

LiveChat Reference @ WPU

What is LiveChat?

LiveChat is the name of the David & Lorraine Cheng Library's homegrown reference service, which utilizes the free Meebo chat widget (see Figure 1). This widget, linked directly from the Library homepage, allows students to easily ask for assistance from a William Paterson University librarian, from practically anywhere.

Unlike the previous IMRef pilot project, students are no longer required to install proprietary Instant Messaging (IM) client software (MSN, Yahoo!, AIM, etc.) on their computers, in order to participate. Instead, an icon on the Library homepage will indicate whether the service is online or not, and can be easily accessed with the click of a button.

In addition to its ease of use, Meebo provides a single, online interface for all of the Library's previous IM accounts, bringing them together into one, easy to use location. This will be especially helpful during Winter Session, when reference services are run from off campus, while the Library is closed.

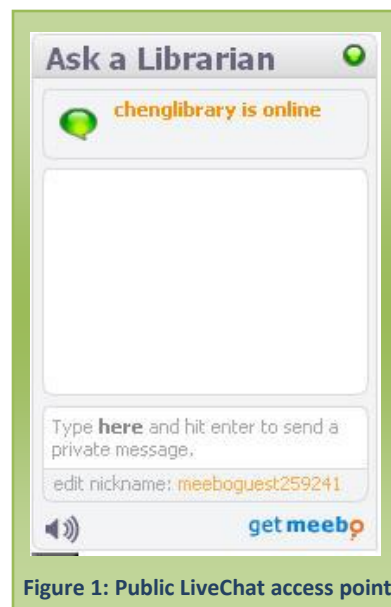


Figure 1: Public LiveChat access point

Meebo

Meebo is a freely available Web 2.0 tool that is already being utilized by libraries across the country for similar IM reference services. Part of its allure is how easily it can be used by students and staff alike.



What can Meebo do?

It can connect students and librarians in a simple reference interaction, through which:

- Simple answers can be given,
- Websites can be shared




What can't Meebo do?

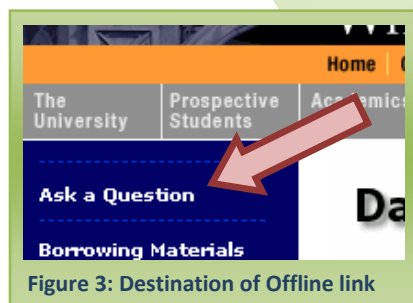
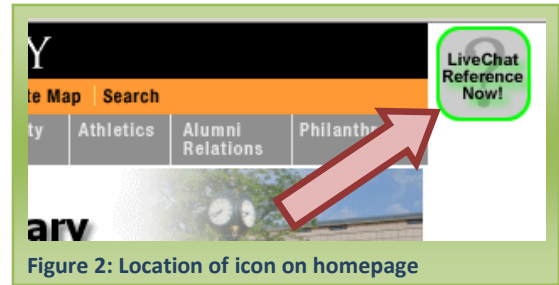
While Meebo can do quite a bit, some of the more advanced features that we're accustomed to with QuestionPoint (Q&A NJ) are not present, such as:

- Pushing websites and cobrowsing
- Sharing documents (.PDF files, etc.) through the chat window (see *Using Meebo: Sharing Files*, below).

What Do Students See?

When students visit the Library website, they will now see one of two icons in the upper right-hand corner of their Web browser, beside the main University banner.

 During the hours that the service is available (all times that the Reference Desk is staffed), users will see the green “**LiveChat Reference Now!**” icon, indicating that a librarian is available to assist them. Clicking on this link will automatically create a popup window containing the Meebo chat widget.

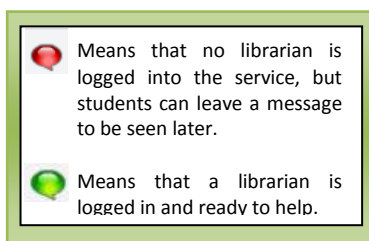


When the Reference Desk is closed, students will see a red icon, informing them that “**Live Chat Offline**”, and providing a hint that other options are available. Clicking on this link will bring users to the existing “Ask a Question” page on the Library website, where they will be presented with other possibilities for getting answers to their questions.

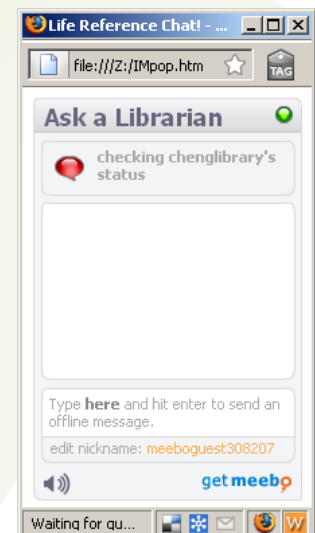
IMPORTANT!

The **LiveChat Reference Now!** icon’s visibility is currently controlled by a bit of programming and *will not automatically go on and off based on whether a librarian is actually logged into Meebo*. Therefore, it is important that everyone remember to sign on during their reference shifts, otherwise we’ll have some irate students to deal with.

When students click on the **LiveChat Reference Now!** link, a popup window will appear* with an embedded Meebo chat client. At the top of the chat box, students will be presented with a brief message, letting them know the status of the LiveChat service (whether it is on- or offline).



Regardless of which icon is listed, students will still be able to send a message. When the green icon is shown, this message should be immediately received by the librarian on duty. If the red icon is listed, a message will be left until the next time that the service is activated.



To use the service, students simply type their question into the chat box and press the enter key. They will automatically be identified by a Meebo-generated *nickname*, usually consisting of “meeboguest”, followed by a number. To identify themselves more descriptively, the nickname can be changed by the user, and will be retained during the course of that chat session and, possibly, when they return to chat at a later date (unless using a school computer).

Using LiveChat: The Librarian Perspective

The Library has its own Meebo account which is easily accessed through most any computer with an Internet connection and Web browser. This means that it is possible for librarians to answer questions at the Reference Desk, their offices, or even from home.

To log in:

1. Open your Internet browser and go to <http://www.meebo.com>.
2. You'll be presented with a somewhat complicated login screen, but the only part you need worry about is the right-most box (see Figure 4):
 - a. **Username:** chenglibrary
 - b. **Password:**
 - c. Check the "remember me" box to retain the username and password for the next session (optional)
3. Click the "Sign On" button.



The Meebo Interface:

When you've successfully logged in, you'll see an interface similar to that below (see Figure 5).

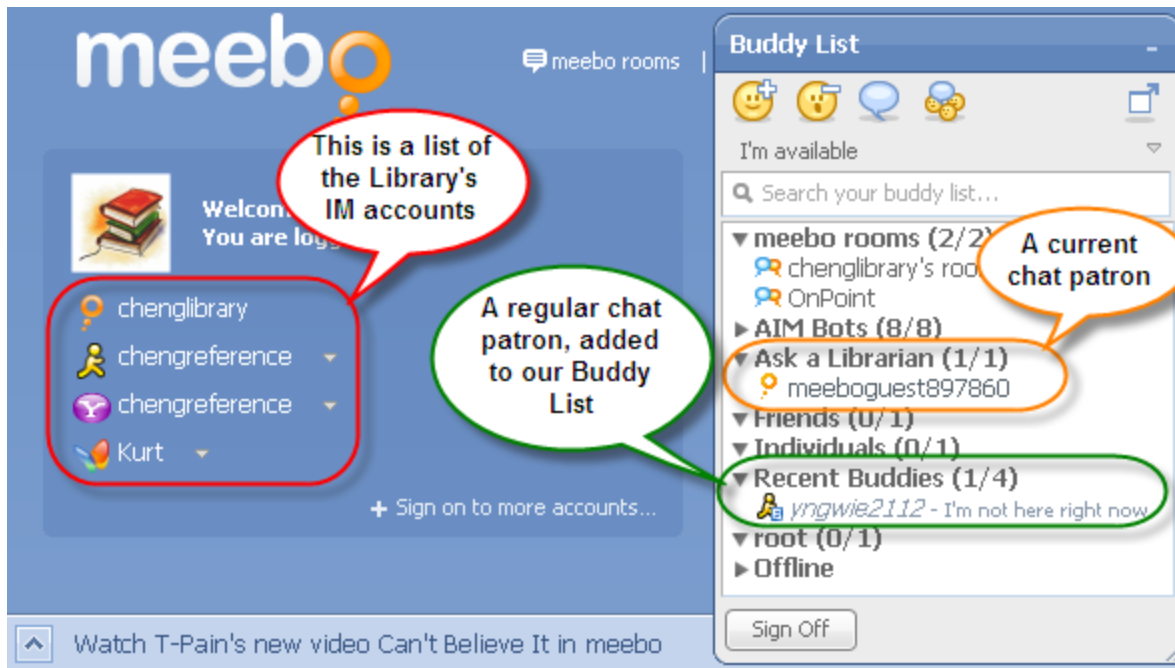


Figure 5: Meebo interface.

A brief overview of what is displayed:

1. **Account Manager:**

The red bubble lists each of the Library's three Instant Messaging accounts that are brought together into the chenglibrary Meebo interface. Each of these accounts can be accessed through this single webpage.

2. **Ask a Librarian:**

This list includes any patrons that have opened a LiveChat window on their computer, allowing librarians to see how many people have logged in, and to easily restart a conversation with any of these individuals, should the connection be lost. In the case of the example, only one individual is logged in, and they are using the default nickname applied by Meebo.

3. **Recent Buddies:**

Any recent chat visitors will be temporarily listed in this space, as long as they are still logged in. These can consist of students using the LiveChat widget or even those who have chosen to add chenglibrary to their personal Buddy Lists for their regular chat programs (AIM, MSN, Yahoo!, etc.).

Having a Conversation:

Conversations can be initiated by either the student or the librarian, although it is most likely that patrons will begin most reference interactions, through the LiveChat widget.

To start a conversation with any of the contacts in your Buddy List, simply double-click on that name.

1. When a new conversation is started by a patron, a chat box will open in the chenglibrary interface, presenting their question to the librarian (see Figure 6).

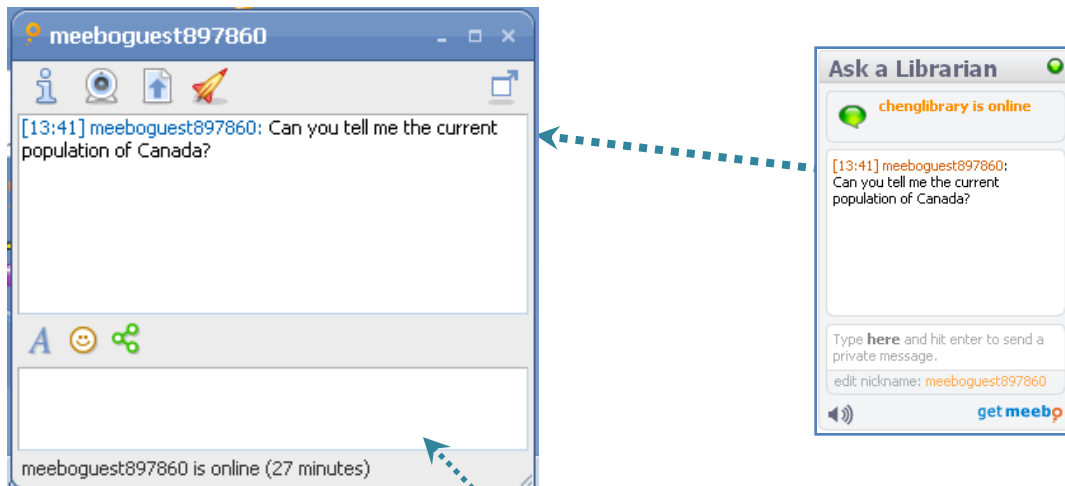


Figure 6: Meebo chat box in chenglibrary interface.

2. To reply, simply type your response in the text field provided, sending the message by pressing **Enter**.

LiveChat Etiquette:

Conducting a reference interaction online can be quite different from in person. Not only are students (and librarians) unable to see familiar visual cues that might help to understand how something is meant (jokingly, etc.), but it can be easy for all parties involved to feel isolated.

The following tips will help your LiveChat reference interviews go more smoothly:

- **Offer a *Pleasant Greeting* for each interaction**
"Hi, how may I help you?" or "Let me see what I can find on that topic."
- **Provide an *Abbreviated Reference Interview***
"Can you give me some more information about your topic?"
- **Maintain *Constant Contact***
"Please hold while I look for that." or "Let me see what I can find."
- **Give *Clear, Unbiased Responses***
- **Confirm the student's *Satisfaction* with the interaction**
"Can I do anything else for you?" or "Does this answer your question?"
- **Know When to Refer**

Paraphrased from:

School of Information and Library Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (n.d.). Definitions for Chat Reference Competencies. Retrieved October 16, 2008 from http://www.ils.unc.edu/~luolili/diss_surveys/competencies_definition.htm.

Keeping Track of Questions:

Because this is a new service, and much more visible than our previous attempts at IM Reference, we will need to work out some of the kinks before we get it 'right'.

Below are some of the identified issues and possible solutions for compensating for them:

1. Without speakers, it can be hard to know that a new question has come in.

When monitoring LiveChat from your desk or location other than the Reference Desk, you may hear a 'bling' alerting you of new questions, coming in. But, at the Desk there are no speakers, meaning that this helpful, yet subtle, cue may go unnoticed.

Therefore, it is a good idea to periodically check the LiveChat interface, to be sure that no questions have been left unanswered.

You can also keep an eye on the Windows toolbar, running across the bottom of your monitor, looking for flashing text in your open programs. When new messages come in, but your browser is not the active program, Meebo will notify you of new messages in this way.

2. Protocol is to answer questions in the order that they arrive, but this can be difficult with multiple chat boxes appearing on the screen, often overlapping each other.

With multiple chat boxes popping open in the LiveChat interface, it can be difficult to keep track of which questions came in first. This could result in disgruntled students or completely missed questions; especially during busy times.

To deal with this, I would suggest *maximizing* the first chat box so that it takes up the entire interface screen. All other incoming messages with 'queue up' behind this window, allowing you to focus your attention on the first one.

Sharing Websites:

While Meebo does not have the same capabilities as Q&A NJ's interface, it *is* possible to send websites to students, in response to their questions.

To do this, simply cut and past the URL of the page you wish to share into the text field on your chat box, and press **Enter**. Students will receive the exact URL which they will then have to cut and paste into their Internet browser, to view. Because students may expect these web addresses to be actual links, it may be a good idea to provide instructions, after sending (please cut and paste this link into a new window).

Please keep in mind that any *Proxied* links to Library resources will still require that students verify their connection with the University by logging in.

Sending Files:

While the Meebo/LiveChat interface that we are using *does* offer an option for sending files (PDF, DOC, etc.) to users through the chat screen, this feature does *not* work with the Meebo widget.

Therefore, when students request that you send a particular article or other resource, it is advised to use either the *Reference Desk email* account, *your own WPUNJ email*, or through whichever *database* you are using. This simplifies the process and ensures that students receive resources quickly and efficiently.

It is also good practice to check in with students after sending files to ensure that they have arrived.

Dealing with Difficult Patrons:

Because of the anonymity of the LiveChat widget, there is the potential that students or other users will abuse the service by presenting fake questions or becoming offensive and/or rude.

The best way of dealing with this is to remain calm, but attempt to correct the student's behavior:

Student: Come on, hurry up!

Librarian: Please be patient. We are very busy, and this information is not quickly available.

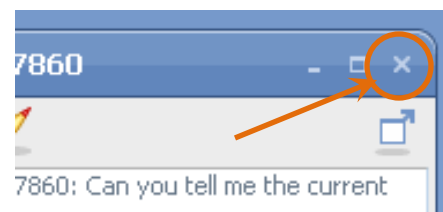
Student: Expletive!

Librarian: Excuse me, but that language is not appropriate. If you are not able to speak in a civil manner, I will have to end this conversation.

If this type of response has no effect, and students continue to behave inappropriately, it may become necessary to end the conversation by closing the chat box. Please report any of these situations to TJ in order to keep track of any trends.

Ending a Conversation:

When you have finished a conversation with a student, simply click on the "X" in the upper right-hand corner of the chat box. This will close the session, allowing you to focus your attention on any other questions that are waiting.

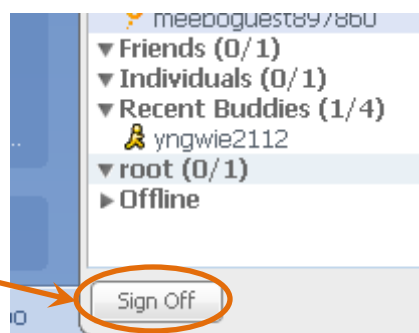


Closing Meebo:

Even though access to the LiveChat service will be hidden on the Library homepage, after hours, it is still possible for users to tell that we are still logged in, even if there's nobody there to answer.

Therefore, if you are the last person staffing the Reference Desk, you should **Sign Off**, using the button at the bottom of the **Buddy List**.

If you are staffing the service from a location other than the Reference Desk, be sure to log off before leaving your desk. Otherwise, questions may go unanswered, and (more importantly) nobody else will be able to log in to the Meebo/LiveChat interface. In addition, be sure to tell the librarian on duty that you are logging off so that they can then take over.



Hours & Staffing:

LiveChat reference services will be available during *all* hours that the Reference Desk is open, and will be (unless otherwise arranged) staffed by the librarian on duty.

It is essential that we all remember that this is a service point, and take the responsibility seriously. This will be a very visible service, and it is important to understand that these are our students.

For the Fall 2008 Semester*, hours will be:

Monday-Friday:	8AM-10PM
Saturday:	8AM-5PM
Sunday:	noon-10PM

* = Hours will change for holidays.

joachima1 11/16/2008