

## QuestionPoint Respects Language Diversity

*A German library opens language doors with multilingual cooperative virtual reference services*



### Situation

Located in the center of Europe, the Berlin Central and Regional Library (ZLB) is extensively used by many people from many countries. Their command of English and German is not sufficient for them to ask questions in these languages. Furthermore with the library environment almost totally in German, the impression projected is that if they don't know German (or maybe English), then the library staff will not be able to understand their questions. The librarians are essentially barricaded behind a language wall.

### Solution

The Berlin Central and Regional Library (ZLB) began using QuestionPoint in 2003 under the name InfoPoint, after the QuestionPoint patron interface was available in several languages and had been translated into German.

In 2004 an agreement was made with the Bibliothèque publique d'information in Paris to use QuestionPoint as the basis for cooperative virtual reference, with each library placing question forms on its Web site in the language of the other library. Once the start had been made with three languages (English, French and German), the next step was to add Turkish (since Berlin has a large Turkish population). Thereafter the ZLB actively began to look for additional partner libraries in other countries in order to expand the service in additional languages. After a slow start, the number of libraries interested in participating in this endeavor increased rapidly in 2006.

Questions posted on the QuestionPoint form on the ZLB Web site, which are in languages not handled by the staff

### AT A GLANCE

**The Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin (ZLB)  
Berlin Central and Regional Library Berlin, Germany**

- [http://www.zlb.de/fragen\\_sie\\_uns](http://www.zlb.de/fragen_sie_uns)
- Virtual reference service offered in 14 languages
- 10 of the 20 official EU languages are represented



(left to right) Paul S. Ulrich (American), Tarik Seden (Turk), Kerstin Mammeri (German) looking at a Turkish question received from their Web site.

***“We have to open the language doors so patrons can ask questions in a language they feel comfortable with, not a language the library is comfortable with.”***

of the library, are sent directly to the partnerlibrary to be answered. Conversely, the ZLB has German-language forms on the web sites of the partner libraries and it answers the German questions posted there. This means that the libraries have “branch reference desks” on the Web

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sites of the partner libraries. If there is no QuestionPoint patron interface in the respective language, the partner library provides the translation. Offering this type of virtual reference service is innovative to both the libraries as well as their patrons. Furthermore, having more library partners in various language areas also means that the number of questions asked increases. Paul S. Ulrich, Information Services Librarian of the Berlin Central and Regional Library (ZLB), says that multilingual virtual reference has changed the way they are perceived by patrons, especially since their library represents other libraries. He says, “We have to open the language doors so patrons with questions can ask them in a language they feel comfortable with, not a language the library is comfortable with.”

## Results

Multilingual services make the library visible as a place where questions can be asked regardless of the language. The person asking the question can decide in which language he wants to ask his question and the library puts him in contact with someone who can help in this language. Patrons have discovered the service and have begun to ask questions. A question was posted by a Russian living in Germany who began her question in German and said that she did not feel comfortable asking a question in German; she then asked her question in

Russian, which was then answered by the colleagues in Russia—in Russian.

In addition, the presence of forms in numerous languages also attracts questions relating to information from the countries where the languages are spoken. Because of the presence of the Chinese form, a question was asked (in German) regarding Chinese literature from the 19th century. The question was translated into English and sent to the Chinese partner to be answered. This question would not have been asked at the Berlin Library if the Chinese form had not been present.

ZLB hopes to get additional libraries to participate so that it can extend its services in as many languages as possible. Furthermore it hopes that other libraries will create their own partnerships and also begin offering multilingual services. QuestionPoint is currently offered in the ZLB in 14 languages: English, German, French, Turkish, Polish, Chinese, Czech, Estonian, Greek, Latvian, Romanian, Russian, Swedish and Finnish. More will be coming in the future.

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For more information about QuestionPoint, visit [www.oclc.org/questionpoint/](http://www.oclc.org/questionpoint/), call 1-800-848-5878, or send e-mail to [libservices@oclc.org](mailto:libservices@oclc.org).