

Library's response to the challenge of the (networked) world of lifelong learning

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2006**

Abstract

With the constantly unfolding changes in the educational horizon, the survival and relevance of the library as a repository of knowledge and provider of information services can only be assured in being proactive, swift and responsive. Lifelong learning targets the improvement of “knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective”. It strives to provide learning opportunities on an on-going basis, among others, to the marginalized, isolated, underprivileged and the unreachable. It provides further learning opportunities to adults from diverse backgrounds, already working and people with families and other commitments. It promotes the development of knowledge and capabilities that enable people get accustomed to a world that is knowledge based and equip them to function effectively in the socio-economic milieu in which they live. The resultant liberalisation of learning which brings along such system as open and distance education ensures that where learning takes place and is accessed does not have to be confined to a particular place or time. The controlling variables may depend on the learners and the learning requirements. The swiftness and responsiveness of the library would then require that the old stereotyped order where the library consults or is consulted within its own limited four walls has to be jettisoned, for the emerging and workable new system that is redefined, reshaped and refocused.

This paper notes that all the stakeholders of this form of learning who can be found anywhere and everywhere, and may live thousands of kilometres away, require library resources and services. The paper discusses how library should respond to the challenging role in this dispensation. The strategies including possible coalition of libraries, getting the customers equipped with such competencies that will make them information literates, among others, are brought into play. The experience from the University of Botswana's continuing education programmes and the involvement of the library is factored in. The e-learning initiatives and immense possibilities of other modern technologies, which have not only transformed teaching, learning and interaction processes but are also applicable in the library environment are discussed.

Background Information

Generally, education is known as an instrument which helps individuals to adapt to the dynamics of life. Somtrakool (2002) notes that education is one of the most significant vehicles in the development of human life, and can contribute toward personal well-being and happiness.

Somtrakool maintains further that education is a tool for human beings to use for solving daily problems, or adjusting to the environment. In the like manner, Akinpelu (2002) observes that the essence of education is “the development of human potentialities, and ultimately, the human self”. For their individual and related reasons, the two named authors are strong advocates of lifelong learning. Whilst Somtrakool contends that one should be involved in education throughout life in order to lead a happy life in society, Akinpelu sees the involvement of ‘self’ in the continuous process of change and evolution. The latter then advocates that lifelong education becomes a necessity if planned development of the human self is to be achieved. Talking of the intentional use of the word “planned”, Akinpelu philosophically argues that whether or not there is education in the informal, non-formal or formal mode, the human person will continue to grow and develop, but the direction of its growth and quality of its development are what may be in jeopardy.

As a dynamic member of the society, man needs to learn to improve his knowledge, skills, and competence, within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective, if he wants to continue to find himself useful and relevant. This is what lifelong learning targets. It strives to provide learning opportunities on an on-going basis to people in the community, particularly, the marginalized, isolated, underprivileged and the seemingly unreachable individuals. Speaking as a representative of the European Union at a conference on Lifelong Learning in Beijing, Alan Smith (2002) considers lifelong learning as being an all-purpose learning activity, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence. He argues that “we certainly believe that the concept of lifelong learning is not only lifelong in the sense that it begins in the cradle and presumably ends in the grave, but it is also very much life-wide”. He confirms that it has not to do only with formal education, but also with informal and non-formal ways of learning.

In another treatise, Akinpelu (1996) attempts to draw a distinction between lifelong learning and continuing/recurrent education. He asserts that lifelong education is a much more all-inclusive and all-embracing concept. According to him, lifelong education “is an organisational concept for all the education of a life-span, irrespective of level, time, and space or even mode”. He notes that lifelong education “is an attempt to recognise, systematise, and make more effective, all

provisions that could be made for the education of a human person from the cradle to the grave to meet the exigencies of his/her developmental stages in life". He remarks that continuing education is a segment of this global concept, as also are formal education, adult education, recurrent education, non-formal education, and even informal education.

Tapsoba (2002) believes that lifelong learning cannot be talked about in a vacuum. He notes that it needs to be integrated with societal values adding that "we need to look at development and consider the available resources". He affirms that basic resources such as libraries are critical but regrets that libraries do not exist in many villages and or even in many cities. He therefore queries, "how do you build lifelong learning in that context?" He submits that if people have to build lifelong learning, they have to have that capacity to access on a continuous basis, the information and knowledge, the technologies and other innovations.

Africa is probably in the forefront of the societies of the marginalized, isolated, underprivileged and the seemingly unreachable people. This probably accounts for the reason why lifelong learning should find its home in this continent. Talking of lifelong learning in indigenous Africa, Omolewa (2002) notes that though lifelong learning is not a recent phenomenon in Africa, there is always much to learn as he takes into account the following challenges:

- a) further knowledge explosion;
- b) modern technology;
- c) the challenge of globalization and the need for competitiveness;
- d) standardization and global perspectives; and
- e) demands for new skills and interest.

Omolewa was not left in any doubt that a person will always continue to appreciate the value of learning as long as there is life, and motivation to do so. He therefore contends that it is not correct to say that a fool at 40 is a fool forever. With the institution of lifelong learning, he pleads that we should rather agree that life begins at 40.

In the quest of lifelong learning to promote the development of knowledge and capabilities that enable people get accustomed to a world that is knowledge based and equip them to function effectively in the socio-economic milieu in which they live; library has a role to play. The library prides itself in opening the window of access to learning, the capacity to acquire knowledge and competencies, the opportunity and motivation to continue updating users' cognitive, social and creative skills. Ultimately, these skills are known to constitute the keys not only to economic success, but also to individual fulfilment, and social cohesion.

Given the fact that lifelong learning ensures that individuals fulfil their own personal aspirations, it does not matter where they work or live, they can still continue or further their education in their respective places of work or abode. Today, universities and other institutions of higher learning are liberalised and broadening their intakes and modifying their courses to become relevant and responsive to the needs of the changing world. The resultant liberalisation of learning which brings along such a system as open and distance education ensures that where learning takes place and is accessed does not have to be confined to a particular place or time. Many individuals, without leaving their homes or places of work, can be empowered to fulfil their aspirations through open and distance learning. It is then no wonder that distance learning programmes are initiated in various institutions of learning in different countries to promote lifelong learning system. Thus it is no longer weird to see some universities dropping the toga of their well-known single-mode for dual-mode system and accommodating the distance learning system in the traditional face-to-face system; whilst some other universities are purely open and distance teaching institutions.

The nature of learners and learning needs

It has been established that in this age of lifelong learning, the barrier, which used to compel learning to take place within the school walls, has been pulled down. In other words, learning is no longer restricted to any particular place or time. The learners can therefore be found anywhere and everywhere – in cities, towns, villages and other remote locations, undergoing their studies. The university that enrolls them does not have to be within the country where they live. It can even be thousands of kilometres away. There is no geographic restriction as lifelong learning

continues to diminish country boundaries when it comes to individuals' choice of institutions to enrol with. It is also implied in the statement of Omolewa (cited earlier) that age no longer poses a barrier to education. In the light of what is in vogue in respect of lifelong learning, he had pleaded the acceptance of the line he toes that "life begins at 40", and the rejection of the syndrome that "a fool at 40 is a fool forever". It is therefore no longer fashionable to see academic setting entirely dominated by youngsters of late teens and early 20s.

Adults from varied backgrounds, many in various workplaces, several with families and others with different commitments, are now known to commit themselves to improve their knowledge, skills and competence through (continuing) education. Indeed, it is not uncommon these days to see some parents struggle with their children to obtain the same degree programmes! From several options available, they choose their courses of study, the universities or institutions to do the study and the preferred study mode, which could be part-time, full-time conventional mode, distance delivery, evening or weekend mode. As they struggle in pursuit of their learning, there are different agenda being pursued. Whilst some plan to improve their lots in their careers, others intent is to change and move to entirely new careers.

Several people and groups of individuals require lifelong learning. In Africa, for instance, without prejudice to the programmes of open and distance learning, there are several target groups such as women, rural population including men in cattle posts, youth, street children, soldier-children in war-torn areas, refugees, women in veil, etc that require lifelong learning. Having entertained the argument that learning throughout life is deemed to be crucial in surviving the rapid societal changes in the 21st century, Ouane Adama (2001) Director, UNESCO Institute for Education, highlights his perception of what individuals should be equipped with. According to him, "individuals need to learn key life and survival skills; they need to learn how to process fast changing information to relevant knowledge; and women and men need to learn how to live together in a world made smaller by globalisation processes".

Precisely, the areas that are begging for the learning attention of some of the earlier identified groups include such issues as poverty alleviation, diseases such as HIV/AIDS and cancer, children's rights, women's rights, protection against abuses, workplace and home learning,

democratic principles and practice. Others include healthy living, social and cultural values, the modern information and communication technologies, among others.

In advanced countries of the world, there is the emergence of some educational network, which has remarkably created room for several individuals to join the train of lifelong learning. For instance, Maier and Warren (2000) cite Thorne (1999) saying that “in the US, Western University has 15,000 students across 64 locations. California Virtual University and the Southern Regional Electronic Campus are similarly large networked organisations offering hundreds of courses. Sylvan Learning Systems, originally an educational testing company, now has links with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and University of Technology at Berkeley with 48 sites in shopping malls and business centres”. Barnard (1999) also reports the use of a similar model by the National Technological University (NTU). The NTU according to him is a cooperative effort of 46 universities to provide graduate and continuing education courses primarily for engineers. Barnard notes that the member universities use satellite television and compressed digital video technology to deliver classes at over 1,000 job sites. Students have the option of choosing from among more than 500 academic courses, plus another 3,000 hours of continuing education opportunities. Barnard quotes Stallings (1997) in a report on the University of Phoenix and contends that “this publicly held for-profit company has an enrolment of approximately 55,000 students who are nearly all working adults”.

The instances noted above lend credence to the view that indeed the age of network world of lifelong learning is here! It is therefore sufficient to say here that for the library to appropriately respond to the needs of these learners, the library needs to know its customers and their needs. It is these identified needs of the customers that are translated into the services that the library renders. This new learning environment for students is bound to create a significant impact on the library.

The library’s Response

It is obvious from the nature of the learners and current developments in the educational field that great challenge is before the library in this dispensation. The library has never been

confronted by greater challenge than it is presently experiencing. Hitherto, the armchair system where the library only consults or is consulted within its own four walls of a physical space was the order of the day! The reality today is that any library that still endeavours to indulge in the old stereotyped order will only succeed in throwing itself out of relevance in the emerging and new educational system that is redefined, reshaped and refocused. The least the library can do is to be proactive, swift, and responsive, adapt and transform to the new demands.

Partnerships with the faculty

The constantly changing academic milieu requires that the library move to a new paradigm with some strategic planning which will see its involvement joining forces with the faculty as good partners in curriculum planning and development. The faculty-library partnership is required particularly in an environment like the University of Botswana where increase access is sought for tertiary education and training through distance and lifelong learning. Given the fact that provision of distance education is supposed to be a team work, the library must not be seen as an isolated entity but an active part of a complete whole. This partnership will ensure the establishment of good working relationship even at the planning stage of any programme between the library and the project team, course specialists/designers, tutors, module writers etc. With the establishment of partnership with the faculty, the library will be acquainted with adequate information of what is to be expected and therefore have some strategic planning in place. The effective application of strategic planning, according to Davis (1998), will ensure that the library is well positioned in terms of services, resources, staffing, funding, and opportunities to fulfil its mission within the academic community. More important, strategic planning will enable the library to take a more “proactive” stance in envisioning and moving toward a clearly defined and desired future.

Application of Information Communication technology

The modern information and communication technology (ICT) has made a terrific and celebrated entry into the educational theatre of the world. Oladokun (2002) contends that the advent of ICT is currently revolutionising the educational pattern in the world today. The impact of ICT in the

classroom continues to transform conventional pedagogical approaches as it can be/is being applied as a vehicle for lifelong learning. The import of this transformation is that the library too cannot afford not to move with the demands of the emerging technology. Indeed, ICT is seen as an integral part of library and information dispensation. Poulter, Tseng and Sargent (1999) assert that “in an increasingly technological society, providing Internet access is seen by many as a natural extension of the library’s remit to provide information, educational and leisure services to users”. It will therefore not be a surprise if the performance of the librarians is to be judged on their ability to integrate ICT within the operationalization of library practice and the effectiveness of cascading the acquired knowledge of ICT to their clientele.

It is gratifying to note that the library is moving with the societal change to make itself relevant for lifelong learning. In many places across the globe, librarians have been working in an opulently networked environment, as digital or virtual library appears now to hold the ace. Poulter, Tseng and Sargent (1999) observe that the Internet is freely available at the point-of-use to the academic librarians in the UK through the nationally-funded JANET (Joint academic Network) and SuperJANET services. They add that virtually all UK higher education and many further education libraries offer publicly available Web sites. Brophy (1997) also talks of the launch of what was described as the “Virtual Academic Library of the North West (VALNOW)” in the UK. According to him, VALNOW was “located at the University of Central Lancashire, but serving users across the whole of northwest England”. With over 20,000 students, library and learning resources services “are delivered through a total of nineteen service points in northwest England” combining traditional delivery with electronic library services. In a report based on a European Commission (2001) funded study called “Libraries without walls” Brophy writes, “VALNOW delivers materials, offers videoconference sessions with subject experts, provides access to remote and local datasets--all through a cooperative network involving librarians from a dozen different institutions”.

Barnard (1999) gives account of the Western Governor's University (WGU) in the United States. This institution presents a case of how existing public universities and other state entities are working to pool their assets and utilize the potentials of communications technology. The WGU is being implemented to "broaden access to higher education by fostering the use of advanced

technology for the delivery of educational services”. The *modus operandi*, according to Barnard, is that “the member universities use satellite television and compressed digital video technology to deliver classes at over 1,000 job sites”. It is also possible for students to choose from among more than 500 academic courses, plus another 3,000 hours of continuing education opportunities”. In providing library services to the scattered students of this university, Barnard acknowledges that “institutional and organizational libraries, combined with public and academic libraries in areas where students are located, provide information resources needed for their studies”.

Akin to the WGU type of consortium is the California Virtual University (CVU), which “offers distance course and degree programs from five University of California campuses, 13 California State University branches, 48 California community colleges, and 16 independent California colleges and universities”. Basically, Barnard (1999) provides information on two different models of library services being provided with the current and emerging versions of virtual universities. The schools created by consortia such as the National Technological University and the California Virtual University leave the provision of services to their individual member institutions. Since these libraries are involved in developing web-accessible databases for their traditional students, it is, in most cases, easy enough to extend the services to all students regardless of their location.

In the light of more and more academic libraries forming consortia on a statewide basis to provide common access to electronic records, Kascus (1997) predicts that there will be “a kaleidoscope of options for distant learners to choose from in terms of Internet and web access, full-text retrieval, seamless document delivery from publisher to workstation, online reference service, and electronic communication”.

Another likelihood, which Barnard observes, is that services such as access to library resources are provided through “vendors with established track records”. He gives an example of the model offered by the University of Phoenix. According to him “they have no physical library collection, so all of their library services are offered online or through document delivery”. Barnard also notes the claim of the University that “its online library collection provides access to millions of

articles from thousands of business and professional journals”. Besides, the system permits users to request and receive articles from nearly 4,000 journals, in addition to a free bibliographical search service.

E-learning Initiatives

Some evidence of the development and application of electronic learning activities from some of the virtual universities has been demonstrated as seen above. Some institutions of higher learning in developing countries are also gearing up to ensure they are not completely left behind in the application of electronic learning initiatives in their domains. At the University of Botswana for instance, plans are already in the offing for the commencement of electronic class delivery. Already there is a clear institutional strategy for on-line teaching of students, combined with the introduction of interactive video conferencing, e-learning and other educational technologies, to create virtual classroom learning experiences for them. There is no doubt that these initiatives will be deployed towards the service of distance and lifelong learners.

At the Centre for Academic Development (CAD) of the university, Educational Technology Unit headed by a Deputy Director was created to handle the implementation of this strategy. With the installation of some equipment and software, this unit has already begun organising series of training and workshops for the staff (including the librarians) of the university. There is also a comprehensive range of training programmes on electronic use and application lining up for the students as well. The teaching of information literacy skills by the librarians, which will soon be discussed, is part of the agenda. Already the library has formed its own University of Botswana electronic learning (UBel) team, which has been working to put some of the course content in WebCT for online delivery. It is instructive to say that in the meantime, the library database is accessible via the Internet. The library systems also have the self-help/service function, where individual borrowers can carry out book renewal from any computer with an Internet connection, anywhere within or outside the university campus.

Collaborative partnerships among libraries

In order to justifiably face the journey and challenges of the lifelong learning, libraries may need to go into partnerships. Collaboration, according to Fergus (1991) is “a form of cooperation in which local resources are pooled with external technical and other assistance to achieve educational goals which have been locally determined”. He concludes that “the hallmark is partnership rather than domination”. Oladokun (1998) acknowledges that “collaboration empowers group of individuals and organisations to pool their resources together, to share them and thereby assist one another”. Lim (2000) also opines that “partnership must be anchored on meaningful sharing of resources, both human and material”. He adds that “preparedness to go into partnership must likewise involve the process of looking into our institutional capabilities”. Adekanmbi, Kamau and Mphinyane (1996) affirm that “through collaboration, resources that would otherwise be at a distance become accessible thus ensuring fair distribution of resources, provision of parity esteem, satisfaction of political beliefs and improvement on economic efficiency”.

In order to rise above the enormous challenge posed by lifelong learning, establishing linkages and forging of coalition among libraries are critical. The network of coalition efforts is capable of building bridges through which the isolated and the marginalised can be effectively reached. As the effect of open and distance teaching institutions transcends the borders of where they are located, the establishment of collaborative partnerships among libraries does not have to be limited to local or national levels alone, it can be international. This of course depends on the need, location and widespread of the students the libraries are to serve. For instance, the University of Botswana Library (UBL) can go into collaborative partnership with other academic institution and public libraries within the country to effectively serve its ubiquitous distance learners. This is collaboration at local or national level. At the international level, the University of South Africa (UNISA) – a mega distance teaching institution that has students in other countries like Botswana, United Kingdom etc., can go into coalition with some libraries in those countries. The **convergence** of actions and strategic partnerships among libraries could pave the way for more effective lifelong learning responses.

Teaching of Information Literacy Skills

The new pedagogic paradigm in vogue seems to tend towards accentuating the empowerment of students and encouraging them to take control of their own learning. In the same vein, the move towards a knowledge-based society in a rapidly changing educational pattern is driving universities to prepare their students for lives and careers in the information age. On its part, the library, as a custodian of information has a strong role to play in this exercise. The teaching of information literacy skills is perceived as a *sine qua non* to equipping the students to be able to effectively cope with the demands of the new age of information and lifelong learning. At the UBL, information literacy skills programme is regarded as a fundamental service to be rendered to guarantee resource-based and independent learning to the University of Botswana students.

For a long time the UBL had been clamouring for the official recognition of the teaching of information literacy skills at the university. The effort of the library appears to have yielded some dividend of late with the librarians now not just playing the role of ‘the sage on the stage’ but also functioning as ‘the guide on the side’. The librarians, in conjunction with the lecturers of Computer Science department, now handle the teaching of the General Education Course (GEC) 121 & 122, which embed information skills programme and computing skills component. This course is mandatory for the first year students of the University. Thus the job of the librarians at the University of Botswana now involves active teaching on how to find, use and evaluate information as part of a lifelong learning continuum. With the new ‘learning to learn’ slogan at the university, the students now endeavour to master new skills and competencies in information skills as they are being piloted to know how to function appropriately in the constantly changing society.

Conclusion

Building a culture of lifelong learning entails providing the necessary opportunities and infrastructures for those who are often marginalized. As various educational institutions are moving with the demands of the new age even to serve students in their doorsteps - at home or place of work, the library owes it a responsibility to know that its survival strategy would no longer accommodate the idea of waiting to consult or be consulted within its small walls. At the

local level, the public library cannot afford to remain in town serving only the interest of people in metropolitan areas and neglect those in the rural areas. As against getting stagnated in catering for only the urban dwellers, the public library should develop mobility and move to serve the indigenous people in their remote locations. In our earlier discourse on lifelong learning in indigenous Africa, we identified several target population and some challenges (i.e. HIV/AIDS, poverty alleviation, children's rights, ICTs, etc) that need to be addressed. In deploying mobile library to serve the rural areas, it should be armed with posters, handbills, flyers and book materials that give enlightenment on those issues. Public and mobile libraries owe it a responsibility to give the indigenous people, including the marginalized rural dwellers necessary motivation to learn.

Given the dire need to prepare people for the challenges of lifelong learning, various institutions of learning seem to have been coerced to transform educational activities. The effects of e-learning initiatives and immense promises of other modern technologies, which have transformed teaching, learning and interaction processes are also known to have the capacity to assist the library in its onerous tasks of meeting the needs of this category of learners irrespective of their locations. Appropriate coalition and collaborative partnerships with the educators, some group of libraries and other educational parastatals, would be imperative and must be harnessed to adequately cope with the trend. With the dawn of new tide and dynamism of (digital) information, equipping the learners with necessary skills is bound to provide the needed enhancement to cope with the new age and development.

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