

An Overview of Development of Reference Service in Libraries

Kim Ji Hyon

The great leader Comrade **Kim Il Sung** said as follows.

“Libraries and reading rooms should be well-stocked.

Since all our people study, this is very important.” (“**KIM IL SUNG WORKS**” Vol. 33 P. 423)

The library reference service, which emerged in the 19th century with the development of libraries, has been changed continuously as one of major service functions of libraries.

The library reference service is considered the information consulting process in which the librarians recommend, interpret, evaluate and use the information resources in order to satisfy the information requirements of readers.

It is very important to study the characteristics of reference service in libraries in terms of the process of development so as to make it possible to understand the essential contents and predict the future development of library reference service to some degree.

In terms of the process of development of reference service in libraries, reference service has some characteristics as follows:

Firstly, the library reference service emerged as both school education and libraries developed, being related to each other closely and directly.

The school education hadn't been spread widely all over the world and the concept of the free public libraries hadn't been established until the concept of library reference service was created in 1876.

The creation of library reference service was directly related to both establishments of free universal education and free public libraries.

The concept of free universal education, no matter what class, religion, or race, made it possible for all school-age children to receive the free public education.

The development of free universal education brought the advanced literacy rate and created better workers on the whole though there were some differences between regions.

As the universal education was becoming the norm, the free public libraries were established and spread rapidly in such a way to stimulate the development of libraries and to contribute to the development of universal education.

The reference service in libraries was the direct result from the establishment of free universal education and public libraries.

Universal education taught the public to read and public libraries offered material to read. The public who received the universal education knew how to read, but didn't know how to use a library. As the social demand for the universal education increased and the more people received it, the number of people who came into the library rose, which made it vital and important to teach the library users how to use the library. Finally, this resulted in the establishment of library reference service.

It is obvious that library reference service was established for purpose to contribute to the

education of the people who used the library.

Library reference service has covered several stages of change since its establishment, but it has held on to its functional features which include answering substantive questions, instructing users in the selection of appropriate tools and techniques for finding information, conducting searches on behalf of the patron, directing users to the location of library resource, assisting in the evaluation of information.

Secondly, reference service is being changed from the way of service in which libraries users depend on reference librarians to the full to the way in which they get necessary reference information even on their own.

Library reference service has developed continuously for almost 140 years since its foundation and in particular, there was an expansion of reference service in libraries for some reasons after the mid -1940's.

By this time, with establishment of many new libraries, expansion of the buildings and services of libraries and the explosion of knowledge and publication, library users needed more assistance. In the late 1940s and 1950s, public libraries expanded telephone reference services and the special reference collections were established for this service in the larger libraries.

In the 1950s and 1960s, there was an increase in subject departments in medium and large public libraries with reference staff provided in each area, as well as in large academic libraries, as collections grew and were dispersed among locations.

In particular, with the great influx of students in the 1960s, academic libraries began to offer bibliographic instruction on a larger scale.

Another reference service developed in the 1960s was the establishment of Information and Referral centres(I&R), which were found most often in urban libraries and provided with practical information relating to basic human needs for food, clothing, shelter, employment, and health services.

This reference service is considered the way of service which depends on reference librarians to the full.

In the 1960s and 1970s, public library systems and other types of libraries began to provide advanced and specialized reference service to member libraries and their users.

The most radical change in reference service came from the advances in computer and communication technology.

In the early 1960s, libraries began using computers for their indexing and abstracting services by storing and connecting bibliographic information to machine readable magnetic tape.

During the 1970s, with the development of storage technology, reference services improved greatly, and by the mid-1970's the new online service appeared as vast stores of bibliographic information could be accessed and efficiently processed.

But access to online information resources required the use of trained intermediaries - online searchers - who quickly assumed a prominent role in libraries.

By 1980s, reference service was changed distinctly from the print-oriented reference into electronic reference.

The Internet, which emerged in the early 1990s, brought about a radical change in library reference service, and reference transactions could now take place outside the walls of the library.

In particular, with the radical development of the Internet technology, the traditional reference service turned into the new one by which library users could get information if necessary.

People could use library services by e-mail anywhere at any time and reference librarians could not only interact with patrons on the Internet but also extend their search for needed information anywhere in the world.

Library patrons began using the Internet to acquire the necessary information and the traditional reference service, which depended on reference librarian to the full, was in decline.

Reference librarians began spending more time instructing patrons in the use of information technology and less time trying to track down specific pieces of information.

Today, library reference service has turned into the one by which library users can get information on their own without depending on reference librarians to the full, and helping patrons to ask better questions, evaluate information, and understand information structures - in short, teaching information literacy skills – has become an important role of reference librarians.

Thirdly, the actual functions of reference librarians have changed very little over years in spite of radical development of library technology.

Samuel Green, who proposed the idea of reference service in his paper “Personal Intercourse and Relation between Librarians and Readers in Popular Libraries”, presented a lot of examples about reference service in which four functions of the reference librarian were embedded.

1. Teach people how to use the library and its resources.
2. Answer readers’ questions which range from simple factual queries to in-depth research projects.
3. Aid the reader in the selection of good books, recommending material that fit each reader’s interests and ability.
4. Promote the library within the society and generate support from the society, which would lead to more use of library and greater financial support.

The development of library technology has brought a great change for nearly 140 years in terms of scale, types and contents of reference service since the reference service was founded.

A century after Green first discussed reference service, Thomas Galvin listed the functions of the modern reference librarian as follows:

1. Assist and instruct in the use of the library.
2. Assist in the identification and selection of books, journals, and other materials relevant to a particular information need.
3. Provide library users with simple and factual answers.

More recently, in her dictionary of librarianship, Joan Rertz has defined reference service as including but not limited to answering substantive questions, instructing users in the selection of appropriate tools and techniques for finding information, conducting searches on behalf of the patron, directing users to the location of library resources, assisting in the evaluation of information, referring patrons to resources outside the library when appropriate, keeping reference statistics, and

participating in the development of the reference collection.

As is evident from the above-mentioned, the nature of reference librarians hasn't been fundamentally changed whereas reference service in libraries has been changed a lot with the development of library technology.

Thus, library users consistently rate reference service as one of the most important features of the library even today.

Reference libraries in the future will continue to teach user about information, answer questions, recommend sources, and promote the library within the society.

We should make a great contribution to the building of a powerful socialist nation by perceiving the importance and significance of reference service in libraries and solving properly the theoretical and practical problems to develop further reference service.