

## The Ubiquity of Library through Reference Service: bridging the gap to the marginalized

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### **Abstract:**

*In the swift, modern, mobile and digital world, education and learning is no longer restricted to the confines of a limited environment. Open and distance learning (ODL) has become a trendy method of breaking down the insularity of the typical conventional system of education. In breaking down geographical barriers among nations of the world, ODL adds a new fillip to learning in the growing export of distance education from one country to the other, often referred to as cross-border or transnational education. While distance teaching institutions take education to scattered people within a nation and in some cases, trans-nationally, the challenges to effectively and efficiently take the library to the ubiquitous students and meet their information needs remain. The traditional face-to-face and armchair system where the library only physically consults or is consulted within its own walls or even the confines of the institution, has no place in distance learning environment. The distance, cross-border and/or transnational education now increasingly in vogue portends the inconsequence of maintaining the status-quo.*

*With allusion to some empirical studies and some visible practices, including the use of Question Point, in some institutions in Botswana, the paper believes that the information needs of dispersed and disadvantaged students may not have been met. Believing that information delayed is information denied, the paper notes that any tardiness (without due notice) in responding to queries of users defeats the purpose of reference service. It notes that the intervention of modern and accessible information and communication technologies in reference service would mark an effective and notable difference.*

*The paper believes that reference service in the new information world does not necessarily have to be conducted face-to-face, as obtained in the traditional system, but remotely at a distance. It notes the instrumentality of the new technologies that have compelled the librarians and information professionals to re-define the optimal and convenient ways to promptly meet the information needs of not only the on-campus clientele, but also distant and off-campus patrons. With handheld mobile or portable devices such as smart (cell) phones, laptops, iPods etc., the paper hints at the application of instant messaging (IM), social media platforms, Skype, ooVoo, short message service (SMS), and blogs, among others, as usable devices in reference service. The paper strongly advocates that appropriate training be given to the librarians on effective and continuing adoption of emerging information and communication technologies that modern age offers in reference service.*

**Keywords:** open and distance learning; distance learners; reference services; Question Point; social media.

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## **Introduction**

It is a modern world. In the old world, education and learning was restricted to the confines of a limited environment and mainly undertaken by a face-to-face classroom-bound delivery mode. For learning to take place, there existed eye-ball to eye-ball meetings between the learner and the teacher in traditional classroom situations. This traditional system was also the practice in the then known library and information world where services could only be performed within the four walls of the library. As if tracing the genealogy of reference in a document titled “Evolution of the Reference Librarian,” Johnson (2011) confirms that the desire of any library is to ensure a user leaves the library fully satisfied of having met his or her information needs. A library/librarian would aspire that the customer does not leave the library with his question unanswered.

The modern world commands a new order and system. The insularity of the typical conventional system of education is broken down and learning now takes place anywhere. Even though distance education may have come of age, it assumes a new dispensation with the establishment of distance teaching institutions in many countries in the 1980s. Different from what it used to be, there is home school, online learning and e-learning, and independent study such that students obtain their academic qualifications without having to visit or know the campus of their institutions. There is “the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process (this distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education)” (Keegan, 2013: 50). The traditional face-to-face system where the library only physically consults or is consulted within its own walls or even the confines of the institution does not necessarily have any significant place in the modern world. Thus a user may not show up physically in the library with his question, but may digitally transmit requests from a remote location. In the new dispensation, the aspiration of the library/librarian would rest on how to satisfy the queries of its varied and dispersed users, at a distance.

In the new world, there is a change in the dynamics, and education is experiencing new *modus operandi*. Evidently, a new fillip to learning is added with education getting exported from one country to the other through open and distance learning (ODL) in what is now known as trans-national or cross border education. In the trans-national or cross-border education in vogue, students do not have to live in the country of the distance teaching

institution to receive their studies and qualifications. They are at liberty not to leave their country of origin or where they work to access education and training in another country where their institution is located.

While a distance teaching institution takes education and learning to its ubiquitous students who live within or outside the country of the institution, the library of the institution has the responsibility for providing effective support services to the students in their dispersed locations – be it within the country or outside. Being a service agency, the library normally reflects the aspiration of its parent institution, and caters to the teaching, learning and research needs of staff and students, irrespective of their locations. The challenges to effectively and efficiently carry out its obligation and take the library to ubiquitous students and meet their information needs remain.

One major factor that has attempted to bridge the yawning gap between distance teaching institutions offering education and individuals spread in various parts of the world who want to study without leaving their jobs is the advance in technology, particularly in information and communications technologies (ICTs). ICTs have not only made education and learning at a distance much easier in advanced countries of the world but has also made library and, indeed, reference service to distance or cross border students, more effective. For instance, while Internet interactive reference service, toll-free telephone and facsimile lines were common approaches to reduce the burden of distance learners to their libraries in the north, such free lines were rare and considered an unaffordable luxury in the south. It is gratifying to note that mega distance teaching institutions are available today in various parts of the world – developed and developing countries alike. Unfortunately, while it is common to hear of the exploits in distance and, or cross-border education in developing countries, there has hardly been any corresponding tales of remarkable success or effective library and reference service to distance learners in the developing world, especially in Africa. From experience, reference service to staff and students that are campus based cannot be said to be inspiring, not to talk of service to those in remote locations. There are several instances where queries are sent to or deposited at the reference desk or with librarians and the promise of coming back with responses was never honoured. In this respect, reference service in many libraries is not reliable and can best be described as predominantly ‘pedestrian.’ Libraries, and indeed reference services, are expected to be salt, to sweeten and cushion the rigours of academic pursuit and inquiry in institutions of learning. The question can then be raised, if reference service to those who are near (on-campus patrons) is grossly deficient, how will the performance to those at a distance be effectual and inspirational?

Concerned that the libraries and reference service offered in Africa and indeed, Botswana, may be losing its relevance if it is found wanting in providing the necessary reference support to its supposed patrons, this study observes that the advantage of permeated handheld mobile or portable devices such as smart (cell) phones, laptops, iPods etc. should be exploited. The paper believes the advantage the modern devices vis-à-vis the social media platform would be the necessary tonic the library needs not only to bring relevance to its services but also vitality to its service to the users. Granted that not all academic libraries operate distance learning programmes, the suggestions are bound to be useful to any libraries, nonetheless.

## **Literature Review**

The importance of library and information services to distance learners is underscored in many countries to the point that library associations, especially in advanced countries, have

formulated guidelines on library services to distance learners. The significance of the library as an information source led the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 2008) – an arm of the American Library Association (ALA) - to formulate “Guidelines for distance learning library services.” The philosophy of the guidelines, among others, assumes the precept that access to adequate library services and resources is essential for the attainment of superior academic skills in post-secondary education, regardless of where students, faculty, and programs are located. Comparing conventional students with distance learners, the “Guidelines” further state that members of the distance learning community are entitled to library services and resources equivalent to those provided for students and faculty in traditional campus settings. As if to solicit appropriate library and information service to distance learners, SCOUNL (2001) – the Society of College, National and University Libraries in the UK - also advocates that higher education in general, and library and information services in particular, should be working towards the provision of flexible, ‘any time, any place’ services for all their users. The SCOUNL advocacy was probably to ensure that distance learners are not left feeling disadvantaged because they have followed this mode of study.

Several authors have also affirmed the need for the existence of an effective and efficient library service as a key requirement of any distance education programme. For instance, Kumiko and Pogroszewski (2015) and Ping (2015), among others, have argued that distance education students are equally entitled to library resources and services as on-campus students. They noted that some academic libraries have continuously been incorporating changes in the ways they provide reference services to accommodate off campus programs; adding that traditional services are blended with the contemporary ones, made possible by the Internet, and more broadly, information and communication technologies.

Regrettably, Nicholas (2010) indicates that although a transformation is going on, there has been a resistance to the shift amongst some librarians. Nicholas believes the reality is that the physical reference desk is becoming obsolete. He rightly observes that students nowadays want services that are fast and efficient, and will assist them to complete their assignments from off campus at any time of the day. He therefore argued that librarians need to embrace change and take advantage of new technologies like social media platforms and other web 2.0 technologies. On the application of Web 2.0 technologies in libraries, Nguyen Cuong Linh (2008) found out that at least two-thirds (32 out of 47) Australian university libraries deployed one or more Web 2.0 technologies. Among Web 2.0 technologies utilized by Australasian university libraries, Rich site summary (RSS) was the most widely applied technology and instant messaging (IM) was the least used technology.

Similarly, at California State University San Marcos (CSUSM), USA, Olivas and Cheng (2012) indicated that the institution’s library began using online screen casting software as a way to quickly create and customize video clips in instant messaging (IM) reference interactions and emails. The use of screen casting allowed librarians to communicate with students as if they were sitting next to each other at a reference desk. It is also remarkable to note the effort of some individual libraries and librarians in applying modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) for reference purposes. For example, in his study conducted amongst academic librarians, Chu (2013) found that a number of academic libraries were using social networking sites. The benefits of using the tools were perceived to outweigh the costs, reported to be minimal. Chu indicated that the findings in the study revealed a change in librarians regarding the use of social networking tools, which appear to be moving towards a favourable trend. Further, according to Murray cited by Chu &

Meulemans (2008), librarians are continually exploring the latest in technologies, including MySpace and Facebook. However, he raised a concern that during his explorations on MySpace and Facebook, he saw more interaction going on between different libraries and librarians than he saw between libraries and students. He argued that interaction between the librarians and students has the potential to be extremely powerful, even if it ends up not reaching the entire constituent of students.

Some efforts are also being put in place in digital reference services in a number of academic libraries in Africa. According to Quibria (2003), the advent of new types of ICT, in conjunction with globalization, has opened up fresh opportunities for economic and social transformations from which both developed and developing countries can immensely benefit. Casting a cursory look at what seems to be the early experience in Southern Africa, Muswazi (2000) observes that the development of digital library initiatives in the region is still in its infancy. He points out that equally important is the fact that regional electricity and telecommunications networks are unstable and unreliable and this results in considerable down time on library systems.

Much later, Ubogu (2006) examined the websites of 23 institutions of higher education in South Africa and noted a number of digital library initiatives, services and systems, amongst which electronic reference service (Ask a librarian) was included. He asserted that the key element in making these initiatives feasible was expertise within the library for the application of new technologies.

In Namibia, Utoni (2014) evaluated the digital reference services at the Polytechnic of Namibia Library and the University of Namibia and found that these libraries used the general digital reference model in providing responses to library users. The study established that the two libraries failed to train librarians working with digital reference services. The study further found that lack of ability to fully demonstrate to users how to access various library services was one of the major challenges that the librarians experienced. The study established that the two libraries did not follow the American Library Association's Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) and the International Federation of Library Association's (IFLA) standards of staffing and training of librarians working with digital reference services.

Whilst assessing the Nigerian environment and, by extension, drawing reference to libraries in Africa, Azubuike (2006) noted that the majority of libraries in Africa cannot effectively play their role in the information society due to the so-called "great African library decline", which is characterized by very poor funding, total lack of or inadequate application of information technology, unavailability of or unreliable access to the Internet, and rusty professional skills and outlook due to inadequate resources for training and development. However, a later study by Eke and Ekwelem (2014) revealed that in Nigeria, 13 (48%) of 27 Federal University libraries in Nigeria are offering some form of digital reference services to their users. According to these authors, twelve (92%) of these libraries are linked to subscribed databases while none had interactive services. The paper concluded by highlighting the need for more academic libraries to digitize their reference services.

Despite the challenges experienced by developing countries noted above, the benefits of digital reference services cannot be over emphasized. The advent of technology, especially social media platforms, has provided developing countries with an opportunity to provide reference service beyond the four walls of the library. The number of students studying at a

distance is also increasing, and the provision of library services to off-campus students adds to the quality of the education provided by the institution and ensures that programs delivered in the distance environment will be comparable to those offered on campus (Lebowitz, 1997)

### **Reference Service at the University of Botswana**

The University of Botswana Library (UBL) mission is to “develop and provide access to quality information and foster a supportive environment which promotes learning, teaching and research capabilities of the University and the nation, and contribute to international scholarly communication” (University of Botswana library, 2014).

The University of Botswana Library (UBL) has a well-established infrastructure in terms of computer and Internet facilities, and the collection is well stocked with print and electronic information resources. As expected, the UBL provides a number of services to students, staff and other members of the library community, including reference assistance. Traditional reference services are blended with contemporary ones. The Library has subject based librarians who offer specialised reference assistance. Hitherto, the reference desk was located at the ground floor near the circulation desk and the librarians took turns providing service at the desk. Of late, the Library has reference desks on all floors of the six-storey building, though not fully functional; the librarians are available at the desks during scheduled hours to assist library patrons. Telephone and direct email reference service is also offered to students and staff. Whilst it is possible to access email from almost everywhere within the campus through the wireless system, the costs of telephoning are usually borne by the students. Whilst the on-campus students enjoy easy access to the Library, at least by email, distance learners may have to take care of every bill to access the reference desk from their various locations. Apart from the main campus, the University of Botswana has two other campuses in the northern part of the country that do not enjoy the wireless facilities of the main campus. Additionally, the Centre from Continuing Education, the outreach arm of the University, has satellite campuses where its part time evening programmes are held.

In a study to determine if the library and information needs of the students in two of the seven satellite centers of the University of Botswana were being adequately met or not, Oladokun (2010a) indicated that the results of the inquiry revealed that the information needs of the students in the outreach arm of the University were not significantly met. Within the limit of the materials or resources available for their use, including public library facilities, the students were asked to indicate whether *all*, *most*, *some* or *none* of their information needs were met. A significant majority (72.5%) of respondents indicated that only some of their information needs were met. Only one respondent (1.3%) indicated that all his/her information needs were met, while another four respondents said that most of their information needs were met. The words of SCONUL (2001) affirming that distance learners will expect libraries to provide services that satisfy most or all of their information and learning support needs appear not to have so much bearing in so far as the findings of this study are concerned.

In another study carried out to determine how distance learners meet and satisfy their information needs, Oladokun (2010b) notes that 57.4% respondents indicated the Internet as the information source that satisfied their information needs. This was followed by the University (of Botswana) Library (51.6%). Other information sources that satisfied them include colleagues (37.1%); email (31.9%); online databases/sources (28.8%); WebCT (27.7%); public library (27.5%); coordinators (18.7%); radio/TV (16.8%) and ‘none’ (those

that indicated no information source satisfied their information needs) (6.1%). Other information sources which some respondents indicated satisfied their needs include books/modules/study guide (n=3); tutors (n=1) and past question papers (n=1). Even though reference service was not specifically suggested, none of the 364 respondents mentioned it as an information source that satisfied their information needs, whereas they mentioned other sources on their own.

Similarly, in another study that involved the students of four tertiary level distance teaching institutions, including the University of Botswana, Oladokun and Aina (2011) established that 45.9% of the respondents accessed information from materials (books) they bought on their own. In order to access information resources and services, 40.9% of the respondents personally traveled to their institution's library. Those who indicated that they accessed or received library and information support through online or electronic supply comprised 32.7% and those who accessed or received library and information support through collaboration with some libraries and information centres comprised 27.5%. Less than a quarter of the respondents (22.0%) indicated that they received the support service through direct supply by post from their institution's library. It is also important to note that quite a substantial number (57%) indicated that their institutions did not provide them with adequate library and information support. Hence, they accessed information resources and services through other libraries.

In a document on the strategic plan of the University of Botswana (2008), six priority areas were outlined, with *improving the student experience* as priority area 5. Among others, Goal 13 of the priority area was to continuously innovate and change to meet identified student needs. In order to improve the student experience and 'to provide an integrated and holistic approach to equipping students with the necessary skills to succeed at university...', reference service in particular was an area the Library earmarked for necessary refurbishment. In this respect, partly to enhance the visibility of the library among its users including the off-campus students, and partly to ensure promptness in attending to the information needs of the users, whether on-campus or off-campus, the University of Botswana Library opted to subscribe to Question Point, a reference service package that was thought would improve the student experience.

Thus in the past few years, the UBL offered reference service through Question Point (*Ask a librarian* service). QP is an e-mail based service designed to assist library users with their specific information needs. The *Ask a librarian* platform had a web form that the library user completes. Within this platform, the user is required to indicate the department they are working with or studying in for easy allocation of queries to the subject librarians responsible for that department. This e-mail based service is linked to all subject librarians, and if a question comes in, all subject librarians received the question and the subject librarian responsible for the department where the question came from would answer. The *Ask a librarian* service was limited to the students and staff UB. Despite the initial promise it offered, it is regrettable to note that for the duration of the period of subscription to Question Point, it could not be ascertained that the new package meant to improve the student experience actually achieved the purpose. The subscription turned out to be a fiasco as the records could not justify any good use of the package. The subscription to QP was consequently discontinued due to low usage by students and staff.

A number of reasons appeared to have joined forces together to make Question Point (QP) unpopular and unable to achieve its purpose. First, the subscription was not given the

required and adequate publicity among the rank and file of library patrons. Thus, marketing of the product was a bit deficient and consequently could not attract the required good use from patrons. Second, there was some element of tardiness in responding to the questions submitted in the QP by the users. It is on record that in some instances, questions dropped in QP were ignored and not responded to. This appeared to generate some reactions. For instance, on several occasions after staff had been trained on the application, the Deputy Director, under whose portfolio the QP was instituted would send memorandum to staff. Two of the many emails sent to staff are presented below

Kindly make it your habit to check question point at least twice a day to find out if any question has been assigned to you. If so, please find time in your busy schedule to answer it as fully as possible within 24 hours (which is the turn- around time we have set ourselves). If for one reason another, you cannot answer it right away, let the customer know that you are working on it and will be responding soon

QOBOSE, E.N. (MR.) email sent to Library\_Senior\_Staff on 12 Sept 2011 @ 7:56 (Permission obtained)

Apparently observing that staff assigned questions were still not yielding or responding to questions asked promptly, another email was sent to ‘colleagues’ within less than two weeks stating

This serves as gentle reminder concerning QP. Our QP performance goal is 24 hours turn around time, which means any question received must be answered within 24 hours and not more. .... We are all expected to answer 100% of questions assigned in a timely manner. However, during the week end, you are expected to log on QP and answer new questions right away (check it at least 4 times). You can only refer if the question is so specialized. My observation is that at present we in most cases fail our customers dismally, it takes far too long to answer these questions. If there is anyone who is still not sure how to log on Question point to answer questions, please let us know now so that this can be addressed as a matter of urgency. We must act professionally and improve on this as an important undertaking....

QOBOSE, E.N. (MR). Email sent to Library\_Senior\_Staff on 23 September 2011 11:59 (Permission obtained)

Perhaps the third reason could be attributed to work overload. The professional librarians who were charged with the responsibility to respond to questions from the QP were not only librarians in the office, they were also lecturers (in the classroom) carrying some teaching loads, with attendant marking of continuous assessment tests, assignments and examination scripts for huge classes of credit earning information literacy skills (ILS) courses.

With the enumerated problems surrounding QP, it could be said that the library patrons who knew of the QP and tried to use it did not have good stories to tell of the new library product and could therefore not sell it to their classmates and other library users. As the stock was taken and the users could not measure with the amount expended, the Library had to chop the product from the menu offered the library patrons. For now, except with pockets of innovation on the part of a few librarians, the reference service largely remains traditional. How will the distance learners be effectively assisted in Botswana and indeed the rest of Africa?



## **Social media application**

In his discourse whilst writing the foreword in *Social Media Strategies for Dynamic Library Service Development*, Mutula (2015) citing André-Michel Essoungou (2010) from Capurro (2013), alerts that ‘A social media boom begins in Africa: Using mobile phones, Africans join the global conversation . . .’. Using Facebook as an example of the platforms mostly visited, the alert notes that ‘Facebook—the major social media platform worldwide and currently the most visited website in most of Africa—has seen massive growth on the continent.’ Constine (2014) also asserts that the takeaway from Facebook’s announcement is that it now has 100 million active users in Africa, and 80% of those come on mobile. That 100 million makes up 50% of all Africans connected to the Internet.

Social media is seen as a very dynamic aspect of the mass media that has not only grown in popularity, but has also become the mainstream; with its alluring magnetic appeal the platform provides its numerous users with profound and rich experience in interaction, partnership and collaboration (Oladokun, 2015). With handheld mobile or portable devices such as smart (cell) phones, laptops, iPods etc., that are within easy reach of students in this new age, and the prevalent social media, a library should be able to utilize and exploit the platform to its full advantage, especially in reference service.

Social media can provide libraries with the opportunity to reach out to their customers and also give the customers a chance to interact with the library. Social networking tools also enable librarians to identify library patrons on the social cyberspace and pro-actively provide the type of information that would normally result from reference service (Gbadamosi, 2012). These tools are not only used as a tool for promoting library services, programs and new resources, but they can also be used for reference service.

Statistics have shown that there is a tremendous use of social media sites by the users all around the world and Africa especially, as earlier observed. At the University of Botswana, students have access to free Internet through the university libraries, computer laboratories and Wi-Fi on campus. The library staff also has access to personal computers with full internet access. Research has also shown that a substantial number of students now have access to mobile devices and smart phones in addition to other internet linked computers.

In Botswana, the government is committed to improving the lives of people through technology as enshrined in the country’s vision of 2016. The number of mobile subscriptions has exploded over the last decade, reaching a penetration rate of 157.8 per 100 people in 2010 (Business Monitor International, 2015). The recent introduction of competition into the fixed line and Internet provision markets will also likely encourage a reduction in tariffs , as experienced in the mobile market following the entrance of a third mobile operator in 2008. Internet usage rates are likely to pick up with the expansion of 3G Internet subscriptions. Currently, there are 35.7 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants, up from 17.5 in 2013 and expected to grow further in the medium term (Business Monitor International, 2015).

The growing mobile internet penetration level in Botswana therefore creates an enabling environment for University of Botswana librarians to utilise social networking platforms to provide online reference service to library patrons. Adoption of these technologies will enable Librarians to respond to as many reference questions every day over the Internet, especially from students enrolled on the distance mode of study, as may be raised. Moyo (2004) indicates that digital reference service will also offer the following benefits:

- service will be accessible wherever there is Internet access;
- capability to reach both remote and local library users;
- increased accessibility of librarians to library users;
- point-of-need assistance to users;
- convenience for those users who cannot otherwise come to the library (e.g. mobility impaired, invalids, etc.);
- expanded scope of library services while extending hours of service (facilitates 24/7 service);
- additional communication option for library users;
- opportunity to market the library to virtual communities and,
- meeting of user expectations (library users expect the library to offer competitive online services like banking, shopping, investment and so on).

The numerous benefits of digital reference services can be derived from the application of any of the platforms discussed below, and libraries in Africa and Botswana in particular can learn from the applications.

### **Synchronous Messaging (IM)**

More widely known as instant messaging (IM), synchronous messaging allows real-time text communication between individuals. Khan and Bhatti (2012), note that libraries have begun employing it to provide "chat reference" services, where patrons can synchronously communicate with librarians much as they would in a face-to-face reference context. They further note that the text-based nature of IM applications is changing into a more multi-media experience, where audio and video messaging is becoming more common. The application of Skype and ooVoo, for example, offers an audio-visual advantage. Even as they provide more multi-sensory experiences, they can be made available throughout the library's web-presence. As Khan and Bhatti observed, libraries can place links to their chat reference services within the resources themselves, even within the articles in subscription databases. This will afford distance patrons the same experience as patrons who are physically present in the library.

A study conducted by Olivas and Chan (2012), at California State University San Marcos, found that since the introduction of chat reference, there has been a high use of IM reference service, and the data shows strong levels of satisfaction among students.

### **Social Networking sites (Facebook, MySpace, Twitter)**

Facebook, MySpace and Twitter are three prominent social networking sites. Lenhart and Madden (2007) found that 67% of young adults aged 18–32 used social networking sites; Rideout et. al. (2010) found that 53% of 15–18 year olds used social networking websites. An average of 48 minutes is spent per day on the sites (Oladokun, 2015). According to Onyango (2012), the dramatic penetration of the social networking activity in Africa was made possible by the fact that 57% of tweets are emanating from mobile devices. There is a significant change to the figures in the study of Farooqi, et. al. (2013) which found that of the 1000 participants whose age ranged from 18–25 years, 640 or 64% of them were using Facebook daily for around 3–4 hours. It is palpable that within these age brackets are university students doing their diploma, degree or higher degree programmes either full-time, part-time or by distance delivery mode. One feature that endears Facebook to its numerous

adherents is instant messaging/chat and apps. Besides, apart from allowing its users to customize their profile, Facebook allows them to hang photos on their 'walls' or upload in e-albums and post videos. A librarian can open a Facebook page, which is free, and customize the use for members of his or her constituencies.

Dickson and Holley (2010), observe that as a result of its strong user base among college students, Facebook appears to be the most logical social networking web site to be used by an academic library. Even though recent discussions about social networking focus on Facebook rather than MySpace, Chu & Meulemans (2008) allude to "point-of-need/just-in-time" reference assistance and assert that both MySpace and Facebook can indicate if a person is online and available. With the two platforms, it is possible for students to easily find if a particular librarian is available to assist them. Drawing experience from some occurrences, Dickson & Holley (2010) indicate that some Library Facebook pages incorporate a number of functions in addition to the "ask a librarian" feature. This includes a catalog search function, Lib Guides, a World Cat search, and links to all essential library web pages. Essentially, the goal of creating a Facebook page is to provide customized library services within Facebook itself rather than merely redirecting users to the official web site.

Twitter is a micro-blogging network of real-time posts short messages or 'tweets' that are limited to 140 characters or less. It can be used to send messages to family, friends, anyone who subscribes or just the general Web community at large. Whilst Twitter is used by many people for many different things, a library or librarian can adopt it for reference service purposes. Oladokun (2015) asserts that a library that will move with the demand of modern times will not rule out the use of the platform to fraternize with its technology savvy users and address their needs. He adds that in using Twitter in the Library, an online community of students can be created where questions relevant to library services and resources can be raised and addressed, where announcements, possibly on new arrivals or useful materials that can help students write their assignments and other services, can be made. More specifically, a subject librarian can customize the platform exclusively for his/her clientele and address their reference/information needs.

## **Blogs**

Blogs have several potential uses by academic libraries. Blogs can be used to communicate library events, publicize information resources, and offer subject-related reference services (Zhipping and Yan, 2009). Microblogging, which is a newer blog option made popular by Twitter, allows librarians to go where the students are located. Unlike traditional blogs, Librarians can interact and respond to student comments without the requirement that students visit the official library web site (Dickson and Holley, 2010). However, for blogs to be an effective method of interaction, librarians need to respond quickly to any comments posted on the library account.

Pomerantz & Stutzman (2004) assert that blogs are a natural fit for use in library reference service, especially with the use of Lyceum, a software package for developing blogospheres. They indicate that blogs have to date been used by libraries primarily as high-tech bulletin boards. They however point out that blogs may be fruitfully used by libraries for other, more interactive purposes, but they propose the use of blogs specifically for use in reference services.

Writing further on possible use of blogs for reference service, Pomerantz & Stutzman (2004) cited Pomerantz et. al. (2004) have presented a 5-step model of the processes involved in providing digital reference service. One of the steps mentioned is tracking, which is quantitative and qualitative monitoring of repeat questions for trends. Another step mentioned is Resource Creation, which is seen as the creation of new materials for inclusion in the collection maintained by the reference service, either directly by archiving previously answered questions, or indirectly through the use of tracking data to indicate areas in which collections of information resources should be developed.

When blogs are used for reference service, more and more individuals make contributions to the conversation initiated by the original question, and a thread grows. As the thread grows, it comes to contain more and more information related to the original question, and from more and more individuals “perspectives.” In this way, the value of the thread increases as a response to the original question, and over time it comes to contain broader coverage of the topic at hand and a more complete response (Pomerantz & Stutzman, 2004).

### **Skype/ooVoo**

According to Barnhart and Pierce (2011), video communication tools, such as Skype and ooVoo, are being used for professional communications in both higher education and industry, and have already been piloted as reference tools by some libraries. According to Olivas and Chan (2013), the California State University San Marcos education librarian began using Skype as a way to meet ‘face-to-face’ with distance education masters and doctoral students who could not come to campus because of how far they lived or because of time constraints. They indicate that like Google talk and other voice-over Internet protocol tools, Skype offers voice and video capabilities enabling the users to have a conversation with each other during real time.

Barnhart and Pierce (2011), citing Booth (2008), write about Ohio University’s experiments with creating a Skype based reference service. He further points out that Apple’s latest mobile device, the iPhone 4, with its Face Time video communication application, suggests that video communication may soon become widely available on mobile platforms. Face Time allows two iPhone callers to not only hear each other, but to also see each other, something which has until recently been reserved for communication devices in science fiction settings. Over time, tools that allow for sharing data interactively and face-to-face interaction will help to address many of the concerns about the quality of digital reference services.

According to Cohen and Burkhardt (2010), the Champlain College’s librarians introduced Skype based reference services at their Dublin study abroad campus. This service allowed them to offer reference services as well as provide library instruction. As noted by Barnhart and Pierce (2011), there are two distinct aspects to reference work. One is more synchronous and focused on the transaction, usually in the form of a question initiated by a patron with an information need. The second, and more asynchronous aspect, is the management and creation of guidance or instructional tools that help patrons use information resources independently. What is common in both is a need to make these services visible and accessible when and where patrons need them.

Through Skype based reference service, the Champlain College librarian had a session with a student who had emailed asking for a personalized session. Using the file sharing

functionality, the student shared his assignment with the librarian, which enabled him to ask in-depth, specific questions during the 35-minute call. He also shared his outline and introduction with the librarian so that she could see where he already had done research and where more information was needed. Using the screen sharing functionality, the librarian walked the student through a number of searches in the databases. The librarian and the student were able to read abstracts together, discuss their relevance to the topic, review bibliographies, and explore new search terms for improved searching (Cohen and Burkhardt, 2010). Though they alert that a Skype-based reference service takes time to build, it is worth trying. Like any other new initiative, encouraging results may not come with immediacy. Having overly high expectations can lead to disappointment or premature perceptions of failure.

## **Conclusion**

From all available evidence, it is obvious that there has not been any outstanding performance in reference service not only to the campus based staff and students of the University of Botswana, but also to its dispersed distance learners. But as a service agency, the library should be seen to dutifully reflect on the aspiration of its parent institution, and appropriately address the teaching, learning and research needs of staff and students, regardless of their locations. Whether an institution runs a single or dual mode system, a library should effectively and efficiently carry out its obligation and take the library to the students and meet their information needs. Though some challenges may be visible, they are not insurmountable. The need for the librarians to be swift footed, mobile and virtual appears to be the call of the present age. As the students adopt mobile devices for their various needs, libraries and reference librarians, in particular, must also step up the pace with the application of instant messaging (IM), social media platforms, Skype, ooVoo, short message service (SMS), and blogs, among others, and serve the patrons' reference menu on their devices anywhere, anytime. In the appropriate use of the facilities described above, the following recommendations should go at length to keep some of the challenges at bay.

- Though quite a sizeable number of the librarians were trained traditionally trained, they should be encouraged not to continuing living under the illusion that it is a Herculean task to understand the use and application of various ICTs.
- Adequate training for the librarians on the use of modern devices would disabuse their minds of technophobic tendencies. The librarians should rise to the challenge, be willing to be trained and put new knowledge into practice.
- Though a handful of subject librarians in UBL operate faculty based Facebook pages, they are not fully utilized. An appropriate marketing strategy should attend all the various services that the library has to offer – beginning from the time of orientation given to new students, to the teaching time of information literacy skills (ILS) course.
- If not every time the library opens, specific days and times when a librarian can be available for live chat on skype, ooVoo, Facebook, IM etc. can be set and communicated to the students so that they are aware of the meeting times with their librarians.
- So long as the University of Botswana or any institutions offer some distance learning programmes, there is need for a dedicated and innovative librarian to be put in place to assist the learners from scattered and isolated locations.
- Use of short message service (SMS), email facilities etc. on cell/mobile phones can also offer some invaluable assistance.

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