

USERS' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING DIGITAL REFERENCE SERVICES IN PTAR LIBRARY UiTM

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ABSTRACT

Reference service is one of the library's primary services besides acquisitions, classification, cataloguing and physical planning. Digital reference is a service by which library reference service conducted through online and the reference transaction is a computer-mediated communication. The word "reference" in this context refers to the task of providing assistance to library users in finding information, answering questions, and otherwise fulfilling users' information needs. In this paper identify the user's perception regarding Digital Reference Services (DRS) in Perpustakaan Tun Abdul Razak 1, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Shah Alam. The purpose of study is to investigate users' perceptions on digital reference services in PTAR based on their awareness, quality and also identify user understanding and interest in this service. Using a quantitative approach of study, a survey method with the questionnaires has been used to collect data from respondents. The questionnaire has been sent to 120 respondents of PTAR 1 UiTM users and students. The respondents are the active users of the library. The result of this study to improve the digital reference services and create understanding on what are the user's difficulties in using the services.

Keywords: Reference Services, Digital Reference Service, Perpustakaan Tun Abdul Razak, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Academic Libraries

INTRODUCTION

Reference service is a way or a path for libraries to meet the needs of the communities they serve. It is a platform for them in fulfilling the user needs. Filling individual information needs requires discovering the real need behind a patron's first question. Patrons may not clearly express real information needs or may be limited by misconceptions about libraries. Reference services can be divided into two ways or two modes, either in person or virtual references (also known as digital reference). In person, it means that user directly interacts face to face with reference librarian, in the other hand, virtual reference service is conducted online. Virtual reference service nowadays becomes a famous way for student in

getting information. Virtual reference is also called digital reference, e-reference, electronic reference, remote reference, Internet information services, live reference, and real-time reference (RUSA, 2004). Digital reference is a service by which library reference service is conducted online, and the reference transaction is a computer-mediated communication. The word "reference" in this context refers to the task of providing assistance to library users in finding information, answering questions, and otherwise fulfilling users' information needs. Reference work often but not always involves using reference works, such as dictionaries and encyclopedias. This form of reference work expands reference services from the physical reference desk to a "virtual" reference desk where the patron could be writing from home, work or a variety of other locations (Ohio Library Council, 2008).

The roles of reference librarian is to maintain reference collection and advises staff of new materials and use of catalog and reference materials; answers patrons' reference questions; researches questions as requested; assists in the selection of reference materials; keeps current on reference materials, issues, policies, and new techniques by reading professional journals catalogs, and other related literature; updates reference index and summaries on the computer; trains, supervises, evaluates, disciplines, and hears complaints; prepares orders for and displays public information forms and publications, including college catalogs, financial aid forms; opens and closes the library, assumes responsibility for the operation of the library on Saturdays and evenings as scheduled. Performs circulation desk duties, as needed; answers questions and assists patrons, as requested. (Ohio Library Council, 2008).

In PTAR1, the quality of the services is still being study. Users always need the services conducted in good manner. To determine the quality of the service, there are some criteria that been used in order to identify the quality of the service. In order to improve the quality of reference service the current technology should be up to date. Based on Wan Ab Kadir (2006), academic libraries in Malaysia should use the latest formats of digital reference services, such as online chat reference, video conferencing and collaborative DRS. In connection with this, librarians should acquire ICT skills and keep up with new technologies and developments in the library arena. The libraries should upgrade their systems and infrastructure, for instance, upgrading the server and using wireless systems.

This paper focuses the three objectives of the study. They are: 1) To identify the awareness of PTAR's library users towards digital reference services, 2) To examine the quality of the services that is provided by the library, and 3) To find out users interest in using the digital reference services in the library.

LITERATURE REVIEW

a. Definition of Reference Service

Reference service is one of the library's primary practices besides acquisition, classification, cataloguing and physical planning. The term reference services or sometimes referred to as reference and information services can be defined as personal assistance provided by trained personnel to library users seeking information (Wan Ab. Kadir and Diljit Singh, 2005). Bunge and Bopp (2001) noted that such personal assistance is the essence of reference services and is the fundamental role of the reference librarian. The goal of the reference librarian is to meet the information needs of the users. How and to what extent this is done varies from library to library and depends on the type of library. The importance of reference services grew over time with the introduction of new technologies and services in libraries. Bunge and Bopp (2001) categorized reference services into three broad groups:

- I. Information services that involve either finding the required information on behalf of the users, or assisting users in finding information.
- II. Instruction in the use of library resources and services (broadly defined as information literacy skills).
- III. User guidance, in which users are guided in selecting the most appropriate information sources and services.

Reference services traditionally have been offered by a person at a designated desk within the library building, over the telephone, and through correspondence. The reference librarian handles all types of queries, from directional questions to in-depth research. The role of the reference librarian is primarily to answer patron questions and secondarily to provide readers advisory services.

b. Digital Reference Service

Meola and Stormont (2002) defined digital reference services as a mechanism by which people can submit their questions and have them answered by the library staff member through some electronic means (e-mail, chat, Web forms etc.), not in person or over the phone. Today, this definition must be slightly changed to accommodate the introduction of new software which allows librarians to answer reference questions synchronously/in person with the support of the telephone or other additional tools (such as black-boarding, file-sharing) if necessary. Real time, synchronous technologies would lead us to describe DRS broadly as the real time human help delivered through the Internet (Meola & Stormont, 2002). Borchardt and Croud (2001) define the terms "digital reference" and "virtual reference" as similar in services and scope. They say that digital reference is called chat reference, virtual reference, online reference, and synchronous reference.

Academic libraries are trying to meet the needs of the academic and research community by improving their services and enhancing their resources. One of the means is the provision of an effective reference service. A successful strategy to enhance exploitation of resources is to ensure users' satisfaction through an efficient and effective reference service. The speed and accuracy in dealing with reader enquiries by reference librarians have a great bearing on user satisfaction.

An important part of a reference service according to Chowdhury and Margariti (2004) is the reference interview, which involves a personal discussion between a user and reference librarian. Through the interview the reference librarian tries to understand the specific information needs of the user as well as collects background information about him or her particularly on the individual's subject knowledge and the reason for searching for the information. With reference interview, the reference librarian is able to filter the retrieved information in order to select the most appropriate sources for the user. While reference services are largely reactive, the assistance or service is provided when asked for by the users, libraries have also played a key role in providing information services that anticipate user needs. Such proactive services include various forms of current awareness and selective dissemination of information services.

c. The Quality Of Digital Reference Service

Quality of the Digital Reference Service plays an important role in order to create user satisfaction. To determine user satisfaction, it is necessary to identify a measure that incorporates quality of sources, correctness of answers, system success, and relational factors. The importance of interpersonal communication in reference transactions cannot be ignored (McClure & Lankes, 2001). To evaluate the quality of the service, user's satisfaction must become a priority. The effectiveness of the service must become the main point that should be highlighted by the librarian. McClure and Lankes (2001) focused on the components of evaluation in digital reference services and grouped these components under: Outcome measures (quality of answers: accuracy of responses, appropriateness to user audience, and opportunities for interactivity, instructive activities). Impacts of process measures (effectiveness and efficiency of process: service accessibility, timelines of response, clarity of service procedures, service extensiveness, staff training and review, service review and evaluation, privacy of user information, user awareness-publicity). Economic measures (costing and cost effectiveness of digital reference: cost to conduct a digital reference service session, infrastructure needed to support quality digital services, impact of these costs on other library expenditures). User satisfaction (degree to which users engaged in digital reference services are satisfied with the process and the results; satisfaction indicators can include accuracy, timeliness, behavior of the staff, technical considerations, physical facilities and others).

METHODOLOGY

This research uses the survey method using the questionnaire as the instrument. The questionnaire consisted of 5 pages in three sections. It included likert-scale items, and close-ended questions. Every item was constructed to represent each variable. Variables were represented by a series of statements that required response on likert scale. Many variables on the practices of DRS were outlined in Part 2 Section A through Section C and a five-point likert-scale where 1 was marked "strongly satisfied," and 5 was marked "strongly dissatisfied" was used to measure the scale.

The population for the study comprises the users (students) of PTAR University Teknologi MARA (UiTM). There were 120 respondents (N = 120) comprising bachelor degree and diploma students of University Teknologi MARA (UiTM). The respondents were chose randomly.

a. Data Analysis

Various analyses were performed to test the data. The proposed survey instrument was first pre-tested with 20 students in PTAR Puncak Perdana from the Faculty of Information Management of UiTM. The researcher used the students of Faculty of Information Management because they are familiar with library services. The method of measuring reliability in this study is the internal consistency method. From the first step in designing the questionnaire, the variables and scales is adapted from guidelines in evaluation of DRS. It's necessary to its reliability to indicate whether the variables produce consistent results. the statement and question in questionnaire were coded and the data entered in the statistical software for data analysis, SPSS version 12. For example, the genders of the users, the level of study and also age.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, the gender of the respondent involved in answering the questionnaire are more than half of respondents are female 72 (60%) and 48 (40%) of them are male. In addition, among the 120 respondents, majority (46%) of the users' age between 22-25 years old followed by age 20 to 22 years old (36%) and less than 20 years old (10%) and above 25 years old was 8%.

a. Awareness and Existence of Digital Reference Service (DRS)

Perceptions on users' awareness and existence of Digital Reference Service were measured using 7 questions / statements, and the results show in the table.

Table 1: Heard or learn about DRS

	Frequency	Percent (%)
From Website	41	34.2
From Library Orientation	59	49.2
Word of mouth	13	10.8
Recommended by others	7	5.8
Total	120	100

From the findings in this study, it was proven that the students who are physically visiting the library are only 12% or 14 respondents. The percentage of respondent who are physically visiting library is consider low. Most of the user heard or learn about DRS from library orientation. Library orientation also plays important roles in introducing of the service where 49% respondents learn and heard about DRS as shows in Table 1. Users who are learning from website are 34%.

Table 2: Aware on existence of DRS

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	106	88.3
No	14	11.7
Total	120	100.0

In term of awareness on the existence of the service, the percentage is very good whereby 88.3% of the respondent know about the service. The result of table 2 was similar to Wan Ab. Kadir Wan Dolah, (2006), who found that the awareness of DRS is high. Most of the respondents know on the important of the services. However, 18 respondents still thinking that DRS are not important. The library plays roles in order to create user awareness on DRS, 88 respondent were agreed. DRS were improved respondents' achievement in study.

Table 3: Benefits from DRS

	Frequency	Percent (%)
To improve efficiency on information searching	29	24.2
To have up to date information	35	29.2
To improve study	30	25.0
To save time	26	21.7
Total	120	100.0

Using DRS make the study feel comfortable during their learning process. The process of getting information using computer mediated also make them satisfy with their

learning progress. 65% respondents agree that DRS support their study achievement. Respondent also agree (29.2%) that using DRS they will get up-to-date information and benefits them. These types of information findings were contradicted with Wan Ab. Kadir Wan Dollah (2006) regarding his research on Digital Reference Service in selected public academic library where the finding are faster access became benefit for them.

b. Quality of the Service provided by the Library

Perceptions on quality of the service provided by the library were measured using 13 questions. The results show that out of 120 respondents who frequently used DRS majority of respondents are chosen 'Sometimes' (54.2%) used DRS to access information as shown in Table 4. The study also found that 47 (40%) reported 'never' and 8 (7%) 'Always' used the services frequently. Most of the respondents have an experience using the DRS during their study.

Table 4: Frequently used of DRS

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Always	8	6.7
Sometimes	65	54.2
Never	47	39.3
Total	120	100

Respondent also felt that DRS are easy to use because more than 50 percent have a perception on that. Using web forms can be useful because they are structured in such a way as to guide users in asking their question, helping them to frame their question as well as gathering important information which can be used for service evaluation (Berube, 2003). Most of the respondent satisfied with the quality of the answer provided for them and some are not satisfied. An analysis of the answers to questions will allow the library to determine how successful it is in providing accurate information via digital reference. It will allow the library to make management decisions about staffing requirements such as training or scheduling, and whether additional informational resources are needed to enhance the quality of service. Librarians who are conducted DRS were highly knowledge and experience in providing answers for users that can meet their needs.

The satisfaction on the quality of the answer helps users became more effective in the future. The accuracy of response also meets the user satisfactions with 45 of the respondent satisfy with it. The access to the information resources is average which is most of the respondent choose neutral as their answer. The number of the information resources plays important roles in order to make the users find authoritative information. The availability of resource that user demands on are satisfied. PTAR have provided more that 260 database that can be used by users. It is considering enough because all of the subscribed resources

provide very high quality. The current information that library provided also seems good with slightly closed to half of the respondents are satisfied. However, some of the respondent dissatisfied with the currency of the information. The amount of dissatisfied users is considering low with only 4 of them are dissatisfied. Chat reference can be more straightforward than e-mail. It is easier for a librarian to conduct a reference interview in real-time with the user sitting on the other end of the line because they can clarify questions and receive instant feedback from the user (Levy, 2002). Response time of the DRS also effect the quality of the service.

From 120 respondents, 41 are satisfied with the response time of their query questions. Its mean that librarian are ready on given answers for users in order to assist them in any kind of question. The respondents also were satisfied on the quality of the answer given. From amount of respondents, however, only 5 of them were dissatisfied but this is not shown that the DRS are ineffective. In DRS, reference librarians play the main roles. They are becoming backbone for the services. The respondent are asking to choose the scale from strongly dissatisfied until strongly satisfied. From the study, nearly half of the respondents satisfied on the efficiency of the librarian or library staff. From the finding of the study, it shown that the librarians are effective in implementing the services. Table 24 indicate that the librarian have a knowledge in assist students using DRS.

From the finding, 54 student were satisfied with the knowledge that the librarian have. Abram (1999) states that librarians must emphasize in the learning environment they create themselves and not solely to technology. He also demonstrates ten tendencies of the contemporary environment of information that influence librarian's function and role such as: virtual is a place not a format, communities of interest are no longer bounded by geography and every profession's relevance is in question. The courtesy of librarians are good where the finding founded that 53 respondent give a positive results. According to Fielden (1993) pointed out, customer service has an appeal to librarians but it requires significant changes in work patterns and attitudes before it can be implemented fully. The librarian cooperation one of the most important things that need to be consider in implementing DRS.

Table 5: Cooperation of library staff/librarian

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Satisfied	6	5.0
Satisfied	51	42.5
Neutral	45	37.5
Dissatisfied	13	10.8
Strongly Dissatisfied	3	4.2
Total	120	100.0

As shown in Table 5, it were found that only 10.8% or 13 of respondents felt that the librarian not given good cooperation. However, the librarian should improve the services where the process of meet users need become effective. The cooperation of librarian can ensure that the service become backbone for the library in future. The reference librarians assist their users in finding, selecting and using various information sources and materials. To offer such effective and efficient services, they depend on printed and electronic sources in providing relevant and accurate information to the users.

c. User's Levels of Interests in Using Digital Reference Services in the Library

Based on the finding, users are comfortable using DRS because of save their time or reduce their time. Some of the respondents stated that the service is very cost effective. DRS in PTAR also facilitated users because some of them comfortable with the service and thought that it is easy to use. It as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Comfortable with DRS

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Easy to use	19	15.8
Reduce time	52	43.3
Cost Effective	38	31.7
Don't know	11	9.2
Total	120	100.0

The services such as e-mail and online chat reference are become selected mode. The digital era nowadays becomes trends for students in searching for information. Students are more prefer on using computer mediated compared to face to face consultation. Many providers of digital reference have since moved to chat-based and related communication media. These applications include instant messaging (IM), Multi-User Object Oriented (MOO) environment, and other related software applications, which are intended to provide more real time digital reference that emulate telephone and face-to-face reference services (Breeding 2001).

University Teknologi MARA (UiTM) as a parent organization have provided internet network in the campuses. Its facilitated users in order to used DRS today and in the future. From the question that researcher asked, how the library can improve DRS, the most selected answer were by providing accurate answer. Most of the students are stay far from library. This service for them can become preferable regarding to the distance of student's resident and the library. The problems that students face during using DRS are information overload and time consuming. Its can reduce the interest of user on that service. The library also does provided sufficient access to information where 41 respondents are agree with that.

Some of them are not sure and also some of them choose may be. Information literacy skills are very important. Most of the respondents say that the library maybe offers information literacy skills.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Life long learning and continuing professional developments are synonymous and a part of today's workplace. Due to information technology era, the need of access information using computer and network become most selected medium. Hence, there is a need for students to develop information skills that will enable them to identify, evaluate and use information effectively. Wider awareness needs to be made of the library and resources to students and faculty members. The DRS in PTAR have a potential in future to assist student to find information and also can be useful medium for them in completing their study. The students who are library users also needs DRS add more modes. Students also have an intention on the service because of the technology nowadays make them became up to date. From the finding, the students basically prefer online service rather that physically services. Several recommendations are offered to increase the using of DRS among PTAR Shah Alam users. Apart from that, it will help the PTAR to improve their Digital Reference Service. some recommendations for the future improvement of DRS in PTAR Shah Alam are listed below:

Reference work and information literacy skills instruction should be carried out by different librarians. This is to avoid too heavy a workload and stress among staff.

PTAR should use the latest formats of digital reference services, such as online chat reference, video conferencing and collaborative DRS. In connection with this, librarians should acquire ICT skills and keep up with new technologies and developments in the library arena. The libraries should upgrade their systems and infrastructure, for instance, upgrading the server and using wireless systems. All this services can make users feel comfortable using DRS.

Users must be trained to ask serious reference questions, instead of simple enquiries that they can answer themselves with knowledge of library use. The education for user in term of learns by their self is needed in the future.

Promotions on DRS are needed to do effectively so that more users will know about the service. Users should be thoroughly trained in order to collect the full benefits of DRS. Librarians also need to explain the benefits of using DRS to users.

Librarians need to be properly trained, in order to acquire skills to operate various formats of digital reference services. They also need to be trained in interview techniques, communication skills, organization of information as well as other aspects of knowledge, so that they will be able to provide standard answers/information to users. This will lead to an improvement in the quality of service. Librarians also need to read widely so that they can answer questions posed to them.

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