

Teens are from Neptune, librarians are from Pluto: An analysis of online reference transactions.

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Library Trends

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 54, Number 2, Fall 2005

pp. 209-227

10.1353/lib.2006.0021

ARTICLE

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Abstract

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As part of a project to evaluate the effectiveness of Tutor.com's Live Homework Help service, the authors examined over 100 transcripts of online transactions between teens and the virtual reference librarians in California who connect students to Live Homework Help tutors. Using content analysis, the authors document and discuss the difference in online communication styles between teens and adults. In addition, the transactions are measured against Reference and User Services Association's (RUSA) reference performance guidelines and are found to be severely lacking in the qualities required for effective reference service. Recommendations are made within the context of positive library service to young adults, including recommendations on how to make virtual reference encounters with teens more responsive to their homework needs.

INTRODUCTION

In 1992 family therapist John Gray published the self-help book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus: The Classic Guide to Understanding the Opposite Sex*. The cover of the 2004 paperback edition claims that more than fourteen million copies have been sold (Gray, 2004). The title has become a watchword for the seemingly galactic gaps in communication that can occur when people with different values and worldviews try to have a dialogue. The authors of this article were reminded of that watchword when they were charged with evaluating Live Homework Help, an online tutoring program funded by the California State Library. The service originally provided access to Tutor.com at designated hours at thirty libraries throughout the state. In 2003 the service was expanded to allow students



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