

Everything Is Online! Who Needs the Reference Librarians?



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What Makes Mediated Reference Service Less Critical in the Digital Age?



- Ubiquitous nature of computing;
- Increase in number of technology savvy users;
- Abundance of free information resources on the Internet (e.g., Pubmed, PubMed Central, American Fact Finder, Agricola, Full-text article on Research gate, Google Scholar);
- Academic library users' preference to be independent in finding information using digital resources and technology, and their tendency to seek less help from the reference librarians.

Factors Responsible for Reforming Reference Services in Academic Libraries



- The paradigm shift in service delivery and access to resources;
- Shrinking operating budgets;
- Declining statistics of reference transactions;
- A need for developing reference services that are efficient, cost-effective and adaptive to users' needs and preferences.

Do Mediated Reference Services Have a Future in Academic Libraries?



- To determine whether the death of mediated reference service is looming on the horizon in academic libraries, we took a microscopic look at relevant published literature through a series of reflective questions.
 - A. Is reference a rigid service?***
 - B. Are reference transactions decreasing in all types of institutes?***
 - C. Does traditional desk reference service matter anymore?***
 - D. Is technology replacing librarians in academic libraries?***
 - E. Are digital resources in academic libraries or on the Internet always easy to be used by everybody?***
 - F. What is special about mediated reference services?***
 - G. Do we need reference librarians or human mediated reference services in today's academic libraries?***

Is Reference a Rigid Service?



- Declining reference transactions in many academic libraries has put traditional reference practice under scrutiny.
- Analyses of reference transactions in numerous academic libraries show that the number of complex, research oriented reference questions is much lower than that of simple, direction, equipment or policy related questions.
- To improve this trend, academic libraries are “exploring new and innovative ways to enhance reference assistance to and interaction with library users” (Lee *et al.* 2010).

What Changes Have We Experienced so Far?



- Consolidation of reference desks to streamline the service;
- Adoption of tiered reference - basic reference questions answered by nonprofessionals, while complex queries are referred to professional reference librarians;
- Elimination of the physical location of the reference desk and adoption of a model where professional librarians are “on call” to answer reference queries and provide reference consultations by appointment;
- **Roving Reference:** In many academic institutions, reference librarians are leaving the reference desk to reach their users at their point of needs. Instead of sitting and waiting at the reference desk for users roving reference service takes place inside and outside the physical library buildings;
- **Embedded Librarians:** Embedded librarians are becoming an integral part of virtual reference service. [Amrita's experience as an embedded reference librarian.](#)

Other Changes



In addition to telephone and e-mail, many academic libraries are now using:

Chat,

Text messaging,

Instant Messaging (IM),

Audio and videoconferencing software to offer virtual reference services.

Changes in Reference librarians' skills



- Academic reference librarians are required to be well versed with Web 2.0 technology to effectively communicate with the users through chat, IM, texting and social media;
- As more and more collections move online, reference librarians must learn how to search and navigate efficiently through those resources on various vendors' platforms;
- Reference librarians who provide library instruction need to learn how to teach effectively and efficiently in classroom settings;
- To meet twenty-first century users' needs, many academic reference librarians have shifted their roles from "information searchers" to "information creators" and are involved in preparing online tutorials, instructional videos and digital subject or course guides;
- Reference librarians who are subject specialists have collection development and liaison responsibilities and can be assigned to embedded roles for specific courses and/or academic units.

What do you think?



- **Do you think Reference is a rigid service?**

Are Reference Transactions Decreasing in All Types of Institutes?



- **What is your experience?**
- Numerous studies in library literature have reported the decline in reference transactions. Applegate (2008) examined the reference transactions reported through the American Library Survey of the National Center for Education Statistics to find out what types of academic libraries were seeing a decline and to what extent.
- Her study analyzed the data from 2002 and 2004 which showed a decline in reference transactions “per week on a per-library basis and on a per-student basis”.
- She noted that the decline differed by the types of institutions (Carnegie Class) and reported that librarians at master’s institutions had actually seen an increase in the numbers of questions per librarian.

Are Reference Transactions Decreasing in All Types of Institutes?



- Applegate also pointed out that the library literature is “heavily weighed to cover research libraries” (2008).
- Her study revealed that in the years 2003 and 2006 at least 40% of the studies in four leading journals utilized ARL library data as the basis for their research.
- This imbalance in terms of the types of libraries represented in the research illustrates that other libraries’ experiences may be underrepresented in the library literature.
- Similarly, another study (Miles, 2013) involving colleges and universities with medium sized, master’s degree programs and student populations between 2,893- 4,233, found that 77.46% of the responding libraries did not experience declining transactions at the reference desk.

Are Reference Transactions Decreasing in All Types of Institutes?



- On the basis of the survey data, Miles (2013) suggested that the libraries experiencing a decline in the number of questions at the reference desk should not remove the librarians from the reference desk without investigating the reasons why there had been an increase in the number of reference questions at other libraries.
- In another study, Dubnjakovic (2012) found that spending more on electronic resources in academic libraries led to an increase rather than a decrease in numbers of reference transactions in a typical week recorded.

Does Traditional Desk Reference Service Matter Anymore?



- Many articles have suggested that traditional desk reference service is outdated and not an efficient mode of providing service to the academic library users.
- Other studies have revealed that the traditional model is still valid in many academic libraries. Banks and Pracht (2008) surveyed 101 libraries and found that 86% of those surveyed had one reference desk and remaining others had more than one desk.
- Miles (2013) found that 79 (66.39%) respondents out of 119 participants had reference desks in their libraries while the remaining 40 (33.61%) libraries indicated they provided reference services from the desks shared with IT staff or circulation staff and had reference librarians on call.
- **How many of you have traditional reference desks in your libraries?**

Why do the Librarians at these Libraries Still Offer Service from the Reference Desk?



- “The reference desk provides a wealth of teachable moments that librarians should be trained to recognize.”
- “The reference desk staffed by professional reference librarians is still needed. For reference librarians to even consider not doing this is irresponsible, selfish and lazy.”
- “We still take pride in the fact a student can come down to the library at any time . . . and get professional help with their research needs.”
- Miles stated, “clearly many librarians still have strong feelings about the kind of service that they can offer from the traditional reference desk.”

Why do the Librarians at these Libraries Still Offer Service from the Reference Desk?



- “The reference desk is perhaps the most natural constructivist teaching environment in our schools. As a staging area from which to launch into multi-voiced, multi-genred array of resources that can be used to create knowledge, the library has no equal. When viewed this way, the reference desk can be seen as the most dynamic teaching position in the academy. Librarians can make subtle shifts in practice that can take advantage of the strengths of this environment” (Elmborg, 2013).
- Many libraries provide both traditional reference service and virtual reference from a single reference desk point.
- Miles (2013) found that most librarians at mid-size colleges and universities valued the reference desk as the focal point of reference service. “Libraries will need to provide reference services in a variety of ways, with reference desk service by professional librarians being the foundation of that service. What will vary somewhat is the location of the reference desk, the size of the library staff, the amount of time the professional librarians spend at the desk, and the percentage of professional librarians at an institution that offer reference services. What seems clear that the reference desk is not going to disappear anytime soon.”
- In a very recent article, Buss (2016) noted that at University of the Sciences in Philadelphia (USciences) 72% of the total reference transactions occurred at the reference desk. Also, the reference desk serves as a place to meet and greet the alumni and faculty members who visit the library at USciences.

Is Technology Replacing Reference Librarians in Academic Libraries?



- **How many of you believe that technology is replacing us - the reference librarians?**
- “technology can enhance but will never supplant human-to-human reference service. Further, if the latter were to disappear, it would be a severe and possibly fatal blow to the whole concept of library service” (Gorman, 2001).
- **Do you agree?**

Is Technology Replacing Reference Librarians in Academic Libraries?



- All the technology based reference services being provided in modern academic libraries are totally “librarian-centric.”
- The persons who answer reference questions over the telephone or e-mail and provide Virtual Reference Service in academic libraries are mostly professional librarians.
- The electronic media that lack body language, verbal, non-verbal cues and requires question clarification multiple times via chat, e-mail or telephone. In a survey study related to IM, Ruppel and Condit Fagan (2002) found out that 92% participants wanted to have help from library staff about both print and online resources and many of the respondents appreciated face-to-face aspect of the traditional desk and “in-library” staff directing them to physical resources.
- The statement made by Coiera (2000) in his article is very valid in today’s academic libraries, “for our purposes, it should be sufficient to say that pragmatically we do not currently have the technology capable of transforming any arbitrary conversation between humans into identical human-computer interactions.”

Are Digital Resources always Easy to Be Used by Everybody?



- **What do you think?**
- “Many are truly confused and at a disadvantage in the electronic landscape of information research” (Gale and Evans, 2007).
- “The lack of uniformity in search interfaces, advanced search features, and added functionalities” of e-journals, e-books, and “A& I databases have created a greater need for training and educating end-users, especially those who prefer accessing library resources remotely” (Bandyopadhyay, 2010).
- Learners are among the most racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse students in the history of higher education and their numbers are continuing to rise (Merisotis, 2015).

Are Digital Resources Always Easy to Be Used by Everybody?



- A 2015 study of 134 older students (> 50 yrs. of age) reported that an overwhelming number (>75%) were more comfortable and preferred seeking research assistance via in-person meetings with librarians for assistance with their research (Aagard *et al.* 2015).
- “More and more, students realize that assistance from both humans and computerized databases produces the most successful result to search for information” (Deminco, 2002).

What is Special about Mediated Reference Services?



- **Any comments?**
- Kilzer (2011) suggested that the reference librarians' attention was the real "product" that they offered to faculty and students in academic libraries. She wrote, "...human contact becomes less readily available and subsequently more desired."
- 69% of 237 freshmen surveyed at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) preferred face-to-face reference services over the virtual reference or voice media options (Sobel, 2009).
- Magi and Mardeusz (2013) conducted an exploratory qualitative study of 44 individual research consultations at the University of Vermont involving 53 students in the Spring 2011 semester. 52 students reported that having face-to-face individual consultation with a librarian was valuable.

What is Special about Mediated Reference Services?



- They reported that “clear, quick, efficient, and helpful dialogue” and immediate responses to their questions were very valuable.
- Help in navigating large websites with many links, the librarians’ expertise, experience, opinion and ability to collaborate with the students, guidance through research process, selection of high quality and credible resources, comfort, confidence building, inspiration, relationship building, and librarian’s ability to tailor the consultation sessions to individual student’s specific needs were also highly valued by the students who participated in this study (Magi and Mardeusz, 2013).

Do We Need Reference Librarians or Human Mediated Reference Services in Today's Academic Libraries?



- **What are your opinions?**
- Miles (2013) noted the change in reference model in the Fall of 2011 at Southeastern Oklahoma State University “from having a reference librarian on the reference desk for most hours that the library was open to having one librarian, on a rotating schedule, being on call all the time.”
- A few students expressed their dissatisfaction in the annual Library Student Satisfaction Survey for not having a librarian at the reference desk. As a response to their complaints, “librarians decided to put librarians back on the reference desk” during the busy time of the day.”

Do We Need Reference Librarians or Human Mediated Reference Services in Today's Academic Libraries?



- Maloney and Kemp (2015) stated that the complexity of questions received through the proactive chat system in their library caused the reevaluation of the tiered service model.
- They wrote, “although we could train nonprofessional staff to answer questions related to library use, support for the complex chat questions required a broad understanding of the research process, the breadth and depth of thousands of information resources available, as well as topic development and refinement. This breadth of knowledge is beyond what would normally be expected of person working in a nonprofessional position; in fact, seeing librarians’ competencies demonstrated through months of chat transcripts illustrates what we have always known about the work: it is a profession, not a job.”
- “Having a librarian available to provide guidance and advice at a teachable moment, reinforcing and tailoring the research concepts for the individual learner, may well be a component that has been missing for many students as they develop critical thinking skills related to the use of information” (Maloney and Kemp, 2015).

Do We Need Reference Librarians or Human Mediated Reference Services in Today's Academic Libraries?



- “Library anxious” respondents acknowledged that librarians’ professional knowledge helped them feel more comfortable (Martin and Park, 2010).
- The sources available and the channels of communication that are used have changed, but the role of librarians “as interpreters of the library to the public” is still essential (Bishop, 1915).

Do Mediated Reference Services Have a Future in Academic Libraries?



- **Cordell (2013) stated :**

Reference services are still needed, and will be needed for as long as there are libraries. **The knowledge of how to choose and use resources, select and retrieve information, and evaluate and communicate using the information found, is not acquired through osmosis when one enters an academic library for the first time** ... what has changed is that librarians' role has expanded to be interpreters of and instructors on an entire information landscape, not limited by the physical walls in which they work.

- **Gorman (2001) stated:**

It borders on the fatuous to propose that technology can be employed to provide a satisfactory alternative to the nuance of the interaction between librarian and user, knowledge of the whole range of recorded knowledge and information, and the subtleties of information and knowledge seeking . . . technology can enhance but will never supplant human-to-human reference service . . . we must maintain the vital human-to-human component that typifies reference service across our history. **This is an age in which human values are under strain; human contact and sympathy become more prized as they become rarer.**

Do Mediated Reference Services Have a Future in Academic Libraries?



- **Do you agree with Cordell and Gorman?**

Conclusion



- In the digital environment, **there is still a significant need for human intervention and human-to-human communication in the acquisition of inferential, problem solving and critical thinking skills.**
- **Digital technology is unable to outperform human beings** in terms of logical thinking, critical interpretation of information and its contextual application.
- Technology cannot process information and connect the concepts using knowledge and experience like a human brain. **The reference librarians** know information resources in various formats. Using their **knowledge, professional experience, intelligence and intuition**, reference librarians gauge the needs of the information seekers, **formulate and reformulate** the search strategies, **search and locate** information from various sources, and **provide** the users with **a contextual interpretation of information often with synthesis**. However, at present no digital resources or technologies have the abilities to interpret and synthesize information from multiple sources the way an intelligent knowledgeable human being can do.



THANK YOU

Questions?