International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning

Book Review – Libraries Without Walls 4: The delivery of library services to distant users

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April – 2003

Book Review

Libraries Without Walls 4: The delivery of library services to distant users

Editors: Peter Brophy, Shelagh Fisher and Zoë Clarke (2002). *Libraries Without Walls 4: The delivery of library services to distant users.* 299 pages, hardcover. London: Facet Publishing. ISBN: 1 85604 436 X

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Librarians and other information specialists familiar with the *Libraries Without Walls* international conference series have eagerly welcomed the publication of this fourth conference volume. This book comprises the proceedings of an international conference held in September 2001, organized by the Centre for Research in Library and Information Management, at the Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK. Together these papers report on the developmental projects of forty-five library and information services specialists from seven nations – twenty-nine from the UK, five from Greece, five from the USA, two from Finland, two from the Netherlands, and one from Denmark.

A broad collection of papers are organized under seven conference themes: 1) Libraries and Virtual Learning Environments; 2) Online Enquiry Services for Remote Users; 3) Virtual Libraries and National Initiatives; 4) User Behaviour and User Training in the Distributed Environment; 5) The Public Library's Role in Serving Distant Users; 6) Content Development for the Virtual Environment; and 7) Key Technology Issues in Delivering Services to Distant Users.

This thematic organization, plus the extensive index, greatly facilitate readers' topical searching and usage of the volume. An opening alphabetical listing of contributors, giving their institutional or program affiliations and nations of origin, further enhances its use. Within the text, each thematic division is introduced by a separate theme title page, providing further emphasis to changes in thematic content. In addition to conference papers, there is an introduction prepared by the three editors and the keynote paper by Elizabeth J. Burge, "Behind-the-screen thinking: key factors for librarianship in distance education."

In their introduction, the editors provide valuable insights into the parallel chronologies of the Libraries Without Walls conferences and the development of online library services to remote users. The editors reflect on the rapid growth of these services, as observed from the first through the fourth conferences. They examine the concept of how online library services grew from a "theoretical perspective" and the "preserve of a small group" to becoming a "mainstream library service."

The editors also note the significance of "disintermediation," or the elimination of interaction with librarians as information providers, because "more users are accessing services remotely." Another closely related phenomena is that most libraries in developed nations now operate as "hybrid" service organizations, "relying on a managed mix of electronic and traditional 'information objects' to deliver appropriate [materials and] services to their clientele." The editors then present a lengthy discussion of the contents of most of the papers, reflecting on their order and impact during the conference.

Burge's keynote address was naturally the first to capture the editors' attention and praise. Setting the tone for the entire conference, Burge packed a wealth of wisdom and vision into her presentation, making it valuable reading for all those interested in distance education and library services. Burge identifies eight factors relevant to libraries in distance education, including disintermediation, which "has to give way to proactive, 'intelligent agent' intermediation" on the part of distance learning librarians. Burge concludes with "thinking tasks" asking us to think "sideways." Such "thinking tasks" include: "Think analytically about what you notice in your work contents. Think about library services in terms of change. Think creatively. Think critically and transformatively about just about everything" (p. 11- 13). Burge then closes with five maxims for librarianship in distance education, which include, "value your intermediation as essential [and] reach past the technology tools to the human conditions" (p. 14).

The emphasis on the human elements in Burge's keynote address provided an ideal lead-in for the papers in the first section, covering the interactions of libraries and virtual learning environments. Effective human interfacing with users via a variety of means is a recurring theme. Julie Brett's chapter entitled "Distance Learning Zones: A Pilot Project," describes efforts to set up regional international learning centers staffed for transnational students at selected UK universities. Sally Chambers and Paul McLaughlin in their chapter, "University of London – Virtual Campus Project," reported that an "External Library Projects Assistant will be the first point of contact for external programme library users. Having a main contact person for the virtual learning service will help to reduce the isolation experienced by students who are studying at a distance from the main university campus" (p. 38). Linda McCann in "Developing a Worldwide Distributed Resource to Foster Regional Studies" remarked: "Technology issues . . . in a networked environment, and content issues relating to distributed library resources and services to support distance and distributed learning, are undeniably important in the creation of virtual learning environments. However, . . .issues of communication are equally important. Real collaborative efforts require open and effective communication. We are all learners in virtual learning environments" (p. 48 – 49). Sue Roberts and John Davey made a similar declaration at the conclusion of their paper, "Virtual Learning Environments and Information Services*,*" when they said: "The development of relationships within the new academic team is the major critical success factor, and not the technological advances, which are simply the tools to make it happen" (p. 83).

The importance of communication is stressed in the second section, "Online Enquiry Services for Remote Users." Lou McGill reports the finding in, "Global Chat: Web-Based Enquiries at the University of Leicester," that:

> *"Whilst it was essentially aimed at providing an enquiry service, it became obvious that this type of facility was also a powerful tool for user education, at the point of need. Targeting skills support is a significant challenge for those providing services to distance learning students. A chat service offered a useful*

mechanism for providing this support when it was most needed, and therefore most likely to be effective" (p. 87).

In the third section, "Virtual Libraries and National Initiatives," Shelagh Fisher, in "Evaluating the Impact of the UK's Distributed National Electronic Resource," observes the newly demonstrated importance of having an appointed review group working simultaneously with a national automation development project:

> *"The idea of running an independent evaluation alongside a major development programme, so as to encourage it to learn lessons from implementation, is relatively new, yet recognizes the dynamic nature of the Distributed National Electronic Resource, both in terms of rapid chances in technology and in terms of developing stakeholder experience, expertise and understanding. It is apparent that the task of building and evaluating national-level services is complicated by very different perspectives among key stakeholders, and by the lack of any single, clear model on which to base development and evaluate judgments"* (p. 156).

Fisher's final statement applies equally to the building and evaluating of smaller scale services for individual institutions or organizations, and larger scale transnational or global services. Because we are venturing into new developmental territory, we simply do not possess any clear models for guidance and evaluation. Herein lies the vital importance for sharing what we are doing through conferences like Libraries Without Walls and through publication of resulting papers such as these. Through such efforts, we pool our experience and findings, sharing both our shortcomings and triumphs.

The scale of content of this little volume far exceeds its physical proportions. Brought together between its covers is a broad spectrum of reports on emerging automated information systems and the provision of library services to their users. Here are data and observations we cannot afford not to know, making this a book we cannot afford not to read.

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