Cross-cultural Analysis of Virtual Reference

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Virtual reference and its potential for collaboration is an emerging area of interest for both researchers and practitioners (Bao, 2003; Pomerantz et al., 2004). The potential of virtual reference in a global context for international collaboration among libraries has been discussed and is being implemented by many organizations including the Library of Congress (The Library of Congress, 2003). However, the studies in this area largely represent experiences in Anglo-American countries and are discussed and presented mainly at conferences in the United States, such as American Library Association (ALA) and Virtual Reference Desk (VRD) conferences. These studies analyzed reference transactions, policies, and types of technologies used in virtual reference, to name a few. However, the generalization of findings in these studies to other countries should be made with caution as communication is culturally embedded, and communication during the online reference transaction is no exception. Thus, virtual reference may significantly differ from one country to another.

Despite the fact that practitioners have begun collaborative virtual reference around the globe, little attention has been given to the impact of cross-cultural (inter-cultural and intra-cultural) communications on reference transactions. In an effort to bridge this gap, this panel will present a series of virtual reference case studies from Middle
Eastern and Far Eastern countries to identify similarities and differences. Specifically, the research panel will analyze e-mail transaction transcripts because e-mail is the most predominant form of virtual reference services offered in these countries. Given the nature of the study, the International Federation for Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Digital Reference Guidelines (IFLA, 2004) will be used as a framework of analysis for the study. In addition to this framework, the taxonomy of e-mail reference interview developed by Abels (1996) will be used as well.

This panel will present the following cases: Virtual reference in China will be analyzed and presented by Bin Li, the Israeli virtual reference case will be presented by Pnina Shachaf, Noriko Hara and Yukiko Sakai will focus on the Japanese experience, Virtual reference in Lebanon will be analyzed and presented by Lokman I. Meho, and Nahyun Kwon will discuss the case of virtual reference in South Korea.

The implications of the cases and the analyses presented in this panel are relevant to research and practice and involve:

- Expanding the research in virtual reference to a more global context;
- Identifying commonalities and differences in virtual references among the compared five countries;
- Contributing to the international and comparative librarianship research;
- Describing cases from countries that are underrepresented in the virtual reference literature;
- Enhancing or expanding the existing IFLA Digital Reference Guidelines; and
- Describing challenges that may originate upon implementation of global collaborative virtual reference services.

REFERENCES


