
Resurrecting the Library Profession: Digital Competencies for Librarians

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Abstract

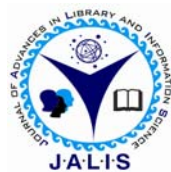
In one of his lectures, our professor was saying that when some books are lost, nothing is lost. When Internet link is lost something is lost. When readers are lost, everything is lost. This is in parallel to the adage that when wealth is lost nothing is lost. When health is lost, something is lost. When character is lost everything is lost. A library is characterized by its Readers who are considered guest supreme. Today, invariably all kinds of library systems are suffering the loss of good many readers due to their access to the World Wide Web through internet. A corrective to the situation is that the library professionals need to equip themselves with digital competencies and resurrect the readers services lost to the digital world. This paper discusses the various facets related to Digital Competencies in the context of library professionals and library services both digital and online.

Keywords

Digital Outreach; Digital Competencies; Digital Literacy; Library Professionals.

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INTRODUCTION

Society is an agglomeration of individuals. The society today in the new millennium is known as knowledge society which has become ubiquitous with more everyday activities, goods and services available electronically and many categories 'only available online'. Cole., Allen, and Schmitz, "Researchers now routinely expect to conduct a large portion of their research online; citizens served want quicker, more convenient access to the resources of their publicly funded institutions; and legislatures are demanding maximum value for the dollar. Knowledge on demand, anywhere, anytime, has become a goal for institutions of higher education." [1] Such an environmental change, for want of library professionals' digital competency have driven away a majority of readers from the library premises and the library websites hosting rich eResources are underutilized.

Digital Outreach programme is used to deliver information to vulnerable people and this can be introduced to the library users to increase the use of the Library websites as well as the internet amongst particular target groups and in this case the library users of a particular library.

According to a report from the Online Computer Library Center (2005), "College students in need of library assistance today have many options beyond the traditional one of walking into a physical building in search of a staffed reference desk. At most institutions, they can also search for information themselves on their library's Web site or use links provided there to contact a librarian via e-mail, chat, or instant message. However, these latter options assume that the students visit the library Web site, when in fact studies show that a commercial search engine is their first choice when starting an information search." [2] It is not only the category of students but the whole academic community comprising of scholars, teachers, guides besides students that need staffed assistance. Unless the library staff equip themselves with digital competency, they cannot promote digital literacy among the library users.

Digital competencies are recognized as a necessity today for every individual user of the library. The concept is becoming an essential life competence. From the view point of the academic library professionals, digital competencies have become more essential as they have the responsibility of

guiding the information users who are more inclined towards the digital resources available over the World Wide Web through the Internet rather than the physical documents at the library.

If at all an adage has been realized of its meaning by a majority in a society, it is "Knowledge is Power". Knowledge encourages people's participation in development. Any lack of application of knowledge and technical know-how accentuates the process of marginalization and economic deprivation. Therefore, education aims at imparting process-oriented and skill based learning in order to help people gain livelihoods and foster development. UNESCO has been doing yeoman's service for the past few decades crossing over geographical and cultural boundaries in the promotion of human welfare and empowerment through literacy development programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Don Tapscott (2009), in his book entitled *Grown Up Digital*, outlines his research conducted with nearly 6,000 people from the Net Generation living in various developed countries including Canada. In order to identify ways the Net Generation differs from other generations, Tapscott (2009) compares his findings to interviews conducted with 800 people from Generation X and the Baby Boomer Generation. Most applicable to education are the conclusions that the Net Generation is collaborative, relational and innovative. Eshet-Alkali and Amichai-Hamburger's (2004) research exploring the cognitive skills necessary in digital environments, shows that the Net Generation, in comparison to older generations, is generally not an effective user of information. Beard and Dale (2009) discuss in their paper that library space contributes users' literacies because it is one of the contexts of their use just like possible designs of writing have to correspond to different social and cultural contexts.

EMPOWERMENT : STARTING FROM INDIVIDUALS

Every human being is considered potential for a nation's progress as well as for promoting human welfare by promoting self. There is an adage that, after all, charity begins at home. A person who is able to appreciate self values based on ethical ego can understand the social values and common good and make his contributions to that effect also. Every individual has social obligations that place

challenging demands on individuals, who are confronted with complexity in their lives. In order to face all such confrontations and complexities fulfilling one's own needs while contributing to social welfare activities, every individual needs acquisition of different types of literacies and competencies. Such acquired literacies may help one face challenges in life successfully as well as identify overarching goals for education systems and lifelong learning.

In the context of technological developments today, the most fundamental to all types of literacies is the computer literacy. Simonson, Maurer, Montag-Torardi & Whitaker (1987) define computer literacy as "an understanding of computer characteristics, capabilities and applications, as well as an ability to implement this knowledge in the skilful and productive use of computer applications".

DIGITAL COMPETENCIES AND LIBRARY TECHNOLOGIES

'A competency is more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context. For example communication is fundamental to all the skills and social activities of an individual as well. 'The ability to communicate effectively is a competency that may draw on an individual's knowledge of language, practical IT skills and attitudes towards those with whom he or she is communicating.' According to a release from the MIT Career Development Center, Competencies are "a collection of characteristics (i.e. skills, knowledge, self concept, traits and motives that enables us to be successful in our interactions with others at work, school, home and in our community at large." [3]

In the context of a Library system which happens to be one of the mass media communication systems, digital competencies play a vital role. When a librarian becomes proficient in digital competencies, he/she may enlighten the whole of the academic community in their research productivity ultimately elevating the nation with his/her e-services. The potential and significance of competences required for the library professionals who are in charge of academic research communication include competencies involving the search, identification, capturing, filtering and retrieving the relevant information for every individual user at the right time

in a right format that may be desirable to that individual user. The job of the library professionals is ever challenging due to the nature of changing environment while users always are keeping pace ahead of the library professionals at times in getting adopted to the new technologies.

The process of ever changing Technology has become a continuum establishing the fact that change is permanent. According to Lankshear and Knobel, (2003) in the context of library the professionals should take cognizance of "changing ways of producing, distributing, exchanging and receiving texts by electronic means"[4]. Digital competence stands as a global challenge for the educational systems of the new century.[5] Acquiring Digital Competencies is vital to the professionals of Academic libraries which are hand in gloves with the academic institutions to which they are affiliated and promote the causes of education.

DIGITAL COMPETENCIES

Digital means information represented in numeric form (Binary code) primarily processed by a computer, and literacy includes the ability to read and interpret media, to reproduce data and images through digital manipulation and to evaluate and apply new knowledge gained from digital environments. Digital literacy denotes an individual's ability to perform tasks effectively in a digital environment. Aviram and Eshet-Alkalai described digital literacy as a combination of technical-procedural, cognitive and emotional social skills.[6]

According to Bawden (2001), 'Competence' is a term that has entered the educational discussion as a separate term more recently. However, it has been a part of the conceptions of 'literacy' for a long time.[7]

COMPUTER SCIENCE IS MARS WHILE LIBRARY SCIENCE IS VENUS

Digital competencies originated from the field of Computer Science. Library and Information Science field has been quick to adopt any such new digital technology soon it is released for application. It is only the computer science experts give always all the programs meant for library applications. There is a criticism against the community of librarians lacking digital literacy while applauding the community of computer science academics. Saracevic and Dalbello wrote in 2001 that Library and Information Studies (LIS) education has not been a leader in the

development of digital libraries, but as in so many other instances, a follower [8] – a Venus attracting potential for computer applications over vast data. They suggest that digital library research has been primarily done by computer scientists while the library and information studies community has focused on the applications and practice, not the research. They use the astronomical metaphor of the digital library research community and the digital library practice community being in the same planetary system, but one is on Mars and the other on Venus. Whether this personifying comparison is good or bad, the message is that the library and Information Science professionals should acquire Digital Competencies. Computer Science experts design packages not only for Library and Information Science but for all the fields. This criticism is a matter for the library professionals to acquire digital competencies so that they can provide better programs as they have a knowledge about the structure of their Library Information System. Only an outreach programme by professionals equipped with digital literacy can win back the readers gone with the wind.

In such circumstances, what competencies do the library professional need to keep the services going on as *all* the information users are no more exclusive library users. If they have to be brought into the purview of library services, the library professionals have to redesign their service style in accordance with the changing technology and the changing user preference for the digital information rather than the print media.

COMPETENCIES PROMOTING LIFE LONG LEARNING

It was in 2006 that the European Parliament and the Council (2006) published a report of recommendation identifying eight Key Competences for Lifelong Learning: Communication in the Mother Tongue; Communication in Foreign Languages; Mathematical Competence and Basic Competences in Science and Technology; Digital Competence; Learning to Learn; Social and Civic Competences; Entrepreneurship; and Cultural Awareness and Expression. Four years afterwards, the value of this recommendation is recognised in the Europe 2020 [9]. In this case, the recommendation meant for life long learning can be contextualized for also the librarians community who are more akin to the promotion of life long education.

Martin (2005) defined digital literacy as 'the awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyze and synthesize digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action; and to reflect upon this process'. [10] Many authors have underlined the multidimensional nature of digital literacy, identifying the following abilities as essential components for this competence: 'understanding the characteristics of digital documents (Media Literacy); selecting the right applications for the task to be done; being able to use different applications (Information Technology Literacy); being able to solve problems regarding information research, using methods and tools to access information and knowledge (Information Literacy); the capacity of sharing information and knowledge within a technological environment; and the ability to participate in the life of a community of practice, building up knowledge within a virtual environment, in a cooperative way individual and collective goals and competencies.'

Calvani, Fini and Ranieri (2009) developed a conceptual model to represent digital competence. Grounding on previous research on digital literacy and focusing on the cognitive and metacognitive dimensions of the relationship to technologies, they proposed to define digital competence as the ability 'to explore and face new technological situations in a flexible way, to analyze, select and critically evaluate data and information, to exploit technological potentials in order to represent and solve problems and build shared and collaborative knowledge, while fostering awareness of one's own personal responsibilities and respect of reciprocal rights/obligations' [11].

ADVANTAGES OF DIGITAL COMPETENCIES

Digital competence could benefit citizens, various communities and the economy and society in general in various areas. The notion of *literacy* once denoted basic skills and knowledge and is traditionally associated with books and printed matter. Today literacy is blended with many other computer and information technology concepts. Literacy is not used as a single concept but as compound and complex concepts. The current explosion of technologies, however, is adding to the dimensions of the meaning of the term literacy.

DIGITAL OUTREACH TARGETING ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

The lamenting of the library professionals over the prodigal readers should be fixed with an end by adopting digital outreach programme which requires them to be thorough with the keyword search tools like the various online thesaurus (NASA, UNESCO, LCSH AND MeSH etc.), Knowledge of the various eResources, eRegister of profiles of users including their email ID, techniques of online surveys, designing periodical online Newsletter issues and short and fast communicating methods and important of all online User Education.

CONCLUSION

Digital Competence is the set of knowledge, skills, attitudes (thus including abilities, strategies, values and awareness) that are required when using ICT and digital media to perform tasks that include solve problems; communicate; manage information; collaborate; create and share content; and build knowledge effectively, efficiently, appropriately, critically, creatively, autonomously, flexibly, ethically, reflectively for work, leisure, participation, learning, socialising, consuming, and empowerment. Though the list of tasks is bewildering, it should be within the capacity of professionals enthusiastically interested in library service. Digital competence is the most recent concept describing technology-related skills. In recent years, several terms have been used to describe the skills and competence of using digital technologies, such as ICT skills, technology skills, information technology skills, 21st century skills, information literacy, digital literacy, and digital skills. These terms are also often used as synonyms.

Digital Competence could be seen at the convergence of multiple fields. Library professionals need to be digitally competent with their ability to understand media (as most media have been/are being digitalized), to search for information and be critical about what is retrieved (given the wide uptake of the Internet) and to be able to communicate with others using a variety of digital tools and applications (mobile, internet). All these abilities are found affiliated to different disciplines that include media studies, information sciences, and communication theories. Analysing the repertoire of competences related to digital literacy requires an understanding of all these underlying concepts. Moreover, other

additional aspects have emerged as new requisites for being functional in a digital environment, such as for example the ability to peruse hyperlinked texts. When the library professionals equip themselves with digital competencies which is the need of the hour, they are sure to win back their readers and resurrect the library profession through digital outreach programmes and effective online services that includes Selective Dissemination of Information, Current Awareness Service, digital bibliography compilation and possibly other traditional services with a potential of being converted to online.

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