

National Library: Any Questions

A successful central/local government collaboration

Can a guinea pig overeat? What does a flea look like on the inside? What are some of the events leading up to World War 1?

These are just a few of the questions the AnyQuestions.co.nz team have been helping students with this year. AnyQuestions.co.nz gives all school children in New Zealand their own free guide to help them find good quality, trusted information amongst the millions of pages on the Internet. AnyQuestions.co.nz is a people-based service making great use of technology to allow our children to be independent library users - they can receive help from a trained librarian whether they are at the library or not. AnyQuestions.co.nz is an example of technology allowing libraries to deliver a traditional service in a way that meets the needs of New Zealand society in 2005.

Six weeks into Term One 2005, the service is already operating at capacity, with two and a half times as many students trying to access the service as we can serve. The service has already been commended by the Sunday Star Times and on TVOne.

This submission will concentrate on three aspects of this project: the service vision and design, the collaboration journey and finally, the results.

The service is backed by the Ministry of Education, and staffed by librarians from the Auckland, Manukau, Wellington and Christchurch public libraries and the National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Matauranga o Aotearoa. The service gives students their own online librarian to talk to for support with homework and helps build students' search and information skills.

The service uses interactive Docutek VRL*plus* software customised for New Zealand use and aims to complement the information students can find in their school and public libraries.

The software has two main components: a chat window and a co-browse window. The chat screen allows the librarian to discuss the question and possible search strategies with the student, while the co-browse engine allows both librarian and student to visit sites together in real time. Librarian and student can take turns to lead, a form filling function allows each to see what the other is typing into the search fields, and the librarian can also point out results on the patron's browser window with an interactive arrow.

The service is staffed Mondays to Fridays, 1pm-6pm. At present three librarians are online every hour, with a fourth librarian coming on for the eight busiest hours per week. Operators fluent in Te Reo Maori and English staff the service for the first hour every day, and we are aiming to build this bilingual capability.

AnyQuestions.co.nz puts all New Zealand school children in touch with the skilled-people networks to help them find the best information for their needs. The friendly and encouraging guides who will help children navigate the immense world of electronic information.

The service, Any Questions.co.nz:

- Helps connect all New Zealand school students to quality information, when they need it, by extending the window of support outside of school hours
- Supports The Learning Country and the Knowledge Economy with our operators' knowledge of the New Zealand school curriculum
- Helps students find information themselves by modelling effective search strategies, guiding students through the electronic materials available to them and recommending other places to look for information

- Collaboratively builds on New Zealand's investment in existing education and public library infrastructure to deliver this service
- Reinforces and augments the services and skills offered by school libraries by selecting appropriate electronic materials and providing a consistent approach to information literacy.

The project was accomplished with only two face-to-face meetings for the project teams. All other work was carried out remotely and managed by regular telephone conferences.

The 'journey' had many benefits to the partner organisations - development of skills on the project which could be brought back and used locally within our own organisations, increase in operator skills in an electronic environment, increased networking and understanding of the business of the other agencies serving a shared customer group.

This service was successfully marketed directly to school students, with a mail-out of stickers and bookmarks to every school in the country. Students from schools in every region in the country have already accessed the service.

In brief, as at 24 March 2005 -

- 2,720 sessions have been held with New Zealand school students
- 3,412 students logged out of the queue before being served
- 66 percent of sessions are between 6 and 20 minutes duration, demonstrating the personalised support this service offers
- 80 percent of students who responded to our satisfaction survey have told us they would use the service again
- 73 percent of students who responded to our satisfaction survey have told us they would refer the service to a friend.

Although by no means a new concept, AnyQuestions.co.nz is noteworthy within New Zealand for providing a:

- reference service tailored to schoolchildren's curriculum needs
- bilingual service, although modest in scope
- transparent, accountable and safe service resulting from a design requirement whereby transcripts are unable to be edited by either party to the transaction
- successful collaboration in service delivery between central and local government agencies.

The students have also spoken about the ways in which they like this new service:

- They really like the anonymity it provides
- They can use it at a time that is convenient to them, rather than being dependent on public or parental transport to visit their local library

The service has many challenges to address, in particular growing the service hours and numbers of librarians to meet the evident demand from students and developing a sustainable funding model to support this successful service delivery model. Planning for this began in earnest in April 2005.