

You are at: ALA.org » ASCLA » Volume24, Number 2, 2002

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### **Harnessing the Net: The Collaborative Digital Reference Service**

by Diane Nester Kresh

The Collaborative Digital Reference Service (CDRS) was launched in June 2000 by the Library of Congress and 16 academic, public, national and special libraries. The service provides professional reference and information service to anyone with an information need through an online network of libraries and related institutions. CDRS now includes more than 200 member libraries worldwide and questions are sent around the world seeking the best answers in the best context. There are no restrictions on the types of libraries that can participate and CDRS is currently free.

#### **How Does CDRS Work?**

An information seeker (student, researcher, adult "lifelong learner") requests information through a CDRS member library. The member library sends the query to the online Request Manager (RM) which looks for the member library best suited to answer the question. Once a match on a library has been made, the query is sent to that library for answering. The library can then choose to: answer the question, using a range of print, non-print and electronic resources; reject the question because it really should not have been assigned to the library it was assigned; ask for clarification because the question is unclear and needs more information from either the sending library or the patron before the it can be answered; or return a partial answer, suggesting to the patron that more work may be needed. Answers, minus patron information, are edited and stored in a separately searchable knowledge base of information. The knowledge base is being populated with information provided by CDRS librarians and will ultimately serve as a front end to CDRS, designed to "catch" and answer incoming questions if there is a ready match. If there is no match on the knowledge base, the question will be routed through the RM and assigned to a library.

#### **Building Partnerships**

In January of 2001, the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) and the Library of Congress on behalf of CDRS member libraries, signed a cooperative agreement to guide CDRS through the early stages of development. That agreement was renewed early in 2002 and commits LC and OCLC to work together on behalf of libraries to create a service that will enable libraries to: access the CDRS global network; access a software solution for managing a local Ask a service that includes email, chat, internet co-browsing capabilities, a profiling service, knowledge base, administrative support, and statistics;

escalate seamlessly questions from the local service to the global reference network where users will be automatically routed to the library best suited to meet the patron's needs; and finally, access a web interface with a common look and feel and co-branded with the Library's and OCLC's logos. Through this close partnership, the Library of Congress and OCLC are creating a self-sustaining digital reference service on behalf of member libraries, supporting the creation of standards and best practices for the provision of electronic reference services and promoting both the importance of and use of libraries.

Visit the [CDRS](#) web site for current information, including how to participate.

Diane Nester Kresh is Director for Public Service Collections at the Library of Congress and the Director of the Collaborative Digital Reference Service, a 24/7 global, Web-based, reference service linking libraries and research institutions.

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