoming term. Aside from discussing the assignments and session content, the course instructors asked that emphasis be placed on encouraging students to seek research assistance. With this in mind, an electronic library guide (LibGuide)<sup>1</sup> was created, containing all course materials including handouts and assignments. A chat widget was embedded into the LibGuide to allow students to access research help anonymously. It seemed only logical to place the widget alongside their assignments so that they could access research help at their virtual point of need. The students were also encouraged to utilize the library's reference desk and the course librarians' open-door policy. The open-door policy was intended to serve as a means for students to have further interaction with their librarians. Students were invited to stop by for research assistance or simply to say hello.

### **Problem**

Everything was organized for the course and the live widget was set up and staffed in anticipation of student requests for research help. As new librarians, we had naïvely expected that we would be inundated with questions relating to their library assignments or assignments from other classes. Although students had actively asked for assistance during the IL sessions, *none* of them made use of the services available to them, chat or the open-door policy of the librarians. The fact that they needed help, but were not using any of the services, left us with a sense of bewilderment. In an effort to gain some insight, each student was issued a feedback form on the last day of class.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://libguides.unbc.ca/arts102>

There was a common theme to the results. Despite having found the sessions overwhelmingly useful, 20% of the students wrote that they wanted more help on an individual basis. Specifically, students were asked "What further training or support, if any, would you like? Please describe." Their replies were refreshingly straightforward. According to the feedback sheets, students wanted "more one on one sessions", "maybe more tutorials", and "one on one work at my pace". Apparently, the students wanted and needed our help, but we were not providing the service in the way that they needed.

### **Implementation**

As a result of the students' feedback, the librarians approached the course instructors to discuss the idea of having the library conduct reference hours within the First Nations Centre (FNC), to determine if this would better meet the needs of the students.

The First Nations Centre is a welcoming and nurturing space, which serves as a "home away from home" (First Nations Centre, n.d.) for many. Within this space, students' academic, social, and technological needs are met. The First Nations Centre provides students with access to computers, study space, counselling and peer support services, and serves as a supportive community meeting place for all. This is where Arts 101 and 102 students were doing their research and completing their assignments. Their instructors were also located in the Centre. This was the ideal place to be to ensure that students received the one-on-one research and reference assistance they wanted and needed, at their point of need.

While the idea to provide the reference hours came from NAP student feedback, the service was made available to all students using the First Nations Centre. Point of need reference service started the last week of February 2009, with set hours of service on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 11 a.m. to 12 p.m.. Admittedly, library staff were a little hesitant at the start, wondering what the students

would think of having 'us' in 'their' space. Would students view staff as "intruders in their domain" as experienced by librarians at Bowling Green State University in the late 1990s (Nims, 1998)? Our approach to the launch of service was a little unorthodox in that we began providing the service without consulting existing library literature ahead of time. We saw gap in existing library services that needed to be filled.

Due to the speed with which this service was launched, very little marketing was undertaken. Staff publicized the service via in-class announcements and posters placed throughout the FNC, specifically on the walls above the computer terminals, printer, and on the Centre's refrigerator door. On the days that librarians were available for the service, they would make their presence known by introducing themselves to the room, stating their name, position, and why they were there. Depending on availability, the librarian would log in to a computer ready to assist. Every attempt was made to position ourselves in a highly visible area, whereby we could greet and initiate contact with the students as they arrived.

### **Evidence**

Librarians collected very minimal statistics during that first term of the service (Winter term 2009). Staff created a spreadsheet to record service statistics, recording primarily the date and number of questions asked. In total, participating librarians answered twenty-four questions in twelve service hours. Averaging two questions per hour, staff deemed the pilot a success, and decided that the service would continue the following term (Fall 2009).

Prior to the start of the Fall 2009 term, staff changed the way that statistics were to be gathered. We hoped that the changes would provide us with a clearer picture of the types of reference transactions occurring in the FNC. Participating librarians would now record the nature of the questions they answered. Reference transactions occurring in the FNC

were to be classified as being either Facilitative (directional), or Basic or Complex in nature (research related). Staff defined Basic and Complex reference transactions based on the amount of time it took to answer the query. Basic questions took between one to five minutes to answer, while complex questions required six minutes or more to complete.

During the Fall term 2009 librarians recorded a total of 26 reference in the First Nations Centre. Using the new recording model, we learned that 15% of questions were facilitative; 46% were classified as basic reference questions, lasting 1-5 minutes in length; and 39% were complex in nature, taking six minutes or more to answer. In total 85% of the 26 questions answered during the Fall term were research related.

The service was offered again the following term (Winter 2010), where 34 questions were asked, a 23.5% increase over the previous term. The recorded data showed 24% of were facilitative whereas the remainder were classified as 41% basic and 35% complex.

### **Outcome**

Our hopes were simple, that the students would make use the services available to them. We hoped that our presence in the classroom and in the FNC would help to promote the library and the many services available. As a result of offering reference services in the First Nations Centre, the number of student appointments with librarians increased dramatically. By the end of the Fall 2009 semester, there were only six requests for one-on-one appointments. This number increased dramatically the following term. In the Winter 2010 term a total of 20 students made office visits, 11 of which were pop-ins!

This pilot project played a significant role in creating and maintaining trusting, meaningful, and truly collaborative relationships with partners outside of the library. As a result of this project, librarians and NAP instructors continue to work closely together to create

meaningful curriculum. The library also enjoys a closer relationship with the students. The students know who we are and what we can do for them. This type of embedded service proved to be a tremendous opportunity to expand the role of the library throughout the university.

New opportunities have presented themselves as a result of this new and successful initiative. The library is now involved in NAP orientation activities, conducting research and writing workshops for NAP students, and conducting workshops for SAGE (Supporting Aboriginal Graduate Enhancement) students. Librarians still hold reference service hours in the First Nations Centre, proving that the influence and importance of the library extends beyond the four walls physically defining traditional library space.

### Reflection

Upon reflection, the old adage that hindsight is 20/20 holds true. The location and service hours will not change, but the marketing of FNC hours and the collections of statistics would be altered dramatically. As stated previously, very little effort was put into marketing FNC reference hours outside of signs and word of mouth. For the Fall 2011

term, additional marketing items will be placed in key orientation materials and acceptance packages. Backing hindsight, there is a gaping hole that needs to be filled in relation to the collection of statistics for this service. We know that the service was used, but we forgot to gather information relating to how the students view the service. Every effort will be made to solicit user feedback about the service, its location, times, and usefulness to the students and their research needs. Such results will be meaningful in shaping the service's future direction.

### References

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