

Experiences in Developing and Delivering Lifelong Learning Programmes for Singaporeans

Tay Ai Cheng

Singapore has no natural resources, its only resource being its population of about 4 million people. The government therefore invests heavily in constantly training and re-training its workers. This implies that Singaporeans have to be ready to unlearn and relearn to stay relevant in the knowledge-based economy. The National Library Board (NLB), Singapore's mission is to expand the learning capacity of the nation so as to enhance national competitiveness and to promote a gracious society. By developing a relevant and responsive library system, which caters to the needs of its people, the NLB helps in creating enlightened individuals who can better position themselves to realize their full potential.

Within this context, the NLB has embraced the promotion of lifelong learning as one of its focus to make libraries and information accessible to all. Participants will be given insights into how NLB has developed and transformed public libraries in Singapore to become pulsating cosmopolitan centers for lifelong learning and interaction. The author shares NLB's holistic lifelong learning framework which uses its network of lifestyle libraries as delivery channel for lifelong learning. The presenter will explain how NLB has prototyped, developed and delivered a suite of products and services that reach out to the masses, to support their learning journey. Case studies of lifelong learning initiatives will be expounded upon. NLB has implemented an information literacy programme to teach Singaporeans to become more info-savvy. This programme reaches out to students, working adults and also senior citizens. The setting up of the One Learning Place, a learning center, conveniently located within the library will highlight the importance of building partnerships in lifelong learning. NLB has also offered its users a total library experience through successful thematic programming and the creation of niche libraries that reach out to Singapore's multicultural and heterogeneous communities. NLB's conduit for lifelong learning is reflected in its virtual environment which uses IT as an enabler to provide seamless access to information 24/7/365 for Singaporeans at home, work and at play. The presenter will also share how NLB is proactively leveraging on an e-environment to offer lifelong learning opportunities. As a knowledge-based society, Singapore needs to sustain lifelong learning and the role of the library as a democratic 'people's university' becomes critical as a partner in learning.

Keywords: Lifelong learning, Singapore, Library programming, Information literacy programmes

1 Lifelong Learning: The Singapore Agenda

Singapore is a knowledge-based economy which has no natural resources and the government places much emphasis on educating its people as its human resource. Lifelong learning in Singapore is seen within the context of creating an economically active workforce where Singaporeans need to renew, reskill and remain relevant. The government is especially concerned to turn the “digital divide” into “digital dividends”¹⁾. Lifelong learning has become a national campaign where the government promotes the collaboration between different ministries, statutory boards and the private sector. Setting the directive at national level, programmes are cascaded into executable projects at organizational levels. Agencies such as the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), the Workforce Development Agency (WDA), the InfoComm Development Authority (IDA) and the National Library Board (NLB) have been instrumental in championing national lifelong learning programmes. A series of activities and programmes has been set in place to nurture and sustain lifelong learning in Singapore. Some of which include;

- *Lifelong Learning Endowment Fund*: makes monies available for employees to attend training courses to upgrade their skills.
- *Singapore Learning Festival*: an annual event in collaboration with the MOM and WDA that is thematic in nature where the focus is on finding a job, becoming self-employed, and picking up a skill.
- *eCelebrations*: a programme organized by IDA to promote an e-lifestyle.

The National Library Board (NLB) as a statutory organization has also been proactively promoting and supporting these lifelong learning initiatives.

2 Contextualizing Lifelong Learning at NLB

NLB sees itself as an advocate of lifelong learning as reflected in its mission statement which is, “to expand the learning capacity of the nation so as to enhance national competitiveness and promote a gracious society.” It also strives to deliver a world-class library system that is convenient, accessible and useful to the people of Singapore²⁾. NLB’s tag line of “knowledge, imagination, possibility”, helps to foster creativity and innovation. The library has invested vast amounts of monies in IT infrastructure and has constantly re-engineered its services to establish best practice models. Acknowledging this was a case study conducted by Harvard University on the transformation of public libraries in Singapore where libraries are seen as celebrating learning and a place that promotes a vibrant and pulsating lifestyle³⁾.

For the financial year ending in 2002, the NLB had a critical mass reach where its network of 67 libraries welcomed an annual visitorship of about 28 million of whom 2 million were members. Its annual loans translated to 28 million. As a strategic community agency, the NLB has been a conduit for the delivery of public programmes where reading

and literacy is promoted as part of its lifelong learning initiatives. Some of the key performance indicators are loans, visitorship and membership. Now, with an established IT infrastructure and the growth of information in both print and electronic media, NLB has embraced both IT literacy and information literacy as part of its lifelong learning strategy.

3 Delivering Lifelong Learning Programmes in the Branch Libraries

3.1 Library Programming Activities

NLB enhanced its library programming for lifelong learning by translating the readership survey results and user profiling into thematic programmes at the different branch libraries. NLB's network of 67 community libraries acts as delivery nodes to attract users into the library. A programming team has been established to look into various programming events and activities for different target groups. By conducting programmes in the community libraries, NLB aims to reach out to those in the "heartlands", the unserved, and the uninitiated. For the last financial year ending 2003, a total of about 5,000 programmes were conducted attracting over 530,000 people into the libraries. Below is a sampling of some of the thematic programmes conducted in the community libraries:

- *BIZ@the Courtyard*: covers business related topics.
- *Eco@Woodlands*: creates awareness in nature and environment conservation.
- *Chinese Medicine and Health@BMCL*: focuses on traditional medicine.
- *Health@Bedok*: emphasizes the need for keeping fit.
- *music@orchard*: promotes the appreciation of the different forms of music to the youth.
- *Self-Improvement@ the Library*: covers tips on personal effectiveness.
- *KIDS Discover@MPCL*: an experiential interactive learning zone for children.
- *Life Sciences@ the Courtyard*: showcases latest developments in the biomedical and related fields.
- *wellness@orchard*: ways to maintain a healthy mind, body and soul.
- *Mandarin Wellness@TRL*: an ethnic language programme on wellness.
- *Storytelling*: encourages reading and literacy.
- *Born to read to bond*: promote parent child reading and development.

Library programming activities have proven popular resulting in a "win-win" situation for both the library and the user. Not only do they improve their general knowledge listening to speakers, but also the library benefits by achieving its key performance indicators of visitorship, loans and memberships for the branches. Such programming events are usually tied in with book displays, booklists and a membership drive where the branch librarian takes responsibility for managing the programmes.

As part of its programming activities, the NLB has participated in national campaigns too, where the library was seen as having a critical mass of users and an established infrastructure capable of delivering programmes. Some of the significant programmes NLB has participated include amongst others the *Speak Good English Movement*, a programme to promote the correct use of the English language; *kidsREAD*, a programme that encourage

children from disadvantaged backgrounds to learn to read and the *National IT Literacy Programme*, a programme to promote infocomm usage.

4 Delivering Lifelong Learning through Literacy Programmes

4.1 National IT Literacy Programme (NITLP)

This was a collaborative project with the then, National Computer Board (now InfoComm Development Authority or IDA) who needed a permanent venue to offer basic Internet training to Singaporeans. NLB, on the other hand wanted people to be more than IT savvy and wanted to step up training on basic information literacy for its customers to become more info savvy. The One Learning Place (OLP) pilot project was initiated. The Toa Payoh Community Library was picked as a site where an area of 430sqm was set aside with 136 PCs connected to broadband. The challenge was to train 100,000 people in 2 years (May 1999 to April 2001). The objectives of this project was to:

- promote an awareness and usage of Internet and electronic resources to the public;
- bridge the digital divide by providing hands-on training at an affordable cost; and
- groom Internet and information savvy human resource⁴.

The courses offered targeted students, working adults, homemakers, and senior citizens. Courses were delivered in English and Mandarin. The cost of courses was \$20 as compared to more than \$100 charged by commercial schools. There were a total of 86,847 people trained from May 1999 to May 2001 (87% of the target). The shortfall was due largely to limited capacity. When the pilot project ended in May 2001, OLP was set up in 3 other libraries representing the east, north and the west of Singapore. IDA developed an InfoComm Training Framework for different target groups and different levels of competencies. A curriculum was proposed and a tender for courseware development was called. The NLB's information literacy team designed and developed some of the courses. Titles developed included: Searching for Information, Emailing, Netiquette, and Internet Relay Chat. NLB was able to embed information literacy in the curriculum. The courseware was customized for different target groups, such as the senior citizens and homemakers. Since its inception in May 2001 till now over 25,000 participants have attended the programmes.

4.2 Information Literacy Programmes (ILP) in NLB

Advocacy for information literacy resulted in the establishment of an ILP team in early as 1998. The National Library Board Institute (NLBI) manages the information literacy programme portfolio. The ILP team, which consisted of three librarians, positioned information literacy as being a lifelong learning skill for all Singaporeans where they would need to identify, manage and use information in a meaningful way from both print and electronic resources. The Internet and its potential were seen as a lifestyle imperative in order to survive in the knowledge-based information society. In setting up shop, the ILP team carved out three programmes. Figure 1 illustrates the origins of the information literacy programmes in NLB using a 3-tier hierarchy. This then resulted in the creation of different ILP products for the different segments of the population. Again the branch libraries were used a delivery centers for these programmes.

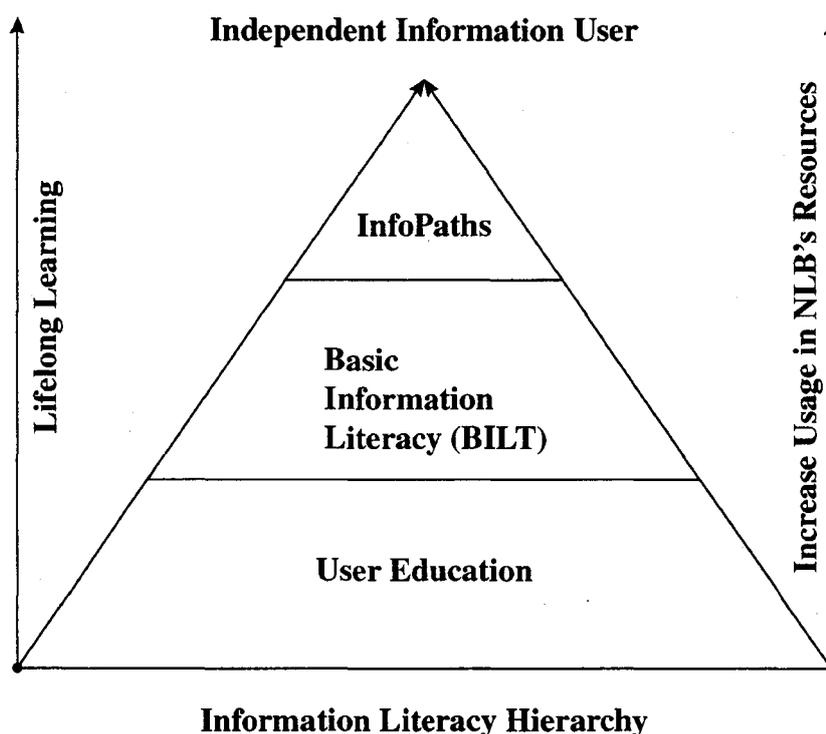


Figure 1: Three-Tier Information Literacy Programmes

4.2.1 Programme 1: Be InfoSmart

4.2.1.1 User Education and Orientation

Be InfoSmart is a User Education Programme which consists of orientation programmes for the general public and class visits for students. The community libraries which act as the customer facing front offer this programme. The objective of these programmes is to introduce the general public and students- from primary to junior college levels, to NLB library services, policies, facilities and resources. This programme is offered free of charge as part of the “public good” function of the library. Introduction to print and electronic resources available in NLB libraries helped increase visitorships, memberships and loan indicators.

4.2.1.2 Thematic Information Literacy Programmes

A series of thematic information literacy programmes have also been developed for the general public. “Hot Topics” such as Business, Travel, Health and Wellness, MP3s and Downloads, Crafts and Hobbies Information on the Internet were developed and delivered. The course was also packaged with other library service promotions such as free access to special collections or resources and a limited hour of free Internet surfing. This programme was offered in the regional libraries.

4.2.2 Programme 2: Basic Information Literacy Training (BILT)

Targeted mainly at primary and upper secondary schools, BILT introduces students to the Internet as a research tool. There are three modules in this programme which is customizable for different levels and different curricula. The average duration of each module is about an hour. Titles of modules include: Internet Search Strategies, Internet Search Tools, Evaluation and Citation of Internet Resources. As the demand grew for Project Work Skills,

a programme to offer hands-on instruction was developed. It helps students to locate information resources for their project work. Again, the librarians work closely with schools to develop the programme to meet the needs of students. Experience has shown that this programme is labour intensive as the demand from schools is high where many schools request the training of entire cohorts.

4.2.3 Programme 3: InfoPaths: Pathways to Information

This programme is targeted at corporate clients, government workers, and other institutions as well as the general public. The InfoPaths programme was customized and value-added to make clients regardless of their IT backgrounds, more info savvy. Emphasis was placed on Internet searching and information literacy rather than IT literacy skills. The courses empowered clients to efficiently and effectively manage information in the knowledge-based economy. The InfoPaths programme was packaged as a separate programme or bundled as part of the information service that is sold to corporate clients. The duration of the programme ranged from a minimum of four hours to a day depending on the client's availability. The client's information needs and areas of interest were taken into consideration when customizing the programme.

The information literacy programmes are constantly reviewed and enhanced to meet the changing needs of the public and corporate customers. To encourage research and development, the ILP team produced together with an external vendor, a CD-ROM on Internet Search Strategies where they experimented with computer-based learning and explored e-learning opportunities. The CD-ROM was produced and made available for sale. A major boost to the team was when the Ministry of Education, Singapore incorporated the CD-ROM as approved learning software for schools in Singapore. Some courses are already offered in e-learning format using a learning management system. Since its inception, over 132,000 participants attended information literacy programmes in NLB.

5 NLB's Role in Value-Adding Lifelong Learning

Nurturing, promoting and sustaining lifelong learning have become a core value for NLB. Its holistic and integrated approach to lifelong learning is value-added in the following ways:

- Creating a yearning for learning where it serves as attractive nodes as its outlets are conveniently located and well equipped (both in terms of content and facilities) to encourage learning through serendipity, interaction and ideas generation.
- Encouraging learning and discovery in an informal setting to equip Singaporeans with skills to glean for information to stay informed and abreast of developments by offering professional staff as "navigators" of information and a series of programming activities and events.
- Bridging and potential divide both social and digital between the haves and have-nots.
- Established infrastructure and reach by creating a facility that is conveniently located and affordable and accessible anytime anywhere to online information resources.

- Acting as a resource centre and a street corner university offering democratic access to all in an unthreatening learning environment.
- Partnerships with agencies such as academic institutions, government agencies, community groups serving the different ethnic groups, training providers, professional bodies and libraries.
- NLB strives to make learning accessible by taking learning to the learners. Using its advanced IT infrastructure as a conduit, eLibraryhub, NLB's digital library provides access to information resources 24/7/365.

6 Conclusion

Singapore invests heavily on lifelong learning programmes and activities to ensure its human resource remains economically active. The government involves all agencies- the private, public sectors and also grassroots groups. The library is a partner in learning where NLB has been successful in reaching out to the masses. While working successfully with other agencies and stakeholders, it has carved a niche for advocating lifelong learning through information literacy programmes. The various thematic programming activities encourage Singaporeans to learn and enhance their knowledge. Sustaining lifelong learning programmes in the library is a challenge and NLB constantly reviews and reflects on its programmes in keeping with international trends. New and innovative ways in offering lifelong learning activities have already taken the form of e-learning. Today libraries in Singapore have been transformed to become cosmopolitan pulsating lifestyle places where users learn through both print and electronic resources 24/7/365. The development and delivery of lifelong learning through programming activities celebrates learning where learners learn through the continuum of work, live and play.

References

- 1) Legard, David. (2001). *Singapore increases drive for national IT literacy: Singapore says "e-inclusion" fundamental to country's success*. IDGNet New Zealand. Retrieved 7, June 2004 from <http://www.computerworld.co.nz/webhome.nsf/0/ECB761180C48493CCC256A78002DC695?opendocument>
- 2) National Library Board, Singapore. (2002). *Unlimited: Annual Report 2001/2002*. Singapore: National Library Board.
- 3) Neo Boon Siong, Hallowell, R, Knoop, C. (2001). *Transforming Singapore's public libraries*. Harvard Business School: Harvard Case Studies. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing.
- 4) Ngian, Lek Choh. (2002). *Information literacy for the masses: The NLB experience*. Paper presented at the 68th IFLA General Conferences and Council, Promoting Computer Literacy @ your Library Session, Glasgow.