

Tilburg University

The library's role in the virtual university

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The library's role in the Virtual University

Introduction

In discussing the role of the Library in the Virtual University, it is useful to reconsider the debates on and the development of the Digital Library ten years ago.

As library director of Tilburg University, I was heavily involved in the development of the Digital Library concept there in 1989, and directed the implementation process. This concept was based on the role of the library in the information chain and the changes that would result from the development of new information technologies and the increasing importance of electronic information:

- Professors and students are both consumers and producers of information. They use the library and other information sources in writing new books, articles, working papers, and theses.
- Electronic information and communication will have an important impact on this process. Information will become available anytime and anywhere. Information production will become easier; electronic publishing will change the current slow process of printed publication.

- Library and Computer Centre should cooperate and develop a Digital Library in order to provide high-level support for this process.

Conditions for success

This very forward-looking concept was highly successful, but the Digital Library Programme was able to succeed only because there was

- a clear vision developed by the library;
- full support from the senior management of the university;
- cooperation with other libraries, publishers and vendors, and
- a skilled and dedicated library staff to build on.

These conditions are still relevant in discussing the challenges libraries will meet if they want to play a prominent role in the Virtual University.

Developments and changes in the past ten years

Looking back, it is fascinating to see the many important developments and changes there have been in the past ten years:

- an increasing amount of information is available in electronic form;
 - libraries have managed to accommodate digital information in their services and have changed their collection development policy. Licensed electronic information is now prevailing, with important libraries cancelling their print subscriptions to substantial number of periodicals and moving to electronic only;
 - electronic publishing is changing the traditional information chain: direct communication between authors and users is possible, and new business models are being discussed;
 - gradually, Communication and Information Technology is being used for innovations in teaching and learning.
- more individual choices will be needed in the curriculum;
 - the time and speed of learning will be adjusted to personal needs;
 - there will be continuous pressure for quality improvement in order to compete at an international level;
 - the need to have the latest, relevant information available will become more important every day;
 - students will require more transparency in the content and more visualization of the information to be consumed.

An increasing number of universities are currently engaged in applying aspects of e-learning in their curriculum. Courses are being put on the Web, new learning modules are being developed, and universities are cooperating with each other on these developments, also on an international scale.

Opportunities offered by the virtual university are being explored, allowing students to learn individually or on a collaborative basis, independent of place and time.

However, engagement in these developments only makes sense if there is a clear strategy, a key issue that was already clearly stressed in the Dearing Report.

Strategy with respect to the virtual university is very much connected with the question of what the university wants to be, with a clear analysis of its strengths and a precise focus on its key competences.

Trends in Higher Education

The world-wide innovation process in the area of teaching and learning is not only a bottom-up process. In Europe, it is also steered by national and European authorities, which are focusing more on digital learning.

A good example is the Dearing Report in the UK (1997), which stressed that “higher educational services will become an internationally tradable commodity within an increasingly competitive global market.” According to this report “the development and implementation of an integrated C & IT strategy will be one of the main challenges of higher education institutions.”

A more recent example is the Report of the German “Wissenschaftsrat” (2001) that elaborates on various trends in higher educational learning. Trends identified in this report are:

Strategy for the European University Institute

For the European University Institute, which runs the largest post-doctorate programme in the social sciences in Europe, the use of new information and communication technology will be a key issue in its new strategic plan. Courses will be made available on the Web, multimedia applications in the area of history will become a commodity, but the most important strength of our Institute will remain the University as a place. Young people from all European countries come together in Florence, cooperate in small groups with a team of excellent professors, and write their theses on topics that are relevant for the future of Europe. This interactive process will remain a real key asset of the Institute.

The development of courseware will not be our priority, but things will be different for large universities that have to deal with thousands of undergraduate students.

Whatever the strategy of a university with respect to the integration of C & IT in teaching and learning may be, an important question will be whether the library will be involved in this process.

I believe that the library should be involved, because librarians are trained and have experience in information handling. The mission of a university library is to support the primary process of the university, and this implies that the library should actively seek involvement in changes in teaching and learning and should contribute to the solution of problems in this area.

The virtual university is also about research

In general, the discussion on the virtual university focuses on teaching and learning. In most publications the image of the virtual university is connected with teaching and learning.

I think that this is not enough. The idea of the virtual university has already long been applied in the area of research where researchers cooperate on joint projects and publications independent of their location and their university of origin.

C & IT have facilitated this process and have stimulated new ways to publish the results of individual and collaborative research. It is obvious that Web publishing is gradually changing the scientific and scholarly publishing process.

The role of the library

The key issue for the library is what the consequences of these developments should be for the strategy and the services of the library.

I would like to emphasize the following goals:

- the need for the library to provide access to relevant (external) information resources, both printed and electronic;
- the organization of all university-based scholarly and scientific information: learning resources and research output;
- the need to integrate various information resources;
- the provision of training and support. If we want students to make full use of the information resources that are available, they have to be information-literate.

In other words, it will be the role of the library

- to foster better use of existing information;
- to play an active role in training and instruction;
- to integrate the Digital Library with "e-learning".

Document servers

At present many universities have created or are creating document servers in order to store this type of information. With respect to the content they deal with

- courseware
- learning resources
- textbooks
- personal homepages
- research publications
- theses and dissertations.

It is an important responsibility for the library to see that resources such as working papers can be linked to Open Archives and that links from references in library databases and on personal homepages with publishers' databases can be established, based if necessary on licensing agreements.

The creation of document servers and Web publishing of the education and research publication of a university can also have an important strategic impact. A direct link between authors and end-users will be established, which can guarantee that the university community can make full use of everything produced by its own staff. It can also strengthen the position of universities as producers of information in their relationship with commercial publishers. The first step of

a university author can be to make his material available for the research community and for his or her students. Simultaneously, the publication can be sent to a publisher who can start the process of certification.

In this way, the relationship between universities and publishers can become more balanced.

Close cooperation with departments is required

A move in this direction – the integration of the digital library with the needs of the "virtual university" – will have significant consequences for the role of librarians. Library staff will have to work more closely with the actors in the primary process of teaching and research than ever before. They will become collaborators rather than liaison officers between the library and the departments. This implies the need for subject specialists in the library who really understand the research process and have excellent teaching skills.

Personalization

I believe that it is also important to reconsider what will be the impact in the longer term of

- developments in the direction of more individual ways of learning;
- increasing pressure on universities and research groups with respect to research output and the quality of research;
- developments in the area of information technologies, enabling smaller and more handy individualized computing facilities;
- the evolving market in electronic commerce.

A lot of these developments are going in the direction of customization, individualization and personalization of services. Commercial companies, such as Questia, are selling the "personal library" to individual users in US universities. Publishers and intermediaries are offering "personal portals" to end-users.

Libraries should be aware of these developments and this kind of competition. If they do not react properly, libraries will be bypassed and gradually lose relevance.

I believe that it is time to rethink the concept of the Digital Library, a concept that was useful and has worked very well in the past ten years. In this concept, however, the library and its information resources were the starting point.

Libraries should certainly continue their good work in the area of access to information resources, electronic publishing and the provision of training and instruction, but should seriously consider the need to move towards the user-oriented concept of the "Personal Web Library", customized to specific individual needs, dynamic, integrating the personal workspace with the personal information environment.

Conclusion

All key issues relating to the role of the library in the virtual university are interconnected. The university library can play a major role in

- organizing access to relevant, well-selected information;
- supporting innovations in teaching, learning and research;
- facilitating electronic publishing by researchers;
- developing university-based document servers, and
- providing tailor-made and personalized services.

These challenges require strong partnership with the departments of the university and a continuing development of skills and competences of library staff. Above all, they call for leadership and a clear vision by both the university leaders and the management of the library.

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