

Moving into the Future – A New Vision of Library Service for the National Open University of Nigeria

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Abstract

Libraries are moving beyond traditional boundaries. Functional libraries for open and distance learning should be appropriately designed to reflect “Libraries beyond libraries: Integration, Innovation and Information for All”, a theme the 77th World Library and Information Congress of IFLA General Conference and Assembly adopted in 2011. This reflects the emergence of a new wave of library services even in developing countries. Indeed, there is paradigm shift in information services and delivery and library services in the National Open University of Nigeria are being dovetailed into the new developments. This paper describes the vision of the future and the plans and projects already underway in the NOUN Library, and speculates a bit on our future. It discusses the strategies in employing sustainable information and communication technologies to deliver services over distance, geographical and cultural boundaries in Nigeria, determine how new skills acquisition could be achieved through incorporating online open access workshops for professional development and training.

Key Words: Libraries, Open and Distance Learning, Access, ICT, Web 2.0/3.0, Reference 2.0, e-resources, digital environment.

Contextual Frame

The National Open University of Nigeria was re-established following intensive efforts made after the Abuja Declaration of the 2001-10 Decade of Distance Education. Eventually, in 2002 during the administration of the former President, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, the defunct single mode ODL institution was resuscitated. The fledgling ODL single mode university struggled for years to find its feet. There were so many challenges that threatened the existence of the newly resuscitated institution. When the institution began a very slow uncoordinated thrust forward, library services were not part of the programmes. This was in spite of the premise that the library is regarded as a vital part of higher education. Library services are a vital and indispensable element of student support for campus students as well as distance learners. Popoola (1992) maintains that “the library plays a central support role in ODL and must be responsive to curriculum development, to group and individual learning needs and to changes in teaching methods . . . the library has an important role to play in helping to overcome problems, facilitate learning, and develop skills.” Libraries support the tripartite functions of any university. Distance librarianship is a great impetus to effective and quality distance learning. Watson (1999) observes that distance librarianship is inextricably linked with the growth of distance education systems around the world. On the contrary, poor library services undermine the potential impact and effectiveness of distance education.

This position is buttressed further by the ACRL (2006) that the library has primary responsibility for making its resources and services available to its users regardless of physical location.” To achieve this responsibility, the ATS Handbook of Accreditation (2008) notes that the library must integrate print collections, provide access to electronic information, and other resources to foster information literacy. When the National Open University of Nigeria began operations, there was no provision for library services. When library services were eventually incorporated, traditional library services were the prevailing practice. However, the nature of library service in the ODL environment is very significant and different from the traditional system. Open and distance learning presents new challenges especially in library and information services. Therefore, it is imperative to clearly define and devise strategies for effective library service to distance learners. A re-examination of critical functions of a library such as collecting, organizing, preserving and ultimately making knowledge available all come under scrutiny when applied to the distance learning context (McKnight, 2003).

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (2006) discussed the changing role of the academic library given the revolution in teaching and learning brought about by digitization, the internet, and other technological advances. The roundtable recommended three essential actions libraries must make to achieve the necessary transformation to remain relevant in the years ahead:

- librarians must evolve from print media to user-focused media and become information specialists;
- the culture of libraries and their staff must change from a mind-set of primarily ownership and control to one that seeks to provide service and guidance in helping users find information regardless of the format; and
- libraries must assert their evolving role not only within their institutions but share their information dissemination and retrieval expertise in other markets.

In the light of global developments in information, Ammerman (2004) identified three areas that libraries should address as they move into the future:

- i. Collaborative models of scholarship and pedagogy involving both physical and technological infrastructure;
- ii. Globalization, especially made possible by technology including providing library services to those at a distance; and
- iii. Changes in scholarly publication and the digitization of information including cooperative arrangements for distributed collections.

The concept of remote library service was novel and strange. It was mere dream to contemplate providing library services to patrons via online means breaking the barriers of distance. The constraints to the novel idea were many:

- Poor and decaying infrastructure;
- Lack of adequate skills and inadequate human capacity development initiatives;
- Recalcitrant and intractable lack of power supply;
- Poor or lack of functional Internet access;
- Poor financial resources;
- Deep seated suspicion of the ODL mode as an acceptable mode of learning in Nigeria;
- Corruption that has permeated the fabrics of the society;
- Challenge of ignorant administrators and managers who lack understanding of the value of information;
- Poor working environment and lack of proper planning for library services.

In spite of these myriad of problems, the need for access to top quality, timely and reliable information to support quality research and develop researchers cannot be compromised especially in distance learning. Interestingly, several indications show that there is rapid growth of distance education in Nigeria. Current trends indicate that several learners are embracing the distance learning mode. It is therefore mandatory for learners to access rich documentary resources available to campus students. This was a major issue before the advent of the Internet.

Decade of Change and Rapid Transition

Then began the advent and introduction of Information and Communications Technology into all facets of life. Schauer and Radermacher (2011) observe that Information technology is a “colossal technology”, like of this was not witnessed even when steam engines, light bulbs, or air crafts were invented. Information technology provides services of e-mail, e-phone, e-banking, e-trading, e-markets, etc., all rolled into one with a universal infrastructure encompassing many services. Groeling and Boyd (2009) state that technological advances and the Internet have radically changed the way people learn, live, and grow. Ball (2003) buttresses this further and writes that the development of ICT has also given rise to e-commerce, e-government, e-health and a plethora of other “e-sectors”. Telemedicine, for example, already provides aids to decision-making, remote sensing and collaborative arrangements for the real-time management of patients at a distance. Cooper (2002) writes that the “convergence of commerce and communications in the digital information age gives this technology a special transformative power. The Internet is not just communications or just a means of commerce. It promises to enhance productivity in many aspects of life. It provides communications (e.g. e-mail and instant messaging); may be a new form of mass media (e.g. list

serves and news groups) and a major source of Information (e.g. personalized home pages and out of town broadcasts)". Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have pervaded every level of education around the world. Higher Education, particularly, has seen an unprecedented growth in the use of ICTs in teaching, research, extension activities and library services, (Kanwar, (2009).

In higher education, libraries have been challenged to look at how to serve people not only locally but at a distance. This phenomenal innovation has benefited libraries and library users immensely. This ground breaking and tectonic initiative in technology have provided the impetus for effective library services in the ODL environment. Information and Communications Technology is certainly transforming the retrieval and dissemination of information today. This transformation, though manifested in diverse ways at various levels of our social structure, is focused on the '*ultimate learner*'. Daniel (2009) adds that by using technology we can achieve wider access, higher quality and lower cost *all at the same time*. Hilbert (2011) writes that digital technologies are tools that can improve living conditions; ICT represents a concrete and tangible opportunity to tackle longstanding challenges of gender inequalities in developing countries, including access to employment, income, education and health services. This is a revolution – which has never happened before. Computers, micro-electronics, the Internet have changed the landscape of information provision and dissemination in developed and developing countries.

Libraries in the New World

These developments have changed and are changing the definition and operation of libraries. Groeling and Boyd (2009) succinctly state that the library is no longer simply a physical building with four walls. Libraries continue to undergo tremendous transition as they move to virtual services in response to changes in technology and the expectations of the users. The library, like a church, has the heart of the people that form it. Librarianship is changing from managing books to connecting people and quality resources while at the same time delivering resources efficiently and providing the best customer service possible. The emphasis is shifting from what librarians do to how they do it. In a digital world, resources are becoming more of a commodity. Learning how to navigate the increasingly complex morass of information is and will continue to be the domain of the librarian. The academic librarian provides added value to the teaching and learning process. As long as there is a need for learning resources, there will be a need for a guide to navigate those resources regardless of the modality used in delivering those resources. Today, digital literacy -- lies at the heart of the mission of all libraries.

The New York State Regents Advisory Council on Libraries (2010) observes that regardless of the many levels of technological change, libraries remain the embodiment of citizens' "right to educate themselves", a critical necessity in a knowledge economy where everyone must relentlessly improve their skills throughout their lifetime. The library is what makes lifelong learning for all residents both possible and practical.

Practical Developments

To develop suitable programmes of library services for ODL, several possibilities of remote and virtual library service were explored. This generated the avenue for lots of improvements in IT infrastructures, enhancement of integrated library management systems, efficient services, development of offline information literacy programmes, staff training programmes and acquisition of e-resources. The goal is to transform the library ODL environment into active catalyst for information retrieval and dissemination that will cater for the needs of staff and students beyond their geographical boundaries, (Parker, 2011). We are faced with the challenge of developing innovative channels of providing access to information over geographical boundaries. Our pragmatic approaches include:

1. Leveraging on the impetus provided by the new technology, the National Open University of Nigeria Library is developing a platform to experiment on mobile phone technology in information retrieval and dissemination. Mobile and wireless technologies are revolutionizing the way clients interact and communicate with the library, how they search for and access resources, and how they utilize the library as a digital place. We are gradually progressing towards a new sustainable, client focussed and innovative library services integrated into physical and digital environments and pervasive support for learning and research for ODL (Booth, McDonald and Tiffen, 2009). This, we hope to achieve through the deployment of Sierra Integrated Library Management Software.

2. Staff are currently undertaking various activities to shape this new identity and the integrated physical and digital services we will provide. We are looking for inspiration beyond the traditional models of academic libraries.
3. We are moving toward cloud computing as Horrigan (2009) notes, in anticipation of exponential rates of development for more affordable and robust broadband access, increased reliance on Wi-Fi and mobile access, cheaper and more capable online storage. This will help us develop and participate in creative collaboration.
4. The deployment of our new software will come with the implementation of the Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) Tagging of all our collections in all the study centres. This process is intended to be completed by December 2014.

In summary, the National Open University of Nigeria Library is poised to move into the lime light of the global information provision. To achieve, we have designed a new service delivery model with enhanced personalised and customised services. Our programme of integrated physical and digital environment using Sierra will propel our dream of “e-with everything”. The development of Web 2.0/3.0 will initiate and encourage social interaction, collaboration and networking. Our services are geared towards flexibility, innovation, integration and experimentation with digital environment.

Vision for the future

Some of the major trends in the landscape of our information dissemination that will impact on our new library and provide the context for our vision of the future include:

- In the years ahead spanning up to 2015, we expect the implementation and deployment of Web 2.0/3.0 to experiment heavily with social media and apply a more integrated, user-centred service delivery model. This will allow clients to engage seamlessly with the Library at their point of need and in ways that are personalised and flexible, regardless of their location in physical or digital space, (MacManus, 2009).
- In this dimension, we plan to create new ways of online interaction using integrated personalised cloud-based networks blending email, instant messaging (IM), micro-blogging, chat, social news and bookmarking, which are available through Google MSN, Yahoo and Facebook. This will open up our presence online, change our service offerings and influence a growing demand for 24/7 operations.
- Reference 2.0 – Electronic Access to Reference Services. This will enable the interaction between the designated reference librarian and the client beyond geographical boundaries and normal library service hours. This is beside the development of various e-access to reference services which include: chat, IM, web forms and searchable Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) which have been the benchmark of value-added services for many academic libraries in developed countries.
- Development of regular information literacy training opportunities for the patrons. This is in line with ideas portrayed by Sacchanand (2011) that information literacy skills are the core competencies of individuals especially students in the 21st century due to the driving force of information and communication technologies, a prime mover for change that result in radical changes in the society, affecting individuals and organizations. New challenges are being faced to connect people to the learning process in new and different ways, new learning environment, new learning strategies and the emerging new learners. Learning in this century is considered to be a lifelong process, the means to cope with continuous changes. There has been a shift away from the teacher-centered approach to learner-centered, from know what to know how and an increased emphasis on information literacy to enable learners to become more self-directed, and to simulate greater control over their own learning.

Conclusion

We must ensure our new library will be flexible, adaptable and capable of both surprising and delighting our clients with extraordinary features in the way Paul Annett(2009) describes:

Find inspiration for innovation. See technological quirks as opportunities. Try something previously unheard of with your site design. Laugh in the face of convention... Get away with it. And if it doesn't work, try something else instead.

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