AJ ACADEMIC JOURNALS
expand your knowledge

International Journal of Library and Information Science

Full Length Research Paper

Electronic reference service delivery at the Redeemer's University Library: Closer to the promised land

Basiru Adetomiwa

Tekena Tamuno Library, Redeemer's University (RUN), P. M. B. 230, Ede Osun State. Nigeria.

This paper appraised the process of electronic reference service delivery (ERSD) in Redeemer's University, Nigeria (RUN). It highlighted the operations of using modern information and communications technology (ICT) for core Reference Service Delivery such as selective dissemination of information (SDI) and current awareness services (CAS) in RUN. ERSD in RUN are aimed at meeting the growing information needs of faculty members. It has enhanced the reputation of the library as well as increased patronage of library reference services. To elicit information from the faculty, a profile form was designed. The form is a description of the process and procedure of providing current information but personalized to the faculty, and keeps them abreast of the latest development. ERSD offers an important option to users for keeping current with research. Also, there is evidence that SDI can be provided in a variety of ways, both manually and electronically. However, using electronic means has proved to be cost-effective and faster. The library in question has moved from the traditionally approach to online information provision methods.

Key words: Electronic reference, selective dissemination of information (SDI), current awareness services (CAS), online reference services (ORS), electronic reference service delivery (ERSD), Redeemer's University.

INTRODUCTION

Information and communications technology (ICT) has greatly impacted on reference services delivery to make it more effective. It has revolutionized access to information retrieval in the university libraries. Reference librarians now answer reference questions by email and this boosts the competence of the librarians before their users. University libraries are using modern ICTs for their core functions, implementing effective and efficient library cooperation, and resource sharing networks, implementing management information systems, developing institutional repositories of digital contents and digital libraries, and initiating ICT-based capacity building programmes for library users. Ekwelem and Eke (2014) posit that the incorporation of information and communications technology (ICT) into the reference services has affected its functioning at various levels. Lotts and Graves (2011) asserted that reference services are becoming more mobile as technology allows librarians to expand service points and outreach opportunities. They note that the iPad is used primarily for roving reference by the reference and instruction librarians.

Conventional library and information services (LIS) such as Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC), user services, bibliographic services, current awareness services, selective dissemination of information services, in-depth literature searches, interlibrary loan services, audio-visual services, document delivery services and customer relations can also be provided more effectively and efficiently, using ICTs. Online Reference Services (ORS) also called Virtual reference Services (VRS) or Digital reference Services (DRS) and their potentials for enhancing information access electronically ORS can be described as the electronic mediation between librarian and a user needing an answer to a query. Noteworthy is the fact that Libraries that are ICT-driven have continued to provide information online to their numerous clients, who may not necessarily have to visit the Library before accessing the information required for learning, teaching and research in an academic environment.

Without any doubt, the internet is an excellent tool for communicating ideas with other people within an organization and around the world. Also, it has the power to reduce the cost at which services and operations are performed. Time can also be saved when computers are used for online services. Transition to online services is expected of libraries in the developing world in this 21st century if they want to be relevant in the information-sharing world. The library is indeed a major infrastructure in any academic institution; the implication of its inadequacy or absence will be obvious in scholarly communication process. As a result of the rate of scholarly communication, the organization, delivery and control of the huge literature are in jeopardy (Scott et al., 2000). Dunn and Morgan (2003) and Massey-Burzio (2002) in Malik and Mahmood also believed that this state of affairs gave libraries an impulse to reach users electronically where they are and provide quick access to relevant, credible and authentic sources.

According to Barry et al. (2010), cooperative browsing or co-browsing is a virtual reference function that involves interactive control of a user's web browser. This function enables the reference librarian to see what the user has on his or her computer screen. Several types of co-browsing have been offered in mobile devices of late. Libraries may have software that incorporates dual modes of co-browsing in a variety of formats. For instance, it is possible to browse on a mobile device within and between documents (such as Word), web pages and images. This is interactive reference services and shows effectiveness.

Providing remote-based services for users has been a steady practice of libraries over the years. For example, before the widespread use of chat software, Xiao (2008) believed reference questions were often answered via phone, fax, email and audio conferencing. Email is the oldest type of virtual reference service used by libraries. Library services in America and the UK have since gained visibility in their use of virtual reference services using chat software. However, a survey in America revealed that, by 2010, over 2000 libraries were using chat reference services.

It is against this background that this paper appraised the process of electronic reference service delivery in Redeemer's University with the aim of highlighting the capabilities and potential of information and communications technology (ICT) has greatly impacted on reference services delivery to make it more effective.

Redeemer's university library

Redeemer's university library now Tekena Tamuno Library (TTL), since May 2015 to immortalize the erudite scholar who served as the Chancellor of the University from 2006 to 2015 commenced operation in October 2005, shortly after the University took off. The take-off site of the library, like every other key unit in the University, was the temporary site of the University inside the Redemption Camp. The library operated at this site for nine years in a twin-building that could accommodate 150 users at a time; with the extension, the library could accommodate 534 users at a time as at 2009.

TTL moved into its present accommodation on January 27, 2015. Though temporary, the new building serves its purpose – built and compartmentalized to house the building. It can conservatively seat over 500 people at a time, a figure that conveniently satisfies the National Universities Commission's (NUC) benchmark for the present student populations of the University. The University having relocated to its permanent site in Ede, Osun State, and the Library occupying its own building complex, the collection had grown to its present state of over 25,000 volumes of books, over 500 journals and 22 electronic database subscriptions that provide access to well over 25,000 electronic journal titles in relevant discipline and programs being run by the University.

TTL, since inception in 2005, has never lacked in quality staff to manage its operations and services library system (KOHA) software. The aim, within the next one year, is to operate the library using high technological devices which cover security, self-services, charging and discharging of materials and digitalization of library materials. The first ten years of TTL are indeed eventful. The period has laid for the library a robust foundation upon which a great future of academic excellence can be built for the University.

Comprehensive schedule of duties

Tekena Tamuno Reference Library, as a unit of the University Library, is a public service area that opens between 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. on Mondays to Fridays, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturdays, and 3 p.m. to 8 p.m. on Sundays. The Library Assistants in the unit run shift in conformity

with the department's shift pattern. The unit has the following as her duty Schedule:

(1) Selective dissemination of information to all academic members of staff: This begins with the distribution of a form called the selective dissemination of information (SDI), Form (Figure 1) to all departments in the three colleges by the Reference library assistants. The forms are then filled and returned to the unit for help on stated research interest(s). Relevant links sourced from various search engines are sent via provided email addresses.

(2) Answering users' requests using reference sources: Users' requests are answered by the Library Assistants at the unit using the available Reference Sources. Requests beyond them are usually forwarded to the Reference Librarian.

(3) Rendering assistance to final year students on their projects: Final year students are assisted with their projects via the SDI forms which they are allowed to fill.

(4) Downloading and sending of NUC weekly bulletin: to principal officers, deans, HODs and other Professors.

(5) Displaying of new arrivals; and

(6) Current awareness services, user education and enlighten staff and students: through library familiarization tour on the library's resources and their uses.

Assessment of the unit's performance and level of accomplishment

The T.T.L. reference unit is a public service unit of the University Library rich in reference sources that can be accessed by all its users but not to be borrowed. It is saddled with responsibility of answering users' requests expressed as "queries" and use of reference sources within the possible period of time. Some of the major accomplishments during the last five academic sessions are highlighted below:

At the beginning of each academic session, the unit gave expository lessons to all new intakes, that is, the 100 level students of the University during their library tour on the sources/materials in the unit such as general encyclopaedias, subject encyclopaedias, general dictionaries, subject dictionaries, handbooks and guides, compendiums, and so on and also enlightened them on how to use these materials to their benefit in their academic pursuits. The unit also via SDI forms provided assistance to academic staff by aiding them with online journals and other links relevant and useful to their fields and research interests so as to aid them in their research.

The final year students of the University were also assisted in the unit with their projects by providing them with reference sources and links that had relevant information on their project topics. The reference librarian also furnished the Deans, Professors and some other Principal Officers with weekly Nigerian Universities Commission (NUC) bulletin so as to keep them posted with NUC activities. Users are always sensitised and intimated with newly acquired resources in the unit, and their requests were promptly matched with relevant sources. The community at large had also benefited from the unit as it is accessible to them provided they've gotten the special readers permit. Also, students from other universities, provided they are with their introduction letters, were allowed to make use of the unit and its resources.

Factors that contributed to the achievement of the unit's goals and objectives

The following factors contributed immensely to the achievement of the unit's goals and objectives in no small measure:

(1) Support from the headship: The University Librarian as the head of department had being very helpful in the realisation of the unit's goals and objectives, providing useful advice from his wealth of experience and also ensuring that the unit is well stocked with recent and useful resources.

(2) Good inter-relationship with other units of the department: The unit had been working with other units in the department and this had contributed greatly to the realisation of the unit's goals and objectives. The acquisition unit had always tried as much as possible to provide the unit with sources that are required from them based on observed users' needs and the Virtual Unit was very supportive during the orientation programs organised for the 100 level students of the University.

(3) Staff familiarity with the unit's resources: Staff in the unit are familiar with the materials in the unit and this had helped in prompt matching of users' requests with the right sources, which is one of the goals of the unit.

(4) Power supply: The provision of electrical power supply is also one of the factors that contributed to the realisation of the unit's goals and objectives.

(5) Internet connectivity: The availability of Internet connectivity had also made it possible for the unit to provide links and online resources to both academic staff and students writing their projects.

The unit has accomplished a lot in the last five (5) academic sessions as shown in Tables 1 and 2. The daily statistics showed that library users consult an average of 15 to 25 reference sources every five hours, and a total of 75 to 85 daily. While some other specific reference queries take 2 to 3 users per day. Some of this specific reference queries were satisfied with the use of www.referencedesk.org, ask the librarian on line, online

Table 1. The overall statistics of total number of users, reference books consulted, specific reference queries attended to and SDI forms treated for 2010/11 academic session.

S/N	Month	Total number of users		Total number of reference books consulted		Specific reference queries attended to		SDI form treated	
		2010	2011	2010	2011	2010	2011	2010	2011
1	January	-	1.314	-	642	-	-	-	-
2	February	246	226	615	110	31	-	Nil	-
3	March	625	671	1.104	812	58	-	9	-
4	April	794	712	1.098	1.017	63	10	5	3
5	May	1.035	1.193	4.528	737	67	9	4	3
6	June	1.367	1.318	665	412	45	6	7	1
7	July	113	22	87	43	23	1	3	1
8	August	11	14	13	45	42	-	3	-
9	September	175	445	333	379	34	27	2	9
10	October	722	994	1.248	1.164	21	50	16	17
11	November	1,147	1,072	1.131	769	69	12	10	6
12	December	64	89	28	51	6	10	Nil	5
Total	-	6.299	8.070	10.850	6.181	459	125	59	45

Table 2. The overall statistics of total number of users, reference books consulted specific reference queries attended to and SDI forms treated for 2012/13 academic session.

S/N	Month	Total number of users	Total number of reference book consulted	Specific reference queries attended to	SDI form treated
		2012/13	2012/13	2012/13	2012/13
1	September	100	115	5	Nil
2	October	146	500	26	4
3	November	625	1.104	58	9
4	December	94	98	23	2
5	January	1.035	4,528	67	4
6	February	1.367	665	45	7
7	March	113	87	23	3
8	April	11	13	42	3
9	May	175	333	34	2
10	May	722	1.248	21	16
11	June	1.147	1.131	69	10
12	July	64	28	6	Nil
Total	-	5.599	9.850	419	61

Table 3. The overall statistics of total number of users, reference books consulted, specific reference queries attended to and SDI forms treated for 2014/15 academic session.

S/N	Month	Total number of users	Total number of reference book consulted	Specific reference queries attended to	SDI form treated
		2014/15	2014/15	2014/15	2014/15
1	September	51	67	Nil	Nil
2	October	43	19	6	4
3	November	19	6	16	7
4	December	6	8	Nil	Nil
5	January	261	127	86	5
6	February	487	276	39	3
7	March	592	182	52	3
8	April	493	194	50	1
10	May	882	149	35	1
11	June 31st	871	142	9	1
Total	-	3.805	1.170	563	25

reference dictionaries and encyclopaedia, Wikipedia, Britannica online, encyclopaedia and so on. Also, in Table 2, there was increase in the total SDI form treated with 61 compared to Table 1 for 2010/11 academic session. These support the opinion of Lotts and Graves (2011) who stated that reference services are becoming more mobile as technology allows librarians to expand service points (Table 3). The daily statistics showed that library users consult an average of 10 to 15 reference sources every five hours, and a total of 55 to 65 daily. While some other specific reference queries take 2 to 3 users per day. Some of this specific reference queries were satisfied with the use of www.referencedesk.org, ask the librarian online, online reference dictionaries and encyclopaedia, Wikipedia, Britannica online, encyclopaedia and so on. This is in consonance with Dun and Morgan (2003) and Massey-Burzio (2002) who noted that the current state of affairs (technology) will give libraries an impulse to reach users electronically where they are and provide access to relevant, credible and authentic sources.

Future goals

The unit's future goals are to acquire, with the help of the acquisition librarian, more reference sources, get more shelves, and catalog links on research interest, using KOHA. This is further broken down into the following:

(1) To serve as gateway of reference resources for all library users.
(2) To ensure that the users' information needs are satisfied as expeditiously as possible.
(3) To integrate the library with its user community or the parent institution.
(4) To maintain computerized reference collection; and
(5) To achieve university library's objective of information dissemination to the greatest number for education, research and individual self-development.

Electronic reference service

The reference librarian determined to enhance the reputation of the Library, increase usage of library service and add value to the work of the faculty, and embarked on some online information service (Adetomiwa, 2015). To elicit information from the faculty, a profile form was designed (Figure 1). The form is a description of the process and procedure of providing current information but personalised to the faculty, and keeps them abreast of the latest development (Figure 2).

The reference librarian gets new sources of information (articles, books, news items, conferences, seminars and workshops) to the faculty members he knows to be interested in particular topics. However, the websites of the relevant information were posted to the

FROM: REFERENCE SERVICES LIBRARIAN   TO: ALL ACADEMIC STAFF

DATE:

RESEARCH AND TEACHING PROFILE

*Please do not fill this SDI (Selective Dissemination of Information) form, if you have already filled one before. The Cybrarian will get to you.

The Library is in the process of providing selective dissemination of research and information to academic staff.

Kindly provide the following information to facilitate the provision of the service:

1. Name: _____
2. E-mail address(es) (i) _____
3.   (ii) _____
4. College _____

    Discipline _____ Designation _____

5. Research interests _____

6. Teaching Profile _____
7. Other relevant information you want to give in order to serve you best_____
    _____
8. Intercom Number_____

For online inquiry, please dial intercom number 2447- Reference Services Librarian, You can also send a message to the Reference Library mailbox (runreflibrary@gmail.com) we are always ready to satisfy your information needs.

Thanks for your co-operation.

REFERENCE LIBRARIAN.

(Official use)

Response: _____ Treated and sent on_____

Figure 1. Profile form.

mail boxes of such individuals. The purpose here again is to help users keep current with the websites of information relevant to their areas of interest and research. Initially, reaction of faculty to completing the profile from sent to their offices was lukewarm; however, an informal approach by the reference librarian yielded a positive result, and electronic revision was sent subsequently (Adetomiwa, 2015).

The reference librarian used search engines, some of which were metadata which have the ability to submit queries to other search engines; it is like an index to inventory to other search engines such as web crawler, meta crawler, info.com and others. Although not all the information retrieved by the search engines were relevant to users' needs, the reference librarian did the 'sieving of the chaff from the wheat' to ensure that users received only what was relevant.

The items were finally sent to the e-mail boxes of users. Occasionally, response came from users requesting the reference librarian to furnish them

Figure 2. OPAC Interface of the library where users can chat directly with the reference librarian.

with journal abstracts in specified areas of study, for example, molecular biology.

Conclusion

Evidence from the literature shows that electronic reference service delivery (ERSD) is desirable in libraries, and that the services offer an important option to users to be current with research. Also, there is evidence that selective dissemination of information (SDI) and current awareness services (CAS) can be provided in a variety of ways, both manually and electronically. However, using electronic means has proved to be cost-effective and faster. The library in question has moved from the traditionally approach to Electronic Reference Service Delivery methods. However, a few things are still required in order to perfect the process and procedure of the SDI system being provided presently. For effective SDI service, training is required in the areas of scanning and abstracting of all the main ideas or concepts in the material. The reference librarian is more than determined to improve on what is being done presently. This will enable clients make informed decisions, using the information received. One thing is certain, the Library is closer to the 'promised land' than before. Like the Israelites, though they spent 40 years before they reached the Promised Land, each step they took during the period drew them closer to the land. Agreed we have not 'arrived', but we are closer, and we will get there someday. Remember we started the journey only eleven

years ago in a rough terrain like Nigeria.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

REFERENCES

Adetomiwa B (2015). Selective dissemination of information (SDI) services in a Nigerian university: A report. Information Impact: Journal of Information and Knowledge Management 6:3.

Barry E, Bedoya JK, Groom C, Patterson L (2010). Virtual reference in UK academic libraries: The virtual enquiry project 2008-2009. Library Review. 59(1):40-55.

Dunn K, Morgan A (2003). Going where the students are: Live/Web reference at Cal Poly Pomona. The Reference Librarian 38(79-80):201-213.

Ekwelem VO, Eke HN (2014). Exploratory Study of Online Reference Services of Libraries In Nigeria. Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal). 1193. http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/1193

Lotts M, Graves S (2011). Using the iPad for reference services: Librarians go mobile. College and Research Libraries News 72(4):217-220.

Malik A, Mahmood K (2014). Readiness for digital reference service (DRS) in university libraries: A survey in the Punjab, Pakistan. Information Development: SAGE Journals 30(2):181-188.

Massey-Burzio V (2002). Facing the competition: The critical issues of reference service. College and Research Libraries News 63(11):774-775.

Scott J, Nelson C, Middleton L, Reneson D, Stehler D (2000). Curved precast concrete panels carve out underground library at University of Minnesota. PCI Journal 45(1):40-49.

Xiao N (2008). Web 2.0 as catalyst: virtually reaching out to users and connecting them to library resources and services. Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship 55:2.