Are Patrons Ready for "Do-It-Yourself" Services?

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In very few libraries does funding increase proportionately to the demand for provision of services. If, however, restrictions prohibiting patrons from accessing their own files are eliminated, enabling them to provide for themselves services formerly provided by library staff, will they willingly accept the challenge? In fact, the public does seem willing, even enthusiastic, about self-serve features, as evidenced by the results of an experiment in which the Ohio State University Libraries' automated circulation and online catalog system was programmed to accept patron-initiated renewal and save commands from library-housed and dial-access terminals. Attempting to forestall problems before they were created was essential to the planning, and the methods used are applicable to other libraries considering such enhancements.

requently the strongest opposition to change comes from within the institution or organization being changed. In libraries, practices and policies have rarely changed without dissension. A long debate, for example, raged over whether the public should have direct access to library materials. Critics of this idea, most notably Melvil Dewey, feared the possible chaos and potential thievery. Despite fears of anarchy and pandemonium, the shelves of the Cleveland Public Library were opened as early as 1890 by librarian William Howard Brett, who feared a dishonest public less than the limitations imposed by keeping people away from books. With a belief in the basic integrity of the public, he countered critical arguments with the promise of better service. After shelves were opened, not only were long waits eliminated, but fewer books were lost and circulation increased as much as 44% despite a reduction of staff.[1]

Such improvements to service were the primary goals the Ohio State University Libraries (OSUL) sought to attain in 1970, when the stacks were opened to the entire university community and the Library Control System (LCS), the automated circulation and online catalog system, was introduced.

Patrons were invited to search the University Libraries' holdings for authors, titles, or subjects, using public terminals located in the main library and each of the department libraries beginning in 1974. In 1980, users with home or office computers and modems began to request dial access to LCS.

The complete holdings file, eventually to include order and processing records, was accessible to patrons using either public or personal computer terminals,

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but access to circulation functions was restricted to staff terminals. Patrons were encouraged to request a "save" (a term synonymous with "hold" at OSUL) for items in circulation, but doing so required assistance from library staff, either at a circulation desk or via the libraries' telephone center, where callers often encountered a queue or a busy signal.

One reason for the difficulty in reaching the telephone center was that patrons were also trying to renew books. Patrons are permitted to renew books an unlimited number of times, but are accountable for maintaining a current renewal status to avoid penalties for long-overdue materials. Since all circulation functions were suppressed at public terminals, patrons also needed staff assistance to fulfill this obligation.

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Like many university libraries, OSUL perpetually operates on a less than ideal budget, trying to do more with less. At circulation desks, where the day-to-day operations already taxed the available staff, the influx of calls generated by the overdue notice mailings produced an even greater workload. The telephone center, limited by the number of staff who could answer the phones, had an alarmingly high number of abandoned calls, with many patrons hanging up in frustration before the staff could provide any service.

To maintain the convenient service desired by the public without diminishing quality of service, the libraries needed either to increase staffing, equipment, and telephone lines or to create another solution. Choosing the latter option, OSUL decided to allow the public to enter their own renewal and save transactions on a trial basis. Assuming patrons would be willing to do so, and these options could be presented without an overwhelming collection of choices and documents, how might they

respond? Would the library system benefit or suffer in the effort? If the public response was demonstrably positive and the library benefitted by employing staff more efficiently, then perhaps enhancements that allowed patrons to access other LCS features could be introduced with some assurance that patrons could be enticed to try them. This paper examines the results of this venture.

BACKGROUND

OSU Libraries implemented patron-initiated renewal and save capability using LCS in the fall of 1989. Targeted users were OSUL patrons, including faculty, employees, and students of the Ohio State University, users of the State Library of Ohio, and courtesy card patrons—altogether, potentially more than 80,000 patrons. Because this audience has varying levels of computer skills, instructions had to be widely accessible and simply written.

Because so many patrons wait until books are overdue to renew them, renewal requests usually come in response to overdue notices. A guide was prepared to be sent with each overdue notice to assist patrons in resolving overdue problems. Since some patrons would be unable to access either a personal or a library terminal, patron-initiated renewal was only one of several renewal methods described in the guide. The guide made no reference to the placement of saves.

A brochure was distributed to requestors of dial-access service and displayed at the public terminals. This brochure, "LCS Renewal and Save Instructions," was written with the assumption that the patron using it for renewal purposes might have a book but not an overdue notice in hand. The brochure also included instructions on how to place a save on a record retrieved during the course of a search.

Aside from the style and the inclusion of save instructions, the two instructional aids differed in one other important way. The guide inserted with the overdue notice encouraged patrons to locate and to use title numbers (numeric computer-as-

signed identifiers) since our experience with telephone renewal requests was that the letter and number combinations of LC call numbers could be confusing. The brochure detailed renewal procedures using either call numbers or line numbers retrieved from a title search, and saves using call numbers only, but did not refer to title numbers.

The results indicate that not only is the public eager to participate further but that libraries can benefit from a self-services policy without sacrificing quality of service.

Regardless of which aid or method used, screen responses had to be carefully worded so that unsuccessful attempts would not dead-end. If the request failed, patrons should either be able to tell what went wrong and know how to fix it or be instructed that assistance from the circulation staff was necessary.[2]

CONCERNS AND SOLUTIONS

Kenneth Dowlin described innovation as "the process of creating small, incremental improvements on what is accepted today," but people commonly resist change. One source of resistance is the perceived threat of a loss of power.[3] The mere suggestion of enhancing LCS to allow patrons to enter their own renewal and save commands precipitated a variety of skeptical reactions, including doubts about whether effective instructions could be written, concerns as to whether we were serving the elite or the masses, and fears that patrons might inadvertently (or even intentionally) alter circulation records. Some staff members objected that the impact on library staff would be negative, with time that should be invested into "real" problems being diverted to explaining these services. Others objected to the appearance that we were attempting to shift our workload to the public. Only success would convert the doubters among the library staff.

Preventing improper use of these transactions was an important concern.

The system needed to prevent one patron from unwittingly renewing another's books, since they might assume they had resolved their own overdue status. The renewal transaction was programmed to succeed only if the patron identification number were entered as part of the request, and only if the number entered matched the one in the circulation file for that title and copy.

Saves were even more problematic because saves at OSUL are essentially delayed check-outs. Even without public access to saves, we had witnessed and wanted to avoid "prank" saves. We had also experienced the problem created when patrons placed saves on items already checked out to themselves, generating fines unnecessarily. To discourage saves from being placed maliciously, OSUL does not send via campus mail items saved at publicly accessible terminals; a picture ID card must be presented. Inadvertently placed saves were avoided by programming the system not to accept a save when the request included an identification number that matched one already in the circulation file.

METHODOLOGY

To measure the public's acceptance of these capabilities, to determine which command type (and, therefore, which instructional aid) was most frequently used, and to assess the impact of these operations on staff activity, monthly transaction statistics of renewal and save activity from all staff, telephone center, and publicly accessible terminals were reviewed from the fall of 1989 through the summer of 1990. These statistics were then compared with statistics from the academic year 1988–1989, when the features were not available systemwide.

As a matter of coincidence, the method of generating overdue notices had been changed in the fall of 1989 so that each patron class (faculty/staff and student/courtesy card) received notices once every other month. All student patrons and courtesy card holders received notices in September, November, January, March, May, and July. Faculty and staff (including graduate teaching assistants)

received notices in the alternate months. Therefore, to make the 1988–1989 population groups' statistics comparable to later statistics, months studied were combined into two-month segments (January/February, April/May, July/August, and October/November), roughly reflecting the quarters of the academic year.

FINDINGS

Impact on Staff Activity

Public reaction, reflected in the growing use of the features as recorded in the transaction logs, seemed enthusiastic. More than 33,000 renewal transactions, over 13% of the total number of all renewal transactions, were logged at publicly accessible terminals during the 1989–1990 academic year. Significantly more than 7,000 save transactions, over 19% of the total number of saves placed during the entire year, were placed at public terminals.

During the four quarters before patron-initiated commands were introduced, the telephone center entered 197,928 of the 277,017 renewal commands entered systemwide, peaking at 75% by the end of the summer of 1989 and averaging 71% for the entire year. In the year after the public terminals were authorized to enter these commands, the telephone center handled 151,345 (60%) of the 251,884 total number of renewal commands. Using a standard t-test, this change was found to be statistically significant at the .01 level. Staff terminals (operated by library personnel, but excluding telephone center terminals) were affected, too, although to a lesser degree. In the academic year 1988–1989, staff terminals fielded 28% of the total number of requests; between fall of 1989 and fall of 1990, only 26% of the total number were entered at staff terminals.

For 1988–1989, the percentage of renewals entered at public terminals theoretically should have been zero since public terminals were not programmed to accept renewal transactions before fall of 1989. However, the transaction logs used for this study did not distinguish between successful and failed attempts. Therefore, the handful of renewal transactions entered at public terminals during 1988–1989 probably were failed attempts. In the summer of 1990, one year after the public terminals were authorized to accept renewal commands, the percentage had risen to 16%.

During 1988–1989, the preponderance of saves (roughly 85%) was entered at staff terminals. The number of saves placed at public terminals averaged 2%, although, as previously mentioned, some of these numbers represent failed attempts. However, since patrons in the Health Sciences Library have been able to place saves at public terminals since 1974, some of the save transactions can be assumed to have been successfully entered commands. Once patrons were able to place their own saves, the percentage dropped steadily to 70% during the summer of 1990, and the percentage placed at public and dial-access terminals increasingly rose to 23%. The number of saves placed at the telephone center, averaging 13% of the save transactions during 1988–1989, diminished to 9% during the summer of 1990.

Command Preference

As each record is added to LCS, it is assigned a title number, which is similar to an accession number in that it is composed entirely of numerals. We believed patrons would find a title number easier to use than a call number. To determine whether patrons actually did prefer using title numbers versus call numbers, statistics from dial-access terminals for the postimplementation period only were used. Libraries that had only one circulation desk terminal sometimes diverted activity to public terminals in order to minimize lines of patrons waiting for assistance at circulation desks. Unfortunately, it is not possible to determine which transactions at library public terminals were performed by patrons and which were entered by staff for patrons. Therefore, the dial-access terminals gave a more accurate picture of patron preference.

The guide accompanying the overdue notice described and encouraged the use of title numbers for renewing materials, so it is not surprising that patrons used title numbers more often than call numbers

to renew books (56% of all renewal transactions were entered using title numbers).

The brochure posted near public terminals and distributed to requestors of dial-access service, on the other hand, described the renewal procedure using call numbers. Patrons who may not have carried an overdue notice and the accompanying guide to a public terminal would have used a brochure, so a fairly substantial number of renewals (32%) were entered using call numbers. The brochure was the only source of instruction regarding the placement of saves. Since it described the procedures using call numbers only, the number of saves placed using call numbers was, naturally, quite high (88%).

Copy-specific saves were discouraged (limited instruction was provided) and blocked for all patron classes except special library-coded identification numbers to avoid the complications that could be created if saves were placed on serial volumes or newly added copies of titles, so those numbers were, as anticipated, low (less than 3%).

Obviously, a little instruction goes a long way, and patron education played an important role in the selection of commands. A more detailed breakdown of transaction logs, isolating the progression from failed to successful or aborted attempt, was not used for this study, but would surely provide guidance in the preparation of other instructional aids or help screens and would provide a mechanism for future research in the area of patron instruction.

CONCLUSION

With surges in circulation resulting from open stacks and automated systems, it is apparent that patrons are eager for improved services, even if improvement requires greater efforts on their parts. Ultimately, however, it is not only the public who is intrigued by these features. Library staff will be encouraged to try more adventuresome experimentation once they realize that the number of patrons served increases even as staff and equipment resources level off and the number of routine activities at staff-assisted stations decreases, allowing expansion of services for more "needy" patrons.

In his 1989 *Library Journal* article, Richard De Gennaro writes, "We are entering a new era and the only way libraries can conserve what they have built in the past and perform their vital mission in the future is by innovating."[4] The possibilities for expansion of self-serve features include touch-tone phone renewals and patron-initiated check-out using remotely accessible terminals. Resistance and doubt, at least initially, can be expected, but extended access is, as Bernard G. Sloan observed, a "logical, even inevitable, extension of on-site public access,"[5] and we should make every effort to make services convenient, empowering patrons to use all available resources.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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