Evaluation of Current Trends in Reference Services in lieu of a Model: A case study of Central Library, Visva-Bharati

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Abstract
Reference service is considered as the heart of library services. A good reference service depicts good collection. An initiative has been taken to evaluate the present trends in reference services of Visva-Bharati central library. A most comprehensive model of reference service developed by Saxton and Richardson in 2002 for the multilevel analysis of a reference division is taken into account. The paper also highlights the genesis, meaning, function and theories of reference services. The data taken into account (March to June, 2009) in preparation of the paper to find out the present status of reference services is based on the independent predictors or parameters of the model.

Keywords: Reference Service, Reference Service-Model, Visva-Bharati Central Library.

Introduction
Reference services concept has become common among American librarians since 1876. Reference services theories appeared in 20th Century. Reference service is one of the library’s primary functions besides acquisition, classification, cataloguing and physical planning. In the traditional sense, the term reference services or sometimes referred to as reference and information services can be defined as personal assistance which is provided by trained personnel to library users seeking information.

Academic libraries are trying to meet the needs of the academic and research community by providing as well as improving their services and enhancing their resources. A successful strategy to enhance exploitation of resources is to ensure users’ satisfaction through an efficient and effective reference service. Information to be provided to the right person with speed and accuracy at the right time to satisfy its user is the motto of each and every library or information center.

Advancements in information technologies have brought out incredible changes in almost every aspect of information services. Reference services are also not an exception. Many new models, new tools, and new ideas have been emerged, implemented, and accepted into reference service. However, in spite of all of these changes, the basic functions of reference service have remained essentially constant, i.e. to provide information.

This paper evaluates the present trends in reference services of Visva-Bharati central library in respect of the most comprehensive model of reference service developed by Saxton and Richardson in 2002 for the multilevel analysis. The data (March to June, 2009) has been considered in evaluating the present status of reference services.

Reference Service: It’s Genesis and Meaning
Reference service, as a distinct function of the library, began in the late nineteenth century, largely in response to the growing prevalence of publicly funded libraries (both public and academic) seeking to serve relatively inexperienced and unskilled readers and scholars. There was only one problem – they did not know how to use the library. Thus reference service was developed to solve that problem.

The beginning of reference service is generally attributed to Samuel Swett Green, who in 1876 published the first article on helping patrons use the library. While it is doubtful that Green actually invented the idea of reference service for library users, he was the first to speak publicly about the concept and was the first to discuss it in writing. In both his speech to the first meeting of the American Library Association and his Library Journal article, Green discussed the need for librarians actively to assist members of their communities in using library resources. While the term reference did not evolve until several decades later, the publication of Green’s article helped to popularize the new concept of reference service. That patrons
appreciated such service is evident from the fact that virtually all-modern libraries still offer some version of ‘personal relations between librarians and readers.’

According to the ALA Glossary of Library and Information Science, Reference Service is that phase of library work which is directly concerned with assistance to readers in securing information and in using resources of the library in study and research.

Ranganathan defines Reference Service as ‘Personal Service to each reader in helping him to find the documents answering his interest at the moment pinpointedly, exhaustively and expeditiously.’

Both definitions convey that reference service means ‘process of establishing contact between a reader and his documents in a personal way’. His ‘documents’ refer to those who will serve his requirement precisely.

With the technological advancements, users’ information seeking behavior has undergone a lot of change.

**Theory of Reference Services**

In 1930, James Wyer stated three types of Reference Services Theories such as:

1. **Conservative Theory**: Conservative Theory persists on education and guidance instead of boundless help. This theory states that reference work is limited to use the ready reference sources to help the users.

2. **Liberal Theory**: Liberal Theory focuses on the maximum help. According to this theory Reference Librarians must apply any approaches to retrieve the information that users need.

3. **Moderate Theory**: The average of Conservative Theory and Liberal Theory is Moderate Theory which most of Reference Librarians prefer.

Accordingly

Direct Reference Service is a face-to-face process in which reference librarian answers the user’s question directly.

Indirect Reference Services include reference sources selection, provision and publishing the bibliographies, union catalogs, guidelines, newsletters, and reference sources evaluation.

**Components and Functions of Reference Service**

- Essentially a reference service incorporates the following three basic elements: Information or knowledge base
- User or client—now likely to be a member of the new cyber-community in which the library operates
- Information professional or librarian, who plays the role of intermediary assisting and advising the user in their information seeking.

Samuel Swett Green better known as the father of Reference Services laid down four functions for Reference Librarian, as:

1. Instructs patrons how to use the library
2. Answers patron queries
3. Aids the patron in selecting resources, and
4. Promotes the library within the community
5. Even today these four functions remain the core of reference service.

One may mention Dr. S. R. Ranganathan’s five laws that still stand the test of changing times and changing media. Also Kuhlthau who identifies five levels of services,

- **Level 1** – Librarian / library is the organizer of the material
- **Level 2** – Librarian is the locator or ready reference
- **Level 3** – Librarian is the identifier, helps user identify tools for the information need
- **Level 4** – Librarian is the advisor
- **Level 5** – Librarian is the counselor

These five levels of service remain valid, even as users have less contact with traditional library support. This study as stated above by various examples shows that users ask similar questions whether in person or via an e-mail reference service.

**Evaluation of Reference Services: Model**

Success of a model depends on knowledge of the community that a library serves. Library staff that understands its users and their needs will develop a service model that best fits to those needs. Models that work well in one library will not necessarily be good in another.

Saxton and Richardson (2002) developed the most comprehensive model of reference service for their multilevel analysis. Their model is based on the following independent predictors:

- Query (difficulty, currency),
- User (library usage, reference service usage, and educational level), service behavior exhibited by the librarian (readiness, interest, understanding, and verification),
- Librarian (experience, education level),
- Library (collection size, service level, service policy); and on the

Following dependent outcomes:
- Utility (usefulness, completeness),
- User satisfaction, and
- Accuracy.
Visva-Bharati Central Library and its Reference Section
With the aim to spread Indian spiritualism and philosophy to the world, Visva-Bharti was founded by the great poet, prophet and philosopher, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. The university was established on 23 December 1921 by an Act of Parliament and it became Central university in 1951.

The genesis of the library in Visva-Bharati goes back to 1901, with the founding of the Brahmacharya Asrama at Santiniketan. Rabindranath Tagore emphasized the use of books in the educational development of students. Presently, the Visva-Bharati Library (Central and 12 sectional libraries) has more than 8 Lakh volumes of books and bound volumes of Journals. The library subscribes around 300 current journals, and more than 5000 e-journals available from the INFLIBNET Centre. User strength is nearly 6018 and 550-clients use central library each day. The library has an institutional membership of DELNET (Developing Library Network). Beside regular text holds enriched and important collections of old and rare documents. Special collections like: Prabodh Chandra Bagchi, Pramatha Choudhuri, Humayun Kabir, Sati Kumar Chattopadhyay, Lila Ray, Ashok Rudra, Abanindranath Tagore, Panchanan Mondal and Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay are also there.

Reference Division at Visva-Bharati Central library supports the educational research and service mission of the University. The Division encourages user awareness about the information sources and provides instruction in the use of those sources. An enriched collection with general reference tools, PhD Theses, Visva-Bharati Quarterly, Visva-Bharati News, local collections etc. as well as a good number of Bengali literatures, help the users to meet their needs.

Objectives of the Study
1. To evaluate the current trends in reference services in respect of a Model.
2. To analyze the factors those directly influence the reference services.

Methodology
The data recorded are based on the daily statistics obtained from the Reference Division of Visva-Bharati Central library. ‘Document use slip’ filled by users and other statistical records have been examined thoroughly for the last four months (i.e. March to June, 2009). The records are kept safely and they are also provided in preparation of the Annual Report. The above model has been considered appropriate since it covers all the aspects regarding evaluating a reference division.

Analysis in the light of Reference Service
Statistical data (as per records) has been analyzed to assess the current trends in reference services keeping in mind the parameters of evaluation models. Though the data that are being recorded in the reference division satisfy the models partially, we have tried to evaluate the trends of reference services with the available data in respect of the models.

In respect of users

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Number of User</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>709</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>613</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>690</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Gender wise number and percentage of users of reference section

Figure 1: Gender wise number of users of reference sections
From the Table 1 and Figure 1, above it is seen that, the number of reference users was highest in the month of April, whereas, it was lowest in the month of May. If we like to consider the percentage of users in respect to gender then it is seen that the female users’ number is very low, the range of which is from 13.19 to 33.67.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Number of User</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regular Member</td>
<td>Temporary Member/ Visitors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>851</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>902</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>612</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>690</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Number and percentage of membership status of users of reference section

From the above, more than 90 per cent of the reference is from regular members while less than 10 per cent is from temporary members, which is quiet expected.

It is also found that in the month of June the temporary users is highest, i.e. 78 (11.31%), the reasons may be that the month of May-June was under summer recess for every institute so the academics as well as others feel free to visit the other institutional library.

In respect of Document use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>No. of Document used</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Stack</td>
<td>Rare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Number and percentage of documents used by the users of reference section

From the Table 3 and Figure 3 it is seen that, the reference section in addition with its reference collection it has served to its clientele with the documents of rare and general collection. Documents used for reference purpose from Stack 35.60 per cent are the highest during the month of June while 11.03 per cent from rare stock in April. The statistics show an overall use of documents increases during the month of May.

Number of document used by the users is highest in the month of May, i.e. 467. The usage by the student shows highest (52.47%) during April followed by the scholars 34.48 per cent during May.

Educational level of users of reference section
Figure 3: Category documents used by the reference users

Table 4: Number and percentage of documents used by the different type of users in reference section

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Scholar</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>&quot;VB Member&quot;</th>
<th>Temporary</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>44.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>52.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>467</td>
<td>35.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>15.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Actually the employees retired from the Visva-Bharati services have the opportunity to obtain the library membership if they require and they are termed as ‘VB member’.

Figure 4: Total documents used by the reference users for the last four months
The ‘Educational Level’ of users shows increase in use by the students during the month of April followed by the scholars in the month of June. From the Figure 5 it is very much clear that out of the total reference users who visited the reference section for document consultation by student is maximum, i.e. 76 Per cent. While the faculty and staff are of 2 per cent and one per cent respectively. It may be stated that, 18 per cent usage by scholars is also not so satisfactory.

**Educational Level**

Among the temporary reference users it is seen from the Table 6 that, mostly scholars from different universities used the library as a part of their research work.

**Service Level**

It is observed from that above, in this section users are also browsing the OPAC in addition to browsing Internet / Web. The Photocopy (limited to 15-20 pages per day per head per document) from the reference documents is also popular service along with the e-resources download. Service provided through OPAC is higher than Internet surfing, pages photocopied is also high.

### Table 5: Number and percentage of users of reference section as per their type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Library Member</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Scholar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>664</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>745</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>483</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Figure: 5 Percentage of users of reference section as per their type

![Pie chart showing percentage of users by type](image)

### Table 6: Number of temporary users of reference section category-wise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Temporary Member / Visitors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7: Number of reference users as per services offered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>OPAC</th>
<th>Internet</th>
<th>Download</th>
<th>Photocopy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item</td>
<td>Pages</td>
<td>Document</td>
<td>Pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6: Users as per services offered

Evaluating the Current trends in respect of ‘Saxton and Richardson, 2002’ Model

The evolution parameters (i.e. Saxton and Richardson, 2002 Model) have been considered to evaluate and find out the current status of reference services in Visva-Bharati Central Library.

1. **Query (difficulty, currency):** Both retrospective and current queries are made from the users all over India and abroad. But present student of the university mostly seeks latest information on the part of their course as well as for competitive examination.

2. **User (library usage, reference service usage, and educational level), service behavior exhibited by the librarian (readiness, interest, understanding, and verification):** A good number of permanent members (i.e. student, scholar, faculty, staff) of the university as well as some temporary members (both Indian and foreign) use the reference division over the year. It is also followed that during the vacations (like summer) the usage decreases in number of regular members (especially students) and increases in number of temporary members.

- **Usage:** Three types of documents (i.e. general reference, stack, and rare) are being used in the reference division over the year. A good number of general reference document are used by the different types of users followed by stack and rare documents respectively. It is seen that the temporary members are using most of the stack and rare documents as the part of their requirement; similarly the research scholar uses most of the rare documents. It is also followed that maximum usages of the documents are in May-June (i.e. during summer vacation) as because a good number of scholar and temporary members use the reference division and generally they use more reference documents than the regular students. So, it can be stated that the usage of reference documents is through the year.

- **Educational level:** The Reference Division categorizes the user on the basis their designation instead of their educational qualifications. We have categorized users into five heads (i.e. student, scholar, faculty, staff, and other). The educational level of the user may be understood easily from the above-mentioned categories except ‘Other’ category, which includes retired personnel (faculty, staff, ex-student,) of the university as well as temporary members who are not match with the student, scholar and Faculty.

- As Visva-Bharati is an academic institution,
so a good number of student uses the reference division over the year for their course and career development. From the above analysis it is also seen that a good number of scholar users the reference division for their research work followed by the ‘Other’, faculty and staff respectively.

3. Librarian (experience, education level): Personal assistance is the essence of reference services and is the fundamental role of the reference librarian. The reference librarian tries to meet the information needs of the users.

4. Library (collection size, service level, service policy): The Central library has more than four lakh volumes out of which 25 thousands (approximately) are reference documents.

From the ‘Service level’ point of view, e-services (OPAC, Internet surfing, download facility, photograph service) are also being provided to the user with the general reference services (i.e. answering the user’s query, guide to the user to find out the source of information, referral service, etc.). Visva-Bharati library has an updated ‘Library rules’, which cover the reference as well as library services as a whole. No separate reference service policy has been formulated till now.

5. Dependent outcomes
   - **Utility**: Tagore founded and propounded the name Visva-Bharati, which means the communion of the world with India for research and teaching where library acts as a pivotal role as it has very enrich collections with a lot of rare documents, so a university library has a greater ‘utility’ over time. It is clear from the above analysis, a good number of users (both Indian and foreigner) use the reference division over the whole year. Therefore, it can be stated the utility of this library is very high.
   - **User satisfaction**: We always try to satisfy the user by providing necessary services to them.
   - **Accuracy**: We always try to provide the accurate answer to the query and source of information. Hardly is it seen that the source does not match with the query that the user expects.

**Suggestion**

1. Usage is less, in respect of user attendance (especially students) as they use the reference division as ‘Reading Room’. Steps to be taken regarding motivating them to use reference division as its utility.

2. Digital camera is being allowed to the users (especially the user of the Kala Bhavana-Department of Fine Arts) in the reference division under the supervision of a library personnel to make the digital photocopy of the drawing, sculpture, etc. as reprography or scanning is not possible due to the size as well as condition of some documents are unusual. A proposal for purchasing a ‘Document Camera’ in order to provide services to the potential user from our end.

3. The statistics can be kept as per Model to evaluate the reference service properly.

4. Periodical evaluation of the reference services made by the Librarian should be incorporated into the workflow of the university to determine how effectively the library is fulfilling to its goals regarding services.

5. Service behavior exhibited by the reference personnel (readiness, interest, understanding, and verification) should be amiable.

6. Virtual reference service may be introduced with help of the advance technology as increase in demands for reference collection can be provided to the remote users.

7. Training should be at par with the advancement of technology to the existing staffs for providing the better services to the clientele.

8. Collections of reference documents should be made as such that it has the potential value to its user.

9. User awareness education should be introduced to use the library resources properly.

10. CAS and SDI service should be developed accordingly with the users demand to satisfy their needs.

**Conclusion**

Reference service is the most intensive kind of personal service, which attempts to bring together the user and information in a personal way. Periodical evaluation of reference services can fulfill its goal. Evaluation of reference services can be significantly improved if evaluator uses a specific model or strategy to increase the standard of data that they collect. Evaluations of reference services can be much more useful for decision-making and planning regarding services if the evaluator takes care in designing and implementing specific model of the evaluation. Success of any model depends on the knowledge of the community that the library serves. A library staff that understands its users and their needs will develop a service model that best supports those needs. Models that work well in one library will not necessarily apply to other that serves a different type of community.

This case study focuses on evaluating the current trends of reference services, which has the potential to improve our knowledge regarding current reference services. Through the effective use of this case study the professionals would be able to build a guide for practices of reference services. The Model, Saxton
and Richardson, 2002 mentioned above is based upon some predictors by which the core service values of reference division have been evaluated.

Reference


