
Virtual Learning Environment: Issues and Challenges before LIS Schools and Libraries

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Abstract

There has been a sea change in the ways how education is provided with the application of new ICTs. Providing LIS Education in Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) has become an issue today. Delivery of library services has also been in existence such an environment. As such it is a big issue and challenges before the LIS Schools and Libraries. The present paper highlighting VLE, Virtual Community, Characteristic features, objectives, Issues, Essentialities, Choice of content etc of, LIS Education in VLE, etc emphasizes on the American Experience, IGNOU initiatives in India concluded that Indian LIS Schools should adopt virtual learning system.

Keywords: Virtual learning Environment; LIS Education; Libraries; Issues and challenges.

1. Introduction

The rapid strides made in the field of ICT have also led to a paradigm shift in education and training in all fields and the borderless library plays a vital role. More and more individuals are taking courses to distance education to relish their dreams. To cater to this large segment of learners, a number of institutions including the virtual institutions have started offering a wide range of courses on the web called web-based education tutorials or online courses or virtual courses. The web collects and creates knowledge resources from any place any time. Thus, it acts as collaborator between the creators and users of knowledge and become a part of the global knowledge network. Again the emergence of Open Source Software (OSS) has also brought a drastic change the way how information is delivered and accessible freely. Such advancements in ICTs in the web era have enabled the LIS Schools to provide education by adopting maximum technologies in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Modern library systems are also coming up to deliver their services in such an environment.

2. Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

VLE is a term that contains the online learning services. This is also called learning platform that organizes and provides access to online learning services for the students,

teachers and administrators. These services include access control, provision of learning content, e-learning tools and administration of user groups. In much literature, different terminologies have been used for the term “virtual learning” as:

- ◆ Internet learning
- ◆ Distributed learning
- ◆ Network learning
- ◆ Online learning
- ◆ Tele learning
- ◆ E-learning
- ◆ Computer assisted learning
- ◆ Distance learning
- ◆ Web-based learning
- ◆ Federated learning

These terms have given us an indication that in VLE, the learner

- ◆ is at a far off place from the tutor or teacher or instructor;
- ◆ uses some form of technology (obviously internet connected computer) to
- ◆ access the learning resource materials which are web-based;
- ◆ also interacts with the teacher/tutor or instructor and other learners;
- ◆ is provided with some form of support to meet his/her needs.

3. Virtual Community

A virtual community or online community is a group of people who, initially or basically communicate via the internet, instead of face to face. Online communities have also become a complement to the communications carried out in real life by people who know each other. These usually utilize some type of collaboration software (social networking software) and adopt an appropriate name for their purpose, such as open source communities producing software in open code [1]. The web environment provides a number of opportunities to both the teachers and learners. In the environment, learner gets access to a wide range of knowledge. They can develop new ways for learning. The web also provides a vehicle for high tech learning where teacher acts as a facilitator for the students.

Virtual learning with innovative applications of ICT has become today a boon. Specialized websites are coming up in various disciplines providing online courses and training in virtual environment. Some such sites include:

- a) The Australian Correspondence School (<http://www.asc.edu.au>)
- b) California Virtual University (<http://www.california.edu/catalogs.html>)
- c) Belford University (<http://www.Belforduniversity.org>)
- d) Online Study for UK (<http://www.ebam.ac.uk>)
- e) E-Learning training (<http://www.outstant.com>)
- f) United States Open University (<http://www.open.edu>)

4. Characteristic Features

The characteristic features of the web based VLE are:

- ◆ It facilitates self learning at the learner's convenient time and place.
- ◆ Electronic publication is cheaper and faster.
- ◆ It facilitates faster and cheaper delivery of the material.
- ◆ It promotes better teacher-student interactivity.
- ◆ It enables to update learning materials speedily.

5. Emergence of Vendors Marketing E-recourses

Many vendors around the world are coming up concerning marketing of e-books, some important of which include:

- ◆ Net Library (www.netlibrary.com): A division of OCLC providing versatile e-content for libraries and publishers which also offers e-books, audio books, databases, e-journals online.
- ◆ Ebrary (www.ebrary.com) : A leading e-content services and technology, provides more than 60,000 full text digital books and other authoritative content from over 200 leading publishers.

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- ◆ Books 24X7(www.books24X7.com) : A leading provider of web-based digital, technical and business reference content, containing thousands of digitized “best-in-class” reference books, research reports, documentation and articles.
 - ◆ Questia (www.questia.com): An online library providing 24X7 access to the world’s largest online collection of books and journals articles in humanities, social sciences, magazines and newspaper articles
 - ◆ Safari online (www.safaribooksonline.com): A searchable e-reference library containing broadest range of technical and business content.

They play an important role in providing education in this new environment.

6. LIS Education in VLE

The scope for LIS Education has undergone changes with the rapid expansion of knowledge and development of research activities, particularly in the area of ICT. For qualitative improvement of LIS education in VLE , there is need to introduce new courses based on ICTs in different LIS schools to face the challenges .In fact ICT has not only affected operations of library services but also LIS education. As such there is a need to integrate the qualitative changes in the LIS Education:

- ◆ to increase quality of LIS students
- ◆ to meet demands of the market in e-environment
- ◆ to face the challenges due to fast development of ICT and its impact on LIS Education
- ◆ to suit increasing demands for trained LIS professionals
- ◆ to increase job opportunities for LIS professionals
- ◆ to use internet based e-courses which are increasing day-by-day
- ◆ to adopt e-publishing which is being increasingly accepted by the users
- ◆ to transform traditional mode of LIS education in India.

Proper utilization of educational technology for imparting courses can produce better results. It has become essential to consider the utilization of virtual learning environment in the LIS education.

6.1 Objectives

The general objectives of providing LIS education in VLE are:

- ◆ to have a broad perspectives on the core principles of LIS and its applicability in the new environment;
- ◆ to understand the managerial activities of the libraries and Information systems in the modern context.
- ◆ to comprehend the principles of knowledge organization, retrieval, management, delivery, etc;
- ◆ to enhance practical skills in new virtual environment to face the challenges;
- ◆ to meet the current demands of the new digital era;
- ◆ to train the learners suitably in the tune of the market demand;
- ◆ to provide on-line information skills; etc.

6.2 Essentialities

To boost the ICT based LIS Education it is essential to adopt:

- ◆ Intensive and rigorous short term training courses
- ◆ continuing education programme
- ◆ workshops/conference/seminars
- ◆ in-service training
- ◆ project based learning
- ◆ computer assisted instruction
- ◆ developing intelligence learning technology by having self teaching guides or do it yourself series.

6.3. Issues

The LIS education system is not able to effectively cater to the needs of the emerging market for the LIS professionals. The web based teaching and learning system may solve problems to a great extent. For effective implementation of the web based LIS education, it is however, necessary to consider the following issues [2]:

- ◆ **Changing the Learning Culture:** Migrating to the electronic learning environment calls for a change in the attitude of learners. The learners need to be trained in handling of the new media.

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- ◆ **Training of Teachers:** Teachers need to upgrade their skills in developing and delivering the course content through networks. Training programme for the LIS teachers in web page designing, multimedia courseware production, HTML document preparation, etc is essential.
 - ◆ **Courseware/software Development:** Web based learning does not refer to just putting the learning material on the network. The material should be relevant, interactive, user-friendly, and able to facilitate the self-learning process. Trained manpower is required with the knowledge and skills both in software development as well as in LIS.
 - ◆ **Equal Access to Technology:** It must be assured that learners have equal access to the material provided on the net, immaterial of where they live or placed.

6.4. Content Choice

The content choices for the Digital library Education fall into the following category:

- ◆ Systems, networks, and technology;
- ◆ Collection and resources in various media;
- ◆ Representation, organization and operability;
- ◆ Storage and searching;
- ◆ Functionality, access and use;
- ◆ Institutions and services, and finally
- ◆ User community and related applications [3].

These can be applied in case of VLE too.

7. Web Accessibility in LIS Schools and Libraries

Access to web resources is the most important activity concerning learning in virtual environment. Today various institutions around the world are made accessible to the web and libraries and LIS Schools are not exception to this. In a recent study on web accessibility trends in university libraries and LIS Schools in Canada and US, many clues have been established in this regard which have a great impact on the virtual learning environment in the process of LIS education and delivery of library and information services [4]:

- ◆ Canadian web sites were more accessible than the US sites.
- ◆ US sites showed a random like up and down movement in accessibility status between 2002 and 2006.
- ◆ The 2006 data for institutions in the USA show that, on the average, 47 percent of the web pages met accessibility criteria checked by Bobby (a software based accessibility checker which can investigate conformance to the 1999 Web Accessibility Guidelines). For home pages, this percentage is slightly lower at 41 percent.
- ◆ The seven Canadian LIS schools performed much better on the Bobby –tested variables. of the pages, 68 percent were Bobby approved and 86 percent had approved home pages.
- ◆ For the US libraries studied, 60 percent of the web pages were Bobby approved. Of the homepages, 55 percent were accessible. For libraries, the superiority of Canadian web over US web sites was less pronounced than it was for LIS Schools.
- ◆ Among both LIS schools and libraries, the percentage of accessible web pages ranged from percent to 100 percent. Such a wide range was found for both the US and Canadian web sites.

8. American Experience

Many library schools around the world have already introduced e-learning as a tool for continuous learning in LIS. In US, there has been a fast adoption of e-learning techniques in the LIS schools to render education in a VLE which has benefited the students and teachers. The first online LIS Education in US was started in 1993 by Syracuse University, New York. 12 LIS schools accredited to ALA organizing online programmes in the field have been using variety of learning technologies. In most of the Schools, the programme participants need not to visit the school campus. All the schools ranging from 4-24 hours daily provide online technical help.

9. IGNOU Initiatives in India

9.1. E-Gyankosh

It is a digital repository initiated by IGNOU to enhance the accessibility of knowledge to share its valuable resources with educational institutions and learners internationally. This

national Digital Repository acts as a podium to store, index, preserve and share the digital learning resources developed by the Open and Distance Learning Institutions in the country [5].

9.2. Nodlinet

The Library and Documentation Division of IGNOU has started giving efforts to take higher education to the doorsteps of the hitherto un-reached through its various modes of Information and Document Delivery Services. NODLINET (National Open and Distance Learners' Library and Information Network) is a recent initiative taken up by IGNOU to provide a platform for libraries and information centres of the open and distance learning system of the country that will provide access to all electronic and digital; resources from the leading publishers and vendors across the globe to its stockholders from anywhere at anytime using advanced technologies to enhance the quality of education at par with the conventional education system[6].

9.2. IUC-TEFED

Inter University Consortium for Technology-Enabled Flexible Education and Development (IUC-TEFED) is the latest initiative of IGNOU which works as a nodal point to undertake all types of collaborative activities involving Open and Distance Learning, e-learning new knowledge creation, appropriate technology, etc. The structure of Inter University Consortium is on the lines of Pan-African e-Network and the existing consortia of UGC, AIU, etc. All the open universities in the country can be its founding members while conventional universities as its associate members. NGOs, organizations involved in the development of Education and Training, Industry, etc can also be invited for collaboration and partnership. The consortium is expected to facilitate convergence and sharing of knowledge through judicious mix of media and technology [7].

10. IATLIS Recommendations

The Joint National Conference of IATLIS and Association of Government Libraries and Information Specialists held at Hyderabad in 1997 on IT have recommended that:

- ◆ IT and its byproducts such as internet, CD-ROM and E-mail should be increasingly and effectively used in LIS education

- ◆ LIS students may have internship in libraries which have IT environment for gaining practical experience and confidence
- ◆ LIS students should acquire multimedia technology which has vast potential and utility for teaching LIS subjects
- ◆ IT environment might be created in all types of Library and Information Centres in the country LIS should adopt IT in the management and offer value added services to the community.
- ◆ Short term and long term programmes such as seminars, symposia and workshops be organize at regular intervals by agencies like DST, NIC, NISCAIR, INFLIBNET, Library Schools, Library Associations for the LIS teachers as continuing education programme.

Realising the greater impact of IT on Library and Information Services and to prepare the competent manpower and considering the impact of ever-growing Educational Technology on teaching and research, the XXII IATLIS National Conference -2005 also recommended that:

- ◆ The UGC should take appropriate steps regularly to revise the LIS Curriculum at different levels.
- ◆ UGC may take necessary steps to initiate and provide on-line learning facilities by exploring the possibility of using the newly launched EDUSAT, both for formal and distance students.

11. Conclusion

As an impact of the globalization and ICT revolution as well, there is generally an agreed implication that education and training in LIS should go in the tune of the same. LIS schools all over the world, as such, are accepting the new technologies. In this regard, India is lagging behind in comparison with other advanced counties like, US, UK, etc. The establishment of the Indian Training and Education Network for Development (INTEND) by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India is a good approach of the government. The initiatives taken up by IGNOU are a good signal

in the country. Web-based mode of teaching has become an important component of LIS Education in India. The use of new ICT by the Indian LIS Schools should be encouraged to produce professionals to manage knowledge resources in the VLE.

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