Problems And Prospects of Library Automation in Rural Colleges of Meghalaya: With Reference to Mawsynram Border Area College

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Abstract

This article presents a scenario of library automation and the networking in a college library located in a rural area of Meghalaya. It also describes the issues and challenges faced during the process of automation in view of the fact that it lacks basic infrastructure and facilities viz. regular power supply, good Internet access, shortage of manpower and constraint in library budget. In spite of these hindrances, best efforts were made by the college to establish a LAN using a desktop computer as a server with open source software (OSS) Koha as the Integrated Library Management Software (ILMS) to manage the library operations. The shift from a traditional to an automated mode of operation in the library had made a huge impact in the manner in which library services are being offered to the students and teachers of the college. The article also highlights certain issues and problems faced by the college when trying to offer online services to e-resources provided by INFLIBNET through the N-LIST programme.

Keywords: Library Automation, E-Resources, College Library, Open Source Software, Koha, Meghalaya

1. Introduction

Library automation, is the application of computers and utilization of computer-based products and services in performing different library operations and functions which includes production of output products while providing the various library services. According to Bhanja and Barik (2009) library automation may be defined as the application of automatic and semi-automatic data processing machines (computers) to perform traditional library housekeeping activities such as acquisition, circulation, cataloguing and reference and serials control. Lately, "Library Automation" is the most commonly used terms to describe the mechanization of library activities using computers.

2. Mawsynram Border Area College

Mawsynram Border Area College, Mawsynram, is the only college located in a remote place of East Khasi Hills District which is about 53 kilometers from Shillong the capital city of Meghalaya. Till the year 1996, the area was deprived of quality college education due to the unavailability of a college which offers graduate degree either managed by Government or Private managed. To address this long pending issue the people of Mawsysnram working together with the village Dorbar donated a plot of land measuring around 22,000 sq. meters for the proposed college. On 27th September 1997 the College was formally inaugurated. At present, after

nearly two decades of its inception, the college offers a Bachelor's degree of Arts in some of the popular subjects. The College now have seven academic departments with a total enrollment of 355 students. The college now have 24 teachers and 7 non-teaching staff. The library is being manged by a College Librarian with one supporting staff. The college academic departments at present comprises of Geography, Economics, Political Science, Education, History, Khasi and English.

3. The College Library

The library started to function in 1997. The college library is established in one of the corners of the college building. The library comprised of several rooms. The library at present has approximately a collection of 5000 books including journals and magazines which caters to the academic community.

4. Purpose of the study

1. To highlight the steps and procedures adopted to ensure that the Collge Library In Mawsynram Border Area College is automated using an modern ILMS despite the constraints that plagued the college.

2. To identify the issues and problems that may affect the sustenance of the automation process and its future expansion.

With the College administration sanction of minimal funds, a desktop computer intel core i5 with 4 GB RAM and 1 TB hard disk drive was procured which was identified to be used as the ILMS server. The other LAN expansion was planned using unmanaged network switches, UTP cables and RJ45 connectors. Due to the lack of the expertise, the college authority sought the support of the North-

Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Central library to assist them in installation, customization and training of the library staff on the Koha environment.

5. Installation of Koha ILMS Including its Implementation and Training

Once the LAN was established, the installation of the Koha ILMS was planned. The Koha ILMS was selected for the purpose in view of the fact that it is a standard ILMS with available library features including support for standard data formats (MARC). Secondly, since the software is freely available, the latest version which was downloaded off-site was installed and setup in the desktop machine with Ubuntu operating system running. Wide popularity of the Koha software amongst librarians and libraries worldwide and the availability of support through the community site had a very strong influence while selecting an ILMS to be adopted by the College Library. The installation of the Koha ILMS was carried out during the month of December 2015 being the lean period of the college activities to ensure that the librarian has adequate time to focus and get acquainted with the entire software environment including maintenance. Once the installation and customization was completed the software was ready for use.

To ensure that the librarian was able to work on the new software environment especially data entry, registration of patrons and issue/return a one-week hands-on intensive training was given to the College librarian in NEHU Central Library, Shillong, with the guidance of the concerned library staff. During the training programme, the staff was trained on the different modules that are available in Koha viz. acquisition, cataloguing, barcode generation, serial module and circulation. Following the training, the

work of data entry in the cataloguing module including patrons registration for circulation requirement was taken up. As a maintenance procedure, the Librarian was familiarized with the data backup procedure to an external hard disk to ensure that library data is secured.

Though the process of building the bibliographical database is a continuous process, however, through the LAN, students and teachers can access the OPAC easily and search/browse on whatever bibliographical details that are available. The two OPAC points setup for the purpose have been a great help to the library users as a whole. With this present setup, students and teachers now have been made aware of the latest library facilities and were requested to refrain from going directly to the book shelves to search for a book without consulting the OPAC first. With the OPAC becoming very popular with the students and teachers of the college. With the introduction of the ILMS, the present library services in the college library had undergone a sea change when compared to its earlier traditional ways.

6. Problems for Sustenance and Future Expansion of the Automation Programme

The automation of the College Library had in fact brought some relief to the over-burdened library staff especially as regularly experienced by them during the pre-automation days. With a limited amount of the just 2 staff expected to carry out the entire library housekeeping and user's services actvities, the introduction of the library OPAC had reduce the time spent on the daily staff-user interaction considerably. Now, at present, and in the light of the ILMS available the two staff can focus on their respective task of cataloguing including data entry and circulation services. Adopting a new

information system to provide satisfactory library services to the clientele may sound an easy task but it does not come without any issues. The library users, both teachers and students, needs to be trained and re-trained on how to use the system conveniently in order to meet their requirement. In this aspect, it was realized that an awareness-cum-orientation programme needs to be conducted periodically especially to the newly admitted students every academic year. It is through these programmes that the innovativeness of the librarian is highly desired in order to meet the objectives. While solutions to the above-mentioned issues could be derived as and when the need arise, other teething problems specific to the local environment as a whole will continue to co-exist for some time and may have an impact on the library automation programme in the college.

According to Das and Chatterjee (2015), some of the inherent problems associated with library automation programme are high initial investment, library staff needs to undergo intensive training, retrospective conversion and requirement for regular software updates. Librarians planning for a library automation project needs to foresee the above-mentioned problems right from the planning phase to ensure that the problems are addressed at the right time and for future sustenance. However, it was found out through the study that the problems that plagued the Mawsynram Border Area College are fundamentally related with lack of necessary infrastructure in view of being remotely located in a neglected rural area of the state of Meghalaya. The main problems and their effect on the library automation programme and other national initiatives surrounds around the following issues.

6.1 Internet and Mobile Network Connectivity

The College has no connectivity due to the reason of the distance and being remotely located. Secondly, the college due to its location suffers from very poor mobile network coverage. In view of these problems, the college is devoid of Internet connection from all known possible sources. It was known that absence of a stable internet access will hamper and slow down the building of the bibliographic databases in Koha normally accomplished through the embedded Z39.50 features.. Thus in this scenario, library users will not have the opportunity to fully realize the web 2.0 features as expected with the implementation of the modern ILMS. Software updates/upgrades would also be impossible in such a dismal scenario may jeopardize the future of the library automation programme in the college. What is ironic is that though the college has its own Website hosted in the clouds, however, most of the time the college cannot access the same due to the absence of internet connectivity.

6.2 Networking and Resource Sharing

N-LIST an initiative of the MHRD to enhance library services in Colleges in India does not see the light of day in the Mawsynram Border Area College. Through INFLIBNET, these initiatives are being successfully established in colleges located in urban areas which had uplifted the image of college libraries since they are able to provide valuable information to its users in view of the above -mentioned resource sharing projects. However, to provide this type of service is a distant dream for the college in Mawsynram.

6.3 Financial Constraints

Being a privately managed college, it is difficult for the management bear all the expenses in the college in view of minimal returns. Therefore, the college as a whole is dependent on the mercy of the State Government of Meghalaya for financial assistance. Financial constraints is thus a major factor that hamper the growth and expansion of the college not to mention about improvement of library services through library automation.

6.4 Electricity

Lack of regular supply of electrical power is one of the major problem within the college campus. The entire area regularly experienced frequent power failure. As a result, even batteries connected to UPS gets easily damaged over time thus having a bearing on the college expenditure related with maintenance of such computer and power systems. At times due to defective batteries in UPS, the computer systems frequently experienced abrupt shutdown which have a disastrous effect on the library data and the entire computer system as a whole. In such a scenario, sustenance of a library automation project would sound to be impossible in the long run.

6.5 Distance

Though the college is just around 53 kms away from Shillong, however it takes about 3 hours to reach the college premises due to the bad road conditions. The deplorable conditions of the roads which lies neglected for a long time without repair or expansion have a direct bearing on the lack of improvement of necessary infrastructure in the village and around the college. This seriously affects the condition of the college and diminished the role it is expected to play to uplift the people of that area and the community as a whole.

7. Conclusion and Suggestions

Though in the absence of necessary infrastructure, it is commendable to note the sincerity and enthusiasm of the college authorities and library staff in making best efforts to improve library services by adopting latest ICT tools and applications. Through the study, it is suggested that the college authorities should address these basic issues on the right platform and not leave them to linger unattended for so long. For sure, it may be concluded that without the basic infrastructure as spelled out above, overall functioning of the college will be affected. In such a position, enhancement of library services through the implementation of library automation will be set on the back foot.

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