

International Best Practices of Service-Friendly Librarians: Fresh perceptions from a year-long comparative analysis of U.S. & Asian-Pacific Libraries

John Hickok
Librarian/Instructor
Coordinator of Library Instruction
California State University Fullerton (U.S.A.)

Introduction

Libraries offer many forms of service to their clients/patrons: circulation services, catalog/database services, operational services (e.g., audiovisual viewing, photocopying, etc.) and much more. But a service with the greatest interaction between librarian and client is that of Reference & Instruction. In this form of service—"Reference" as individual teaching, and "Instruction" as group teaching—librarians have the opportunity to exhibit the best of service-friendly assistance.

However, there are challenges to giving superb Reference & Instruction service. During 2005 and 2006, the author of this paper (hereafter "I", using the first-person) conducted a year-long cross-cultural study of Reference & Instruction services in all 15 countries of East & Southeast Asia, comparing them with Reference & Instruction services in the U.S. The results were fascinating! There were many common challenges, cutting across all borders and cultures. Yet these challenges stood as opportunities as well—opportunities for innovation and change.

In this paper I will discuss 5 major challenges to superb Reference & Instruction service, with examples—of both trials and creative solutions—from both sides of the Pacific. While not every solution is perfectly applicable to every library, the ideas presented here should, at the least, provide interest in making innovations to Reference & Instruction service.

Challenge 1: limited resources

In hundreds of interviews, a common concern I heard was "How can we provide superb Reference & Instruction service when we don't have the resources or budget we really need? It is frustrating to give friendly service when we cannot meet clients' needs." This is indeed a challenge, especially for those in developing countries...or even in developed countries, when the budgets are simply not enough. Some examples:

- An academic library: most current encyclopedia- 25 years old (developing Asian country)
- A school library: yes, books...but limited hours/no librarian (developed Asian country)
- An academic library: not enough funds for electronic databases (all countries)

I would encourage librarians and library directors to not be overly discouraged. In my travels, I saw dozens upon dozens of encouraging examples of creative ways of meeting challenges. Some examples:

- A library director in Indonesia—displeased with the costs of official plastic magazine jackets—used bulk plastic from a local plastics company to make beautiful equivalents at a fraction of the cost
- Librarians in several Philippine academic libraries, knowing that not every specialty database could be afforded, offer *Pathfinder* guides, with next-best free Web resources¹
- A group of libraries in Thailand formed the "Thai University E-Books Consortium" to buy 3,000 e-books from OCLC²

Challenge 2: Clients not using Reference & Instruction services

A common phenomenon I found in my Asia research—but present in the U.S. too—is in academic libraries: students not using (or taking advantage of) the Reference & Instruction services available. That is, when needing to find information, students will often just look on the Internet, ask friends, or just rely on textbook sources/referrals only. Similarly, library instruction sessions are not well attended unless made mandatory. In one (unpublished) study conducted by an Indonesian Librarian, librarians ranked last—behind the Internet, friends, and instructors—for consulting to find information. Why is this so? Why do valuable information resources the library has go unused (or underused) by students? There are a few factors that contribute to this.

- The nature of K-12 and undergraduate education. Throughout Asia, standardized testing is prevalent. Students often memorize only what is needed for tests, without regard to supplemental reading. Independent research (e.g., independent research papers) are not common until the final undergraduate thesis or graduate study.
- An overemphasis/overconfidence/over reliance on the Internet. I observed this phenomenon in the U.S., and saw it in the technology-rich libraries of Singapore, Hong Kong, Korea, etc. (and really, *all* academic libraries).
- A negative stereotype of librarians' status or usefulness. Unfortunately, in some developing countries, "librarians" in school, public, or even academic libraries have not received formal training. Clients experience this, and therefore stereotype all librarians as not that helpful.

So what can be done to face this challenge? This challenge actually becomes an exciting opportunity: an opportunity for a vigorous marketing campaign of the library's Reference & Instruction services. Yes, marketing. Market and advertise your service. Likewise, an intense PR campaign on the professionalism and expertise of trained librarians can be launched. Some examples:

- A library in Singapore made its Reference Desk *massively* prominent, such that all students couldn't escape it and its inviting signage
- Many U.S. libraries have successfully encouraged administrators/instructors to require more independent research (and library sessions!) at the secondary/undergraduate levels.³
- A public library in Taiwan (Taipei Public) launched a terrific "Google or Librarian?" banner campaign to stress the value of librarians
- The image of librarians has increased as more librarians are becoming session instructors (Info Lit training sessions) instead of just passively sitting at desks.⁴

Challenge 3: Not "reaching" clients to help them become Information Literate

During my research, I met hundreds of superb, highly trained and enthusiastic librarians with fantastic service-friendly skills. But many admitted disappointment of not being able to "reach" more of their client-base; e.g., more of a school or university's overall student population. This is related to Challenge 2 and the nature of education: if students have no "assignment" or reason to use library resources, then why bother going there at all? Consider these:

- While in Japan I interviewed students in the library with "What library resources are you using today?" Frequently the answer was "None; I just need a place to study."
- While in Korea I interviewed students with "Where would you find information about ___?" Frequently, the answer was "Naver" [Korean search engine, like *Google*]

- In nearly every country (and the U.S. too), I interviewed students on if they knew about the resources their library had. Frequently the answer was: “Not really; I had a brief library tour my first year, but that’s all.”

So what can be done to better reach your total client base? How can you extend your service-friendly expertise to *beyond* the one-client-at-a-time at the Reference Desk? There are many exciting endeavors that have been launched in both the U.S. and Asia. For example:

- Several universities have launched required library instruction classes: e.g., the University of Malaysia’s: required Freshman IL course⁵
- Several universities have follow-up library sessions, besides first year orientations; e.g. several Manila universities’ 3rd/4th year thesis research training (Lyceum, CE, UST, etc.).
- A U.S. library launched a “roaming librarian” program, where librarians would proactively (without solicitation) approach students on computers with friendly tips

Challenge 4: Librarians’ expertise/specializations not always available or utilized

A frequent challenge I documented was librarians—particularly those newly trained in library schools—with great energy and enthusiasm, placed in responsibilities where their skills were not being utilized. Or, conversely, where clients needed subject-based help, and no librarians with subject specialization were readily available. Namely,

- In China, I frequently observed librarians with subject expertise “hidden” in back offices (doing research for faculty) rather than available for students.
- In Vietnam I frequently observed librarians assigned to clerical duties only, rather than proactive, client-interfacing assistance
- In Thailand, LIS students typically major in LIS *exclusively*, from undergraduate to graduate, providing no other subject breadth.

These challenges can also be turned into opportunities. Library directors who allow creative freedom among enthusiastic librarians create a win-win situation: the interest/motivation of the librarians remains high, and the library gets incredibly innovative features. Similarly, library directors who encourage subject specialty training among their librarians (either time for concurrent degree study, or in-service training) again create a win-win situation. Faculty are far more likely to encourage their students to use the library when they know there is a librarian knowledgeable in their field there. Some examples of creating opportunities are:

- As mentioned previously, many Philippine universities prepare subject guides (Pathfinders) to highlight subject specialization
- Many U.S. libraries have online subject guides created/maintained by librarians. Sometimes the librarians have degrees in these subjects, but sometimes not—they have just adopted them and immersed themselves in the resources of that field.⁶
- A library director in Hong Kong gave her librarians creative freedom to produce a fantastic online library tutorial. This would have never been possible if they were confined to their “assigned duties only.”⁷

Challenge 5: When traditions become inflexible

Traditions can be good and positive things. For instance, we, as a library profession, have the tradition of providing helpful Reference assistance. That is a tradition to be championed! But sometimes certain traditions that libraries and librarians grow accustomed to can actually become impediments to progress; they can become inflexible to innovation. Some examples:

- In Japan, many public and academic libraries had the tradition of mandatory rotation of librarians to different departments/duties every few years. Although this was done for the concept of cross-training, it actually forced librarians into unhappy positions they had no interest in
- In many libraries—both in Asia and still in the U.S.—the tradition of the “total silence” library and the “stern, shush-ing librarian” still exist. While quietness can certainly be expected in parts of a library, active learning and discussing should be welcomed—even encouraged—in other parts
- In Thailand, China, and several other countries, the tradition of library directors being outside faculty members—with busy teaching schedules and only 2-year appointments—rather than a permanent librarian, persists. Even though many admit the problems with this arrangement, the tradition seems ingrained.

Can traditions like these—that limit, rather than expand, library service—be amended. Yes. It may take rallying many supporters...or lobbying key leaders...or preparing concrete-evidence reports. But with effort, inflexible traditions can be revised. Some inspiring examples of this include:

- Libraries in both Asia and the U.S. creating cafes actually *within* the library, allowing food/drink inside (designated areas) of the library...such as the café at DaNang University library, Vietnam.
- Libraries in both Asia and the U.S. creating “Information Learning Commons” within the library, allowing (encouraging) lively discussion, group work, and more...such as that at the National University of Singapore.
- While many libraries in Asia have heavy restrictions on photocopying and thesis use, some libraries have relaxed these, focusing more on educating students on proper/improper citing versus copying...such as Petra Christian University library, Surabaya, Indonesia; Lyceum of the Philippines University library, Philippines; and others.

Conclusion

In traveling throughout Asia for a year, and having visited libraries throughout the U.S., I was in a unique position to document common challenges—and particularly in regards to service-friendly Reference and Instruction service. Certainly, *all* these challenges do not exist at *all* libraries. But they are frequently enough found so as to learn from them, and look for creative solutions. Thankfully, there are many innovative, proactive libraries—in both Asia and the U.S.—that are doing just that. We can look to them as examples, and in turn, make similar innovations in our own libraries. It is all about turning challenges into opportunities for better service-friendly Reference and Instruction.

Notes

1. For example: De La Salle University's *Pathfinder* guides online:
<http://www.dlsu.edu.ph/library/pathfinder/default.asp>
2. Butdisuwan, S. (2005). "Digital Library: A Transition for Academic Libraries in Thailand." *Going Digital: Experiences from East Asia and the Pacific* (collection of essays from 2005 American Library Association annual conference). Retrieved October 1, 2007 from: <http://csuspress.lib.csus.edu/goingdigital/butdisuwanpaper.html>
3. Discussed in: Foster, A. (2007). "Information Navigation 101." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 53, issue 27, A38-40.
4. Braun, L. (2002). "New Roles: A Librarian by Any Name" *Library Journal* 127, issue 2, 46-9
5. Chan, Sai-noi (2003). "Making Information Literacy a Compulsory Subject for Undergraduates: the experience of the University of Malaya." *IFLA Journal* 29, no. 4, 328-335. Retrieved October 1, 2007 from: <http://ifl.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/29/4/328>
6. For example, the subject guides at California State University Fullerton:
<http://www.library.fullerton.edu/content/research/ResearchGuidesByMajorSubject.htm>
7. The online library tutorial of Hong Kong Baptist University:
<http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~lib/support/tutorials.html>