

**VIRTUAL REFERENCE SERVICES: A REALISTIC APPROACH FOR EFFECTIVE
REFERENCE SERVICES IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES**

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Abstract

The paper discussed the concept of reference services/materials, nature and its usefulness for effective reference services in Nigerian University libraries. The paper further provided overview of virtual libraries, and discussed virtual reference service, impact of information communication technology on virtual reference services, characteristics of virtual reference service, the need for implementation of virtual references services in university libraries, role of virtual reference service in information provision and organization of virtual reference service and its benefits in academic libraries. The benefits include access to the library's resources at anytime from anywhere, reached with ease, greater interaction between the librarian and the patron. More so, the challenges of virtual reference service in Nigeria and approaches for effective virtual reference services were highlighted.

Keywords: Virtual reference services, reference services, university libraries.

Introduction

A university library can be defined as that library that serves institutions of higher learning like universities with information resources with a view to supporting their teaching, research and learning activities and in the overall realization of the objectives of the institutions. To cap it all, the university library stands out among other libraries with respect to certain advantages it has over them of these advantages are that it selects and acquire books and other information materials through purchase, gifts and exchanges. It prepares these materials for the

use of students and others who require them. Such preparation includes: classifying materials according to the classification system in use by the library, providing descriptive information about the author, title, facts of publication, number of pages etc. moreover, it makes these materials easily accessible through open shelves or other efficient means. it also circulate information materials form general collection and from the reserved collection. In addition, it provided reference services.

The traditional reference system involves a face to face interaction between the librarian and the user. The user poses his queries to the librarian who scrutinizes them through reference interview. Through the users body language, the librarian is able to obtain clues that could enable him circumscribe the user's needs. On the other hand, reference service in an on-line environment operates quite differently.

In the last decade, libraries have become more sophisticated and more ICT- dependent. Virtually all aspects of library operation are affected by Information and Communication Technology. For example, libraries have moved from card catalogues to on-line catalogues. With so many changes in the practice of librarianship, reference service has also changed. Today, librarians not only help their users at the reference desk but also in cyber space (Achebe 2010). This can be referred to as “virtual reference” “digital reference,” “e- reference”, “Internet information service,” “real-time reference,” and so on. This technology mediated reference service has emerged as a result of various factors among which are the advent and wide use of the internet and asynchronous services.

According to Adayi (2019) virtual library is a creation of the internet. It has been described as a library in which collections of books and other materials are stored and accessed through the computer. Information and communication technology has enabled libraries to offer virtual reference services, such as chat, email and video call referencing, providing patron with in remote access to library staff for assistant and support. The focus of this paper it to examine virtual reference services as a realistic approach for effective reference services in Nigerian university libraries.

Virtual Libraries: An-Overview

Adayi (2019) defined virtual library as a creation of the internet. Virtual library can be defined as an organized collection of in digital information resources such as e-book, e-journal, e-pamphlets, e-magazines, e-newspapers, etc. that are developed, hosted and maintained by individuals, governments, organizations, associations, agencies, institutions, academic centers and establishments, etc, that are accessible from any location on the globe over a network on the internet. A virtual library can be defined as an organized collection of digital information resources e-books, e-journals, e-pamphlets e-magazines, e-news papers, etc that are developed, hosted and maintained by individuals, governments, organizations, associations, agencies, institutions academics centers and establishments etc that are accessible from any location on the globe over a network on the internet.

Dictionary of Library and Information Science (2015) defined virtual library as a “library without walls” in which the collections do not exist on paper, microform or other tangibles form at a physical location but are electronically accessible in digital format via computer network.

Harrod's Librarians' Glossary (2019) defined virtual library as techniques of virtual reality sophisticated computer simulations which could be used to provide users with library and information services by electronic means, with network document delivery and access as if from a 'resal' library but without a physical entity actually being necessary.

Dictionary of Information and Library Management (2014) also described a virtual library as an electronic stock of information which can be accessed via database, but is not held in any one place. A virtual library is a collection of resources available on one or more computer systems, where a single interface or entry point to the collection is provided. The virtual library ensures that systematic development of the means to collect, organize and store information and knowledge in digital forms and to provide ready access to it around the clock from any location. Such libraries provide access to virtual indexes, catalogues and books. Chimah Uhegbu & Nwokocha in (Adayi, 2019).

Virtual Reference Service

According to Dictionary of Library and Information Science (2011) reference services are described as all the functions performed by a trained librarian employed in the reference section of a library to meet the information needs of patrons (in person, by telephone or electronically). The functions of a reference librarian includes: answering substantive questions, instructing users in the selection and used of appropriate tools and techniques for funding information, conducting information search on behalf of the patrons, directing users to the location of library resources, assisting in the evaluation of information, referring patrons to resources outside the library when appropriate, keeping reference statistics , and participating in the development of the reference collections.

According to Bakkar cited in Mole (2023), it is a service that allows librarians and library users to interact with each other through the internet by chat, e-mail or instant messaging. Many reference resources are now in electronic forms and the conventional print materials are now digitally store. Virtual reference service is defined as the provision of reference and information services involving collaboration between user and librarian in a computer-based medium (Mole, 2023). Owoeye cited in Mole, (2023) describes virtual reference service as the internet-based question and answer services which connect users with experts in a variety of subject areas such as law. This service are designed to provide quick and convenient access to information resources and support to users who may not be able to visit physical library or who prefer to seek help remotely.

Virtual Reference service can be defined as the provision of real-time personal assistance to patrons via web-based interactive software. To meet the user at his or her “point of need” and to satisfy the patron’s information need, the librarian can use e-mail to answer a fairly specific or simple question (Mahender 2013). The “point of need” may happen when the library is closed, or when the user is unable to get to the library. That way, users can still be in contact with experienced reference librarian.

Virtual reference service, also known as live or chat reference is a relatively new but increasingly popular service delivered primarily by public and academic libraries. Cahill (2017) has observed that:

“In the virtual reference model, library users connect to librarians through specialized software that allows them to chat live online, and also enables the librarians to push web pages to the person’s

computer and even guide him/her through searches and authentication process using the co browser function, while both librarian and user can see what the other is doing as they navigate the internet. Virtual reference service is another area where collaboration has proved to be a powerful tool. In some cases, libraries in different countries have collaborated, leveraging the time zones to offer virtual reference services on a 24/7 basis without having a single library work outside their regular hours.

Virtual Reference Service offers a new take in the information market place. Cahill (2017) further opined that virtual reference services offer the user the guidance of a professional searcher who will not only deliver the information sources people need but will actively guide them step-by-step through the search process in real time, enabling them to absorb and assimilate the search skills displayed. It also offers the addition assurance that the student is getting help from someone who understands the academic environment and its demands. Being real-time, librarians can ask as many questions as needed in order to be sure they have understood the user's information need and in return, the user can request clarifications and ask follow-up questions before the session ends. The growth of virtual Reference service in the developed economy is dramatic.

Cornwall (2013) listed the characteristics of virtual reference service as thus:

1. **Personalized:** Personalized learning is a big trend in education, and virtual reference service are as personalized as you can get. Students are able to get the targeted help they need that facilitates mastery of the content and skills they are currently learning.

2. Flexible:- Flexible learning is characterized by choice. Virtual references services are flexible in that they allow students to choose the way in which they want to interact with the librarian. Chat, Email, phone. Web conferencing. In person. Different strokes for different folks.
3. Ubiquitous: Ubiquitous learning means anywhere, anytime learning- And 24/7 reference services that can be accessed anytime, anywhere are ubiquitous too.
4. Just-in-time: Just – in-time learning is ubiquitous learning at the point of need. Just-in-time virtual reference services allow students to get help at the very moment they have a reference question (like at 11:30pm, the light before their paper is due). For libraries, that means providing 24/7 reference service through multiple avenues.

Benefits of Virtual Reference Services in Information Provision in University Libraries

Virtual reference services are set up to make learning easier for students. Its functions are in tandem with its roles. However, Adayi (2019) pointed out the following as roles of virtual reference services:

- it makes learning and acquisition of knowledge easy by providing information materials through ICT based tools.
- speed up the means of collecting, storing, and organizing information and knowledge in digital form.
- make possible consortium database that is beneficial to students in a learning environment through linkage of numerous collections that exist between and

among research institutions, business organizations, government and educational institutions.

- it promotes economical and efficient delivery of information to all segments of the scholars in various campuses and schools.
- Provision of current and up to date scholarly publications.
- With virtual reference services users are not limited to the old brick and mortar establishment that was the library, but may instead access the library's resources at anytime from anywhere.
- Another benefit of virtual reference service is that patrons who hitherto were unreachable may now be reached with ease. Chat software allows librarians to better ascertain reference questions than through the use of e-mail. "Co-browsing" and "escorting" the patron is another benefit of virtual reference service. Co-browsing not only allows the librarian to work individually with the patron, but it also permits the patron to see the librarian's computer screen which affords greater interaction between the librarian and the patron. Most online users could be reached with this service. Previous non-users could also be reached and enticed by the virtual reference service. Virtual reference service takes online researchers where it finds them and excels at addressing online patron needs (Ademodi, n.d).

Virtual reference services are important in academic libraries for effective service delivery;

1. **Conveniences and Accessibility:** Virtual reference services provide conveniences and accessibility support to students and faculty who may not be able to visit the library in person. This is particularly important for distance learners or those with busy schedules who require assistance outside of regular library hours.
2. **Expanded Reach:** Virtual reference services can expand the reach of the library beyond its physical location, allowing it to serve a broader range of users, including those in remote or underserved areas.
3. **Enhance Student Success:** By providing online access to reference and research services, academic libraries can help students develop their research skills, improve the quality of their work, and ultimately enhance their academic success.
4. **Competitive Advantage:** Virtual reference services can help academic libraries remain competitive in a rapidly changing information landscape by offering cutting edge resources and services that meet the changing needs of their users.
5. **Social Media:** Libraries can use social media platforms such as twitter, facebook and instagram to offer virtual reference services to users.
6. **Knowledge Base Software:** knowledge base software can be used by libraries to create a centralized repository of information that users can access anytime. (Lanke, 2008).

Overall, virtual reference services are valuable tool for academic libraries seeking to provide high-quality support to their users, expand their reach, and remain competitive in a rapidly changing environment.

Role of ICT in Virtual Reference Services

Information and Communication Technology has enabled libraries to offer virtual reference services, such as chat, email and video call referencing, providing patron with in remote access to library staff for assistant and support. Through information communication technology, there are several tools used for virtual reference services, including;

1. Chat Software: Libraries can use chat software to provide real-time assistance to users. Some commonly used chat software include library answer, spring share, question point.
2. Email: Libraries can offer email reference services where users can send their questions and receive answers via email.
3. Video Conferencing Software: Libraries can use video conferencing software like Zoom or Skype to provide face-to-face assistance to users remotely.
4. Text Messaging: Libraries can use text messaging services to provide quick and easy assistance to users via mobile devices.
5. Email: Libraries can offer email reference services where users can send their questions and receive answers via email.
6. Video Conferencing Software: Libraries can use video conferencing software like Zoom or Skype to provide face-to-face assistance to users remotely.

7. Text Messaging: Libraries can use text messaging services to provide quick and easy assistance to users via mobile devices (Lanke, 2008).

Challenges of Virtual Reference Service in Nigeria

1. Cost of internet use connectivity: In a developing country like Nigeria where students are used to a system where library use is free for the virtual library may be problematic.
2. Poor infrastructure: The cost of internet may be compounded by the enormity of funds needed to establish and maintain a virtual library in a country where ICT infrastructure is poorly developed.
3. Low ICT skills: Many students do not have information literacy skills to assist them to understand and use various information sources.
4. Poor information literacy skills: Many students do not have information literacy skills to assist them to understand and use various information sources.
5. Inadequate Manpower: Experts in ICT are few in Nigeria. As a result, employment of experts is still low, resulting in many institutions having low manpower in the area.
6. Poor maintenance culture: Our people have low maintenance culture. They lack the experience of regular system check to detect fault as timely as possible. Because the technicians lack this culture, they wait until the equipment breaks down to the level of no repair, which invariably affects the system and halts any progress made in computer application in the execution of Jobs. (Adayi, 2019)

Recommendations

Libraries can use virtual reference services to deliver effective library services. Below are some recommendations for university libraries. .

1. New additions, timings, holidays, announcement/notices of library.
2. Share images/videos about library sections, events, library staff etc.
3. Notify the public about products and services of the library
4. Notify users of current reviews, publications and acquisition.
5. Share information about institution's publications, reports etc.
6. Creation of user groups, belong to the same subject and ask them about the required documents.

Conclusion

The subject of ICT in libraries and other field appear to have been over-flogged, but even if it is so, it is worth it. The phenomenon has become a way of life and any attempt to boycott is at one's peril. There has been much emphasis in government circles on; patriotism, national orientation, re-branding etc, all for national development. National development cannot be achieved without adequate investment in education to cultivate the minds of the citizenry. Lack of sufficient and relevant information, therefore, is the missing link in national development. While so much is tied to funds and funding, the nerve center, perhaps is the political will, which controls even the hand that controls the funds, Nigeria must learn to set her priorities right.

Greater attention must be paid to the universities, particularly the libraries which are the life line of the universities. With a sustained financial investments for: networking of university

libraries, provision of virtual libraries, training of skilled manpower, provision of necessary infrastructures and proper management, the Nigerian universities and indeed the society will be lifted out of the doldrums. Any society that fails to invest in information will sooner than latter pay dearly for it.

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