

Reaching Out: Library Reference Services for Students at Home

By *Sheila Beck and Sara Rofofsky Marcus*

Description: Students work on their research assignments at all hours of the day, all week long. Yet, reference librarians are only accessible when the library is open. Students today are not the traditional students of previous years. Today's students have jobs, families, and other responsibilities that prevent them from accessing the library during the traditional working hours of a library. How do these students contact a reference librarian when they need help? The proposed answer is to provide inexpensive methods of serving the real-time reference needs of students, in particular observant Jewish students who have additional access limitations.

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Our lives are complicated. We are librarians, wives and mothers. As observant Jews, we have an additional layer of responsibilities. Being observant takes time.

Shabbat and holidays require preparation and time in shul. Our children are in yeshivas where they have longer school days, carry heavy academic loads in 2 languages and commute sometimes long distances to school.

In addition to school libraries, our students need to use the public library to complete assignments. Often the library is not open late and students have to wait for early dismal on Friday to find materials. Students' time at the library is very limited in the fall and winter when Shabbat begins early and when family members are too busy with preparations to provide transport or the student doesn't have the time to travel to the library and start the research process. A student related to me that every week in elementary school she was assigned a book report but she had to wait until Friday to go to the library for the book. Unfortunately the report was due on Monday.

To assist their children, parents often end up going to the library for them during their own lunch hours, before work and after work. Yet their children don't like the books they pick out and /or they don't get the request correct, adding to the stress in the lives of both student and parent.

For the current generation, the Internet is the public library and one that is available 24/7. The Internet can be filtered if so desired by the yeshiva at school and by the parents at home, another advantage over conventional libraries. Since 1994, the use of computers and the Internet has grown exponentially. The cost of computers has dropped dramatically along with size and improved screen resolution. In fact, many of our students do not remember what it is like not to go online. The Internet is the logical place for students to find school assistance. Project Gutenberg is one of the online free resources that have copies of the classics for older students and the Internet Public Library is a portal to quality information for school assignments. There are tutoring sites and Ask an Expert also. Yet after finding out not everything is a Google search, students need our assistance.

In order to assist students at home, public libraries in the 5 boroughs of New York City, Nassau and Suffolk counties added "Ask a Librarian" and "Chat" functions. "Ask a Librarian" typically refers to email reference usually using a form specifying the type of questions answered. This is available 24/7 whenever the student needs to ask for assistance. The negative is that if the request is not clear, days can pass until the librarian understands what the student is asking. Then the information still may not be available online and a trip to the library is required.

Chat is real-time communication between a librarian and student. One disadvantage is the librarian and student might be multitasking and have unexpected delays and another is that it is difficult to conduct a reference interview without face to face contact. Thus chat may be perceived as cold and unfriendly. Also if the service is not 24/7, the student is limited to when the service is available.

Ideally our students have access to a school librarian who knows Judaic, their assignments, and the philosophy of their yeshiva. In a perfect world, the librarian is available in the evenings and contacted by IM or email. Most students are familiar with these modes of communication. The student or parent would be provided with the librarian's ID. Also, Yahoo, MSN messenger and AOL Instant Messenger can be filtered. Like minded yeshivas could form consortia to increase coverage and the infrastructure of the AJL could be used as a basis for the creation. Funding is available from local, state and federal funds as well as grants for the provision of library services.