Reference Desk And Its Application

By Mehri Ezadi Yeganeh [1]

Abstract

Virtual reference desks (VRD) a reference service that initiated electronically where users apply computers or other internet technology to communicate with librarians without physical presentation. It can provide patrons with live, real-time reference over the web. It can be effectively used as a potential application in distance education. If a library wants to use VRD, it should provide some facilities for better use of this environment.

…Reading , the work of alert mind, is demanding, and under ideal conditions produces finally a sort of ecstasy. This gives the experience of reading a sublimity and power communication…

White E.B,

Introduction

Technological developments have affected not only the format and sources of information, librarians use to provide reference services, but also the way they provide references in some libraries worldwide that have started offering live online reference services. So libraries and their collections have partially moved to the virtual world of Internet. As a result library users can submit their queries at any time from any place in the world. Clearly Virtual Reference Desk is currently a hot topic in some libraries.

VRD is the process of providing reference services in the virtual positions.

Indeed, libraries have been providing reference services to remote location for

1. MLS in library and information sciences, Qum Azad University

decades with the assistance of telephones ,and electronic mail. It is time, though, to build on this foundation with a variety of technologies that would enable libraries to bring real time reference services into the network in a routine and broad-based fashion (**4**: 206).

DIFINITION OF VIRTUAL REFERE NCE SERVICES

VRS is a reference service that initiated electronically where users apply computers or other Internet technology to communicate with librarians without physical presentation. VRD refers to network of expertise, intermediation and resources put at the access of a person seeking answers in an online environment.

Reference librarians regularly juggle between helping people standing at .the reference desk, and helping those people who call to ask questions At some institutions, reference librarians now try to work with three or more patrons concurrently. VRS is reference activity conducted through an electronic medium. There are several types of VRS ranging from the simplest e-mail to the most interactive-customer relationship management systems (CRMS)(**9**: 7-8).

Communication channels used frequently in VRD include:Email and Chat

*E-mail:

1- Basic form: In this way library may reply by e-mail/phone/fax/letter, and so on

2- web form:

2-1: Simple form: It includes name/e-mail/ address/phone. . . .

2-2: Extensive form: It includes identification of information/clarifying questions/purpose of research. . . .

*Chat:

1- Chat with simple technologies: In this method written messages will be send back and forth.

Instantly, live interaction between librarians and users.

2- Chat with contact center software: The library will purchase this software and work with it.

For the Library's Part Policy mentions that chat will only be used by librarians and staff, and the information gathered aides in training librarians and graduate students for the service (**12**: 25-36).

The reference interview is clearly at the heart of the reference transaction(**10**: 375-379). Chatting allows the reference librarian to conduct the review in real time. The librarian seeks the real question, obtains the document for patrons, and review the result to be certain that the patrons are satisfied (**7**: 209). E-mail Ask-A reference does not provide the synchronous service most users need nor the quality of service they are used to get at the reference desk.

While online sources are utilized in provision of VRD, use of electronic sources in seeking answers will be important.

Library Systems & Services (LSS) has published a training manual and a general help book: *Establishing a Virtual Reference Service: RD Training Manual (5)*. This manual includes a helpful section comparing the skills used in virtual reference with those used in traditional reference.

Some of the libraries that apply VRD would have useful and important experience that can help others. By knowing their experience it will be possible to imagine what VRD might be in the future.

Josh Boyer, Reference Librarian for Distance Learning at the NCSU libraries, gives an overview of one academic library's

solution to the problem of staffing, choosing software, and getting used to online chat as a new mode of communication. He concluded that VRD may help patrons who are willing to use it, but we should optimize our virtual environment to give those who won't ask reference questions a better chance of helping themselves.

Temple University library, one of the first adopters of virtual reference technology, began its online chat services in November 1998. Temple discussed the ongoing experiments with different staffing models and shared the results of the research into various software packages. The Temple service currently receives approximately twenty-five to thirty questions per week.

At the Florida distance learning Reference and Referral Center (RRC) librarians have begun experimenting with real-time online library instruction using a chat room as a virtual classroom. Rachel Viggiano and Meredith Ault described their experiences and shared tips and strategies for making online teaching and learning. It makes a conference professional room that allows RRC staffs to lead users from one room to another.

Diane Nester Kresh describes a different sort of experiments in taking reference into cyberspace, the Collaborative Digital Reference Service (CDRS) launched by the library of congress. Looking at public demand for both physical libraries and online reference, she concluded that librarians have the ability to bring users to the online environment that will give them an edge over web search engines.

Developing policies and procedures, and creating an efficient workflow are perhaps the most difficult parts of getting any virtual reference services. A useful tool would be a model of virtual reference that librarians could use to help the development new services to determine how they could be more efficient and successful.

Here are some reasons that show the VRD will become the vital part of each library especially academic and research libraries:

Exponential growth of resources

Users turning to the web for answers

Great demands for online reference assistance

New inovations such as interactive, online services

Need for distance librarianship

It seems, virtual reference systems will be a work in progress, like any other software. However based on a few years of experience as mentioned before some major problems still remain in this area.

- Co-browsing and collaboration

Co-browsing means librarians can see what the patrons see, and vice versa. The fundamental problem is that VR systems must be able to escort the patron anywhere on the web. Particularly through those databases that library subscribe to. The libraries spend a lot of money on these services, so there should be a virtual reference software to show patrons how to use them more effectively. Unfortunately none of the existing software works correctly with databases.

But proxy server-based Co-browsing and Cisco's dynamic content adapter seems to be the best solution to this problem. There are still many databases that can not be co-browsed effectively even with proxy-server based systems.

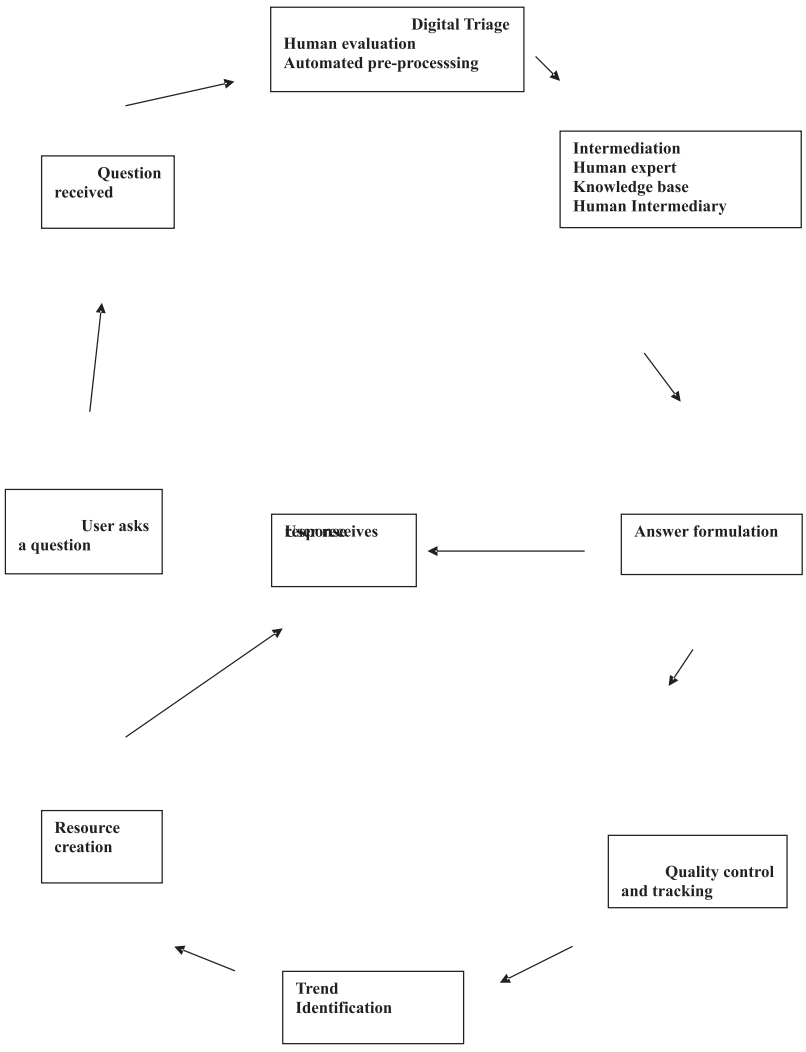
- Communication

The communication technology is another area that could be used for some important VR purposes. Chat is considered as a communication tool for almost any function, except for reference services. Because an effective reference interview requires careful attention to nuance of voice and inflection that are lost in chat. Moreover chat is much more

time-consuming than regular voice communication because user have to type every thing, check the spelling, and then correct errors.

Many people may have two-line telephones or high speed Internet connections using cable or DSL. In these cases, it is possible to talk with patron. But for other kinds of answering it should be done by Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP). VOIP is a developing Internet protocol that allows both voice and data to pass over the same Internet connection. Thus the user and librarian can talk to each other. But now rely on voice chat instead of text chat in VRD has a risk of loosing information. It is possible to capture the voice as a second file and to store the web pages pushed during the session along it. Here the problem is that analyzing sound files is more tedious (talking too long without interesting) and cumbersome than reviewing chat transcripts. Perhaps the best solution could be to explore ways of using

Figure 1: Flow of transferring information in a virtual reference desk:



voice-to-text software to convert voice records to searchable text files.

Networked reference services

One of the greatest potentials of the new virtual reference software is that it could serve as an effective platform for the development of shared and networked reference services. The reference service works for routine reference questions that can be easily answered within the resources of the local library. It would be suitable if a question could be simply and easily transferred to somebody else to answer it. The problem is that there is any good technology that allows us to quickly and easily transfer and share questions among one another. VR software has the potential to change all of this situation. It allows the transfer to call librarians from any library using the system and it can be done live. So, now there is a basic network structure that makes it possible to share reference.

Online reference collections and knowledge bases

One of the things that distinguish libraries from other sources of information on the web is that libraries can provide access to current authoritative data in a wide variety of subject areas. The problem is that a lot of information is still in the printed form of reference collections and are not available over the web. So, if we are serious about moving reference services to VRD major reference publishers must begin to move some of those key resources to the web. Therefore a reference search engine allows user to keyword-search the full text of entire electronic reference collections regardless of which publisher created the sources.

To reach this level some tools as mentioned before are necessary in these environments that one of them is Virtual Reference Desk (VRD).

Virtual reference Desk (VRD)

VRD software developed by LSS (Library Systems & Services).

It is a commercial software product to make Web reference services easy, quick and cost-effective for libraries. The VRD software is a hosted reference network that operates through library's web browser. Also it can be effectively used as a potential application in distance education. If a library wants to use VRD, it should provide some facilities for better using in this environment .

McClennen and Memmott suggest a model that is based on a set of specified roles for information professionals. They recommended that advanced DR services might employ different information professionals for each of specified roles, which are (**6**: 300-303):

Patrons
Filtering
Answering
Administrator
Coordinator

Patron

The fundamental role in a VRD is the asking of questions. "Users", "customers" or " patrons" in digital worlds require the same level of services as if they had walked in through a door, though providing much less information about themselves. In the classical model of reference, the patron interacts with a librarian in person or over the telephone and can be thoroughly interviewed and ascertained to be a member of the community to be served. The librarian can respond to visual or voice, happy smile or disgruntled frown. The answer is delivered in person, thank-yous are duly received, and the transaction is promptly forgotten save as an entry, a log.

In VRD environment, the digital librarian receives a textual message by e-mail, Web, or chat. The librarian must determine with a

limited amount of context, who the person is and what question she or he is really trying to ask. The patron may be located anywhere in the world, and may be of any age, gender, and profession. Even if asked directly, they may be reluctant to provide such information. Lacking auxiliary cues, it is imperative that the "reference interview" represented by a web form, e-mail template, or chat script is carefully designed to elicit enough information that the reference librarians can answer the patron's real question. One very useful technique is to ask the patrons how they are planning to use the information. Once the answer provided and sent back to the patron, further questions arise. The systems that allow for digital communication make it easy to keep a record of the entire interaction with the patron.

Filtering

There are many characteristics of digital communication, which serve to obstruct the flow of information between the person who asks a question and the person who answers it on a large scale. These same characteristics are responsible for muddying the flow of incoming questions. The questions arriving at the in-box of virtual reference desk are inevitably mixed with various kinds of non-questions, including repeated questions, inequities about previous transactions, questions that are unclear or out of scope and out-of spam. These all need to be deal with one way or another, before the real questions can be answered. Some of this filtering can be done automatically, but there are always cases, which require human judgment.

Answering

In VRD the role of the person in charge of answering is the customary role of reference librarian assisting patrons with their information needs. This is easily the most consuming job in virtual reference, and thus the core of any service. As with other roles, there are substantial differences between working in face-to-face setting and working in virtual reference environment. On the positive side, librarians are spared the weary task of answering "Where is the bathroom?" for the thousandth time. On the other hand, a never-ending flow of challenging questions makes the job much more intensing than working at the reference desk of the local library.

Without patrons waiting impatiently in front of desk, it become important to specify standards for workflow. These include:

How often should the in-box be checked?

How much time should be spent in answering each question?

How quickly should a response be returned?

In theory, librarians can work anywhere, they can even get an Internet collection. This could range from a public reference desk to a private office, to their home.

Different librarians may work best with different types of questions. For example, it may make senses to designate some persons as subject specialists and others as generalists. Some, may work best on locating sources while others excel at looking up specific answers. There are possibilities numerous.

Administrator

Any system, which employs more than one or two people, will require a certain amount of attention to smoothing the flow of work. This is the role of administrator. The task performed by administrators clear the way for the librarians to do their jobs properly.

In some cases, administrators may take on the role of making sure that every question is answered promptly. They may also be

responsible for clean up duties such as doublechecking answers before sending them to patrons, transferring answered questions to archives, and collecting statistics about the operation of the service. There may also be low level technical tasks that administrators could assume such as creating accounts for librarians, or monitoring the software used to operate the service in case of errors to prevent patrons from submitting questions or librarians from accessing the system.

Coordinator

The final role necessary for the successful operation of a VRD is that of overseeing the "big picture". This is the role of coordinators, who are responsible for defining and implementing the policies and procedures that make possible the operation of the service. This role may involve tasks such as: choosing software; setting down procedures and getting feedback about them from the rest of the staff; training new staff members and making personnel management decisions. These are many ways similar to the role played by the coordinators or directors of any other reference service. The main difference in digital world is that it is very important to have policies and procedures that are clear and well understood. Therefore it is very important to be clear about who has primary responsibility for setting down the policies need ensuring that they are relevant.

In order to make these decisions, coordinators need to try to rely on the latest work on theory and practice in the digital reference community. A few years ago, this community was a relatively small one.

It is clear that any system will have some advantages and disadvantages, specially if it is used for the first time. Therefore, followings are accounts about some of them .

Advantages of Virtual Reference Desk:

-VRD should support at 24h in 7 days of a week;

- It should provide private, and secure communication between users and librarians;

- VRD should complete session transcripts;

- It will queue features, which let users, and librarians know how many people are waiting to be helped;

- It will push technologies allowing librarians to send web pages directly to the users desktops;

- It is able to transfer questions to and from all of libraries using the network, live and real time;

- It can allow a library to conduct a group instruction;

- And many other services. . . .

Despite many advantages in VRD still there are some disadvantages in doing work in this environment. Perhaps by solving these problems researchers and librarians may perform their activities better than before.

Disadvantages of Virtual Reference Desk:

- It's done only by chat and e-mail, real assistance is difficult;

- It is Time-consuming: it takes a lot of time and users have to type everything out with attention to spelling and typing errors;

- In this environment queuing and routing questions is difficult; there is no script messages to handle routine function and requests;

- It takes too long: Users expect everything to be instant, convenient, and efficient.

If the user logs off prematurely, it won't be immediately apparent to the librarian.

As an aid to the researchers following list is provided introducing some sponsoring organizations that offer their services in the form of VRD, especially in English language. Readers by checking will have more

opportunities to understand the mentioned subjects.

Answer Zone . Six public libraries in Texas. http://askwerzone.org

Ask A Librarian. Four collages in . http://cuyamaca.net/library/askLibrarian/default.htm

Ask A Librarian. Statewide virtual reference service for uses of 57 libraries in Florida. http://www.asklibrarian.org

Ask a Question. A service of the Seattle Public Library, King Country Law Library, and the University of Washington Health Sciences Libraries. http://www.spl.org/quickinfo/chat/download.html

Ask Us Now. Three academic libraries in NYC. http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/services/reference/

Ask A WNY Librarian. A multi-type collaborative coordinated by the Western New York Library resources council, involving 2 medical libraries, 4 academic libraries, and 2 public libraries. http://www.wnyirc.org/vreferen/index.htm

AskAway. A services of more than 50 public libraries in the South Central Library System, a seven country area in south central Wisconsin. http://www.askaway.info

AskColorado. Statewide 24/7 virtual reference services in English and Spanish. http://www.askcolorado.org

CLEVNET Library Consortium. More than 30 public libraries in ohio. http://knowitnow24*7.net

King Country Library System. Ask A Librarian eAnswer! 41 public libraries. http://www.kcls.org/aall//pickerpage.cfm

New England Law Library Consortium. http://www.nellco.org/librarylawline

NOLA Library System. 21 public libraries in Ohio. http://www.askuquestions.com

South-Central Library Consortium of Pennsylvania. Academic, public,school and special libraries.http://www.ship.edu/~library/sclcpa/vrl.html

Conclusion:

The world of virtual reference desk is changing rapidly. New technologies should be applied in this environment. By comparing VRD with traditional reference desk we can find more its advantages and dis -advantages. As it mentioned before VRD also have some problems or disadvantages. However besides a few year experiences some major problems are still remaining in virtual reference systems. Now a days most of the librarians have a tendency toward using this technology in their libraries.

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