Library as a Provider of Lifelong Education : e-Learning Programs Provided by Feng Chia University Library

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The term "lifelong education" as an educational lexicon has appeared in English language literature for some decades. However, it has gained a renewed currency in the past ten years or so, the reason being that in the knowledge economy and information technology age it has become all the more important.

All types of libraries, be they academic or public, have always had the mission of providing learning resources and offering information-seeking assistance. Therefore, they have naturally taken on the supporting role in the area of lifelong education. But, with their rich information resources, staff's professional competencies, advantageous locations, and alliances with the community of scholars, some libraries have taken one step further in transforming their role as supporter to that of provider of lifelong education. This paper will examine the background of this transformation, the work that is involved, and the impacts that it creates for the library and the wider community.

Using Feng Chia University Library in Taiwan as a case study, this paper will profile its role as a provider of lifelong education in organizing and providing e-Learning programs. The success factors for its performing this role will also be outlined. With this detailed description and analysis, it is hoped that some other libraries may get to know the mechanics and logistics involved in providing lifelong education programs.

Keywords: Academic library, Distance education, e-Learning, Information technology, Lifelong education, Online courses, Public library

1 Introduction

Libraries have long been regarded as an important part in the educational process. With a wealth of learning resources, well-designed searching devices, and staff's professional competency, they have played a very effective role in supporting teaching and learning. It is, therefore, natural for libraries to become allied with lifelong education after the latter has been advocated and promoted by UNESCO since the 20th century. However, in this alliance, most libraries have only played a supporting, though nevertheless important, role. In order

to be more effective and visible in lifelong education, libraries should and can (with some innovative thinking) transform themselves from the role of a supporter to that of an active provider. The following will argue the case for libraries to take on this active role, and delineate a successful story of an academic library performing the functions of an active provider of lifelong education.

2 Background of Lifelong Education

The term "lifelong education" is very much a buzz-word nowadays. According to Kenneth Wain[1], the term first appeared in an official document in the 1919 Final Report of the Ministry of Reconstruction, Adult Education Committee (London). In the early 1970s, this term began to be used internationally largely through the promotional efforts of UNESCO in its publications and conferences. An often-quoted publication is *Learning to Be*, commissioned by UNESCO and written by Faure et al in 1972[2], in which the report ended with a list of principles of lifelong education with recommendations about how they should be read. This publication, however, does not define what lifelong education is. In fact, there have been a number of other similar terms, such as "adult education", "recurrent education", "permanent education", and these terms are sometimes used interchangeably with lifelong education. For the purpose of this paper, lifelong education means education occurring in informal, and formal settings throughout one's life from infancy to adulthood.

UNESCO has promoted lifelong education in the past few decades as a means of eradicating or reducing illiteracy. However, in the knowledge economy that we are in now, lifelong education has taken on an extra dimension than just as a tool of combating illiteracy. One of the biggest characteristics and challenges in the knowledge economy is the rapid advancement of technology. What one learns in school or just a few years ago is quickly out-dated and superseded by the latest state of technology. Therefore, lifelong education— which continually adds value to an individual—becomes crucially important. It is also said that in the knowledge economy, one would not stay in just one profession throughout one's life like before. The rapid changes in this day and age are such that one may have to switch one's profession several times to cope with the changing circumstances. Even in a certain work environment, the demands of job and customers are such that they quickly drive workers to learn new techniques in order to survive. Therefore, people in the knowledge economy need self-enhancement all the time, and as a result, they have to turn to lifelong education. Yet, people do not necessarily have to go to classrooms for their education for one reason or another. Some may not like the classroom setting, and in this day and age when pressure of time coming from work and family life is much greater than before, some people may prefer a more flexible and informal mode of learning which lifelong education offers.

3 Impact of Information Technology

An impetus to the popularity of lifelong education in the knowledge economy is the development of the new information technology. The new information technology—CDs, multi-media, personal computer, internet, etc.—greatly facilitates the implementation of

lifelong education. People do not have to learn face-to-face. Instead, they can easily learn online and with help from a diverse range of other IT products, e.g., videos, CD-Roms. The advantages of online learning mode are many and varied. First, people can save time in traveling to a certain physical location for their lessons. Next, people can take their lessons anytime that is convenient to them. Third, with discussion forums, chat rooms, etc. available, people may feel more free to exchange their thoughts and opinions than otherwise in a face-to-face situation, and thus a sense of community is quickly built up. Fourth, for people with disabilities or inconvenient to leave their homes, e-Learning provides the ideal mode for their studying. On the other hand, the downside of online learning is the lack of human interaction. But, this shortcoming is largely circumvented by some face-to-face encounters between tutors and students and among students.

Because of the public appeals of online education (some may term it e-Learning or web-based learning), quite a number of universities and colleges have incorporated this mode of teaching and learning in their programs. A few of them even make online education the exclusive mode. Some others, like the University of Southern Queensland, the Open University of Hong Kong, the Nova Southeastern University in Florida, USA, make it the main thrust of their courses. And it appears that these institutions have attracted quite a huge recruitment. Apart from universities and colleges, some academic and professional associations have also assumed online education as one of their functions and income avenue. For example, American Library Association (ALA), and Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in USA all provide online courses for the purpose of enhancing people's skills and competencies. In the case of ARL, the Office of Leadership and Management Services (OLMS) sets up the Online Lyceum, which offers a wide range of distance/online courses with the aim of keeping learners updated on their professional knowledge and management skills. Some examples of the courses are—Designing for the Web, Measuring Library Service Quality, Effective Decision Making.

4 The Supporting Role of Libraries

In lifelong education, libraries and librarians have played a very important role, and there are obvious reasons for this being so. First and foremost, libraries are resource centers where students can go to obtain the required reading materials. Public libraries' function in this regard is particularly significant because members of the community do not usually have access to academic libraries, and public libraries have therefore become their principal source of reading materials. In order to cater for the demands from members of the community for lifelong education, many public libraries have established dedicated departments with specialist staff and resource materials to help lifelong education students. Secondly, libraries provide convenient and comfortable reading space for the students who may find it difficult to do some quiet study at home or in office. Thirdly, librarians have also contributed to lifelong education in that they assist students in their search for resource materials and train students' information literacy skills. As noted before, public libraries these days usually see supporting lifelong education as part of their mission. As a measure of doing this, they have

special departments or personnel to do this. However, supporting lifelong education is not only confined to public libraries, academic libraries have also been active in this area.

In the case of academic institutions, quite a number of universities and colleges have established a special division on distance and continuing education to attract students who for one reason or another may not be able to go through the traditional mode of learning. Some universities and colleges even go all the way to make the whole institutions a "virtual campus". To have an effective lifelong education program, elements like course contents, course design, and technological infrastructure are of course of paramount importance. But not less important is the support system that is made available to students. These include services such as student registration, students counseling, and by no means the least, the library and information service.

Academic libraries have to realize that lifelong education students are different from the traditional on-campus students. Lifelong education students will rarely visit the campus library, and have fairly busy job and family commitments. Therefore, first of all, a well-designed and user-friendly library website will be useful for off-campus students to access the library catalog, and various types of electronic resources, e.g., e-journals, e-books, e-newspapers, and databases. Furthermore, to cater for the special needs of off-campus students better, some libraries even set up a special page for them to facilitate their access to resources and services. Furthermore, as lifelong education students may not visit the campus library, the library should preferably set up virtual reference service on the web so as to answer off-campus students' questions for information. Information literacy skills training programs are very important these days for any university student. Since off-campus students may not take advantage of the face-to-face information literacy training program, well-designed on-line tutorials will have to be launched. Library staff's email addresses and telephone numbers should also be included in the website; therefore, if off-campus students wish to ask for help, they would know the channels.

In some universities where distance education and e-Learning are the predominant part of teaching, some innovative, and to some, fairly drastic organizational changes will have to be made for the purpose of tailoring better to the needs of off-campus students. In a very well-written paper by Susan McKnight of Deakin University in Australia, a new and innovative practice regarding the supporting system given to lifelong education is described[3]. In Deakin, a new Learning Services Division is established, and the library is a component of it along with the Office of Flexible Learning, the Center for Academic Development, and Learning Resource Services. This Division is under the supervision of the Executive Director. With this integrated approach, a holistic service is provided to the students. So far as the library service is concerned, a separate website for off-campus students is built up to tailor to their special needs. In order to deliver resources materials onto the off-campus students' desk-top, a large quantity of electronic resources has been acquired. At the same time, print materials are still provided to off-campus students. The students request the items from the catalog and the materials are then dispatched to the students within a reasonable time-frame.

5 Role Transformation: From a Supporter to a Provider

From the foregoing, it has been shown that libraries have played an active role in supporting lifelong education. But, in fact, instead of the supporting role, libraries are in a good position to assume the role of a provider of lifelong education. The reasons are perhaps quite obvious. To begin with, library is a place where resource materials are acquired, classified and cataloged, and properly kept on shelves. Next, the library is usually conveniently located and has space for a variety of uses. Another advantage is that library staff are information professionals who can assist the off-campus students in their information-seeking endeavor. Finally, libraries are part of the academic and scholarly community, and it is fairly easy for them to secure the service of online instructors. Therefore, in this paper, I would argue that libraries should transform from just being a supporter of lifelong education to being a provider and thus an active player in the lifelong education arena. Feng Chia University Library in Taichung, Taiwan, has in recent years become very active in this regard. Their efforts may be a good illustration as to how libraries can take a forward step from just being a backroom provider of lifelong education to the forefront as an active provider.

Feng Chia University, a private university, is located in Taichung, Taiwan. With about 20,000 students ranging from undergraduate class to doctoral study, it now has 7 faculties, namely, Engineering, Business, Science, Architecture, Humanities and Social Sciences, and College of Continuing Education. To meet the challenges from the knowledge economy, the university has invested heavily on setting up a first-rate information technology infrastructure. The university library is in the core of this infrastructure. The library was recently renovated and has successfully transformed itself from a traditional warehouse of books to what it called a "LearningWorks". The emphasis and focus are now on becoming proactively assisting faculty members in their teaching and research, and innovatively helping students in their learning.

Driven by this new mission and conviction, and imbued with "outside the box" thinking, Feng Chia University Library has taken a very bold step forward in positioning itself as an active player in the arena of lifelong education. It realizes that as a university library, it is in an advantageous position to take on this role. First, it is endowed with a wealth of resources materials, both print and non-print. These resources materials can support the teaching of lifelong education courses. For example, when compiling course readers, library can easily have access to the right reference materials. Second, the library is located in a prominent and convenient location on campus, hence facilitating students to come to this venue for face-to-face meetings. Lastly, library staff are in close touch with the community of scholars; therefore, it is comparatively easy for them to identify the relevant instructors. and to invite them to teach the courses. On the other hand, however, there are some obstacles in library organizing these courses. Two obvious ones are (1) financial constraints, and (2) staffing implications. Planning, organizing, and running these courses do require a large amount of financial and staffing resources. In Feng Chia University Library's case, it could put together

some very innovative and convincing funding proposals for running lifelong education courses and thus successfully securing adequate outside grants. In tackling staffing problem, the Library formed an e-Learning and Digital Content Strategic Management Research Group by re-deploying staff from various sections in the Library, hence having a focus group to deal with the work related to running e-Workshops. The staff in this group would assume their usual library duty when work involved with the training courses was finished.

5.1   Programs Organized by Feng Chia University Library

In recent years, Feng Chia University Library has organized a number of seminars and short courses, as part of its lifelong education efforts. However, in providing these courses, it has recognized that it is not appropriate for a university library to run discipline-related courses (such as law, architecture, biology, etc.). These courses should be left to the relevant academic departments. Instead, Feng Chia University Library has devoted its efforts on organizing courses teaching generic skills - skills that all members of the academic community should learn. Knowledge of the new information technology is obviously such a skill in the internet age. Therefore, the courses provided so far have their focus on IT and its applications.

Two major lifelong education programs that Feng Chia University Library has developed and organized are worthy of some detailed descriptions because they illustrate how lifelong education programs can be run under the aegis of a library. These two courses are : (1) Strategic Planning for e-Learning and Digital Content, and (2) Strategic Planning for University and College Leaders on e-Learning. Before delineating the planning and running of these two programs, it may be worthwhile to highlight their similarities and differences. With respect to similarities, these two courses adopt blended teaching as its mode of instruction. This means that both online and face-to-face teaching methods are used. Next, these two courses are mainly taught by overseas faculty, but supplemented by facilitators and tutors in Taiwan. As a result, the medium of instruction is English, and Chinese is used only in the interaction of students and local facilitators and also over the LMS (Learning Management System). Third, both courses are credit-bearing so as to enhance the attractiveness of the courses. Lastly, the bulk of the students come from either academic institutions or government departments, and the students are in general middle to upper levels in their home institutions. On the other hand, however, these two courses also have their differences. The first course is entirely designed and developed by the Feng Chia University Library, whereas the second one is "commissioned" to an overseas university that is chiefly responsible for designing the program, albeit with input from the Library. In other words, this program may be regarded as an "outsourced" product. The next difference is that as some instructors of the first program are not able to come to Taiwan, CDs with audio are produced and included as part of the course readers. In the second program, all the instructors—small in number as compared with the first program—come to Taiwan to give face-to-face instruction. Consequently, the course readers for this program contain only the lecture notes including hard copies of the power-point presentations and further readings.

5.1.1 "Strategic Planning for e-Learning and Digital Content"

The first program—"Strategic Planning for e-Learning and Digital Content"—was initiated because it was felt that the rapid development of information technology in the past two decades or so has revolutionized the conventional classroom teaching as well as the traditional scholarly publishing. Academic institutions, government departments, and corporations in this day and age, therefore, have to come to grips with this new environment. It was also recognized that strategic planning and management played a very important role in meeting the challenges as presented by the new environment. The program was initially conceived at the beginning of 2003 as a traditional face-to-face international conference. A number of overseas speakers were identified and invited to come to Taiwan to cover the various areas of e-Learning and digital content. However, the outbreak of SARS during the earlier part of 2003 rendered a physical conference undesirable. Instead, Feng Chia University Library, with some innovative thinking, decided to turn this into a series of workshops conducted through the e-Learning mode.

As the name of this program implies, there are two parts—(1) e-Learning and (2) Digital Content. The first part was held from June 20 to July 31, 2003. It covered three important elements in running e-Learning and distance education programs, i.e., (1) development and management of a business model, (2) implementation and collaboration of a supporting system, and (3) international liaison and cooperation. Seven international instructors from Australia, Hong Kong, New Zealand and the USA produced narrated PowerPoint presentations, which were turned into CD/VCDs by the Library. These CD/VCDs, together with lecture notes, and some reference readings, were packaged into a course pack, and distributed to students. Learning support was provided by 12 Taiwanese online facilitators and 6 tutors working through a learning management system (LMS). This course attracted many applications from universities and colleges, government departments and corporate organizations. Some 170 students were eventually enrolled and they come from all four major regions of Taiwan. During the e-Workshops, students were encouraged to participate in online discussion forums and complete assignments. All dialog in the LMS was bilingual, Chinese and English. The relationship between international instructors, Taiwanese facilitators and students is shown through a diagram of the course architecture in appendix 1.

In order to obtain the feedbacks of the students on the usefulness or otherwise of this program, a post-course questionnaire was conducted. This survey, adopting a standard five-point Likert scale, was carried out online and by mail with a follow-up telephone survey if necessary. A total of 88 student evaluation forms (about 50% of the total student population) were received. Overall, the majority of responses was positive. For example, 64% of the respondents found the course well-organized and informative, and indicated that they would register for online workshops again in the future, and about 67% of respondents agreed that the course content was useful4).

The second part of this program—Digital Content — was held from June 30 to July 25, 2003. This part addressed the issue of electronic scholarly communication with emphasis

on global as well as local perspectives, and the development and management of a business model of dealing with electronic information and scholarly communication. Again, overseas instructors were invited to provide narrated Powerpoint presentations, and to design online forums and assignment tasks. The format and the actual implementation of this part were very similar to the first part that was described in the above

5.1.2 "Strategic Planning for University and College Leaders for e-Learning"

The second program that Feng Chia University Library recently planned and organized was the "Strategic Planning for University and College Leaders for e-Learning". This program was funded by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan because the Ministry believed that the e-Learning model as a teaching medium would be very popular and also effective in the knowledge economy and information technology era. It aimed to train various types of specialists in the e-Learning profession—planners, designers, tutors, evaluators, and technical support personnel. The program consisted of 76 hours of face-to-face instruction, supplemented by online discussion led by local facilitators. These 76 hours were meant to instill in students the philosophy, theory and practice of e-Learning. There were basically three modules in this program; these were (1) e-Learning Program Planning and Management (27 hours), (2) Instructional Design for Online Courses (27 hours), and (3) Concepts of e-Learning: Focus on Critical Thinking, Reflection, Strategic Planning, and Evaluation (12 hours). As it was difficult to find suitable instructors in Taiwan to teach these modules, the Library decided to identify and invite experienced personnel from overseas to be the instructors. Several overseas universities were considered for the teaching role, and finally the Library had decided to invite the Director and his staff in the Center for Distance Education & Technology, the University of British Columbia in Canada to deliver the first two modules. As it turned out later on, an instructor from Simon Fraser University in Canada also joined the teaching team. As for the third module, it was co-taught by a professor from the Chinese University of Hong Kong and a professor from the University of Technology Sydney in Australia. Therefore, like the first program, this program was also full of international flavor and perspectives.

The design of detailed syllabus of each module was done by the overseas speakers, although the Library has put in a lot of guidance and suggestions to meet the specific needs of Taiwan. However, the Library had contributed far more in terms of logistics support. It included recruitment and registration of students, setting up of classrooms, and provision of course readers. Before the program started, instructors were requested to send to the Library their Powerpoint files, lecture notes, and some reference readings. These materials were then packaged together as course readers to be distributed to students. If instructors could only supply citations to reference readings, then it would be up to the Library staff to use their professional expertise to obtain these readings and put them in the course readers.

This program attracted a fairly large number of applications, but for pedagogical reasons in face-to-face teaching situation, it accepted only about 50 students. The bulk of the students came from universities and colleges all over Taiwan, with a few coming from government and corporate organizations. Most of them were either currently involved with e-Learning

activities in their home institutions or intending to be involved. Since all the students had to work during daytime, the program was conducted throughout a number of weekends from February to April 2004. During the class, the students' responses were very encouraging, and they interacted with the instructors with great enthusiasm. As a result, the students had benefited a great deal from the program.

6 Conclusions

- There is no doubt that Feng Chia University Library has run its lifelong education programs successfully. It may be worthwhile, in this concluding part of the paper, to summarize their experience and to enumerate the success factors in the following so that other libraries may learn the important points.

- Libraries that are thinking of organizing these courses should have the right mindset. They should not just be content with the position as a supporter of the educational process; instead, they should realize that with their well-endowed assets (library collection, professional staff, convenient location, etc.), they could very well be a provider of educational courses. The important lesson here is that libraries have to think "outside the box". The management of Feng Chia University Library has the vision and dynamism to take on a new challenge, and then successfully cascade down this mindset to all its staff.

- For libraries to run courses, endorsement and support from their parent institutions is of paramount importance - in the case of academic library, it is the university and college management, and in the case of public library, it is the municipal authority. With blessing from the higher authority, cooperation from other administrative units, such as Finance, Personnel, Computing, can conveniently be obtained because libraries would need their assistance in providing educational courses.

- Adequate funding is essential for organizing and administering these courses. However, library budget does not usually cover expenses in this regard. Therefore, fund-raising, particularly from the relevant government departments and corporations, is an important task that has to be undertaken.

- Equally important in the running of these courses is adequate staffing resources. Library staff usually have their fixed and assigned duties and would have little time to involve with running educational courses. With some ingenuity and self-sacrifice on the part of the staff, this problem may be overcome. In Feng Chia's case, the Library re-deployed staff from their normal duties and formed a focus group to work on the courses. This is a temporary measure and members of the focus group would go back to their normal duties once the work related to the courses is completed.

- The planning and preparation work have to be thorough and detailed as there are so much work involved in organizing these courses. -

The above factors contributed to the success of Feng Chia University Library in organizing and running educational courses. It is hope that other libraries can also take

these factors to heart when they are planning and organizing lifelong education courses.

Notes

1) Kenneth Wain, *Philosophy of Lifelong Education,* London: Croom Helm, 1987.

2) Torsten Husen, and T.N. Postlethwaite, *The International Encyclopedia of Education* (vol. 6), 2nd ed., London: Pergamon, 1994.

3) Susan McKnight, "Changing the Mindset: From Traditional On-campus and Distance Education to Online Teaching and Learning," IN *e-Learning and Digital Publishing,* eds. by Steve Ching, Paul Poon, and Carmel McNaught, London: Springer [forthcoming in 2005].

4) Steve Ching, Paul Poon, and Carmel McNaught,"Virtual Workshops of Distance Learning: Practising What We Preach," *International Journal of Distance Education Technologies,* 2004, 2(1) : ii-v.

Acknowledgement

Appendix 1: Course Architecture