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Home away from home: An analysis of in-person point-of-need reference services at academic libraries

Abstract

This study explores the different types of in-person point-of-need reference service strategies that take place within an academic library. Such services can broadly be grouped into two categories. Those that take place within a physical library and those that occur outside the library completely. Through evaluating previous research there appears to be four broad ways of implementing point-of-need in-person reference services. Such services can be utilized in conjunction with each other, more traditional reference services, or electronic point-of-need reference services. The four types of point-of-need reference services found are (1) Roaming reference services (2) Peak-hour secondary reference services (3) On-call reference services and (4) Outpost reference services. Among these point-of-need reference services there is no standardization regarding how such they should be evaluated.

Introduction:

The goal of this study is to understand how academic libraries provide in-person reference services away from the main reference desk. The main reference desk can be conceptualized as the place where the patron typically finds reference workers (and often circulation staff members as well). The reference desk is often located near the main doors and it is where a patron typically goes to have a face-to-face interaction with a staff member. Such a location should be well known to anybody who has spent even a little time in a library.

This study will focus on in-person point-of-need reference services. Although I will go into more detail regarding the definition of point-of-need reference services. The term means, in short, reference services that take place away from the traditional reference desk, often in hopes of providing more accessibility by meeting the patrons where they commonly are (Henry, Varderman, & Syma, 2012, pp. 397-398). Although point-of-need reference services have been conceptualized for at least a century, many academic libraries still struggle with how to define, provide, and evaluate these services. It is therefore the goal of this study to understand how such reference strategies can be conceptualized, utilized, and evaluated. Hopefully through such research, academic institutions will be better able to implement point-of-need reference strategies. It is through such framework that I formulated my research questions as such:

RQ1: How do academic libraries utilize in-person point-of-need reference services?

RQ2: How do point-of-need reference services affect the reference questions asked by patrons?

RQ3: What assessment methods are used to determine if point-of-need reference services are beneficial to the library and the patrons?

Terminology and Conceptual Framework

Before moving on to an examination of relevant research, it is essential to first provide some clarity as to the terminology that will be used within this study. Point-of-need which is sometimes used interchangeably with the term point-of-service, is a reference and instruction strategy designed to take services directly to patrons or students in hopes of providing greater accessibility for such services (Henry et al., 2012, pp. 397-398). This a strategy within a library stands in contrast to the traditional reference paradigm of having the patron come to the main reference desk to seek reference help. Although the concept of point-of-need reference services has become buzz worthy within libraries, the concept itself has been written about and implemented for well over a century (Pena & Green, 2006; McCabe & Macdonald, 2011). Noted librarian and scholar Samuel Swett Green argued in his 1877 treatise “Personal Relations Between Librarians and Readers” that

One of the best means of making a library popular is to mingle freely with its users, and help them in every way. When this policy is pursued for a series of years in any town, a very large portion of the citizens receive answers to questions, and the conviction spreads through the community that the library is an institution of such beneficent influences that it can not be dispensed with (Pena & Green, 2006, p. 164).

What Green was advocating for was for reference workers to get away from the usual confines of the reference desk and to engage the patrons on the patron’s own terms. Such engagement has the possibility of occurring both inside and outside of the physical library. That said, what all of the point-of-service reference strategies have in common is that they are strategies provided by libraries in hopes of providing greater accessibility to reference services for their patrons.

While Green may have been conceptualizing in-house services, point-of-need reference services have been occurring outside of the library building for over a century as well. Although there were reports of mobile libraries in England in the 19th Century, by 1904, Mary Titcomb of Maryland, had provided library services via a horse drawn carriage to local patrons (Public Broadcasting Service, 2011). By the 1930s, there were at least sixty bookmobiles nationwide providing library and reference services to patrons outside of the usual library space (Public Broadcasting Service, 2011). Although most academic libraries tend not to provide reference services via a bookmobile, the idea of a library away from a library has been embraced by many academic institutions, especially as funding for libraries has shrank over the last decade resulting in reduced hours of libraries (Davis & Weber, 2002, p. 52). Such offsite academic reference services, typically called “outpost reference services” could include reference workers providing reference services within an academic instructions’ residence halls and computer labs (see Nims, 1998; Kuchi, Bowering Mullen, & Tama-Bartels, 2004).

It is through this framework that I will further examine modern in-person point-of-need reference services currently being implemented within academic libraries. For this project, I have evaluated previous research that utilized in-person point-of-need reference services within academic institutions in hopes of gleaning the structure of such services, the impact of such services, and how such services are evaluated.

In seeking to understand the types of point-of-need reference services that takes place within the library, the following strategies have emerged:

Roaming Reference Services

Roaming or roving reference is one of the oldest point-of-need services provided by information professionals (Lorenzen, 1997; McCabe & MacDonald 2011). Roaming reference services is generally used to describe the action of a reference worker working wandering around the library looking to assist patrons where the patrons are located (Lorenzen, 1997 p. 53). In some circumstances, these reference workers will roam around with an iPad, ready to meet and engage with any patron who requested such a service via a library chat widget (McCabe & MacDonald 2011, p. 4). Dempsey (2011) points out that an iPad can also assist a roaming reference worker with finding patrons who need help within the stacks, utilizing searches, or answering a myriad of other reference questions away from the main reference desk.

Roaming reference potentially has many benefits and is one of the most studied point-of-need reference services as any information science database search will reveal. Roaming reference services can be of great benefit for students who are uneasy approaching the reference desk or those who realize they have secondary questions after they leave the reference desk (Dempsey, 2011; Kilzer, 2011).

Peak-Hour Secondary Reference Services

The concept of peak-hour secondary reference services is a term that is self-defined due to the lack of research on the subject. Peak-hour secondary reference services essentially utilizes a secondary reference desk away from the main reference desk that only exists during peak hours of library usage (Mirtz, 2013, p. 521). Such secondary reference locations were only deemed to be beneficial when there were so many patrons needing reference services that the main desk would become inundated with reference questions. This concept of peak-hour secondary reference services is one that requires further research.

Peak-hour secondary reference services can be helpful because it eliminates the strain on the main reference desk by providing a secondary reference desk (Mirtz, 2013, pp. 521-522). Although such services seem to be utilized as a point-of-need reference strategy, more studies need to be done regarding how patrons use these secondary reference desks in relation to the main reference desks.

On-call Reference Services

On-call reference services is another concept that has not gotten a lot of research exposure. The concept behind on-call reference services is that a patron, within the library will be able to message a reference worker, usually through an online academic library chat widget, which will call the reference worker to where the patron is sitting or arrange a convenient time for the patron to meet the librarian in their office (Dempsey, 2011, p. 12).

On-demand reference services can be beneficial as it can allow staff members to do secondary projects when there is not a high demand for staff workers in the library, and provide tailored reference help when called by a student. Students also perceive a convenience as the reference worker can meet them at the patrons' location (Cooper Moore & Wells, 2009, p. 82). Such a convenience also has a drawback as Dempsey (2011) observed when it was noticed that some patrons were requesting reference workers to meet them at their location, even though such locations were only a few feet from the actual reference desk.

Outpost Reference Services

Outpost reference services is a broad strategy typified by having a reference worker stationed outside of the physical library itself (Hines, 2007, p. 12). Within an academic institution, outpost reference services may take place in a residence hall or a computer labs but they tend to be on university property (Nims, 1998; Kuchi et al., 2004). Although the concept of outpost reference services is old, it has recently gained attention as a sort of last resort when academic libraries have reduced hours or are shut down completely (David & Weber 2002, p. 52).

Outpost reference services can benefit patrons by providing reference services to patrons who cannot physically come to the library. Hines (2007) and Nims (1998) both note that outpost reference services can be tricky though, especially when such services are unexpected. For example, Nims' (1998) early study on the subject found that when reference workers appeared in an academic computer lab, they were viewed with a certain amount of distrust. Such reference workers were viewed as academic authority figures in the students' space. The students felt inhibited by the presence of the reference worker in the computer lab which was an environment that they was typically void of administrative figures. As a result, few reference questions were asked of these reference workers (Nims, 1998, p. 88).

Summary of Previous Research

Lorenzen's (1997) early research on roaming reference services hypothesized that with the utilization of additional reference services within a library, there would be less reference questions asked at the main reference desk. Overall, this does not seem to be the case. Around the same time, Kramer (1996) observed that there was not a discernable overlap between questions asked at the reference desk and those asked to an academic roaming reference worker.

Mirtz (2013) and Dempsey (2011) both seemed to confirm Kramer's (1996) study when they observed an overall increase in reference questions asked within the library when they created peak-hour reference desk in conjunction with a roaming reference strategy. Mirtz (2013) concludes that a second reference worker in a more populated area of the library tended to serve as a supplement to the main reference desk but did not detract from the usage of the main reference desk. Dempsey (2011) observed roaming reference services were an important reference strategy because many students needed additional help once they left the main reference desk and journeyed into the stacks to find their materials. Kilzer (2011) posited that since the reference desk can be an intimidating place for some, patrons may feel more comfortable asking a roaming reference worker their questions as opposed to approaching the traditional reference desk.

As stated earlier, although there has been much written on roaming and outpost reference there has been little research on secondary peak-hour reference services. Mirtz (2013) examined the types of reference questions that were asked by the University of Mississippi (UM) staff when a secondary peak-hour reference station, in combination with roaming reference services, was opened on a floor of the library where the main reference desk was not located. Mirtz' (2013) study was conceived in her observation that a newly opened Starbucks within the library was creating a large increase in foot traffic on a floor which was being exacerbated during peak usage hours. A point-of-need service was implemented when staff were finding that they were being stopped near the Starbucks to be asked reference questions. These reference workers decided to both utilize a stationary secondary reference terminals while also utilizing a roaming reference service. These reference workers carried iPads so as to assist patrons with their reference questions (Mirtz, 2013, p. 522). Mirtz (2013) found that that among the 130 reference questions asked of the roaming reference workers, 42% were actual reference questions, 24% were regarding printing or copying questions with the remainder of the questions being mostly directional in nature. Furthermore, many of these reference questions were follow up questions to the information they had received at the main reference desk. These additional reference questions included help when patrons wrote down the wrong call numbers, needed help finding misplaced books, or had questions about library layout (Mirtz, 2013 p.522). Although this study did implement both a peak-hour reference station with roaming reference services, Mirtz (2013) never distinguishes what questions were asked of staff member while they were serving at the peak-hour reference desk or while they were roaming the stacks. Mirtz (2013) also never examined how having a roaming or secondary reference workers on a more populous floor effected the amount or the type of reference questions asked at the main reference desk of the library. That said, Mirtz (2013) did observe an increase in overall reference questions within the library while these services were being provided.

McCabe and MacDonald (2011) implemented a roaming reference service within their own library system, the University of British Columbia (UBC) as a supplement to the main reference desk. McCabe and MacDonald (2011) conducted their research over two academic terms but in different ways for each term. During the first term, they utilized either a roaming

reference service or a staffed main reference desk (but never both of these services at the same time). During the second term, UBC simultaneously staffed the main reference desk along with roaming reference services. UBC implemented this system by having reference workers wondering around the library asking patrons if they needed research help. UBC also utilized a virtual chat service that would page a reference worker so they could meet the patron where they were sitting within the library thus acting as an additional on-call reference service. Overall, McCabe and MacDonald (2011) found that of the 228 reference questions logged by the roaming reference workers, 67% tended to be research related (as opposed to directional or computer related). These results are hardly generalizable. The library experienced drastic staff shortages as staffing a roaming reference worker tended to create a bottleneck at the main reference desk since there was one less reference worker at the main desk. During the first term of implementation, McCabe and MacDonald (2011) found that 63% of the roaming reference questions involved research help with the rest being technology or facilities help. About half of these questions took 1-5 minutes, 35% took 6-15 minutes and about 13% of these reference questions took at least 16 minutes. McCabe and MacDonald (2011) also found that many students were paging reference workers to meet them at their work areas, even though the patron was already in very close proximity to the reference desk. This seemed to indicate that many patrons would rather have a reference worker meet them at their workspace instead of approaching the reference desk (and perhaps leaving their belongings unattended). In all, McCabe and MacDonald (2011) point out that the staff found themselves spread too thin when trying to address patrons at the traditional reference desk, patrons on virtual reference, and patrons paging them to meet them at their own location in the library. This led to diminished reference services for the patrons and ungeneralizable results for the study (McCabe and MacDonald, p. 13-14). As with the Mirtz' (2011) study, there was no distinction in McCabe and MacDonald's (2011) study regarding whether the questions asked by the patrons were asked of the on-call reference workers or the roaming reference workers.

Dempsey (2011) found that at the main reference desk of her institution (the Raritan Valley Community College) their tended to be a large majority of questions that were either directional or equipment related. Dempsey (2011) found that when staffing the main reference desk with student workers who could answer these simpler questions, more trained reference workers were able to spend more time working with their patrons utilizing more in-depth reference services. Dempsey's (2011) study combined roaming reference services (where staff members would be both on-call and make periodic walk-throughs of the library floors) with a service where patrons could schedule time a "research consultation (p.13)" time that the patron could explore their reference questions with a Librarian in more depth. Dempsey (2011) found that by utilizing these point-of-need reference strategies there was a 66% increase in the overall reference questions that were asked of the staff. This increase does not account for the research consultation appointments but merely reflected the increase in questions asked to on-call and roaming reference workers. Dempsey (2011) did not record the types of reference questions or the degree of the difficulty of those reference questions which were being asked to the staff.

In regards to outpost reference workers, in a survey distributed to patrons at the University of Massachusetts Amherst Learning Commons, Cooper Moore and Wells (2009) found that out of 656 respondents, about 40% stated that they “wanted library and technology staff to rove the learning commons (p.81)” so patrons could ask questions away from the main reference desk. This study was undertaken to understand a wide range of roaming reference services but seems to indicate a general enthusiasm by the potential library patrons at the University of Massachusetts Amherst for outpost reference services. Such enthusiasm can rapidly dwindle though as Nims (1998) observed when Bowling Green University created an outpost reference service within a popular computer lab. Nims (1998) observed that the student’s did not expect to see a staff member in the lab and viewed their presence skeptically. As a result, very few questions were asked of this reference worker and the experiment was deemed a failure. Thus, Hines (2007) posits that the best locations for outpost reference workers are places that such services won’t seem to out-of-place, places that are wired for internet, and places that aren’t overly social in nature. Such results are far from uniform though. As Davis and Weber (2002) noted, success may be as simple as providing reference services after a library has been permanently closed or hours have severely been reduced.

As may have become evident at this point, there is little uniformity regarding how the success on in-person point-of-need reference services is evaluated by those libraries which are implementing such strategies. Dempsey (2011) evaluated the success of point-of-need reference services by focusing on how many questions were asked of the reference workers within the library. Mirtz (2013) and McCabe and MacDonald (2011), on the other hand, evaluated point-of-need reference services by examining both how many questions were asked of reference workers along with the types of questions asked of reference workers (i.e. whether those questions were research or technology orientated). Askew (2015) on the other hand, posited that the best assessment method for in-person point of need reference services was a blend of quantitative and qualitative methodology where researchers would ask the students directly about how they viewed the point-of-need reference services being offered. Thus, Askew (2015) collected data regarding point-of-need reference services through surveys and interviews of patrons that looked to examine how satisfied patrons were with the point-of-need reference services that were being provided in combination with how often such services were utilized by patrons.

Conclusion

Although the concept of point-of-need reference services is nothing new, it is a concept that is seeing continual usage and experimentation within academic libraries. It is through this framework of growth and experimentation that I asked my initial three research questions. In reviewing previous studies on the subject, such questions are now somewhat clearer.

RQ1: How do academic libraries utilize in-person point-of-need reference services?

Answer: Academic libraries provide in-person point-of-need reference services both within the library building and outside of it as well. Such reference services include roaming reference services, peak-hour secondary reference services, on-call reference services, and outpost reference services.

RQ2: How do point-of-need reference services affect the reference questions asked by patrons?

Answer: Research has tended to demonstrate that when point-of-need in-person reference services are incorporated within a library there does not seem to be a decrease of reference questions asked at the main reference desk, but rather there are more overall reference questions asked within the library. From the little data collected on the subject, reference questions also tend to remain consistent between the main and point-of need reference services (whether that subject be technological, finding materials, etc.). It does seem that patrons often ask roaming reference workers follow-up questions to the ones that they asked at the main reference desk but only seem to arise when that patron has ventured away from the main reference desk and has gone into the stacks looking for their materials. Such results seem to demonstrate that when done well, point-of-need reference within a library can work well in conjunction with the traditional reference desks.

In regards to outpost reference services, the reference questions asked by patrons to reference workers is greatly affected by where the reference worker is stationed and the acceptance of that reference worker in the space of the patrons. That said, outpost reference services can also serve as a strategy for keeping up relationships with patrons when a library experiences hour reductions or actual building closures.

RQ3: What assessment methods are used to determine if point-of-need reference services are beneficial to the library and the patrons?

Answer: Point-of-need reference services are most typically evaluated in relation to the amount of reference questions asked and the type of reference questions asked. Currently, there is no uniform assessment method for assessing whether point-of-service reference services is worth the resources that is put into it. To exacerbate the problem, there seems to be little agreement among researchers as to what would constitute beneficial point-of-need reference services and what factors would need to be measured to understand the degree of such benefits.

Discussion

The research that has come out of a desire to understand how point-of-need reference services enhance the reference experience has generally demonstrated that when point-of-need reference services are incorporated within the library, there has been generally more questions asked within the library as a whole. The lack of generalizability regarding previous studies may be a result of the differences in research methods utilized in such studies as well as how success

of these projects is measured. Therefore, the question of how to justify the worth of point-of-service reference services still remains to be understood. For example, should success be measured in the amount of overall reference questions asked? The topics of reference questions asked? The degree of difficulty of those reference questions? How patrons view such reference services? A standardized evaluation process for both in-house and outpost point-of-need reference services would go a long way in providing a clear path to evaluating and understanding the impact of in-person point-of-need reference services. Although such an assessment might be hard to create due to the vast differences in academic libraries, a clearer means of assessment is definitely needed to provide clarity as to how and if these services are a benefit to the patrons.

Future Research Considerations

Although libraries have utilized point-of-need reference services for over a century, there is still a large amount of research that needs to be done on the subject. It would be beneficial for academic libraries to create a standardized way of assessing these point-of-need reference services and share such data amongst each other. Until such data is shared though, questions of effectiveness and cost benefit analysis will remain prevalent amongst institutions. Because so many libraries are instituting point-of-need reference services and there is so much potential to help patrons with such services, further studies are definitely needed.

Furthermore, studies need to be undertaken regarding how different point-of-need services can be combined with each other to enhance patron accessibility. For example, how does a secondary peak-hour reference desk in combination with a roaming reference service effect the patron's information seeking experience when compared to just using a roaming reference service? Are such combined services worthwhile when considering limitations of staffing?

Additionally, more research should be done regarding what the effects of technology, such as iPads, on point-of-need reference services will be. Not until such studies are completed will reference workers have a clear conception as to how point-of-need reference services impacts their patrons.

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