LIBRARY SUPPORT FOR ONLINE LEARNERS:E-RESOURCES, E-SERVICES AND THE HUMAN FACTORS

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Introduction

The growth in online learning or e-learning, in which education is delivered and supported through computer networks such as the Internet, has posed new challenge for library services. E-learners and traditional learners now have access to a universe of digital information through the information _superhighway. New information and communications technologies, as well as new educational models, require librarians to re-evaluate the way they develop, manage and deliver resources and services. Historically, librarians have sought to provide services to distance learners that are equivalent to those available to on-campus learners (Slade & Kascus. 1998), and this aspiration is grounded in the philosophical frameworks of the Canadian Library Association's Guidelines for Library Support of Distance and Distributed Learning in Canada (2000) (http://www.cla.ca/about/distance.htm) and the Association of College and Research Libraries' Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services (2000) (http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/ACRUStandards_and Guidelines/Guidelines_for Distance_Learning_Library_Services.htm).

In responding to the need to provide ongoing online library support. librarians have worked at translating what they do in a traditional library into virtual or digital environments, while customizing their services and resources for e-learners. Traditionally. libraries offer circulation

services, interlibrary loans, course reserves, an information desk, a reference desk, and library instruction.

To serve learners connected to their institutional library primarily through a computer network, librarians are providing remote access to, and electronic delivery of. library resources, and are using communication technologies to deliver electronic reference services and instructional support. When we speak of providing support to e-learners. we are referring to a wider community of learners than the term "student" suggests. An academic library's learners may include students, faculty, staff, researchers, and so on. The library is seen as a source of training and guidance to a community of learners who are concerned with navigating the complexities of locating and using digital resources and services. Moreover, the rnoke. toward an online environment has resulted in a shift from the systematic one to- one information flow of the past to a new model in which the users and the providers of information are able to relate in a many to- many, dynamic relationship. For example, in the traditional model. a librarian provides a bridge between learners and information providers by selecting and cataloguing resources and by providing assistance with these resources. In the new model, the library serves Its a facilitator by offering ongoing support enabling learners to interact and exchange knowledge with others, to communicate directly with the publishers and vendors of information resources, and to participate in a collaborative endeavor to make available rich collections of online scholarly information resources.

This chapter examines how libraries are responding to the challenges of delivering core services to e-learners. We look at library practices and technologies being applied in the construction of virtual libraries. We also consider challenges and opportunities virtual libraries bring to the support of e-learners, as well as the importance of providing support within a collaborative environment, which stresses human factors, such communication and interaction.

Defining the Virtual Library

Gapen (1993) defines the virtual library as the concept of remote access to contents and services of libraries and other information resources, combining an on-site collection of current and heavily used materials in both print and electronic form, with an electronic network which provides access to, and delivery from, external worldwide library and commercial information and knowledge sources. (p. 1)

Additional terms for the virtual library include the "digital library," the "electronic library," and the "library without walls." Many libraries are hybrids. providing virtual access to electronic resources and services, while maintaining and supporting use of a physical collection housed in a library building. With the tremendous growth of the Internet, e-learners have access to an overwhelming range of information

sources available at the click of a mouse: library resources; government information; news sites; advertising; even whole Web site. devoted to Elvis sightings, crop circles, and JFK conspiracy theories. Librarians have traditionally selected and organized resources with great care. In building virtual libraries, librarians have the opportunity to provide e-learners with direction and to rescue them from information overload. A virtual library can link e-learners to library catalogues, licensed journal databases, electronic book collections, selected Internet resources, electronic course reserves. and tutorials. and to forums for communication and interaction with librarians. The virtual library permits c-learners to access library and networked resources and services anytime and anywhere that an Internet connection and computing equipment are available.

The Landscape of Library Resources

Technology offers opportunities to be innovative, as the followin1 discussion of electronic resources and services demonstrates, but it is important to bear in mind that not all e-learners are equal when it comes to access to computing equipment; the availability, speed, and stability of Internet connections; or the information skills that are needed to make optimum use of virtual libraries.

Online catalogues and indexing and abstracting systems provide elearners with convenient access to bibliographic information about valuable scholarly documents When those documents are not available in full-text form online, a demand is generated for delivery from a library's print collection or from the collections of other libraries through inter library loans. Typical solutions for delivery of non-digital formats include the use of mail and courier services, the establishment of collections at designated sites, and the negotiation of agreements with other libraries through consortia. Given that a growing number of learners are accessing library collections online, librarians are working to develop an integrated approach to providing access to electronic resources that facilitates retrieval and reduces confusion. A library Web site can function as an information gateway, an entry point to a range of online resources, with key components being the library catalogue and journal databases. Most online catalogues permit the integration of electronic books and electronic journals, enabling learners to locate items from digital and physical collections with one search. User services--such as the ability to check due dates, renew materials, and request materials online—are also provided. Gateways may also organize collections and incorporate directories like that provided by Athabasca University's Journal Databases: List Databases by Subject page (http://library.athabascau.ea/iournals/subject .htm).

Librarians have become increasingly creative in enhancing their Web sites, Because not all e-learners have physical access to reference tools—the quick fact-finding tools that are the

staple of library collections—libraries can perform a valuable service by providing. pointers to online versions. Athabasca University Library's Digital Reference Centre (http://library.athabascau.ca/drc), for example, offers a digital version of an academic library's reference collection, including almanacs and directories, atlases and maps. data and statistics, and dictionaries and encyclopedias. Librarians select quality Internet resources to help e-learners navigate the Web. For example, the British Open University Library's ROLT1:s database contains quality-assessed, course related Internet resources "selected by course teams and the Library's Information Specialists" (http://routes.open.ac.uk).

As libraries work to enhance their presence on the Web. a growin,,2 number are investigating the potential of electronic course reserves (e-reserves). The traditional course reserves desk of an academic library, with its limited copies. short loan periods. and high late fines, can be a considerable source of frustration for students. In the e-reserves model, the library makes available, through the World Wide Web, items that faculty have selected and "placed on reserve" for students in a particular course. San Diego State University (SDSU) pioneered e-reserves in the early 1990s (http://ecr.sdsu.edu). SDSU uses Docutek's ERes. a system that provides access to course readings, chat rooms, and bulletin boards.

Athabasca University Library has developed a platform for reserves that operates on a somewhat different model than do other e-reserves systems. The Digital Reading Room (http://library.athabascau.ca/drr) offers a digital solution for course readings and supplementary materials, An in-house storage and retrieval system was developed for the DRR using open source software. The model operates along the principle of open access to collection creation tools, thus permitting course content creators, educational media developers, and librarians to develop a multidisciplinary knowledge database.

Managing the remote access and authentication issues involved in making digital resources available has become a significant area of support to users of the electronic library (Hulshof, 1999). Librarians may be called upon to respond to questions concerning log-in and password information, browser configuration, software installation. and a range of troubleshooting needs. Access problems are hugely frustrating for e-learners. and must be resolved quickly. Ensuring that front-line library staff are adequately trained, providing clear instructions on the library's Web site, and coordinating support activities with computing services personnel can contribute to effective technical support. E-learners also benefit from having a variety of means of contacting the library, including e-mail, Web forms, and a toll-free telephone number.

Library Services: Challenges and Opportunities Reference

E-learners require more than access to e-resources. Traditionally, a reference librarian acts as an additional type of resource, one who can be counted upon to provide expertise in making sense of library systems and research tools, and to offer a helping hand along that often slippery path known as the research process. Virtual library users face additional challenges in mining relevant information out of a computer system that "obstinately" returns zero hits in response to a query that does not match the character strings in its database file most common means of providing electronic reference services to remote users' has beer- e-mail, the advantages and disadvantages of which have been well documented in the literature (Slade, 2000). The around-the-clock and around-the-world accessibility of e-mail allows users to connect with librarians beyond the walls of library buildings and outside the usual hours of operation. E-mail provides a written record of requests and responses, permits the electronic transmission of search results, and allows librarians time to reflect on requests. One of the most serious concerns about e-mail reference services is their impact on the traditional race-to-face reference interview, particularly the absence of the verbal and non-verbal cues that typically assist a librarian in effectively responding to a question.

There are ways to deal with some of these issues. A well designed reference Web form, such as that provided on the Ask AU Library: Ask about a Research Topic Web page (http://library.athabascau.ca/contacts/refinquiry.htm), which encourages e-learners to include full identifying and course information, to describe clearly their research problem and search terminology, and to state the parameters of the assignment, can clarify requests for librarians and University Library has developed SAFARI (http://www.open.ac.uk/safari), a freely available interactive tutorial, as well as an information literacy course called MOSAIC (Making Sense of Information in the Connected Age) (Needham, Parker, & Baker. 2001).

The Successful Virtual Library: Partnership and Collaboration

In reviewing definitions of the virtual library, Sloan (1998) identities an emphasis on the technological and informational building blocks, and a neglect of human components, such as the service tradition and human interaction. The continuing changes in technology have been truly astonishing, and the scope for building new information services and new ways of representing content seem unlimited. However, it is very important to remember that investment in human capital is also a strategic investment, especially when introducing new technologies, procedures, and processes. Although technology is the key infrastructure of the virtual library - a tool used to support library goals-human factors are the most important determinants of the success of the virtual library.

The digital library serves mainly as a facilitator in organizing and providing knowledge and resources to its users. Sharing knowledge and information among library staff. researchers, faculty, students, and other departments within the institution encourages them to work together, develop their skills, and form strong and trusting relationships. A focus on collaboration between the library and the faculty promotes a responsive approach to course design supports teaching and learning objectives, particularly when this collaboration incorporates student contributions and feedback. All parties must have a common vision in which each one participates actively by contributing their skills and perspectives to the building of a genuine partnership. This new approach considers the library as an active partner or the learning community, helping learners to become "information literates" by integrating information literacy skills into the curriculum. For example, the library can help learners to evaluate critically the authority and authenticity of the resources they find, and to enhance their critical thinking skills.

The library can also offer support to learners, and can mentor their work by offering one-to-one communication and interaction, and by achieving a deeper level of understanding of what learners need. From a research perspective, a number of models can be involved in creating an environment that is responsive to the scholarly information needs of a diverse group of e-learners. Librarians locate, select and describe quality Internet resources, and provide access to journal databases and electronic book collections, providing e-learners with full-text content from a wide range of online resources and publications, including peer-reviewed journals. Within this framework, the library works with faculty, researchers, scholarly societies, and publishers in developing and managing a collection of enriched online scholarly resources. Suet a partnership enables researchers to interact with others, exchange experiences, and publish their works online. The library role is thus transformed from simply being a provider of library resources, into meeting the ongoing support needs of the parties involved. The library also serves to foster research skills by encouraging students and other learners to search. investigate, discover, and take advantage of these valuable online resources. Management support is as touch a key to success in developing the virtual library as in any other project. Athabasca University's strategic plan incorporates a distinct section related to library strategies and projects, and explains how these strategies are aligned with the overall mission of the University. A virtual library should have a high profile leader, a key person who can work to obtain the support of the institution's management and promote a climate of change.

In addition, the leader must work with different groups within the institution to ensure that the project responds to their specific needs and goals. For example, whet, Athabasca University Library initiated the Digital Reading

Room project as an enhanced electronic course reserves system, the Library entered into partnership with the Educational Media development unit to ensure a best practices approach to Web- and visual-design aspects. Const2itation with faculty has been an ongoing element of the project, with faculty selecting content and acting as consultants in evaluating the design and functionality of the DRR in relation to their course development and delivery needs. All staff involved in providing library support to e.-learners must be included in the partnership. Technological changes have been the dominant force reshaping library services. Instilling a culture of sharing, motivation, equity. and active partnering encourages library staff to respond positively to the changing roles, responsibilities, and skills that the integration and use of technology requires. A well-designed, ongoing training program enables library staff to upgrade their skills to their new assignments, and helps them to understand and control fear of change.

Conclusion

In summary, library services are an essential component of u quality online learning system. As access to Internet-based courses grows, an increasing number of e-learners are dispersed around the globe, often in parts of the world where physical access to the collections of large academic and research libraries is impossible. These learners are largely dependent on the quality and academic usefulness of services that the library can offer electronically. The strength of virtual libraries and digital collections depends on the relationships libraries develop and maintain with the creators, publishers, and aggregators of e-resources, as well as with those who use, learn from, and evaluate these resources. Providing ongoing technical. reference, and instructional support to e-learners requires that libraries redefine their values and services, collaborate with their users, and approach their tasks creatively.

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