

The role of libraries in elearning – ELAG 2004 Workshop

Introduction

In the academic world, distance learning is an expanding reality and librarians, as well as the other stakeholders in the university system, will soon have to face in significant measure. Elearning can be used as a supplement or support of traditional learning methods at universities (online learning materials, electronic tutorials), eLearning courses and seminars can be integrated and bundled in Virtual Universities, elements of eLearning can be integrated in traditional distance learning institutions (e.g. the long established Open University in the UK). At the same time, it is widely observed that demand from the lifelong learning "market" for education and information is growing dramatically. The proliferation of distance learning programs require great efforts of libraries, to follow and assist the increasing number of remote users with suitable resources and services. This mission is facilitated by the evolution of libraries toward a digital environment.

The role of the library in distance learning has its ground on two different arguments.

- The first is that distant learners must be given the same services and opportunities as the ones offered to traditional learners, and this includes also full library support. (ACRL 1998)
- The second reason is a more general remark on the nature of distance learning: the role of digital resources is much more relevant in distance learning than in traditional, face to face education.

1. Learners focus

1.1 Distance learning students are remote users.

These new users can be the model of what in the next future the most common user will be: a remote user, that uses the library at a distance, from his office, his home, or for a foreign university.

They do not have ready access to campus facilities: such condition represents a challenge for universities libraries, that has to develop not only new educational practices, but also new ways to provide to the students the same possibilities of "access" as those offered to traditional students. This is surely a new field of activity for the library, that haven't yet developed its digital services, but it is also a great opportunity. They must become aware of this issues, in order to take part in the development of the new curricular and extra-curricular activities from their planning phase, developing new skills and services to meet the needs of distant learners.

1.2 Distance learning students survey

As interactivity between students and teachers is more difficult, the learner must rely more on the learning material to answer to his questions. Investigations, as those undertaken at the UK Open University (Bremner 2000), Iowa University (Dew 2000) and a wider survey on UK Higher education (Unwin et al. 1998) cover four main topics:

- information resources and materials provided within the course,
- students' confidence with information resources and libraries in general,

- their preferences in search tools and learning material;
- the visibility of the Libraries' web site and finally the real usage of the university's or other libraries by these students.

The first issue is students' possible need of other information resources apart from those received within the study material. Secondly, student's need for traditional services is confirmed, and there is also interest for digital resources.

1.3 The attitude of the teachers on this issue

Among traditional as well as recent education providers, there are schools and universities that believed (and in some cases still believes) that the didactic pre-packaged material was enough for passing the exam: the student needs only the delivered (via mail, e-mail or fax) material and is not expected to read or consult sources beyond that.(Hardesty, 2000, Levy, 2000). This kind of study seems to be limited and confined within a prescriptive framework, against any idea of independent study (Stephens and Unwin, 1997).

On the other side there are more advanced educational environments which consider the library resources as fundamental for the learning activity. These institutions are usually those with a longer history in education, and with a well-established library service. The relevance given to interactivity in the web learning experience of the on-line course, closely recalls the definition of networked learning as defined by Brophy (Brophy 2001):

“Learning in which Information and Communication Technology is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors, between a learning community and its learning resources.”

The connections cover even who are traditionally in charge for the provision of learning resources as well as user education, information skills training and enquire/reference assistance to member of the academic community, the library (CSALT 2000). Here is the origin of the need to explore the role of the library within this newly-created network.

2. Cooperation, collaboration

The starting point is the need for more information resources, clearly expressed by the students. To support distant learners, services could be broadened through cooperation with other libraries, which is hardly permitted by the library regulations. While the issue of digitalizing traditional resources cannot be considered, because of the difficult issue of copyright laws, the implementation of "commercial" electronic resources could certainly favour the distance learners.

Contracts with digital resources providers should be modified, to recognize all university students as fully entitled to those services, regardless of the geographic location of the Internet connection. On the other hand they seem to consider implicit that students know how to use a library and its resources, and they do not pay attention to instruct them in this direction.

There is, however, a problem of communication among stakeholders Moreover, apart from the basic assistance of the users, teachers never mention or recognize any stronger educational role for the librarians. All the actors of the educational process should be aware of the skills and activities of the others: teachers need to understand how students use the library and other information resources; librarians have to know the practice and the expectations of the

professors, both in their role of library users than in the one of guide to the learning activities of the students, to prepare suitable resources, tools and services; and finally the students, who are at the centre of the educational process must receive a clear and exact guide on the services offered to them.

One foreseeable outcome of this situation is the progressive exclusion/putting aside of the library in favour of more dynamic and responsive agencies as Questia, NetLibrary, etc. Otherwise could digital learning objects institutional depository and initiatives like MERLOT be the silver bullet colleges and universities are looking for to finally make their distance education programs bear fruit?

3. Some issues for discussion

It seems clear that libraries that want to be involved in distance learning have but two choices, one of which is no choice at all:

They can attempt to continue with their traditional role as intermediaries between the end user and the information, although now reversing the direction of the exchange; they will now take information from one end user (the faculty member) and put it on the WWW in order to make it available to another (the student). To do this, it will require more amounts of staff time.

- Issues of resourcing: Is it true that these initiatives will save money for institutions, or do they require more investment of resources to provide an improved learning experience? If they don't save money how do we convince those at the top to fund and support them properly?
- How can we use them to ensure that learners come out the other side of their experience more information literate, i.e. better able to find the information they need, and better able to evaluate its worth?
- How will academics, librarians and IT professionals begin to work together as partners in these endeavours? Is a reassessment of everybody's role and remit necessary, and, if so, how may it best be facilitated?

The alternative is to provide the software, hardware, and training necessary so that the instructor can develop his or her own course materials using an institution depository. A digital librarian must replace the librarian's functions in a radical recasting of traditional librarianship

- Issues of support and training for staff using institutional depository in their work: the systems must be very easy to use, not just for the learner but also for the academic or librarian creating or contributing to the resource.
- Do academics think that digital and hybrid libraries mean human librarians will become redundant? How can we overcome these ideas and promote and use the skills developed by these professions to enhance e-learning experiences?

