

## REDEFINING REFERENCE SERVICES IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

*Within the 21<sup>st</sup> century, academic libraries have witnessed a lot of technological changes, which cannot be wished away. There is need to rethink and redefine the reference services in the library. Reference librarians in academic libraries cannot stay static or traditional in their services or outreach to users, they need to harness technology and its capabilities in order to provide the information and literacy skills needed today by the ‘net-gen’ generation of users. The library users of today in the academic libraries coupled with the advancement of technology has changed the physical makeup of libraries and their functions and, thus, has made an impact on the way information is delivered, as libraries strive to redefine their services in order to meet users’ needs and expectations. It is now possible for libraries to offer reference services to their patrons without worrying about the geographical limitations. This paper will review how emerging technologies are being utilized to offer virtual reference services and how they have impacted on academic libraries.*

**KEYWORDS:** *reference services, digital reference services, virtual reference services, academic libraries, ICT, millenials, reference service models.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

While all units and functions in libraries are experiencing the consequences of technology in one way or another, reference services is one area which has not been spared either. Reference service practices, especially in academic libraries, are dramatically changing due to technological advances and changes in patron needs and information seeking behavior. The essence of reference service lies in the interaction between librarians and users. In the current information environment, providing relevant, timely and accurate information products and services is imperative if academic libraries are to meet the needs and demands of the current generation of information audience (**Makori, 2009**).

Librarians are finding that the traditional delivery of reference services is not as affective to modern patrons and that revision is necessary to meet current information seeking needs. Considering the kind of users librarians are serving today, it is now imperative that they rethink and examine the reference service environment in a more theoretical and conceptual ways. **Gibson and Mandernach (2013)**, note that with the rapid growth and utilization of mobile devices and “default” use of search engines, user self-sufficiency is the norm for certain kinds of transactions in which library staff previously provided expertise and assistance. Therefore, in order to meet emerging user needs and

anticipate trends in research behavior, libraries need to take a proactive approach and envision a new holistic model of “reference services” that more appropriately encompasses reference expertise in the right environment at the right time for the right constituency.

According to **Tyckoson (2011)**, there are four main goals in reference services which include: instructing users, answering information questions, recommending resources and promoting library services. These goals have remained consistent since their introduction by Samuel Green in 1876 at the first American Library Association convention, but the way librarians provide these services are evolving to reflect changing patron information seeking behaviors (**Tyckoson, 2011**).

## **TRADITIONAL REFERENCE SERVICE MODEL**

Reference service refers to a variety of activities associated with personal assistance to library users, including selection, liaison activities, bibliographic instruction etc. according to, reference service also indicates a direct librarian-user interaction, which takes place in some physical service points, typically the reference desk. This means that it is an interactive environment anchored around physical service points usually a reference desk in the library, where users approach reference librarians with queries ranging from simple directional questions to complex instructional inquiries.

One common weakness with this model is that it works best for directional questions while complex and in-depth questions are handled briefly and superficially because

discussion aimed at clarifying the user’s question is discouraged by other users waiting in line (**Freides, 1983**).

## **TIERED SERVICE MODEL**

This is an alternative model of reference service which divides the reference desk into two or more service points, differentiating complex or in-depth service from simple questioning –answering. In practice in this model, there is an ‘information desk’, which is usually staffed by paraprofessionals to filter out simple-directional questions, and refer other reference questions to professional librarians. Another approach in this model is establishing an information desk and a research consultation-service office, whereby the information desk provides quick information and directions and refers library users to librarians when appropriate, while the research consultation service office usually staffed by librarians provides answers to longer, more complex questions (Reih, 1999).

## **NEW REFERENCE SERVICE MODEL**

Several researchers have advocated for a revolutionary change in reference service. Library users are now researching for information on the internet via Google and electronic journals, communicating with reference librarians through e-mail, instant messenger services, and text messaging and expect reference services be delivered in a way that reflects their expectations.

According to **Dempsey (2011)**, “trends over the years have shifted away from ‘static’ reference services, that is, sitting at a reference desk awaiting for a question, to a more

blended, mobile, and adaptable model of helping patrons” (p. 4). Due to advancements in communication technologies, patron information seeking behavior and expectations are changing. Therefore, patrons expect reference services to reflect how they seek information and they expect services that allow them to access information by methods with which they are familiar.

With these technological changes, the work environment for the reference librarian has become busier because users demand more assistance with electronic information sources than with print and librarians are spending more time learning a variety of new things (Tenopir & Neufang, 1995). There is also a notable change from mediated searching to end-user searching which has affected the traditional interactions between librarians and users.

### **DIGITAL REFERENCE SERVICES (DRS)**

One major latest trend in reference services is the movement towards digital reference through the incorporation of communication technologies. **Zanin-Yost (2004)**, explains that “digital/virtual reference services allow librarians to help patrons access information in a virtual environment, using various methods such as e-mail or chat” (p. 1). **Dempsey (2011)**, goes on to suggest that “offering virtual reference services must be considered by any library looking to rethink how they offer reference services to their patrons” (p.7). In order for library reference services to remain relevant to the changing expectations in information needs of patrons, libraries must move to a digital reference environment that is easy to access and navigate.

In practice, many libraries are adding digital components to their reference services because it is where the patrons are comfortable, and more apt to ask for help or instruction. Technologies that encourage interactive communication between patrons and reference librarians will provide a new dimension for traditional reference services.

By incorporating interactive reference tools, reference librarians are able to reach more patrons in environments in which they are comfortable, and gives librarians greater flexibility in how to relay their instruction (Dempsey, 2011). This technology goes beyond just responding to instant messages and email, but allows librarians to create tools for reference instruction such as digital subject guides, bibliographies, instructional videos and tutorials on how to use the library's web resources, etc. The benefit of these tools is that they can be viewed at any time and can assist a patron when a reference librarian is unavailable or outside the library's operational hours.

In addition, the role of the reference librarian has changed towards instructors, translators, guides and teachers. The focus of these new roles is on user instruction. The traditional roles of a reference librarian, the intermediary role and the instructional role are merging due to technology.

With the incorporation of the new communication technologies, the reference librarian's duties have become more complicated and demanding. With the adaptation of digital services, the way reference librarians communicate with their patrons has evolved from answering reference questions over the phone to answering multiple questions at once

over email and instant messenger. The expectations of information seekers leads to changes in the way reference librarians are providing services. Because of technological advances, patrons now have many avenues to ask reference questions: e-mail, chat, text messages, mobile capabilities, etc., and reference librarians are receiving many more simple and directional questions than they have in the past. With this influx of simple and directional questions due to the incorporation of digital reference services, reference librarians are left with less time to properly answer a patron's more in depth reference questions.

### **CURRENT DRS IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN KENYA**

The provision of DRS in academic libraries is a response of librarians to the ever growing information needs and changing information seeking patterns and behavior of the clients – who are becoming less visible in the library. A majority of today's library clients are Millennials, who are characterized as technology savvy, visually oriented, multi-taskers, very demanding and expect nomadic, anytime and anywhere communication. In relation to this, there are changes in the help- seeking preferences of students. Library clients prefer to access the library via the Internet and seek the help of a reference librarian in a digital environment. Thus, they opt to make use of the DRS over the traditional reference service being rendered.

DRS can be offered in two types, namely: asynchronous, where a patron submits a question through e-mail and web form and the librarian responds at a later time; and, synchronous, where a patron communicates directly with a reference librarian in real-time

using web chat applications. Chat, Voice-over-IP (VoIP), video conferencing, short messaging system (SMS), and Instant Messaging (IM) are some of the tools used in synchronous DRS.

Many academic libraries in Kenya today offer DRS on both asynchronous and synchronous transactions. The asynchronous reference tools being used include e-mail and web forms, while synchronous reference tools include chat reference. Also frequently asked questions (FAQs) and Web 2.0 tools, which includes Facebook, Twitter, blogs, are also applied in asynchronous reference services where library clients may seek 24/7 help from the reference librarian with time delay response.

Chat reference refers to the services where the “core of the communication between the librarian and user is an exchange of text messages in real-time” (Francoeur, 2006) using either IM or chat. Strathmore University library is the only academic library found to offer a chat reference service commonly known as ask-a-librarian powered by LiveZilla software. Chat reference comes in various types, from chat using simple technologies (also known as IM reference) e.g. Yahoo! Messenger, Google Talk and web-based chat rooms, to a more sophisticated using web contact software e.g. Virtual Reference Software, 24/7 Reference (Singh, 2004). Libraries may prefer using free chat software such as Yahoo! Messenger, Google Talk, AOL Instant Messenger, Meebo, LiveZilla and many more.

Electronic mail is one of the asynchronous reference tool. Majority of academic libraries in Kenya have an email address provided to users to contact the librarians for any

inquiries. The library users communicate to a librarian over e-mail and the librarian can respond to their user's query at a later time. This reference tool is being used in Mount Kenya University, university of Nairobi, Kenyatta University libraries and many other academic libraries in Kenya.

Web-based forms are also being used as reference tools to provide a channel for users to communicate to librarians. Kenya Methodist and Kenyatta university libraries have provided such a form on their libraries' home page where users can fill in their inquiries and submit electronically for a response from the librarians.

Adoption of web 2.0 technologies in library services is also another way of offering reference services, which provides an online collaboration, participation, sharing of information and communication between the librarian and the users. Most of the academic libraries web sites visited all had one or more of the web 2.0 tools, including Facebook, Twitter etc. Looking at the wall postings of the Facebook fan page and Twitter accounts of some of the academic libraries, these Web 2.0 tools are being used as marketing tool to promote library services and collections and not really as venues to provide reference and information services to library clients. Most of the postings are famous quotes on library related matters.

FAQs is another asynchronous way of offering reference service being used by most academic libraries. Libraries have compiled a list of frequently asked questions and provided

their responses to be referred to by users at their own time. These FAQs have been provided in the various libraries' sites for ease of access.

Some academic libraries like Kenyatta, Strathmore, Kenya Methodist, University of Nairobi among others have provided online tutorials and guides on various information related issues like 'how to reference'; bibliographic management software tutorials; information about the library resources, services and facilities; etc. These tutorials and guides provide information to the users and can be used to answer library and information related inquiries. They can also be downloaded, printed to be used at the user's convenient time and place.

## **CONCLUSION**

Serving the Millennial generation is a challenge that all academic libraries have to now confront. They are a difficult cohort to serve, largely because they are an elusive group, having both real and virtual world identities. They are more comfortable in the digital environment than they are in the analogue world, therefore keeping them as clients in the age of Google and other search engines will be difficult. But while the challenges are many, it is not beyond the ingenuity of academic librarians to respond to these challenges in innovative ways.

It is notable that the traditional reference desk continues to be the most popular means of getting help in the library but due to the changing library users needs and expectations,

DRS has become attractive to the millennials because they need to satisfy their information needs in a cheaper, convenient and efficient way.

Majority of academic libraries in Kenya analyzed, are using one or more DRS tools. However, DRS should not be taken as a total replacement of the face-to-face reference service.

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