MECHANISM OF THE VIRTUAL REFERENCE SERVICE @ GULBARGA UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

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Abstract

The libraries have been posed with a serious challenge to present evidence justifying the value of the services they offer, as well as for planning and decision-making about the future for its cost effectiveness. Attempts have been made to present the issues that can affect the success with which librarians can extend virtual reference services in an academic environment. Virtual reference services is no more complex than the other types of library and information services, may be at the beginning it may take time to use this sort of e-services but in due course of time this would yield fruitful results.

Keywords: Virtual Reference Services, Reference Service, Instant Messaging Services

1.   Introduction

Developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), networked systems, and especially the advent of the World Wide Web have driven rapid changes in academic libraries, in which almost every aspect of library work has been dramatically influenced by the Web enabled enhanced access to collections and services. ICT is a revolutionary innovation across all sectors of society, providing a wide range of services, like e-business, e-learning, e-health as well as empowerment through information. Libraries are the preservers and disseminators of information and hence, the role of libraries is central focal point in catering to the timely needs of the users in the networked environ. But today, academic libraries are struggling to keep their place in the face of emerging digital technology that has revolutionized not only the way information is packaged, processed, stored, and disseminated, but also how users seek and access information. Academic libraries no longer restrict themselves to print services such as collection development, cataloguing and classification, circulation and reference services, current awareness, selective dissemination, and other bibliographic services, but have extended their efforts to interdisciplinary concepts of Information technological gadgets, management and psychology.

In this context, there is a serious challenge to the planners, policy makers and teachers of Library and Information Science Educators to critically think as to how best the existing libraries could be converted as Learning Resource Centres to support educational, social, cultural activities of the academicians and contribute to the information needs to support learning, teaching and research activities by providing e-resources, indigenous databases, research productivity, learning course instructional materials, academic computing software's in a networked environ using ICT. The Learning Resources Centres have to be innovative in nature to keep their users intact with right kind of information at the right time and right place and to their desktop. Web enabled applications of the Internet technology have been a great strength in extending web-based services from the library portal as a real time service provider. According to Lebowitz (1997) "... as academic institutions

extend their educational offerings beyond the campus, to rural, suburban and urban locations, they need to consider ... the role that the library plays in the education process". This cannot be achieved unless information technology is successfully utilized for rendering web-enabled services and thus reference services as a personal assistance to the users in a e-environment becomes significant.

2.   Virtual Reference Service

Virtual reference has grown from a topic of largely theoretical conversation to a very real and increasingly basic library service. At the time of the first Virtual Reference Desk Conference in 1999, though excitement was high, there was no easy way for libraries to start a new virtual reference program. Today, libraries have a growing number of virtual reference options. Libraries can provide virtual reference by building a platform from scratch, using a specialized software package, or adapting a general tool such as QuestionPoint Service of OCLC, USA, instant messaging (IM) softwares etc. Librarians can take advantage of these real-time communications tools for virtual reference services.

Virtual reference can deliver a reference service by electronic means, from asynchronous via e-mail and web forms to real-time via chat, web push, etc. An ideal Virtual Reference Service (VRS) should provide professional reference service to patrons anywhere, any time (24X7) for one tone Virtual reference services specific time could be allotted. Such goals might be achieved, however, if large groups of libraries collaborate to provide support for virtual reference. This means that a collaborative virtual reference service (CVRS) would allow libraries not only to increase their hours of service, but also to share experiences and exchange knowledge with one another (Jin, Lin and Guo, 2005).

The development of Virtual reference services have begun by establishing library websites of their own. It should be noted that, Library website is a mandatory for providing this sort of virtual reference services to the users. Hence, it does not necessarily mean that, the librarians have to design or develop library websites, but they can outsource for designing the website, but the content should be of librarian's domain as librarians are content managers.

Dr S R Ranganathan, father of library science has emphasized long back on reference services and now due to developments in web 2.0, Virtual reference service can be effectively rendered remotely at the desk top of the users. In true sense, Virtual Reference service can be established or rendered in two ways i.e., 1) E-mail and 2) Chat; leaving apart other modes like telephonic, fax etc.

Librarians can establish a virtual reference service with relatively little expense or technical expertise for extending virtual reference services using Instant Messaging tools like Google Talk or Yahoo Messenger etc. In India, Question Point service from OCLC, USA has been rendered as 'ASK a Librarian' in which three universities in India have been part of Question9Point Projecat i.e. Delhi University, Delhi (www.crl.du.ac.in); Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai (www.tiss.edu) and Gulbarga University, Gulbarga (www.guglibrary.net). QuestionPoint is a unique virtual reference service, supported by global network of cooperating libraries worldwide, as well as an infrastructure of software tools and communications.

One can opt Question Point service rendered as 'Ask a Librarian' from OCLC, Ohio, USA or libraries can establish virtual reference for their users by creating a link at their respective library website by means of e-mail/chat/phone/fax etc. using the net applications.

The snapshots of Virtual Reference service established at Gulbarga University Library, Karnataka has been shown below.
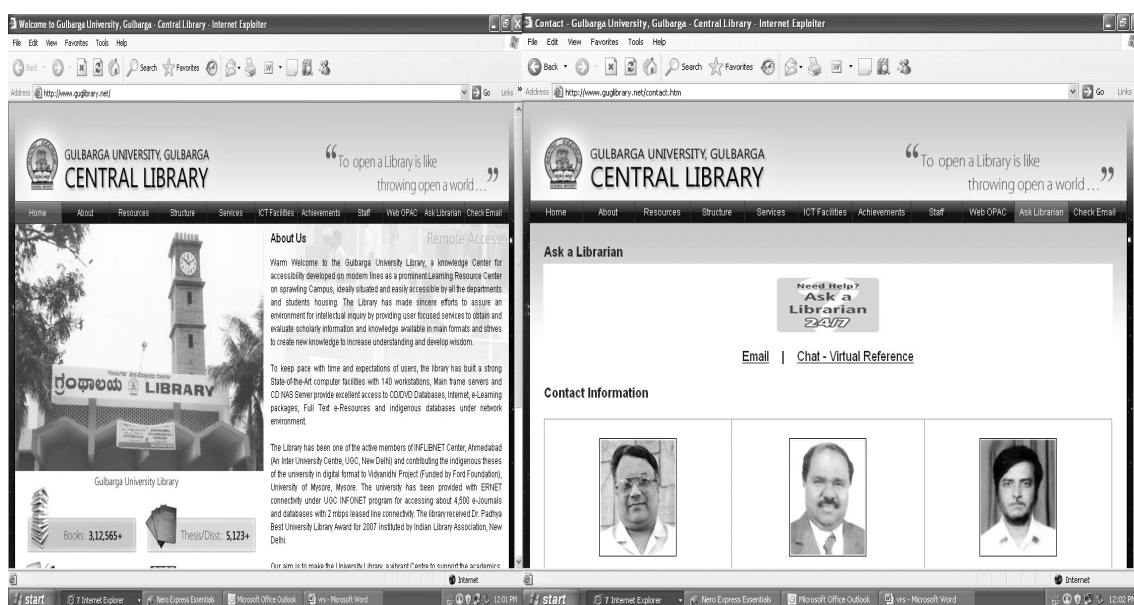

The Gulbarga University Library can be accessed at www.guglibrary.net and from this one can click on Ask Librarian, which shows two options i.e.

- Email

- Chat-Virtual Reference Service

If one clicks on Email option, following format will appear, wherein user has to enter name, question for which he/ she wants to seek help from library and e-mail ID and then click on submit. Once the question with details have been submitted, it will automatically stored in QuestionPoint service, OCLC and a alert from QuestionPoint will be received to the University Librarian i.e. moderator which will inform that a query/ question has been received from the users. User need not necessarily be a user within university but any user from the world and at present over 4000 libraries across the globe participate in providing Virtual Reference through OCLC QuestionPoint service either by e-mail or chat – Virtual Reference Service (at fixed hours) from anywhere (24X7).
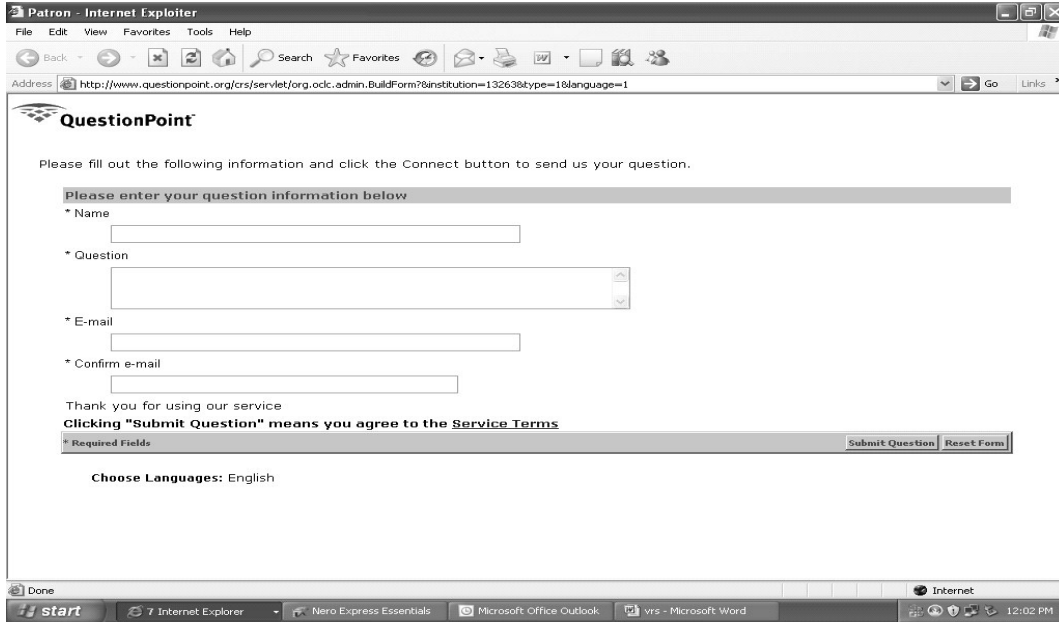
After this, University Librarian i.e. moderator would open www.questionpoint.org with his ID and password.
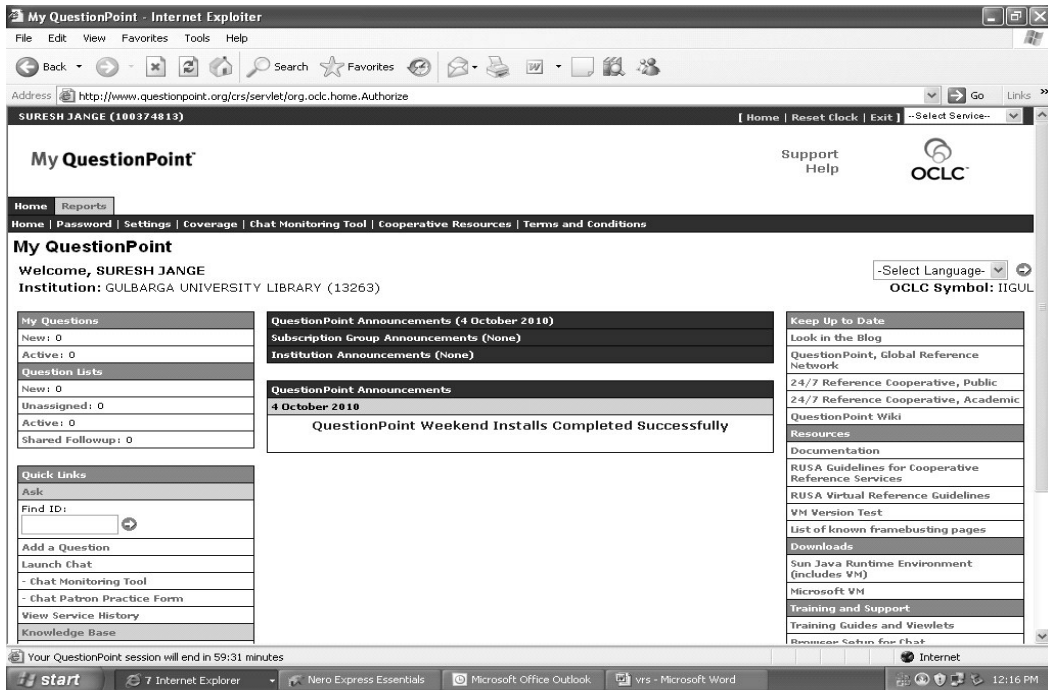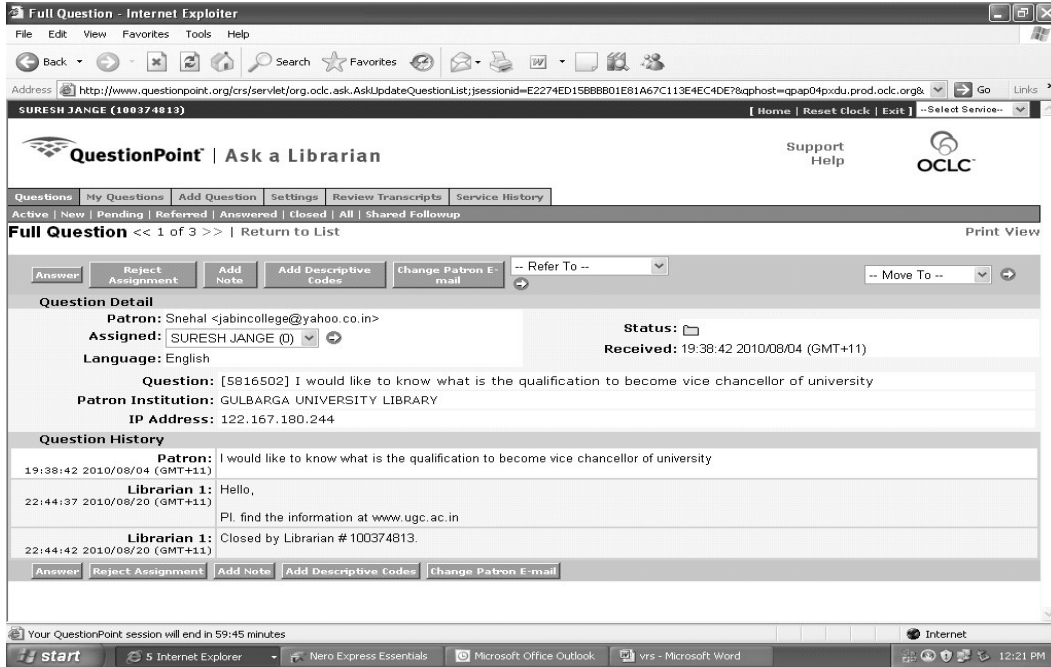
In the process of answering the question, University Librarian can assign the responsibility to any of the library staff either within library or outside the library to respond to the question. For lengthy answers, the Librarian can also attach a file.

Gulbarga University has also set up Instant messaging Virtual reference service by using Meebo – Chat service.

www.meebo.com	Login for Chat
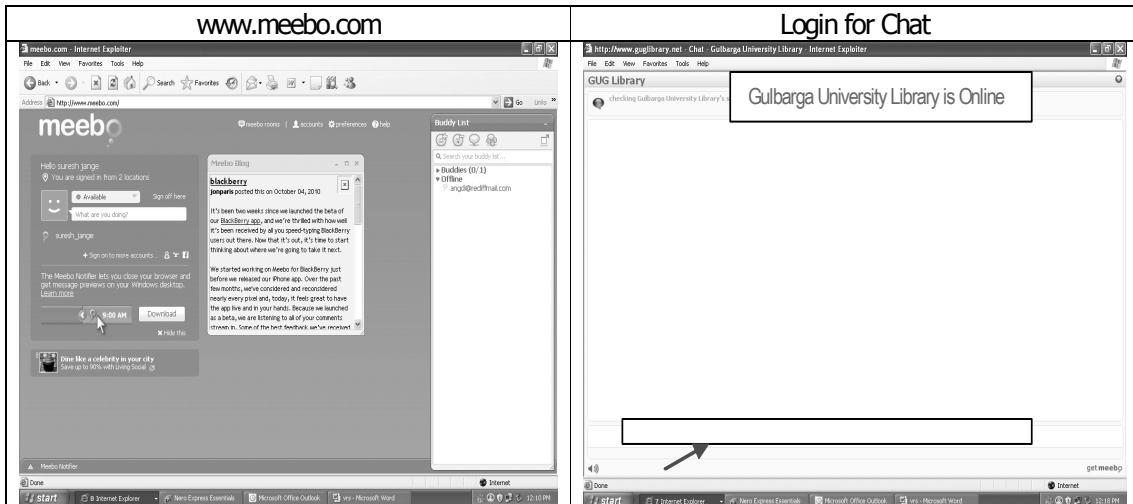
Under this instant chat service, every day the Librarian has to login chat service @ www.meebo.com providing login ID and password. This becomes available for public wherein the user can put a query at the box as shown in the snap shot. The users can interact and can obtain answers clarified instantly.

3. Conclusion

Within the limitations of the library system, the librarians have to be positive in their approach to map with developments in ICTs to provide timely services to the users and thereby enhance the image of librarianship too. Although these Virtual reference services rendered at Gulbarga University are not new or unique, rather it's a good beginning. This sort of e-reference services can be planned and definitely, there is nothing wrong in seeking IT professional's help in setting up the same, may be for designing website or chat services, if librarians are not able to do that and they are required to administer to ensure innovation for a better tomorrow.

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