Learning with the Library Community, Virtually – A Mixed Methods Research

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

Learning takes the center stage and serves as a critical mission at universities and academic institutions. A significant portion of learning takes place in teaching, research, and curriculum activities, which are the primary service responsibilities of academic libraries. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) emphasizes the importance of information literacy competency that is acquired through learning and highlights the significant roles of information technology such as virtual reference services provided at many university libraries today (American Library Association, 2017). It is important to understand how learning can be initiated, supported, facilitated, and enhanced through library services. To answer the calls to action to augment learning through virtual services at academic libraries (Ellis, 2004; Oakleaf & VanScoy, 2010), this research aims to discover insights and understand: How do patrons learn through virtual services provided by the library community? What roles do libraries play in patrons' learning in such virtual community?

The research site is a large academic library at a four-year, public university, which serves about 23,000 students, staff, and faculty. A mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2013, 2014) will guide the design of the research, data collection and analysis, interpretation, triangulation of results, and theory-building based upon the findings. Research data in this project involves both qualitative (interview, text) and quantitative data (survey) collected in the Spring semester of 2017. Interviews have been conducted and transcribed and will be coded and analyzed. The post-session survey received 128 responses. Preliminary results of the survey data show that almost all patron inquiries were fully addressed (mean 4.65, s.d. 0.667), patrons were satisfied (mean 4.86, s.d. 0.385), and learning took place in most of the chat sessions (mean 4.53, s.d. 0.826). Patron satisfaction is significantly associated with how well the question was addressed (r=0.501, p<0.001) but is not associated with learning in any significant way. Learning, on the other hand, is only significantly associated with how well the question was answered (r=0.499, p<0.001). Such finding first confirms the conventional view that satisfaction is driven by how well the inquiry is addressed (i.e. "I've got what I came for."). Interestingly, the finding depicts a somewhat perplexing nature of learning; if learning has nothing (significant) to do with satisfaction, what drives learning? In the next step, interview data will be coded, analyzed, integrated, and triangulated with the findings from the quantitative data to fully understand patron learning in the virtual library community.

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