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Original Article

E-Learning: A Challenging Concept to Libraries

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Abstract

In the academic world e-learning is as an expanding reality and librarians in the university system will soon have to face in significant measure. E-learning can be used as a supplement or support of traditional learning methods at universities. E-learning courses and seminars can be integrated in traditional and bundled in virtual universities. Elements of e- learning can be integrated in traditional distance learning institutions. 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 e-learning programs require great efforts of libraries to follow and assist the increasing number of remote users with suitable resources and services. In this paper try to explain the relation between e-learning and e-libraries and how trends in both could mutually benefit and consider the major challenges of e-learning and link them with e-libraries.

Keywords: E-learning; E-competencies; Virtual universities; E-journals.

Introduction

E- learning will have an increasingly important role in higher education. E- learning encompasses research, learning and teaching in the digital environment; e- learning includes courses that are offered fully on-line. Its growth in higher education has been dramatic over the past few years. Estimates of growth when compared to conventional face-to-face teaching in higher education range from 20 to 30% per year.[1] When e- learning is growing fast it is essential to academic libraries to change their traditional resources and services. As new and better information technologies have emerged, libraries have been early adopters of new information systems and services and have become institutional access points for digital knowledge resources such as on-line journals and special media collections. Not surprisingly as faculty and instructors have begun to adopt e- learning strategies as a part of their teaching repertoires, libraries have played a key role helping to find organize resources to complement programs and courses making use of e- learning and to provide support as students work their way through their assignments

What is E-learning?

A way of defining an e-learning system is that such a system is based on information and communication technology to create, develop, maintain and make available study materials to students and coach, and to assist evaluation of the students all this continuously through time and independent of the location of teachers and of students. The following are a few of the definitions of e- learning.

1. 'E- learning is the use of network technology to design, deliver, select, administer and extend learning'- Elliott

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Masie.[2]

2. 'E-learning is Internet enabled learning. Components can include content delivery in multiple formats, management of the learning experience and a networked community of learners. E- learning provides faster learning at reduced costs, increased access to learning and clear accountability for all participants in the learning process'- Cisco Systems.[3]

E-learning Environment

Twenty years ago a typical college classroom had very little technology. May be there were a few computers but for the most part students turned in a assignments written from a typewriter. Ten years ago technology began to seep into the college academic setting.[4] For example Professors started simple web pages containing course information and perhaps links to reference sources.

In the late 1990's however college academia took a giant step forward in e- learning by introducing courses that could be taken entirely on-line. The environmental trends in e- learning have changed dramatically from the infrequent use of the Internet and e-learning for an entire course.

This environmental trend in e- learning opened up the opportunity to study at the college level to many more students. Technical colleges for example are home to many non-traditional older students. These students have full line jobs, families and little free time. It is difficult to miss work to attend classes during the day. That is when on-line courses can save the day and allow these types of students to work on their degree.

On-line courses are available at many four year and two year colleges and universities. In the last few years on-line colleges have emerged that offer an entire degree program on-line. Another environmental trend in the e- learning is the way classes are conducted. Classes are administered through software programs such as blackboard and webCT.[5] These web-based programs allow students to login to a virtual classroom. They can communicate with the instructor and other classmates through e- mail messages and a class message forum. Professors, teachers and instructors also have an array of options.

As technology progresses so will the e-learning environment. The academic options are far different from what they were even ten years ago. Imagine what the options will entail ten years from now.

E-learning and Libraries

Initially libraries have no relations with e-learning. Many e- learning environments work with a log-in that is authentication, authorization and then personalization of contents and functions offered. In this way each students enters a more or less closed system. They can use learning materials and these can contain links to external documents. However all efforts made by librarians who develop catalogues and portal websites to guide their users to interesting information sources are not always easily accessible by the students once they have entered the virtual learning space. So integration of library services in e- learning should be taken care of. Another point of concern is related to references to web based information resources offered by teachers. Difficulties occurring with such references include the well known broken links and link rot over time and so called multiple copy problem. Libraries make serious professional attempts to avoid these problems in their catalogues and websites, but such efforts can not be expected from the average teacher who has a shortage of time, who may not be aware of the problems and who is probably not aware of modern methods and techniques to avoid the problems such as open link resolvers.

E-libraries: Benefits and Challenges

E-learning is a new field of activity for the library and it is also a great opportunity to provide to the students the same possibilities of 'access' as those offered to traditional students. Libraries must become aware of e-

learning 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 e- learners.

Academic libraries have become partly though increasingly digital libraries or e-libraries often providing a multimedia access center and other services for faculty and students. The convergence of publishing and the Internet have indeed afforded academic libraries a wide range of electronic resources and a large offer of on-line journals, electronic archives, special collections and electronic books from multiple publishers.[6] Enhanced services damaged titles, multiple uses of single texts, generation of detailed usage data, automated catalogue record creation and copyright control.

Benefits of E-libraries

E-learner could benefit when the library offers e- services.

1. The student could consult the on-line catalogue to his own college/university library anywhere and anytime.
2. The student could benefit from a more intensive interuniversity library collaboration.
3. Access to digital full text resources could ease demanding text processing activities.
4. Interactive digital media library could better support different learning styles.
5. Personal and direct e-publishing possibilities could become available even without asking for individual high level computer skills.
6. Searches for information could be more complex and dissemination could be more selective.

Challenges to E-libraries

E- libraries are facing so many challenges. The shift from paper to on-line is fostering a number of different processes and services, distinct business models and novel relationships between publishers, libraries and third parties (e.g. faculty, students and vendors).

1. The e-library market is an immature one and pricing models have not yet stabilized. Take e- journals for example. There is enormous variation in how e- journals are priced.
2. Systems and technical issues are major challenges. The fundamental challenge is integration. Bringing the different components of the library together as a coherent whole. Integration is also fast becoming a bigger problem. Libraries are no longer just dealing with digital textual resources but wide range of different types of data. These include statistical, mapping, geographical, sound and moving image materials.
3. Another major technical issue that has major service implications in security, authentication and authorization. The picture here is a complex one.
4. The selection and acquisition process itself is often more complex for electronic materials. Once a decision has been made, it is ironic that the acquisition of e-resources can often take longer the paper ones. Sometimes just getting a price from suppliers can take several weeks. It can however sometimes frustration the expectations of users.
5. Once a material has been acquired it needs to manage. The management of e- journals is a problem. It is not possible to buy an e-journal package make it available and then forget it. There is always an ongoing maintenance problem. Packages seem to add and substract titles on a regular basis. Access problem occur very frequently.
6. Another important aspect of the management of e- materials is preservation. In the main electronic resources have been acquired by libraries to satisfy immediate need. The issue of preservation of electronic materials has been side stepped. In many areas libraries have continued to acquire paper versions

in parallel with e- versions. However as the prospect of e- only versions of material becomes more immediate, the preservation issue becomes more pressing.

7. The copyright issue is certainly one of the major problems when it comes to use electronic material from the library in e-learning settings.
8. As we have documents available in electronic format it is essential to make electronic annotations right in the text and discuss about them in an on-line forum.
9. Digital information literacy is now an important skill for the learner. They have to acquire to skills for what is called media literacy, i.e., the ability to communicate competently in all old and new media, as well as to access, analyze and evaluate the power of images, words and sounds which are such an important part of our contemporary media culture.
10. When the electronic resources are available on the Internet and in e- libraries, selections of resources get completely new dimensions. Are students and teachers aware about this?

E-competencies for Librarianship

Librarian requires following competencies for maintaining e- services in library. These e-competencies describe the technical skills and knowledge that librarians need to possess in order to provide effective service with electronic products.

1. Have a basic knowledge of the terms like, hardware, software, the web, CPU, monitor, peripherals, printer etc.
2. Understanding of windows directory structures, file formats and basic operations.
3. Ability to navigate web pages.
4. Ability to send, receive, forward mail and attachments.
5. Ability to format, print and download documents.
6. Ability to use electronic catalogs and the databases.

Recommendations

1. High-level support should be given for organization of e- libraries and provide enough funding facility.
2. Support and training to staff needs to be ongoing, and means more than just teaching them to use the technology. New skills and new roles must be incorporated.
3. Staff development must be applied to all the staff, not just those directly involved in preparing on-line course.
4. To provide appropriate advice and assistance to e- learners in information searching.
5. Most commercially produced electronic resources and databases are subject to licensing restrictions. All the licenses must be examined to ensure that e- learners are covered whether within or outside the country.
6. Most electronic resources require users to be authenticated. Whenever possible use a national authentication scheme.
7. Well-designed and well-managed library and information services will add value to the educational programme and they must be affordable and cost effective. Try to identify the whole, direct and indirect capital and recurrent costs for every step.
8. All e- learners must be given the opportunity to develop and enhance their skills in finding and using information.

The OCLC e-learning task force (2003) examined a number of issues related to e-libraries and identified system requirements for technical, functional and cultural aspects of e- learning.[7] The OCLS recommendations constitute a general purpose set of best practice requirements.

Technical and Functional Requirements

1. Display and integrate a variety of information windows as part of a learning activity.

2. Provide bibliographic tools that permit easy searching and reference completions.
3. Provide access to tools that render and present content in user customized formats.
4. Integrate plagiarism software into course management systems to encourage good practice and to assess reliability of content.

Technical and Cultural Requirements

1. Embed library resources in course management systems.
2. Integrate third party commercial information services.
3. Provide easy access to virtual reference services at the point of need.
4. Embed training modules to assist in information seeking.

Future Trends of E-libraries

E-libraries will become an indispensable part of education over the next 20 years. There are a number of discernible trends; first electronic access will be the primary method of accessing scholarly information within a decade or two. It removes the need to be near a physical copy of the title one needs to access, it resolves multiple user issues and greatly increases the ability of a researcher to find what he/she is looking for.

Second, on-line access to scholarly information is an integral part of the trends towards on-line and distance education. The undergraduate population is diversifying and now includes students enrolled in distance learning programs, rural students without physical access to an adequate library and older community college students who work or have family obligations that prevent them from spending time in their campus library.

Third, the Internet has engendered a powerful trend toward personalization. E-libraries enable its users to personalize their library.

Fourth, people increasingly expect complete mobility. E-libraries enable researchers to access their personalized copies of books and journals anywhere.

Conclusion

The last ten years has seen enormous change in library and information services. E- libraries have helped to facilitate rapid development in the field of e- learning. But change is set to continue in the next decade. Libraries are going to be expected more than ever to be fast moving, innovative organizations, which can still deliver stable services. Achieving this will involve energetic technical and content development. But it will also involve developing organizations with the right staff with right skills working in the right structures. It is in this way that we will be better able to support the needs of our users or learners.

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