Virtual Reference Service as a Space for Communication and Interaction: Providing Infrastructure for Learning in Times of Crisis at Uppsala University

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Abstract : Uppsala University Library is a geographically dispersed research library consisting of nine subject libraries located in different campus areas throughout the city of Uppsala. Despite the geographical dispersion, it is the library's ambition to be perceived as a cohesive library with consistently high service and quality. A key factor to being one cohesive library is the library's online services, especially the virtual reference service. E-mail, chat and phone are answered by a team of specially trained staff under the supervision of a team leader. When covid-19 hit, well-established routines and processes to provide an infrastructure for students and researchers at the university changed radically. The strong connection between services provided at the library locations as well as at the VRS has been one of the key components of the library's success in providing patrons with the help they need. With radically minimized availability at the physical locations, the infrastructure was at risk of collapsing. Objectives:- The objective of this project has been to evaluate the consequences of the sudden change in the organization of the library. The focus of this evaluation is the library's VRS as an important space for learning, interaction and communication between the library and the community when other traditional spaces were not available. The goal of this evaluation is to capture the lessons learned from providing infrastructure for learning and research in times of crisis both on a practical, user-centered level but also to stress the importance of leadership in ever-changing environments that supports and creates agile, flexible services and teams instead of rigid processes adhering to obsolete goals. Results:- Reduced availability at the physical library locations was one of the strategies to prevent the spread of the covid-19 virus. The library staff was encouraged to work from home, so student workers staffed the library's physical locations during that time, leaving the VRS to be the only place where patrons could get expert help. The VRS had an increase of 65% of questions asked between spring term 2019 and spring term 2020. The VRS team had to navigate often complicated and fast-changing new routines depending on national guidelines. The VRS team has a strong emphasis on agility in their approach to the challenges and opportunities, with methods to evaluate decisions regularly with user experience in mind. Fast decision-making, collecting feedback, an open-minded approach to reviewing rules and processes with both a short-term and a long-term focus and providing a healthy work environment have been key factors in managing this crisis and learn from it. This was resting on a strong sense of ownership regarding the VRS, well-working communication tools and agile and active communication between team members, as well as between the team and the rest of the organization who served as a second-line support system to aid the VRS team. Moving forward, the VRS has become an important space for communication, interaction and provider of infrastructure, implementing new routines and more extensive availability due to the lessons learned during crisis. The evaluation shows that the virtual environment has become an important addition to the physical spaces, existing in its own right but always in connection with and in relationship with the library structure as a whole. Thereby showing that the basis of human interaction stays the same while its form morphs and adapts to changes, thus leaving the virtual environment as a space of communication and infrastructure with unique opportunities for outreach and the potential to become a staple in patron's education and learning.

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