Review Paper

Academic library reference service: observations in researchers' information behaviour and expectations in staff mediated search

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Abstract

Reference work in most libraries is known primarily for the provision of personalised and targeted information services. In academic libraries, reference and information services are relatively enormous and quite engaging. This paper discusses experiential involvements of the author in direct reference services at University of Uyo (UNIUYO) library, in Nigeria. Ways by which the library/ librarians support their users to meet varied research information needs across disciplines is discussed in this paper. Practical insights into professional guidance accorded a student/ researcher seeking information to actualise desired research goals and needs are also issues highlighted. This paper also examines the standpoint of several authors and their conceptual approach in this regard. The predisposition to falter in information search process ironically becomes a challenge even among advanced library users such as postgraduate students as noted too. This paper nonetheless opined that certain situations encountered via direct reference services, which often times seem time-consuming for the information seeker, can ultimately be redressed through electronic reference platform manoeuvred at the patron's disposal. The study therefore recommends for the sustenance of a continual user-oriented reference and information services for a worthwhile experience for researchers and other information patron.

Keywords: Research data, University library, information search, guidance, scholars.

Introduction

Despite the propelling mass of online resources in advancing information access, students requiring information for research works in University of Uyo (UNIUYO), do consult the reference section of the library as their initial contact point for assistance particularly when in need of a prototype research work (thesis and dissertations). Upon gaining approval to embark on a research project at various academic departments, the students particularly at postgraduate level often consult with the reference librarian. This is with the intent that a related research work / case study would be available for their use as copies of research works from Postgraduate school to the library, are yet to be hosted in electronic form. In this regard, the discourse of students' engagement at various research levels, often begin with their consultations at the library. The process usually culminates into some form of brainstorming, followed by the search process with the possibility of finding appropriate research content.

In the light of the foregoing, this paper discusses nature of research support given to library patrons in a typical person-to-person situation, which characterises the bulk of reference and information services carried out in most university libraries as observed. It also describes information seeking behaviour of students involved in research work, reasons for such actions and the steps undertaken by reference service staff of University of Uyo (UNIUYO) library to support this academic endeavour, irrespective of internet service platform. The foregoing hinges on direct observations made during involvements by the author as a reference librarian**.** It is noteworthy that the experience of learning and seeking knowledge in the library often culminates into literature search for appropriate information[1].

This paper also discusses librarian-mediated searches during inquiry process and information behaviour of students carrying out research in a typical academic library situation. It also takes into cognisance the role of librarians and other library staff as key players in facilitating learning by connecting people to ideas and knowledge through scholarly resources. Students involved in research at UNIUYO in the context of this work, constitutes postgraduate (PG) students at all level which include postgraduate diploma, master and doctoral students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. Consequently, transaction at the reference desk in UNIUYO library with them is the thrust of discussion. Inferences made on this discourse are based on various information literacy (IL) models with recommendations proffered toward enhancement of librarian-user service transaction.

Academic library

Academic libraries are those libraries that serve the information needs of students, staff and faculty members of tertiary

institutions they are established e.g. universities and colleges. Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)[2] note that current concerns in higher education include: i. Increasing demands for accountability (which extends to libraries), ii. Greater emphasis on student success efforts to increase graduation rates (through library support services), iii. The acknowledged connection between student engagement (with the library) and academic achievement.

The importance of pedagogical practices (which are the concerns of reference services) in research and inquiry-based learning (*parentheses by author of this paper).*

An academic library is the seat of knowledge particularly in a vast setting as the university. It welcomes the birth of new knowledge, nurtures the existing one and preserves the old knowledge. It contributes to the development of the scholar through the strength of its collection, services, technology and its staff. Some authors[3] note that the state of a library is one of the criteria for ranking of universities and colleges during accreditation, evaluation and rating of academic programmes.

An academic library provides information service delivery to the user, training in information seeking skills and organising their resources in a way that users find helpful[4]. These services are part of information literacy goals, which involve procedures or activities taken to ensure that users are able to access all relevant information irrespective of the formats. Literacy is the key to education, knowledge and the use of library and information services[5].

Information delivery avenues have traditionally been in print for patrons who visit the library to read and conduct research. Consequently, the academic library supports and contributes to the success of an academic programme amidst other support services[6]. Reference and Information services section of International Federation of Library Association and Institutions (IFLA), notes that in academic libraries and librarians assist students with information literacy instruction and research queries; they also provide in depth reference and research assistance to faculty.

For the furtherance of research services, the University of Uyo (UNIUYO) library in which this paper focuses on, has sections which cater for research needs of students under Reader services. Like most other university libraries in Nigeria, research services in UNIUYO library fall under the following units: i. *Serials and Documentation*: maintains periodicals such as newspapers, journals, bulletins and the like. ii. *Special collections*: as the name implies, collections in this category include rare books, government publications, local/ indigenous content. iii. *Reference services*: offers facts and background sources, theses and dissertations, and few undergraduate degree projects. iv. *Repository*: Created for the maintenance and dissemination of research outputs of graduate students at all levels. Majority of the research outputs are from the faculties of arts, education and social sciences established before other faculties. The repository primarily are collection electronic thesis and dissertation (ETD) abstracts to ease search, but not full content.

Research libraries are described as[7] 'the central organ of a research institute which supports all the functions of the institute's research by providing both old and new materials in its collections and also provides services and guidance to its clientele.' The disparate groups that the academic library serves and the library's obligation to meet their differing needs, has been a longstanding role over time and worth considering.

Reference and Information Services

The function of libraries mainly is to acquire, organise and provide/ disseminate information to actual and prospective users. Reference and information service is more concerned with the last function tantamount to library service role in general. Knowledge base is one of the basic elements of reference services[8]. Information resources in this regard can range from traditional reference sources, unconventional types addressing single subject areas and themes, to online resources sought by users. Staff who execute services do apply knowledge in the course of users seeking information in consideration to: how users search for information, how users learn, evaluate information received and the level to which the specific information provided satisfies the seeker's pursuit for knowledge. This approach places serious responsibilities on the reference and information librarian. The reference library serves users by providing direction to library materials, giving expert advice on library collections and their various kinds from single or multiple volumes.

Consultation by students for assistance at research level can be in person, particularly in a more involving research questions, through telephone, email or other electronic forms. In the academic situation users have perhaps the fullest array of questions, information needs, and enquiries[9]. Question posed in such instance by patrons can range from in-depth reference interview across spectrum of disciplines of knowledge, to 'ready-reference queries' which require quick factual answers. The latter characterise question type requiring brief and 'straight to the point answers' while other patrons do approach the reference desk with in-depth research-based questions.

Library patrons become assisted in ways such as looking up for information, how to use the catalogue to find materials available, recommending web sites and e-resources, taking patrons directly to the shelve or referring to other resource units or outside agencies as appropriate. Service must however, conform to user expectations related to speed and price to suit individual circumstances. If for instance, the user has two weeks to complete an assignment and the librarian recommends that the source will be readily available the week following, then the librarian's reference service relatively would appear worthless to the user.

Reference staffs also brainstorm with users to analyse topics in order to determine which resource best addresses their need, in order to provide appropriate research work. This is in addition to the instructional role of making clear how these information resources could be utilised to achieve ones' desired purpose[10]. The vital component of this role is in personalised assistance and guidance offered to users such as to direct them from one entry to another. Taken together, the form of reference service rendered is to assist, guide, instruct, advice and provide materials. It involves enunciation of the requirements by an information seeker, the search for documents leading expectedly to the supply of document(s) or information. Five levels of staff role have been identified[11] in the light of: organisers of materials/ resources, locator/ lecturer, counsellor/advisor, identifier/ instructor in helping users identify tools for their information needs. Heinström[12] also identified five personality dimensions and their influence on information behaviour. On the contrary, critical thinking[13], argues that current reference practices tend to take the research process out of the control of students. They note that when librarians interview patrons and provide them a list of useful sources, they tend to 'deny students full control of their searches and the full measure of insight their questions could give them were they to have gone through that stage themselves or in partnership with the librarian.' The authors furthermore added that in order to practice student-centered pedagogies of any type, it is important to understand that control and direction must come from the individual learner, not from outside sources like the teacher or the librarian.

Information Search behaviour

Students conducting research particularly postgraduate students notably require in-depth of contents of relevant and authoritative sources by experts in their field of study. Readily available information e.g. on the internet has however changed their conception of research process, in that they expect to find information quickly and without effort particularly with the estimation of easy availability of information[14]. Quite naturally, when students do not find what they require, they in most instances can seek alternative resources e.g. from other institutions that can provide needed research content. For yet others, they can persist and re-schedule a date to check back on the librarian or staff assisting, with the intent that a related work would still be found. Anything short of this expectation would generally, be regarded as a delay, problem or obstacle by the information seeker and can lead to confusion and even frustration. This experience is concurred by some scholars[14-17]. Librarians offer important service duties in order to guide information seekers appropriately, that cannot be over emphasised. Cognitive style[18] has influence on information behaviour in the sense that individual differences relating to cognitive styles and study approaches, come into play in information searches. These can be exhibited in various manner noted to be 'generic graduate attributes' in the twenty-first century[19]. These are: being critically and relevantly literate,

autonomous independent thinkers, skilled communicators engaging across different platforms, and being inquiry focused, These attributes in a nutshell imply being able to seek, discern, use and apply information. It follows that students with holistic learning styles can be more explorative in their searches[18].

A closer look at Kulthau's widespread information search model elaborates more on the interplay between cognitive, affective and behavioural factors in information seeking as discussed by Serola and Vakkari[20]. It buttresses that emotional aspects like feelings of uncertainty often expressed as anxiety or worry, can influence and become strong at the start of a search process. This is particularly so when a (library) user becomes aware of their 'lack' of knowledge about the research topic at hand[21,22]. In other words, if searchers consider that they will likely fail in the search task, this can affect their further actions as they will be more apt to abandon the search too soon. Again, this necessitates the pertinent and assistive role of librarians in reference service whereby both parties can 'chat' in a manner that determines and draws forth actual information needed. Gaining knowledge for research writing, involves exploring ideas and formulating thoughts for indepth understanding of topic. However, it is common for a patron seeking information to become stuck at some point, which warrants immediate help that can be given by human intermediary (a librarian). As further explained by experts, allowing time for reflecting and formulating while they are exploring and collecting information, knowledge seekers in such instance are engaged in critical stages of learning[23]. They furthermore indentify nine attitudes during information search. These are confidence, disappointment, relief, frustration, confusion, optimism, uncertainty, anxiety and satisfaction. Any of the information behaviours can be obvious depending on the seeker's affective state looking for information; hence students' feeling of relief at the end of the search and mental processes. Holliday and Li[14] notes such outcome as being more related to task completion rather than successful learning outcome. Janes[9] again notes that the skill in identifying information sources to assist the users is with the aim of ultimately empowering them to 'be able to do more themselves later.' Reference assistance in research is but a guide; though not easy to deal with many users in a relatively large library like those of the university, reference librarians and support staff use a variety of literature search techniques.

User Enquiry and Reference Staff Mediated Search

A reference service staff would normally diagnose the problem at hand, guide users to find appropriate resources, and offer the unique opportunity of aiding the user review the retrieved information. Sometimes the enquiry process extends further and would naturally lead to further probing for clarification in order to give the staff a clue of what best suits the enquirer's need. Graves cited in Elmborg[24] indicated category of questions that are useful in helping students during consultation at the reference desk. These as 'opening questions' 'following

questions' 'process questions' and 'basic structure questions'. Essentially Elmborg's view has served as a model for research guidance and useful to move enquirers and staff assisting intellectually through the challenge of thinking through a problem. These are:

Opening questions are informal and designed to get things started. When graduate students consult for research material, their usual question often tailored thus 'I need thesis for my research, can you help me with some copies to go through?' Usual response by staff is 'okay, which aspect of research/ subject area do you intend writing on?' More often, response received is 'I don't really have one yet, but if I check what's available, it'll be a lot easier.' For those with an already formulated research topic, usual inquiry can be 'I need material on preservation of resources' or 'I need research project on water' and so forth.

Following questions come up once dialogue commences. It encourages students to talk through what they know and to find language to express it. It again unleashes further discourse to enable both enquirer and the library personnel decipher the issue to address. *Process questions* which akin to 'following questions' broaden the conversation with librarian and user brainstorming on the extend of work done by the researcher in order to determine further information content needed in that regard.

Basic structure question streamlined to focus on the topic at hand. At that point, researcher satisfaction after exhaustive exploration of cognate research themes and content gradually culminates to conclusion on the subject of research.

From whichever perspective or level of inquiry, the user is at liberty to request further assistance to enable the utilisation of additional or several other sources. Where appropriate also, referrals are made or appointments given for further assistance if the search was not concluded as typical with most research experience. The intent is to enable both the staff and the information seeker/ researcher to undertake the search more thoroughly particularly, if the initial timeframe was probably short. Assistance offered the researcher invariable goes a long way to enable them feel at ease with getting assistance from the staff and the library domain in general.

Research Students' Information behaviour: UNIUYO Experience

Students in academic environment are dominant users in academic libraries since they constitute largest population of patrons in most education institutions. They also have varying information needs due to diverse disciplinary study and research needs. When an information seeker (student-researcher in this instance) consults the library with an information problem that requires solving, it only seems logical that the objective of the librarian is to help solve the problem[25].

In University of Uyo (UNIUYO) as a case in point, direct person-to-person reference services are quite intense with the provision for Readers Advisory. This is to enable recommending appropriate research materials to users to enrich their reading preferences. Intermittently, lists of research works from particular subject interests or professional areas are on display or distributed to scholars and academics on area of discipline. Users/ patrons as noted are considerably the focal point of the library reference service[8].

The research sub-unit under reference section of UNIUYO library exists particularly for those who require thesis or dissertation, often when carrying out a research. Upon a student's eligibility to use the section, related thesis works are identified based records/ inventory. The material would then be located and retrieved by the designated librarian and is preceded by a brief crosschecking of the material. Observation by this author over the years as a reference librarian, is the interest in past research materials by researcher from the institution. The research materials generated internally and hosted in the library propels them to contact the research collections at reference section of UNIUYO library. Sometimes their information need is in lieu of academic assignments and other educational reasons as the case may be. For the undergraduate students in final year of study, their need for a research work is often met at faculty libraries equally manned by UNIUYO library staff. Most students carrying out research also consult other resources e.g. journals and specialised texts aside theses and dissertations issued mostly to post graduate students. Essentially, day statistics of enquiry slips at reference section where thesis and dissertations are maintained, indicate an average of over 30 Postgraduate students' consultation daily. When their research work advances, they become engaged in using other sources to widen their scope of knowledge and source.

Various encounters with researchers at UNIUYO library over the years by this author reveals that their initial contact and demand for a thesis/ dissertation stems from the desire to first find related researchable topic to adapt. As such, what becomes uppermost as found through the years among students tackling research is the eagerness to have 'any' available research material to address immediate research problem. This is not farfetched given the fact that available copies generated with the institution, serve as prototypes for research design and a point of referral for literature review and empirical studies within ones locality. Ironically, the demand for locally generated physical copies of research content seems contrary to the usual notion of interest in on-line resources with case studies elsewhere, though the latter is still relevant afterwards. Equally, it had been found at several times that issue date (year) of a particular theses/ dissertations does not matter to students requesting for a copy provided the content addresses a research problem at hand. The demand becomes more heightened when they try to meet timeframe and deadlines for field work and final submission. Patrons are normally attended to on personal basis to ensure

confidentiality and to enable them feel at ease. In this scenario, the staff role becomes more consultative and advisory.

The Stripling and Pitts Research Process Model of 1998 developed specifically to explain research process in relation to gathering facts, relays similar experience as it delineates the following pre-determined steps identified with information seekers on research:

The first concern is the choice of a topic, then determining broad perspective of the topic, narrowing down the topic, identifying the research questions, formulation of a thesis, planning of the research, searching for information, evaluation of the resources and applicability of the resources, compiling all information gathered into a framework to ensure logical arguments. Kuhlthau[21] also support that the information search process occurs in six stages: initiation, selection, exploration, formulation, collection and presentation.

Unfortunately, some of the researchers upon formulating topics quickly dive into gathering data without strengthening the main point and background knowledge required to address essential questions that drive and direct their research purpose, though this was more commonly found among undergraduate students on research. Interrogation at the reference desk revealed that such information behaviour stemmed from initial difficulties they encountered, uncertainty as to how to go about finding what they need, though ameliorated upon brief interrogation with the reference librarian for guidance. These involvements were notably a daily affair encountered by this author from opening hours in the morning till 3pm. Usually, no referrals were required to other sections since all thesis and dissertations in UNIUYO library were domiciled in the reference and information services section. For students preparing a term paper, staff by experience and subject expertise also helps to streamline inconclusive and broad research topics in order to determine and find appropriate research source. Olowu[26] advices that staff involved must be ready to be selfless, energetic and eagle-eyed. These encounters nonetheless bring to the fore, perspicacious knowledge demonstrated particularly on the part of the library reference staff, in the search and provision of required resource.

Recommendations

The bulk of reference and information services discussed thus far attempts to establish client-oriented services with respect to direct person-to-person interaction. Based on the foregoing, librarians, information specialists and library assistants need to update in professional knowledge and skills in order to deliver quality services in the area of providing research data. In so doing, they would competently address information needs of their clients and guide them in information literacy skills to seek, locate and use available information. The efforts to refine query till they come to terms with what is relevant for their user therefore, cannot be over emphasised. However, sitting behind

the 'desk' might no longer be the best way to provide quality service but to deliver in a way that reflects patrons' modern information expectations. This is in terms of communicating with them through ICT platforms such as e-mail, instant messaging, text messaging, social network and the like. In other words, institutionally packaged and serviceable internet service providers and 'hotspots'. Dempsey[27] concurs that 'trends over the years have shifted away from reference services of sitting at a desk awaiting a question, to a more blended, mobile, and adaptable model of helping patrons.'

To implement information literacy skills orientation is encouraged for scholars and other advanced library users. This is because the 'use of academic libraries is influenced most by a user's perceived familiarity with a library and its resources' according to Simmonds and Andaleeb[28]. In this regard, information skills workshop can include finding quality information, exploring the personal significance of a topic, framing an aesthetic experience of some arts, and facilitating personal awareness[29]. Every library user irrespective of level of study or endeavour, deserve constant training/ orientation to sharpen and refresh skills in navigating information, particularly for students at research level. This cogent library duty is a necessity as skills can become waned over time upon departing from academic environment after graduation and perhaps not having contact with a typical library after a while.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed encounters by students carrying out research in University of Uyo (UNIUYO) library vis-à-vis staff mediated involvements in the process at reference desk. It relayed reference services as integrated into the flow of campus learning where librarians assist patrons in a multiplicity of information-related process. It also noted that the nature of reference and information work in a library is influenced and directed by the library's service philosophy being to guide, instruct and provide the user with sources relevant to the researcher's needs.

It is required of libraries to acquaint users, particularly graduate students with range of information resources in order for them to use these resources profitably. This study noted that librarians and staff involved in related services act as intermediaries between library users and resources to make them available for use. They guide users through the process of searching for research information as discussed in this study.

While the expectation for information needs vary from one user community to another, the role of libraries still remain meeting particular needs of its community. Of importance also is providing clients with information and documents they request for through online or manual literature searches[30]. Reference services offered by the academic library plays important role of assisting users in this regard, including other user-services unit offering related services. Consequently, essential services

crucial to the needs of user-community is the hallmark of library services because when satisfaction is established, patronage can easily be obtained by reason of confidence gained and justified.

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