Co-browsing—how does it contribute to information literacy?

Collaborative browsing, or co-browsing, is a software-enabled tool that allows the virtual reference provider to share the Web browser to demonstrate a search or to watch while the patron searches.

There are multiple reasons why attempts at co-browsing sometimes result in frustrating technical difficulties: patron reluctance to allow downloads, firewalls, pop-up blockers, etc.

For a more detailed explanation of co-browsing problems, see Caleb Tucker Raymond's comments, "Is co-browsing dead? 3 out of 5 librarians agree," and Stephen Francoeur's "Is co-browsing doomed," in his Digital Reference weblog.

Despite these difficulties, at least one study has shown that co-browsing enhances instruction. Christina Desai and Stephanie Graves (Does Co-browsing Enhance Instruction in Virtual Reference?) of Southern Illinois University demonstrated that the majority of their VR users are open to instruction during a chat reference transaction and at least half asked for it in the transcript. Their conclusions:

- Provide instruction in a chat transaction, regardless of whether the patron requests it.

- Provide more co-browsing.

- Don't allow technical difficulties to discourage co-browsing.

Lorena O'English, Instruction Librarian at Washington State University, adds her comments to the debate:

I am a believer in co-browsing. (It) is the best way to incorporate real information literacy into the virtual reference transaction. If you just provide answers, then you are a black box—questions go in, answers come out, and the process is totally opaque. If you try to explain what you are doing through chat, it can take a long time to explain something that can quickly be demonstrated, and it can be hard to explain it clearly in the context of the patron's actual question. Also, it really helps when you are working with patrons who are having problems or can't find anything. If you have them do the search, you can pinpoint where they are going wrong and how they can fix their search strategy.

I know there are problems with co-browsing, but I expect those will improve over time. If chat is my only option, I'll do it. But co-browsing provides a true reference desk experience. (e-mail January 12, 2006)