Chat with Hal: Service Evaluation Plan

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Introduction

The Oak Park Public Library is located in Oak Park, IL. The library has three locations – the Main Library, the Dole Branch, and the Maze Branch. Established in 1903, the library recently celebrated its 120th Anniversary in October, 2023 (OPPL, *Main library history*). The current Main Library opened in October 2002, celebrating its 20th Anniversary as the third main library. As for the community that the library serves, the United States Census Bureau's data on Oak Park lists the total population as 54,583 per the 2020 Decennial Census (United States Census Bureau). The population is reported to be approximately 60% white, 19% black, and 9% Hispanic (United States Census Bureau). The median household income is approximately 103,000, which is 1.3 times higher than the amount in Illinois. 38.7% of residents over 25 have a graduate or professional degree (United States Census Bureau). In summary, Oak Park is considered racially diverse and wealthy. Looking at the estimate of children, 23.1% of the Oak Park population are estimated to be under 18 years old (United States Census Bureau).

With over 12,000 kids potentially living in the community, it's clear that there's a need for library services geared toward kids, families, and caregivers. IMLS's data on the Oak Park Public Library further supports the need for children's services. Of their 816 total library programs in fiscal year 2022, 285 programs were children's programs, which amounts to approximately 35% of their programming (Institute of Museum and Library Services).

In addition to striving to deliver quality children's programming, OPPL strives to live up to the following values in their strategic priorities and plan - equity and anti-racism, engagement, learning, and stewardship (OPPL, *Vision, mission, values & priorities*). Looking at their 2024

logic model, it becomes clear that the library focuses on impact when they emphasize, "a commitment to equity and anti-racism informs all of our work" (OPPL, 2023, *Logic model*).

Looking at one particular lens of equity, how does the library fare regarding equity building for the LGBTQ+ community?

In a library climate inundated by censorship attempts on LGBTQ+ materials, Oak Park stands out as a book sanctuary community (OPPL, *Our village is a book sanctuary community*). As a book sanctuary community, Oak Park protects the right to read books, including challenged books. This book sanctuary community was made official with a detailed resolution declared on June 23rd, 2023 (OPPL, 2023, *Oak Park supports democracy and the freedom to read as a book sanctuary community*). The library promotes their Transgender Resource Collection (OPPL, *Transgender resource collection*), as well as their Rainbow Services for kids, families, and caregivers (OPPL, *Rainbow services*). These services include library programming during Pride Month, such as Read to the Royals (drag storytime) and a Pronoun Party program (OPPL, 2023, *'Find your voice' & celebrate pride all summer*). Hal has attested to Oak Park's impact as "a place where people of all ages, but especially youth, feel affirmed as they explore and express who they are" (OPPL, 2023, *Library recognized for 'outstanding efforts on behalf of LGBTQ+ people'*). As discussed in this article, this advocacy was recognized in 2023 when the Oak Park Area Lesbian & Gay Association (OPALGA+) awarded OPPL the Mel Wilson Founders Award. The library highlights this accomplishment on their Awards webpage (OPPL, *Awards*) and in their *2023 Equity & Anti-Racism Impact Report* (p. 8). In their *2023 Strategic Priorities Impact Report*, OPPL highlights this award (pp. 7-8) and their commitment as a Book Sanctuary Community (p. 13).

With OPPL offering many services geared toward LGBTQ+ equity building, which service will I be evaluating? As a KidSpace Associate at Gail Borden Public Library, I'm excited to evaluate OPPL's Rainbow Services - specifically, the Chat with Hal service listed on the Rainbow Services webpage. As stated on this webpage, "Hal is a children's librarian who specializes in serving LGBTQ+ young people and their allies. He is passionate about identity exploration through collaborative storytelling and imaginative play. Hal also collaborates with Collection Management librarians curating materials for all ages, including the library's Transgender Resource Collection" (OPPL, *Rainbow services*). With OPPL's focus on evaluating the library's impact, I'd like to evaluate how the impact of this reference service could be best evaluated, as well as how this impact could be best communicated to stakeholders.

The primary audience for the Chat with Hal service includes kids, families, and caregivers (family members, teachers, etc.) LGBTQ+ individuals and allies – especially LGBTQ+ youth – are a key user population for the Chat with Hal service. Local LGBTQ+ community organizations, such as OPALGA+ (Oak Park Area Gay and Lesbian Association), may also benefit from Hal's reference services. With Hal's contributions to the Transgender Resource Collection (which is for all ages), I anticipate that library patrons of all ages may seek out Hal for reference assistance, even while he focuses on serving kids and families as a children's librarian.

Goals

Although the goals for Chat with Hal are not listed on the library website, the intended outcomes of the Chat with Hal feature may include the following: providing reference assistance on LGBTQ+ materials, resources, and organizations; supporting LGBTQ+ youth and their caretakers with resources geared toward affirming LGBTQ+ identity exploration; and solidifying the Oak Park Public Library as a sanctuary not only for rainbow books, but also for rainbow families. Additionally, the Chat with Hal service furthers the library's vision, which goes as follows:

> As a public library in a Book Sanctuary Community, our mission is to share the information, services, and opportunities that fulfill Oak Park's aspirations. Our vision is to empower every voice in our community. These statements were developed through a yearslong process of turning outward, listening to what kind of community our neighbors want to live in. Oak Parkers told us they aspire to live in a community that is diverse, equitable, inclusive, and empathetic, as well as a place that supports education, health, literacy, safety, and affordability. (OPPL, *Vision, mission, values & priorities*).

Looking at the wider library, OPPL calculated how many of their 2023 programs were tagged as equity/anti-racism and/or multicultural. In their 2023 Strategic Priorities Impact Report, this amounts to 19.3% of all programs (p. 8). The Chat with Hal service is one of many avenues for the Oak Park Public Library to provide equitable reference service for the LGBTQ+ community and allies.

Question

I'd like to explore the value and the impact of the Chat with Hal reference service to patrons who utilize this reference service. As discussed in Joseph Matthews' *The Evaluation and Measurement of Library Services*, Chapter 15: Evaluation of Refence Services poses the following inquiry questions: "What is the value of providing reference to a library's customers?" (p. 230). Since OPPL prioritizes equity building in their programming, I'd like to propose the following inquiry question: *After utilizing the Chat with Hal reference service, do patrons report increased competence in LGBTQ+ identity, culture, and/or history?*

Approach

My approach entails a summative approach, since I'll be exploring the impact and outcomes of the Chat with Hal reference service. Specifically, I'll explore the intended learning outcome of increased competence in LGBTQ+ identity, culture, and/or history. By collecting data on these outcomes from patrons, the library can assess if and how the Chat with Hal service furthers the library's intended impact of building equity and empowering every voice. This summative approach works well for my inquiry question because OPPL focuses on equity and impact as aspects of their organizational culture, as evidenced by their outcome-centric vision, 2023 Equity & Anti-Racism Impact Report, and 2023 Strategic Priorities Impact Report. Although the data would be collected from customers, utilizing a customer-centric approach, the eventual inclusion of this data in the library's strategic planning would ultimately integrate a library-centric approach as well.

Literature Review

Searching for literature on LGBTQ+ inclusive library services, I discovered a slowly growing body of research analyzing LGBTQ+ inclusion in libraries, including but not limited to the following topics: developing LGBTQ+-inclusive library collections, inclusive services to LGBTQ+ patrons, and inclusive practices for retaining LGBTQ+ staff. However, there is limited research on evaluating LGBTQ+ reference services. For example, I found one evaluation of public library reference service to LGBTQ+ youth in Ann Curry's article *If I ask, will they answer?: Evaluating public library reference service to gay and lesbian youth*. Using the method of unobtrusive observation, a proxy named Angela visited twenty Vancouver libraries and asked the following question: "I am planning to start a club at my high school. A gay-straight alliance. What books do you have that could help me out?" (Curry, 2005, p. 69). The librarians' responses are insightful for anyone working in libraries. Having said that, the method of unobtrusive observation is ill-suited for the Chat with Hal reference interactions. Chat with Hal is an online reference service with a librarian openly specializing in LGBTQ+ literature. Meanwhile, Angela documented in-person reference services from multiple librarians. Angela's question is one that Hal could reasonably receive, but the context is too different for the evaluation methods to be applicable.

If unobtrusive observation is ill-suited for this study, which evaluation methods are better suited? Looking at other evaluations for broader reference services, surveys can be an effective way to measure a variety of program outcomes. For example, in the article *Assessment of student learning from reference service*, Gillian G. Gremmels and Karen Shostrom Lehmann discuss the findings from a reference evaluation conducted at Wartburg College, an Iowa college of 1,800 students. The survey consisted of a sheet of paper separated between student and librarian

responses (Gremmels & Lehmann, 2007, p. 491). With students and librarians assessing the learning outcomes, librarians could determine if there were discrepancies between librarians' intended learning outcomes and students' experienced learning outcomes.

This method of evaluating both the librarian and the student can also be found in another study. In the article *Quick and easy reference evaluation: Gathering users' and providers' perspectives*, Jonathan Miller discusses the findings from a reference evaluation conducted at University of Pittsburgh. While Wartburg College's survey questions explored specific learning outcomes, such as database selection (Gremmels & Lehmann, 2007, p. 498), Pittsburgh's survey is broader in its scope. For example, the survey asks users to rank their experiences between 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree) for statements such as "I have a better understanding of how to find information" (Miller, 2008, p. 220). Since the Chat with Hal evaluation will involve assessing specific learning outcomes, such as increased comprehension of LGBTQ+ identity, questions that encourage specificity will be most helpful in evaluating and improving this reference service.

As one final example, in the article *E-mail reference evaluation: Using the results of a satisfaction survey*, Leanne M. VandeCreek discusses the findings from a reference evaluation conducted at Northern Illinois University (NIU). NIU evaluated their e-mail-based Ask-A-Librarian service. Since the Chat with Hal service is likewise conducted over email, this study provided a relevant example of how the Chat with Hal service could be evaluated. Regarding NIU's Ask-A-Librarian reference service, patrons completed six close-ended questions (multiple choice) and one open-ended question for feedback and suggestions. Although the survey questions evaluated customer satisfaction, rather than learning outcomes, the methodology of the survey provided an accessible way for patrons to share their experiences. Additionally, the

library made tangible changes to their service based on that feedback. For example, a patron shared, "Make sure that people know about this great service" (VandeCreek, 2006, p. 104). In response, the library added the Ask-A-Librarian web link to every webpage. This example demonstrates how collecting qualitative data can empower libraries to improve their services, including improving the success rate of their services' learning outcomes.

Evaluation Method

To assess the impact and outcomes of the Chat with Hal reference service, I'd include a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data would include statistics on the number of reference transactions facilitated through the Chat with Hal reference service. By tracking the number of reference transactions each month, Oak Park Public Library can evaluate when the services receive the highest and lowest traffic. For example, are certain pride-themed celebrations, such as Pride Month, correlated with an increase in the usage of the Chat with Hal service? Tracking data over time would provide insights on potential contexts for reference transactions. A data visualization, such as a line graph, would be well-suited for tracking the number of reference transactions over time. By pairing this graph with a timeline of LGBTQ+ celebrations observed in the Oak Park community, OPPL can identify potential patterns in information needs.

As for the timeline of this evaluation, I propose evaluating the service between May 2024 and April 2025. By collecting data over time, OPPL can gain insights in potential shifts in information needs, which may impact learning outcomes sought out by patrons. In line with the inquiry question, this evaluation is designed to assess patron-reported competence in LGBTQ+ identity, culture, and/or history.

To evaluate these learning outcomes, I propose offering a survey after the conclusion of each reference transaction. At this stage, it's important to clearly define two terms. What constitutes a reference transaction? What constitutes a conclusion? For evaluating this service, a reference transaction constitutes a patron seeking information on services, resources, or information on LGBTQ+ topics. The conclusion is the final point of reference service provided to meet that patron's information need. For example, if the reference transaction involves e-mailing a picture book list of LGBTQ+ titles, the survey may be provided in this follow-up email, along with an invitation to reach out for further assistance if need be. If the Chat with Hal reference service leads to a phone call, appointment with Hal, or outreach visit to a local pride club, then the survey can be administered after the phone call, appointment, or visit. Regarding the format, the survey will be available in print and online, with each format including identical questions. That way, the survey can be administered through the most accessible means for a given reference transaction, such as an e-mail survey for virtual transactions, or a paper survey for in-person transactions.

Why surveys? In addition to playing a major role in the literature of reference evaluation, surveys are integral to many library initiatives focused on evaluating program impact. For example, Project Outcome uses surveys to create data on the impact of library programs, improving library programs with this data. In one case study, Plano Public Library utilized survey data to offer sensory storytimes, improve their arts programming, and create brochures for STEAM kits (Project Outcome, 2017). This case study demonstrates how data-informed decision making can set up libraries to better hear and better meet the community's desired learning outcomes, not solely the learning outcomes presumed by the library.

To assess learning outcomes for LGBTQ+ cultural competence, surveys will include a mix of close-ended and open-ended questions. A few examples could include:

- Likert scale questions to measure patrons' perceived competence gains (close-ended questions). Surveying participants on intended learning outcomes can provide quantitative data, demonstrating areas of strength and areas of growth. Bar charts can be used to visually demonstrate results for each question.

Rate the following statements on a scale of 1 to 5.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

Chat with Hal helped me learn more about LGBTQ+ identity.

1	2	3	4	5

Chat with Hal helped me learn more about LGBTQ+ history.

1	2	3	4	5

Chat with Hal helped me learn more about LGBTQ+ resources at my library.

1	2	3	4	5

Chat with Hal helped me learn more about LGBTQ+ community groups in my area.

1	2	3	4	5

- Multiple choice questions with write-in answers. Questions can assess intended learning outcomes as anticipated by the library, while write-in options can empower patrons to share learning outcomes *not* anticipated by the library. If applicable, pie charts can be used to visually demonstrate the ratios of unique categories.

What was the main reason I used the Chat with Hal service? Check all that apply.

- ○ For LGBTQ+ books

- ○ For LGBTQ+ online resources (articles, websites, etc.)

- ○ For LGBTQ+ library programs

- ○ For LGBTQ+ community groups

- ○ Other: _____

- Optional open-ended questions. These questions can provide integral qualitative data for patrons to self-report their achieved learning outcomes, their unachieved learning outcomes, and their feedback on the Chat with Hal service.

What did you learn by using the Chat with Hal service? (optional)

_____

_____

What did you hope to learn, but didn't learn? (optional)

_____

_____

What feedback or suggestions would you like to share for the Chat with Hal service? (optional)

_____

_____

Considering that the Chal with Hal service involves providing services to youth, it's integral to protect the privacy of students. Therefore, students in elementary, middle, and high school will receive surveys that collect no identifying information. Meanwhile, adults who complete the survey will have optional fields for name, phone number, and email. Adult survey participants may also check a box if they wish to be contacted for further program evaluation – such as a phone, Zoom, or in-person interview.

Interviews can provide integral qualitative data to evaluate Chat with Hal, provided that the interviewees reflect a diverse scope of program participants. Interviews can also provide opportunities for richer communication of program impact, empowering participants to flesh out experiences in a way that short surveys can't always encapsulate.

Just as Project Outcomes advocates for the impact of surveys, Impact Libraries advocates for a variety of assessment tools, including interviews. Although Impact Libraries evaluates computational thinking for youth in public libraries, their Access & Equity BYO Interview Protocol demonstrates how to evaluate learning outcomes within an equity framework (Impact Libraries, *Assessment tools*). In one case study at Pennsylvania's Herr Memorial Library, this interview protocol helped the librarian assess students' sense of belonging in her coding program (Impact Libraries, *Case study: Herr Memorial Library*). Similarly, interviews can provide opportunities for community members to share this personal impact. Even when the inquiry question relates to comprehension of LGBTQ+ topics, the comprehension and acceptance of LGBTQ+ identity can correlate with a sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ individuals and allies. This secondary impact may be present in interviews even when it's not the focus of the evaluation; hence, it's important to structure interviews in ways that place equity and belonging at the center of these interviews.

Timeline

- May 2024 through April 2025: Administer surveys. Review results each month to glean data insights, share results, and act on patron feedback.

- May 2025: Review data and analyze trends over time. Compile an annual Impact Report to present to internal stakeholders, such as library staff and library board members.

- June 2025: Present the Impact Report to external stakeholders, such as presenting on the library website and to local LGBTQ+ community organizations.

Recommendations

- Matthews discusses the risk of survey fatigue (Matthews, 2017, p. 284). To incentivize survey participants and minimize survey fatigue, provide all survey participants with a small thank you gift, such as a pride sticker, pride bookmark, or pride button. Additionally, survey participants can earn a chance to win a bigger prize at the end of the evaluation period, such as a pride-themed basket filled with LGBTQ+ children's books.

- Maintain confidentiality and privacy for survey participants and interviewees. Record survey results by survey number, rather than collecting participants' names. Use pseudonyms in interview transcripts.

- Create data visualizations to communicate this data to stakeholders. Include quantitative and qualitative data, demonstrating the impact of learning outcomes from the joint perspectives of the library and the community.

Reflection

I've learned that planning an evaluation requires a tremendous amount of work, but the work is fascinating. One of my strengths is exploring connections and patterns, which made it rewarding to tie in course concepts while I worked on this evaluation plan. One of my areas of growth is learning how to be specific and scoped. I think of the phrase, do you see the forest or the trees? For me, I see the tree for every single leaf. Instead of looking at all the leaves all at once, I had to pick a single leaf to focus on (a single inquiry question), narrowing my focus to just one leaf. I'm still working on that, and I still have trouble condensing my thoughts, but that's a-okay. I feel that I have a lot left to learn about how to evaluate programs, ranging from how to use Excel (this course was my first time inputting a formula, ever) to how to evaluate a program ethically and equitably. I'd like to keep learning beyond this course.

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