

TAKING INDIFFERENCE OUT OF DISTANCE LIBRARIANSHIP

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Introduction

Distance education has changed the practice of librarianship irrevocably. Distance learners now constitute one of the largest groups of library clientele. The size of this group is rapidly growing and expectations are this growth will continue. Distance learners have particular features and distinguishing characteristics which require that individual practitioners and institutions take special steps to ensure that they have access to quality library services. Information facilitators therefore must approach the provision of library and information services for distance education with changed attitudes and from different perspectives. Additionally, librarians and libraries must become proactive in their stance towards providing services for distance education. Unless members of our profession take affirmative action to provide library services for distance learning irreplaceable harm will be done the profession. Further, if librarians and libraries do not provide the information services needed to support distance education some other agency or entrepreneur will fill the breach.

When this system of education was developed, it was regarded as a sub-standard method of education. Consequently, intramural support services such as libraries were not factored into the needs of these "inferior" students. Educators and librarians were indifferent to the library and information needs of distance students. While distance education was and is an alternative method of education, the stigma of inferiority attached to distance education no longer prevails. Distance education is now an additional methodology through which it is possible to have access to learning opportunities, at all levels and in all disciplines. In particular, distance education provides opportunities for persons who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to pursue conventional education. Graduates of distance education programmes are no longer spurned for either employment or further education opportunities. Employers, however, want to be assured that employees who have gained their qualifications through distance education have the same level of skills as those who pursued similar courses at a face-to-face institution. These skills include high level competencies in research, computer literacy, information literacy, knowledge retrieval, utilization, analysis, synthesis and application ultimately leading to knowledge creation. One of the best training grounds for the acquisition of these skills is a library. Libraries provide access to a variety of information sources which provide unparalleled opportunities to access information. The enriched information base of a library fosters the ability to use information successfully. Access to a variety of information sources cultivates the ability to exploit, analyse, optimize and apply the right information, at the right time, for the right purpose. These are empowering and life-serving skills that all students should be able to develop regardless of their modality of learning.

Distance education and librarianship

Learning at a distance or distance education is more than 100 years “young”. Young because the current hype associated with distance education incorrectly suggests that this a “new” style of learning. It is not. Distance education, formerly called correspondence education *inter alia*, dates from the 19th century.

What is new however are the processes, procedures, systems and interaction between and across groups and individuals associated with modern systems of distance education. Also new are the transnational operations and commercialization present in modern systems of distance education.

Several reasons account for the prolific growth of distance education courses and programmes. They include:

1. The need to provide large numbers of students with access to educational opportunities;
2. The inability of any one country to satisfy its total education and training needs or those of its citizenry;
3. The need to cater to client [student and/or employer] convenience;
4. The need to retain the services of individuals who occupy certain positions, while at the same time enabling them to improve their skills. This is particularly important for small states; and
5. The opportunity to expand the revenue base of an institution.

Distance education programmes are now available from the range of institutions that offer education and training. The establishment of dedicated distance education institutions add to the mix of education providers. Courses available through distance span the “cradle to grave” spectrum of education needs.

The defining features of distance education are the distances that exist between the learner, their peers, their tutors and institution of instruction. These elements constitute the genesis for the fundamental differences between traditional and distance education. Many modern systems of distance education have another distinguishing feature. In the changed and changing financial environments of education, places of learning are hard-pressed to become centres of economic efficiency and financial solvency. The need to expand student numbers, thereby improving the bottom line of educational institutions, has caused many institutions to diversify and expand their target population. Distance education programmes have become one of the chief agents to achieve these goals. Consequently, the factors which have led to the expansion of distance education programmes have created new sets of clients for librarians - distance education institutions, distance educators and distance learners.

Information to support learning is one of the key pillars of any academic programme, as well as life-long and life-wide learning. Library services must therefore be central to any programmatic changes or development that occur in education, including distance.

In traditional library services the presumption is that clients are able to go to a library. As a result, traditional services are grounded in a building-based and building-bound philosophy. Distance education students may never visit their institutions of learning. This has led to the development, design and deployment of modalities to take the learning to distance students. Similarly, many distance learners may never have the opportunity to visit the libraries attached to their distance education institution. Distance introduces many new factors into the provision of library services for distance learning. Separation between learners, tutors, teaching institution and libraries impact, in fundamental ways, on the delivery of library and information services to members of the distance learning/teaching community. Therefore, the modalities used to take learning to students have to be transferred to the practice of distance librarianship. Where

necessary, strategies that cater to the specialized needs of distance librarianship have to be created and operationalized to span the learner and/or tutor-information divide.

Timeliness in communication and sufficient time to deliver distance library services introduces a time-line that is unique to this branch of librarianship. The use of intermediaries to facilitate student-librarian contact adds to the time required for these activities. Distance increases the time required to transfer/transport material to students so that they can complete their academic activity within the stipulated period. Distance also affects the ability of a student to have direct contact with the library of their teaching institution. Such contact requires time, the financial ability required to make such contact and access to the appropriate transportation for this interaction. In order to overcome the impact and effects of time and distance a variety of communication methods have to be utilized to link student and the distance library service. The institutionalization of intermediary methods of communication and contact required for distance librarianship is directly related to the need to bridge the distances that exist between library provider and clients. Thus, the defining characteristics of distance education also become the factors which differentiate distance librarianship from other branches of the profession. The tyranny of distance is writ large in library and information services and utilization in distance education.

Distance librarianship

Remoteness, isolation, learning at one's pace and in one's domicile are factors peculiar to distance education. These features alter the nature of how, when and where distance learners access information to support their programme of learning; they also change the profile and size of the client-base; and, they also introduce new issues that are germane to any consideration of library and information services for distance learning. Watson (1996), describes distance librarianship as "the professional and non-professional activities, procedures, services and practices that proactive quality library and information services to all those who learn at distance - regardless of the level of the education programme".

The last phrase of this definition captures the work of those who operate in, what we in the western and northern hemisphere call, the antipode region. Australia and New Zealand have a long history of pre-tertiary level distance education and are known for their efforts in their provision of library services to students at these levels. Regrettably, their approach to distance librarianship is not universal. Distance educators, distance learners and some librarians outside of Australia and New Zealand became engaged in distance librarianship some time after the commencement of these programmes at their institutions. Burge (1991), a distance educator addressed the relationship and responsibilities of librarians and distance educators regarding the provision of distance library services. She cites four pertinent reasons why librarians must become proactive in distance librarianship. These are "professional identity", how language is used to promote or hinder one's professional practice; "elegance", refers to the quality of one's professional practice; "inclusion", includes all aspects of interactivity with distance learners; and, "expectation" which concerns what distance learners, distance educator and librarians expect from each other.

Unwin (1994), in the paper *I'm a real student now* provides researched evidence of the expectations that distance learners have regarding library and information service provision. The survey conducted by Unwin revealed that distance students see library and information services as a core need and support service for their programme of study. The title of Unwin's paper was taken from one of the responses given in the survey undertaken by this writer.

Slade, Extension Services Librarian at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada has written extensively on various aspects of distance librarianship in Canada. His level of

involvement in distance librarianship transcends national issues as he has been one of the authors of the three major annotated bibliographies on distance librarianship that have been published. In *Library services for distance education courses*, Slade (1986) provides an overview of the Extension Library Service at the University of Victoria. Jagannathan, University Librarian of the Indira Gandhi National University (IGNOU) New Delhi which is the largest dedicated distance teaching university in the world, in her 1996 article *Rendering equitable library services to distance learners in India: problems and prospects* provides details of library services provided by this university and why the provision of these services is important.

Burge, Unwin, Slade, Jagannathan and many other writers include steps to eradicate indifference from the practice of distance librarianship. However, the recommendation of these authors need to be fully embraced by all stakeholders in systems of distance education.

While all students regardless of their level of learning need to have access to quality library services, it is the tertiary level programme learner who is in greatest need of support. Stephens and Unwin (1997) provide several cogent reasons why students at this level need to have access to well developed library services. In part they state that:

Due to the emphasis it [postgraduate education] places on research-led enquiry and the development and challenge[ing] of knowledge, it is at the postgraduate level that a key aspect of higher education is clearly visible. ... In advocating the centrality of critical thinking to the postgraduate experience, we are not ignoring the pluralistic nature of the needs and goals which drive students to embark on their studies. ... students do not, in the main, want their studies to be confined within a prescriptive framework; rather, they hope to be allowed to shape a new learning agenda which might transcend existing paradigms.

While Stephens and Unwin were referring specifically to postgraduate programmes these reasons also apply to all levels of education and training.

The annotated bibliographies of Latham, Budnick and Slade (1991) and Slade and Kascus (1996) indicate that the practice of distance librarianship is growing worldwide. However, the spread of distance library services is neither uniform or universal. Some of the largest groups of distance learners are found in the developing regions of the world. Regrettably, these students have the lowest levels of access to quality library services. Scrutiny of the literature annotated in these bibliographies indicates that literature on distance librarianship in the developing world is limited. Exacerbating the plight of distance learners in developing regions is that equality of access for distance learners registered at the same institution is not guaranteed. Distance learners in a developing country do not enjoy the same level of service as their peers who are domiciled in the country of the parent institution. All students should be able to access a wide information base so that they can read within, around and beyond their programme and level of learning; they need to be exposed to different views on the same topic to develop the skill of critical thinking; and, they need to hone their research skills.

What do distance learners want from libraries and librarians?

Parity. Distance learners want to have equity of access to information sources and services. Access to quality distance library services empowers the learner; it qualitatively enhances the programme; it fosters client satisfaction; and, it increases product marketability. While some of these notions are more frequently associated with a business rather than a social service type of activity such as librarianship the reality is that distance has moved education and librarianship into that realm. Therefore, all sectors of a distance education system need to adopt, as appropriate, the principles and philosophies of service-orientated businesses. Product marketability ensures that students will register with an institution and that employers will hold their products [students and future employees] in high regard. A distance education programme

of quality will be able to recruit large numbers of high calibre students and staff. Customer dissatisfaction fostered through either the total absence of distance library services or a service that is not satisfactory equate with indifference towards this corps of library clients - the distance learner. The provision of quality library services to support distance education is therefore a key component of any distance education programme of note.

Indifferences towards the library and information needs of distance learners

Despite persuasive reasons why quality library services should be integrated into distance education systems, library services are not available or accessible to many distance learners during their programme of learning. Disenfranchising distance learners of their right to information can also be termed as indifference. Indifference towards distance learners and their library and information needs manifests itself in different ways. This indifference can be categorised under the following typologies:

ADMINISTRATIVE

1. Planners of distance education programmes who opt not to integrate library and information services in their programming are indifferent to the library and information needs of their students.
2. Distance educators who incorrectly assume that they can provide and satisfy, through print or duplicated materials, interactive sessions and intermittent contact, all of the information needs of their learners are being indifferent to the information needs of their students.
3. Distance education institutions that do not ensure that their students have access to quality library and information services are being indifferent to the marketability of their students.
4. Distance educators must realise that distance students need to have access to up-to-date information and that materials produced for distance learning become dated from the time of their production. Denying students access to library services demonstrates indifference towards the library and information needs of these students and also to the rapidly changing pace of information to which their students need exposure.
5. Distance educators who do not include library services in planning these programmes are indifferent to quality control and assurance issues in distance learning.

PROFESSIONAL

6. Library administrators who remain reactive to the library and information needs of the distance learners at their institutions are being indifferent to a core need of these students.
7. Librarians who view distance learners as being “secondary” to their main responsibility behaving indifferently towards these learners.
8. Libraries and librarians who are not proactive in their support and satisfaction of the information needs of distance learners are being indifferent to a paradigm shift that has taken place in education and librarianship.
9. Libraries and librarians that do not provide bibliographic training to enable distance learners to become information literate are indifferent to the changed environments that distance creates in learning and librarianship.
10. Libraries that have not diversified their collections to include materials that are culturally and linguistically inclusive in recognition of the cultural, social and linguistic spread of their institution’s student base are being indifferent to the fact that distance education has introduced the elements of transnationalism and internationalism to learning and librarianship.
11. Librarians who do not ensure that collections in their libraries are diversified to meet the needs of the changed student population are indifferent to the needs of this sector of their clientele.

12. Library schools that do not expose their students to the differences in and requirements of distance librarianship are being indifferent to a growing corps of clients that their students will have to serve.

TECHNOLOGICAL

13. Librarians, libraries and educational institutions that assume that all distance learners will have access to cutting-edge technology are being insensitive and indifferent to the realities of distance learners. While access to technology in some areas and countries is increasing, the divide between the technology-poor and technology-rich is also increasing. Persons who live in countries with low GNPs still find the cost of technology-based information services beyond their reach. Additionally, low levels of telephony penetration, the high cost of communication charges, limited electrical services, libraries that are not information technology ready or libraries whose technology platforms are in a state of obsolescence all affect the ability of a library and individual to make use of the newer forms of information dissemination, storage, transfer and use.
14. Librarians, libraries and educational institutions that do not integrate a range of delivery strategies and communication devices to provide library and information services to their distance learners are being indifferent to the fact that many students are unable to access, for a variety of reasons, the newer forms of communication.
15. Librarians and libraries that have a high level of information technology integrated into their information delivery strategy and do not provide ways of helping students overcome technophobia are indifferent to the realities of some distance learners. Many persons who are distance learners do not initially have a high comfort level with technology. This applies particularly to women and older persons.

Eliminating indifference in distance librarianship

The availability of quality library and information services must ultimately be the goal of all stake-holders in the provision of distance education. No one sector can achieve this goal on its own. All have to work together so that all distance learners are able to access library and information services of quality. However, independently they can take steps to make a difference.

ADMINISTRATIVE

1. Distance education providers must ensure that all distance learners as a right have access to quality library and information services for all students regardless of where they are located.
2. Distance education institutions must adopt and institutionalize professional guidelines or standards for distance librarianship. In countries where professional regulations for distance library services do not exist they should either be established or existing ones should be adapted to suit local conditions and needs. Adequate library provision has to be made for distance education as existing stock-to-client and personnel-to-client ratios cannot be stretched to provide adequate levels of information service for distance programmes. Library ratios and norms have to be observed for all programmes. Quality assurance demands no less.
3. Dedicated distance education institutions must develop guiding principles for the development of library services to their students.
4. Distance education administrators and professionals need to involve librarians from the commencement of planning a distance programme. The integration of distance library services in distance education must be seen as central and a core service.
5. Distance educators and librarians must recognise that the institution of library services are an important aspect of quality assurance and marketability of distance education programmes.

PROFESSIONAL

6. Library administrators have to ensure that the library is integrated into any programmatic change and development, including distance education.
7. Library administrators must become proactive in the establishment of library services for distance learners at their teaching institution.
8. Librarians in distance education institutions must optimize the teaching role that has been assigned to libraries in the new information age.
9. Librarians have to become well-versed in the teaching role of libraries. In the information age the role of libraries has shifted from being custodial to being integrated into all aspects and levels of the teaching process, including distance.
10. Collection development policies must reflect and cater to the diverse range of social and cultural backgrounds that exist in distance learning communities.
11. Libraries have to ensure that their collection base is diversified in such a way that it responds to the total information needs of its multi-cultural and multi-ethnic corps of distance learners.
12. Library schools must provide training opportunities in distance librarianship. Formal courses for students presently being trained as librarians must be developed. For librarians already in practice, continuing education courses in distance librarianship must be designed and offered.

TECHNOLOGICAL

13. Librarians have to develop a wide variety of strategies to help distance learners become comfortable with technology based information services.
14. Librarians and libraries have to deploy a suite of low, medium and high end technological strategies to enable access and delivery strategies in order to ensure that all distance learners have access to quality services. Sole dependence on IT will disenfranchise a large corps of an institution's distance learners.

In conclusion, Raish (2000) provides compelling reasons why librarians should ensure that there is no indifference towards the provision of quality library and information services to distance learners. Although his comments relate specifically to on-line services nevertheless in principle they are applicable to all aspects of distance librarianship. In his view:

... when our efforts have succeeded, we have gained new respect from faculty members and administrators. After having been barely visible on the campus for decades, librarians are now finding themselves sought after for their expertise in finding information and navigating the Web.

Continuing he states:

... we need to do more than simply teach students how to do high-quality research for their classes. We must prepare them to thrive in today's information-rich environment, to succeed as individuals, parents, workers, and citizens.

Thriving and doing well are ultimately what quality library services for education, life-long and life-wide learning are about. Information literacy for life must be the ultimate goal of distance librarianship. Establishing a policy of inclusion lives up to the expectations of our clients, and improves the identity of our profession. Librarians and libraries must therefore ensure that all learners regardless of their modality of learning have equitable access to quality services. The challenges are many but the rewards are priceless.

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