Description of service
I had never used a virtual reference service before and wasn't sure where to start so I decided to go to the site with which I was most familiar, the Chicago Public Library.

I found the Ask a Librarian service on the CPL home page. The link is located on the right. The link is inside a circular graphic with the words Ask a Librarian along with a photo of a child and a librarian.

When I clicked on the Ask a Librarian link, it took me to a web page that offered three kinds of service: By Phone, By Email, or In Person.

I selected By Email which read: "Email your reference question and receive a reply within two business days from a professional librarian."

The reference form was very simple and required me to fill in my email address, to confirm it and then enter my question.

Below that was an area which read:

This information, while optional, helps us refer you to nearby resources. Any personal information provided will be kept confidential.

Below were spaces to enter the city, state, zip code, and country. I opted to do this.

The question which I entered was this: "I want to know if there is a correlation between elementary student test scores and recess." I sent my question around 5 pm.

After I sent the email, I received a receipt with a question ID in my inbox. The email identified the email box where I would receive the information and suggested adding askalibrarian@chipublib.org to my list of email contacts. In also indicated I would receive a response within two business days.

Around ten the next morning I received an answer to my query. The email started with "Dear julierand@ameritech.net"

The reference librarian suggested I consult several databases and cautioned me that some of them were available only inside a CPL location. S/he suggested five databases: Article First, ERIC, JSTOR, ProQuest One Search and Wilson Select Plus.
Included in the email was information about two articles the librarian had found in ERIC with citations as well as an abstract,

Unfortunately neither of the articles appeared to address the issue of a correlation between student test scores and recess. Rather the articles were about the benefits of recess to school students. This was not my question.

In addition the email contained no information about how to follow up if the information was not sufficient. It did, however, contain a link to CPL databases which could be accessed from home. There was also a suggestion that I visit the Harold Washington Library Center where the staff could help me search print and electronic resources.

**Evaluation of service**

Approachability is the first rule of reference. In the case of virtual reference, this would pertain to the location of Ask a Librarian links on the web site. As Cassell (p 27) states “It is important that libraries clearly mark the service and make it visible on all pages on their website”. CPL’s link was well located and clearly marked as well as easy to use.

The second screen outlining the options for contact (e.g. phone, email, or in person) was also good. I think the CPL service, however, has a glaring weakness in the form of the question form. Because of the lack of interaction in an email reference session, I think the form should attempt to recreate the reference interview so that the service provided can more clearly replicate the experience one would have in a live interview.

While the CPL form was user friendly, it didn't ask enough questions and certainly made no attempt to replicate a reference interview. I can't help but contrast this to the librarian question form on the IPL web site (http://www.ipl.org/div/askus/) which asks for the patron’s name, email, city/state/country, deadline, subject, anticipated use of the information, whether or not it is for a school assignment, the question and sources already consulted. These are questions a librarian would ask in a typical reference interview and which Cassell outlines in Chapter 2 (p 19).

In section 3 of the RUSA guidelines, part 3.10 states "Uses ... Web forms to gather as much information as possible without compromising user privacy." I do not think the CPL form meets this criteria.

Both Cassell (2009) and the RUSA (2004) guidelines emphasize the importance of following up with the patron. Although the CPL email did mention the availability of further help, there was no way outlined to follow up with the reference librarian to let him or her know that the information provided did not answer my question. In other words, there was no follow up or evaluation of the service.
All in all I was disappointed with my first foray into virtual reference. It seemed impersonal and because of the email context, it appeared to be impossible to adjust my search or to get further information. There was no follow up and no back and forth which would have allowed the librarian to fine-tune the questions and to more accurately answer my question.

While I was impressed with the turnaround time and acknowledgment of my query, ultimately the CPL service failed to deliver.

For libraries to continue to survive, and thrive, in the 21st century, we need to consider Steven Bell's assertion (Fry 2009) that libraries need to create an atmosphere where "personal interaction and personalized service" are key. I feel the CPL email reference service has a ways to go to achieve this goal.

Works Cited


Addendum-email transcripts received from Chicago Public Library Ask a Librarian service

Initial Response
Library Question - [Question #6483847]
From: "askalibrarian@chipublib.org"
<askalibrarian@chipublib.org>
View Contact
To: julierand@ameritech.net

Thank you for using the CPL E-mail Reference service. Your message has been received by the E-mail Reference Team, and a response to your specific request will follow this message within two business days.

[Question]: I want to know if there is a correlation between elementary student test scores and recess

Reply received the next day

This is a response from the Chicago Public Library's Ask a Librarian service. We are contacting you in reply to your E-mail reference question.

Dear <julierand@ameritech.net>

We are contacting you in reply to your E-mail reference question:
I want to know if there is a correlation between elementary student test scores and recess.

You may find more discussion of your topic in periodical articles from the Find It, Chicago databases.
To access the databases, go to the Chicago Public Library's homepage: http://www.chicagopubliclibrary.org and scroll down to "Online Research." Click "A-Z Research Databases." You will see a screen instructing you to put in your library card (capital D followed by nine numbers) and zip code. Scroll down the list of databases and select the one you want to search by clicking on the name of the database.

Suggested databases:

Article First
ERIC
JSTOR
ProQuest One Search
Wilson Select Plus

Note: Some databases are only available inside a Chicago Public Library location.

For example, in searching the ERIC database listed above, we have discovered the following articles:

1. Recess--It's Indispensable!
   Olga Jarrett; Sandra Waite-Stupiansky
The demise of recess in many elementary schools--and of outdoor play in general--is an issue of great concern to many members of the Play, Policy, and Practice Interest Forum. Most people remember recess as an important part of the school day. It was a time to be outdoors; to organize games; to play on the swings, slides, and other playground equipment; or just to hang out with friends....

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Accession No: EJ868215
Author(s): Jarrett, Olga ; Waite-Stupiansky, Sandra
Title: Recess--It's Indispensable!
Source: Young Children v64 n5 p66-69 Sep 2009 (4 pages)
Additional Info: National Association for the Education of Young Children. 1313 L Street NW Suite 500, Washington, DC 22205-4101. Tel: 800-424-2460 800-424-2460 ; Tel: 202-232-8777 202-232-8777 ; Fax: 202-328-2649; e-mail: editorial@naeyc.org; Web site: http://journal.naeyc.org
Standard No: ISSN: 1538-6619
Language: English
Abstract: The demise of recess in many elementary schools--and of outdoor play in general--is an issue of great concern to many members of the Play, Policy, and Practice Interest Forum. Most people remember recess as an important part of the school day. It was a time to be outdoors; to organize games; to play on the swings, slides, and other playground equipment; or just to hang out with friends. In contrast, children today are likely to have 10 to 15 minutes of outdoor playtime during the school day, if they are lucky. No wonder there is an upswing in childhood obesity and an increase in childhood heart disease and type 2 diabetes. No wonder teachers are concerned about a generation of children who can't entertain themselves, have social difficulties, and are fidgety and off task in class. In the late 1980s, some school systems began cutting back on recess to allow more instructional time. The trend accelerated with the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001 and was particularly widespread in urban schools with
high numbers of children from marginalized populations. The arguments against recess involved both academics and safety issues. Some administrators believed their school's test scores would improve if children spent more time on school work. Some feared lawsuits from playground injuries. A number of school systems have a recess policy; others allow the principals or teachers to determine whether the children go out to play. Officially having recess and "actually" having recess are two different issues. In this article, the authors list some cognitive, social-emotional, and physical benefits of recess. They call on readers to stand up for recess and provide some steps readers can take.

NOTE: A full-text copy of this article can be found at the Harold Washington Library Center, 400 S. State St., Chicago, 5th Floor, Social Sciences & History Periodicals Desk. The article is ONLY available in microfilm at this location.

2. Play Teaches What Testing Can't Touch: Humanity
Carol Chmelynski

2006
English Article (EJ) 4
Prakken Publications. 832 Phoenix Drive, P.O. Box 8623, Ann Arbor, MI 48108. Tel: 734-975-2800; Fax: 734-975-2787; Web site: http://www.eddigest.com/
Pressures to improve test scores and avoid lawsuits are causing many schools to cut back play time. According to the American Association for the Child's Right to play, nearly 40% of the nation's 16,000 school districts have either modified, deleted, or are considering deleting recess. Moreover, where playtime does still exist, it has become overly safe and highly predictable....
Abstract: Pressures to improve test scores and avoid lawsuits are causing many schools to cut back play time. According to the American Association for the Child’s Right to play, nearly 40% of the nation’s 16,000 school districts have either modified, deleted, or are considering deleting recess. Moreover, where playtime does still exist, it has become overly safe and highly predictable. But according to experts, play makes children more resistant to chronic illnesses since they become more physically active and fit. Also, rough-and-tumble play is how kids learn social skills, how they learn to inhibit aggression, and how to recognize aggressive facial cues. Lack of playtime increasing regulation of what playtime does exist contributes to the childhood obesity crisis, harms children by removing an outlet for creativity, and is a factor in impulse control problems like ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder).

NOTE: The full text of this article can be viewed by finding this article on the ERIC database and clicking on a link that says "View Full Text in . . ." Search terms used to access this and the above article were "test scores" and "recess."

Visit your local branch or the Harold Washington Library Center where professional reference staff will assist you with the library’s extensive print and electronic resources. For library hours and locations:
http://www.chicagopubliclibrary.org/001libraries/001libraries.html
Harold Washington Library Center
400 S State St
Social Science History Division
6th floor
312-747-4600 312-747-4600

If you wish to search the catalog, you can access it from the Chicago Public Library homepage.
http://www.chicagopubliclibrary.org/
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Choose "Search the Entire Catalog" or "Books"

Thank you for contacting Chicago Public Library.

CPL E-mail Reference Team.