

LIBRARY SERVICES TO DISTANCE LEARNERS - THE NEW PROFESSIONAL PARADIGMS

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Abstract

This workshop will examine the issues that professional librarians/information facilitators confront while attempting to deliver quality library and information services to distance learners. Also detailed are a number of new paradigms that distance librarianship has introduced into the profession of librarianship.

Introduction

The provision of quality library services to those who learn at a distance is undoubtedly one of the most exciting and challenging developments that has occurred in contemporary librarianship. Distance education has led to the development of specialised library and information services that can appropriately be called distance librarianship. The genesis of distance librarianship is grounded in the creation of the large-scaled spread of distance education to satisfy personal and national educational goals. Distance education has impacted not only on the discipline of education, but it has also fundamentally affected services and professions that support distance learning and distance education.

The impact and significance of distance education is fittingly described by Howard (1995) when she states that “distance education has led to a redefinition of what is common in education”. Professions, including librarianship, that are associated with distance education have also experienced a redefinition. The effect of distance education on support services has been so profound that the phrase “growth industry” is applied by Cullen (1974) to the changes that have occurred in these activities. Librarianship has grown and changed in many aspects because of the different approaches that have to be taken to provide library and information services to those who learn at a distance. These changes have impacted not only on the delivery of library and information services to those who learn at a distance but also on the delivery of library services to other clients. Thus, these changes have led to the development of new professional paradigms within the field of librarianship.

The redefinition of what is common in library services is rooted in the important differences that exist between traditional education and distance education.

What is distance education and what are the factors that lead to distance librarianship?

Distance education is a method of study that is pursued by students who are physically separated from their tutors and institution of instruction for the greater part of their study (Watson, 1992). The distinguishing characteristic of distance education from other forms of education is the physical separation that exists between the students, their tutors and the institution of instruction. This separation has been termed the “tyranny of distance” within the literature of distance education. It is the factor of distance that redefines the role of libraries in distance education and leads to the specialisation, distance librarianship.

In traditional library services students go to the library to access the range of information services that they need to satisfy their learning needs. In distance education a cocktail of modalities have to be used to take library services to distance learners. Thus, the tyranny of distance applies not only to education but also to the ability of those who study at distance to access library services.

Librarians, distance educators and administrators must therefore adopt new strategies to ensure that quality library and information services are available to those who learn at a distance. These new strategies or paradigms must be applied to every aspect of library and information services. Thus, distance librarianship has wrought a change in what is “common” in librarianship through the introduction of a number of qualitative changes in library and information services.

This paper will examine a number of issues in distance librarianship which have introduced new paradigms into the profession.

A facilitatory institutional philosophy for library services to those who learn at a distance

In order to provide quality library and information services for distance learning and distance education it is necessary for any institution offering distance education programmes and courses to institute a philosophy that recognises the provision of library services to their students is a primary responsibility of the distance learning institution. This recognition undergirds and facilitates the development of quality library services to those who

learn at a distance. This responsibility must be articulated and not merely implied. Formal acceptance of this responsibility directly affects the attitude of institutional and distance education administrators as well as the library and its staff of the distance education institution. A supportive and facilitating institutional philosophy ensures that distance learners have access to quality library and information services to support their learning. Consequently, distance learning has led to the development of new institutional responsibilities in relation to library and information services based on the need to ensure that every effort is made to provide access to library students for distance learners. The extensive use of information technology in the delivery of distance services and the use of e-mail, faxes and 24 hour messaging services are examples of distance strategies that have also been applied to regular library services.

New relationships between faculty, librarians and other distance education facilitators

Distance education has fostered, enhanced and extended the nature of collaborative relationships between the stakeholders in distance education systems. For library services it is particularly important to collaborate with agencies that are external to the library because without their assistance it would be impossible to provide quality library and information services to distance learners. These new relationships affect every facet of the delivery of library and information services to distance learners. Librarians have to develop important links with distance education administrators in order to ensure that the necessary policy arrangements are instituted to deliver library services to their distance students. Creth (1996) strongly advocated these new relationships and partnerships in her Follett Lecture presentation. The need to establish partnerships and relationships is further supported by Lynch who, in referring specifically to Internet based courses and programmes, states that libraries need to be partnered into the planning at a very early stage". The work of Creth and Lynch as well as that of McPherson (1977) provides documented evidence of the new relationships and partnerships that have to be forged to deliver library services to distance learners.

Another form of partnership that is new to librarianship because of distance education relates to policy arrangements which cover contractual agreements with other libraries to provide library services to distance students. These libraries are usually called provider libraries. (Nova South Eastern University, a large distance teaching institution in Southern Florida has been particularly assertive in this regard. For example, it has developed links with some of the offices of the British Council to assist them with the provision of library services to their students.) Provider libraries are usually located in centres that are more convenient to the distance learners than the libraries of their teaching institution. Service contracts of this nature are new models for providing library and information services to distance students. This is one of the new relationships that distance education has fostered in librarianship.

Librarians have also had to develop relationships with other service providers who are associated with the delivery of distance education programmes, courses and support services. These include information technology units - particularly when library services are delivered via this modality; telecommunications agencies whose services are used to deliver library services; materials production units whose services are used to develop library related distance education materials and members of academic staff who are involved in the development and delivery of distance education programmes and courses.

Membership of distance education course teams changes the role of librarians from being reactive service providers to that of being integrated and contributing members of the distance education instructional development team. The library and information skills aspect of all distance education courses are seen to be important aspects of distance programmes from their inception. Librarians therefore have a new and changed relationship with the academic aspect of distance education course and programme development.

The involvement of librarians in all aspects of distance education represents a paradigm shift in the nature of relationships between librarians, faculty, technologists, materials production personnel and those who staff other services. This new paradigm leads to an enhancement of the teaching role of librarians.

The teaching role of librarians in distance education

Libraries and information services have always been important support services for teaching and learning. An important service that academic librarians have always offered is instruction in information seeking, gathering and usage.

The needs of distance learners have changed the quality of this role in several important ways. The work of Snyder, Logue and Preece (1997) provides some important insights into the teaching role of librarians - a paradigm which has been expanded and enhanced by distance education. Their report indicates that many of the respondent libraries provided "assistance with the development of distance learning courses, especially in instructional design, multimedia development, and instructional evaluation". This clearly demonstrates a changed role for librarians. In their information facilitation capacity they have become proactive members in the educational process rather than merely being witnesses to the educational developments and changes

associated with distance learning. Because of distance education, Snyder, Logue and Preece found that librarians have become important members of the instructional team; librarians have become integral to the process of developing distance teaching materials - print and non-print - and most importantly they discovered that librarians have a role in instructional evaluation process. Consequently, librarians have moved from being custodians of information to become contributors to the process of producing information for distance education. Many of these activities represent new skills for librarians and changed models of library services.

In addition, librarians have themselves become distance educators as they have had to become proficient in the use of distance education strategies to develop materials for distance learners on all aspects of library services for these students. McAlpine (1995) reports on the development of a library related video and computer aided instruction package designed to assist distance learners in Australia. These materials were developed by librarians, an instructional designer and programmers to teach generic library skills. They represent another facet in the role of librarians becoming involved in the teaching aspect of distance education. Workbooks, use of electronic teaching methods, online courses and other asynchronous forms of teaching are also used to deliver instruction on library and information services topics.

And finally, distance education has also added to the pool of opportunities for librarians to become creators of information either through the development of new materials or when they repackage of information to suit particular needs. The repackaging of information or value adding services that librarians contribute information used in distance learning systems adds to the teaching role that librarians to this system of education. The teaching skills that librarians develop to assist distance learners are often applied to traditional information services. The transferral of these skills represents a new paradigm in traditional library and information services.

The expanded use of technology to provide distance library services

The impact of the convergence technology and communications on library services to distances learners is graphically described by McPherson (1977) who details the experience of the University of Southern Queensland experience in providing library input into the development of a course which was being developed for world wide delivery via the Internet. She states that “the pace of change ... is unprecedented and bewildering”. Distance education in her view places librarians and other distance education providers on the dawn of a new era and in unmapped territory. Consequently, she sees all those involved in distance education as pioneers. She describes the involvement of library staff in the development of new courses as being “at the rockface” of these distance education initiatives.

The convergence of technology and communications offers distance education institutions an array of options to delivery library and information services. The expanded use and role of technology in the delivery of library and information services has served to reduce the barriers to library and information services that are occasioned by distance for these students. In order to take library services to distance learners many libraries in these institutions have placed most of their services on-line. The digitalisation of information makes it possible to take library and information services to distance students regardless of their location. In addition to on-line catalogues (OPACs), students are able to search databases, examine abstracts and in some instances read full text documents. Some of these networked services also include non-print resources in their information data bases.

Another use of technology to provide library and information services in distance learning is the delivery of information literacy, bibliographic instruction and reference skills as on-line courses. Thus, distance students are able, through technology, to enjoy training in information related skills through the use of technology.

Many libraries use electronic communication as the medium of choice to maintain contact with students making it possible for students to use E-mail as a means of sending and receiving communication related to their need for information.

While technology has reduced the distance between library services and students, distance services librarians are charged to remember that not all countries or all distance students are able to access technology with the same degree of ease. Thus, while technology is an important modality to reduce the tyranny of distance it is important for librarians and others to include other modalities in their delivery of information strategies. This is important because access to technology is not universal, nor are all technological systems equal, therefore total reliance on technology will cause some distance students to experience information disenfranchisement (Watson, 1996, Cavanagh, 1998). The differential between countries regarding levels of technology caused Adams (1998) to make the following comment “one concern that I have personally for the future of off campus library services involves the drift towards [the] increasing disparity between the technology-rich and poor.” The inclusion of technology dependant services demands that institutions “stay the [technology] course” in terms of upgrading hardware, software and having access to technical services for maintenance and training. Thus, while technology can be used as a means of linking the world it can also act as a very harsh divider

between the “haves” and the “have nots”. Therefore librarians and others are charged to integrate other modalities of communication and service delivery to ensure that all distance students have access to information services for their studies. This is particularly important in developing countries where distance education is a channel to expand educational opportunities but where access to technology is extremely limited to large urban areas and to those who have the economic ability to purchase technological and communication services.

Service delivery

The delivery of library and information services to those who learn at a distance is undisputedly the most pressing challenge that distance librarians encounter. Distance librarianship demands that libraries and librarians recognise that their role has transformed from being custodial in orientation to become cutting edge in nature particularly with respect to the delivery of information services. Distance education and librarianship demands that students are placed at the centre of the educational paradigm. There must be a shift from institutional centred programmes and activities to a focus that centres on strategies to help the student overcome the array of challenges caused by distance and temporal factors.. Flexibility must be a cardinal parameter. Distance students must have the ability to access library and information students when, where and how they choose. In response to meeting these requirements Store (1998) reports that the Library at James Cook University sees that it must be “responsive and innovative” in order to meet the library and information needs of its students. It sees distance education as introducing a new marketplace into the profession. In order to keep and expand its share of demand for distance education services this university sees that a flexible approach is a critical and necessary factor. In addition to traditional delivery mechanisms libraries must introduce bold and innovative strategies into their delivery process. The strategies must be deployed to deliver the gamut of services that distance learners require including document delivery; bibliographic instruction; information literacy instruction; reference services; interlibrary loans and access to electronic resources.

In traditional librarianship information seekers go to an information service point to access the information they need. In distance services the information has to be sent to the student. Allied to this factor is the need to have an expeditious document delivery service. Time and distance are real foes when distance students try to access information. The institutional of procedures and channels to get information to students quickly must be an important aspect of distance librarianship. Another new feature of distance library services is the creation of research assistants and others who act as intermediaries between the information seeker and the information source. The existence of intermediaries who link the information source and the information seeker represents a new professional paradigm in librarianship.

In order to bridge the gap between the information source and the information seeker it is necessary to use a variety of delivery strategies to take the information to the student. The use of technology features heavily in this regard, particularly in developed countries. The use of OPACs, on-line systems and services, networked databases and other information providers as well as other technologically dependant information services are found in many distance education library and information services in these countries. The low cost of technology, cheap communications charges and widespread access to these facilities makes the deployment of technological based information services an important modality to provide access to information in distance learning. Once these systems of information transfer are available for distance learners it makes it possible to extend their use to on-campus teaching and learning thereby introducing new paradigms in information delivery in library services.

New professional positions

The library and information needs of distance learners have led to the creation of new employment opportunities for librarians and other information professionals. Perusal of print and electronic position announcements clearly reveals a paradigm shift in job responsibilities based on the new nomenclatures that are being applied to those who provide library services for distance learning. Among the titles that have been noted are Instructional Support Services Librarian; Continuing Studies Librarian; Access Services Librarian; Document Supply Librarian; Distributed Services Librarian; Distance Education Librarian and Off-Campus Librarian. The creation of these posts and their titles are direct results of the initiation of distance education programmes in the parent institution and reflect, in part, a shift of philosophy in library services from that of a library oriented basis to that which is grounded in user oriented concerns.

Associated with these new posts is an articulation of the new skills that are required of those who will work in distance library services. The skills listed for these positions suggest that there has to be a review of the curriculum at library schools so that neophyte librarians are tooled to work in these new positions. In addition to training new members of the profession it is necessary for library schools to provide continuing education opportunities in the range of skills that distance services require so that experienced librarians have the opportunity to gain the necessary training and develop the requisite skills.

The skills and job opportunities that are associated with distance education represent a shift in what is common in librarianship and the development of new professional paradigms. These changes are directly attributable to distance education.

Conclusion

The delivery of library and information services to distance learners has introduced a number of new professional paradigms in the field of librarianship. These changes require that distance teaching institutions institute a facilitatory philosophy to provide library services for those who learn at a distance, that they forge new relationships between faculty, librarians and other distance education facilitators, that librarians assume an expanded teaching role in the delivery of library services to those who learn at a distance, that they expand the use of technology to provide distance library services, that they institute new patterns of service delivery and the development of new professional positions. These developments have altered what is common in librarianship. They have introduced a number of new paradigms to the profession which are of value to both traditional and distance library services. Thus, because of the need to develop quality library and information services to distance learners the profession has developed a number of new paradigms which have redounded to the benefit of all users of library and information services.

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