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E-learning model for Polish libraries – BIBWEB Case study

Purpose

This article describes important role of e-learning in Poland and cover experiences in transferring and localising the course, know-how about how to find strategic partners and establish a sound infrastructure for e-learning and guidelines how to get and use feedback from the learners to continuously improve the quality of the course.

Design/methodology/approach

The article describes the situation in Polish library world and the process of implementation and conducting the online course for librarians “bibweb”. It also relates how the course improves information literacy.

Findings

Libraries in Poland can considerably strengthen their role as an element of the information and knowledge society by expanding their offers regarding Internet access and e-learning. The situation in Germany in 1999 was comparable to the current situation in Poland. As a reaction to this, the Bertelsmann Foundation initiated an online course offer comprising three modules: “bibweb – Internet training for libraries” (online at www.bibweb.de), which met with great acceptance in Germany. For this reason, it made sense to translate the existing successful course product and adapt it to the special requirements of libraries in Poland. The Bertelsmann Foundation and its two project partners, the Warsaw University Library and the “Elektroniczna Biblioteka” (EBIB) library information service have jointly developed such a Polish-language online course (www.bibweb.pl) and offer it on the Internet to the specialist target group since 2003.

Originality/value

This paper shows benefits of international educational project. Polish experiences concerning e-learning may be useful for other nations.

Keywords: e-learning, library trainings, training methodology, Polish librarians training course, European librarians cooperation,

E-learning, remote training, distance education – all these trendy yet unfamiliar expressions have recently entered Polish library world. Librarians gradually get accustomed to them as they offer a new, enthralling quality. However, these concepts can be fully understood only when one experiences the processes they describe. Continuing education via distance learning has been known and available for some time but the development of technologies has enforced changes not only in tools but also in the content and methodology of distance education.

The European Union and Polish government have been recommending e-learning as a new methodology for continuing education and qualification upgrade programs. Details of e-learning are discussed in *Strategia rozwoju szkolnictwa wyższego w Polsce do roku 2010 (The Strategy for Expanding Higher Education in Poland by 2010)* [6].

E-learning in Poland has been gaining popularity not only among education and training companies but also state universities that used to treat distance learning as inferior in

comparison to onsite education. Warsaw University, Maria Skłodowska-Curie University in Lublin and Warsaw University of Technology have recently started to offer their first online courses. Warsaw University Library offers online library user training, a similar online course is being tested at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and the Main Library of Maria Skłodowska-Curie University in Lublin has been offering a course entitled "First steps in our library" for several years now. Numerous foundations and associations run their own e-learning projects addressing specific social groups or specializations.

It seems that e-learning may prove to be an extremely beneficial method of continuing adult education in Poland in the case of many social groups on the condition that Internet becomes cheaper and available at home (the tax deduction for access to Internet introduced since 2005 may be of some help here). Librarians may use e-learning to upgrade their professional skills and acquire new ones as well as support their teaching qualifications. The methodology of work changes over time and its update requires new knowledge and that, in turn, requires time. E-learning leads to the cost reduction of continuing education as it allows students to save on travels and provides an opportunity for flexible arrangement of student learning schedule. Moreover, it provides small town and village librarians with the opportunities of acquiring new knowledge, making acquaintance of new people and sharing professional experience without spending time and money on travels, conferences and workshops. E-learning may also offer new methods and tools for training library users.

The development and implementation of e-learning in European countries has received a considerable financial support from the European Union. In 2005 Poland became one of UE beneficiaries in the field of education with Polish Ministry of National Education responsible for the strategy of spending structural funds within the Sectoral Operational Program for Human Resources Development (SOP HRD). SOP HRD priorities involve continuing education (including e-learning) and the support for schools as well as pedagogical and school libraries. The libraries in question are expected to provide their patrons with access to Internet and workstations for information retrieval and processing as well as professional library services. In order to meet these demands, Polish libraries should consider investing EU funds in the development of modern education system for librarians and library users based on world-wide approved and recognized methodology and technologies.

E-learning platform

Modern e-learning platforms of well-known software companies offer multi-level, fully integrated distance education and interactive communication possibilities. Students and staff work on different, yet interlocking levels, depending on their needs. Options available are differentiated depending on who is currently accessing the platform. E-learning platform involves not only the course content to be read, learnt and tested, but also the discussion forum for teachers and students, chat option, calendar of events and meetings, tests, interactive exercises, newsletter, opinion barometer, sometimes large screen presentations, movies, video conferencing, links to digital resources. E-learning open source software, e.g. Moodle, available free of charge, may also be used for the construction of tailor-made courses such as information retrieval and evaluation, MA thesis planning and composition, bibliography compilation, database and catalog search methods, etc.

BIBWEB – online e-learning course for Polish librarians www.bibweb.pl

The Polish Librarians Association in cooperation with foreign partners (The Bertelsmann Foundation) offers a high-quality online course originally implemented in Germany. BIBWEB was developed in reply to the needs of German public libraries (www.bibweb.de) but it can be used as an education tool for teaching all librarians, irrespectively of the library they work for, as well as any other people interested in acquiring most recent professional Internet skills, for instance teachers.

BIBWEB course is intended to provide its users with specialized knowledge and skills in the field of new technologies, information trends and Internet, serve as the distance learning center for Polish librarians and present a functional model that may be further developed and improved. BIBWEB embodies the European principle of *lifelong learning* according to one's individual schedule and needs and the principle of *know-how* acquisition.

In the beginning the aim was to reach at least 1000 users (20% being public library employees) to approach Polish BIBWEB course of planned three years' duration. Three years later the success of the project exceeded all expectations: 1735 users have completed the course since its opening in May 2003, that is, within the period of 2 years and 5 months, and the number of current users is 890. Only 63 users (2,4% of total number of users) failed to pass the whole course. One cannot underestimate high ranking (based on the school grading scale) of BIBWEB by its users in anonymous surveys filled in on the completion of the course. Seventy-five percent of grades assigned to module 1 have been A or B marks (respectively 68% – module 2 and 65% – module 3). BIBWEB inventors and staff are strongly motivated by these results as well as by the fact that each BIBWEB certificate sent to its recipient testifies the upgrade of his professional skills and translates to more competent librarians, more effectively used Internet workstations and more satisfied library users.

BIBWEB participants not only acquire professional Internet skills but also become familiar with modern teaching methods, which allows them to approach other e-learning courses and workshops with considerably improved self-confidence.

The project received further support from third parties. In April 2004 BIBWEB project received the EureleA European E-Learning Award. In September 2004 Polish Ministry of Science and Information Society Technologies decided to include BIBWEB in the final stage of IKONKA project, leading to the integration of two projects (the governmental project and the public-private partnership) intended to provide foundations for the information society in Poland. It was the first time that both parties fully cooperated in employing financial means and staff effort to the benefit of libraries and their users.

There was a large interest in BIBWEB observed during first months of its availability, although the number of new users did not increase in a significant way. Neither advertising the course at librarian conferences and meetings nor telemarketing run by hotliners improved the situation. Librarians considered the course fairly difficult; advantages of passing it were not obvious to everybody and new users hesitated a lot before they enrolled, relying mostly on the behavior of their colleagues. Only well organized and coordinated encouragement could have increased the number of new participants. The integration of BIBWEB and IKONKA projects became our shared success. IKONKA helped BIBWEB project to surpass the expected number of 1000 distance students. The pilot program was run for the group of 290 librarians in

warmińsko-mazurskie province from November 2004 to June 2005 and it was declared fully successful by its staff and participants. BIBWEB students treated the whole project very seriously; all participants passed the final online test, most of them managing version A without the need for the “life belt” version B.

Librarians from lubelskie province (465 students) are approaching the final stage of the course now and librarians from pomorskie province (301 students) are halfway down the course. Several days ago passwords were sent to librarians from łódzkie province (229 students). Two more groups: from małopolskie (390 people) and kujawsko-pomorskie (295) province are awaiting their turn. Each of the librarians in question participates in two modules. In the end of this phase of BIBWEB project the Ministry of Education will decide on the offer for the remaining provinces.

Running BIBWEB course for such large groups of students is facilitated with the help of a local supervisor, one for each province, usually recruiting from the main public library of a given province. Local supervisors were introduced on the demand of BIBWEB students (Sniechowska-Karpinska, 2005) to decentralize the course and provide the possibility of personal contact with the supervisor (parallel to e-mail and phone contact with “headquarters” in Warsaw).

BIBWEB concept rests on the use of opportunities offered with free access to Internet. New technologies allow for parallel learning – Internet provides access to handouts and other resources as well as enables interaction between students and course staff. Distance learning online varies from its previous forms in the following respects: multiple communication possibilities available (chat, discussion forum, e-mail), various number of participants involved (1 – over 100), learning speed. In comparison to more traditional learning methods new skills may be acquired according to individual student needs and abilities. Moreover, irrespectively of place and time, BIBWEB users are provided with unlimited access not only to BIBWEB content but also other World Wide Web resources and multi-dimensional knowledge.

BIBWEB participants learn how to surf Internet as well as how to search, build and offer valuable information online, becoming thus not only net information researchers but also its creators.

BIBWEB structure

BIBWEB consists of three separate modules (sub-courses) which offer practical advice on the application of information and Internet in everyday operation of the library or any other public institution. Each module begins with a general introduction of Internet tools and resources followed by a specialized presentation of professional knowledge on information retrieval and processing. The latter may involve e.g. the discussion of multimedia technologies, information evaluation techniques and strategies for the implementation of electronic resources and media in everyday work. Targeted examples and exercises, controlled process of learning, tests and scored results help to check and establish already acquired knowledge. Furthermore, BIBWEB offers its users opportunities to improve their communication and self-education skills and develop natural inquisitiveness, all features extremely helpful in the process of life-long education.

Course contents:

- Module 1: Internet basics
- Module 2: Systematic information acquisition on Internet
- Module 3: Creating one's own web resources and services

BIBWEB involves various e-learning tools supporting the process of knowledge acquisition:

- introductory test – testing students' general Internet knowledge;
- reading part – module content planned by its authors;
- links – references to online resources, expanding one's knowledge, exploring related content;
- exercises – practical application of recently acquired skills;
- exploration tasks – testing one's knowledge and skills;
- final test –students who have passed it receive the certificate of course completion;
- dictionary of terms – explaining new words and concepts;
- evaluation survey – serves future development and improvement of the course;
- discussion forum and chat: synchronic and asynchronous communication – mutual help, development through discussion;
- newsletter – current news in the field.

BIBWEB e-learning platform involves separate levels of activity for:

- a) IT staff who take care of BIBWEB software, hardware and smooth operation of the whole platform;
- b) hotliners (course supervisors) who are responsible for direct contact with students, analyse their learning process, help to solve problems, answer questions and correct mistakes;
- c) authors who build and update the course content;
- d) students who access the course content as well as the discussion forum, chat, tests and other applications in order to test their knowledge and communicate with other course participants.

BIBWEB course is based on the principle of self-education so it does not involve any teachers nor tutors.

The student in the process of knowledge acquisition

The participants of e-learning course are not only its passive recipients but also contributors to the successful development of the whole course. They are expected to cooperate as actively as possible and the results of the whole training are proportional to their contribution. BIBWEB staff are ready to help and instruct them but students may individually steer through the course, adjusting the schedule of subsequent parts to their own needs and possibilities. Thus BIBWEB students are expected to:

- ***be active and self-reliant course participants;***
- ***adjust the course schedule to their own needs;***
- ***learn with reference to their professional skills while searching answers and solutions to clearly defined problems;***
- ***exhaust the course content and technology used in e-learning.***

Distance learning requires students to be well-organized, self-disciplined, open and communicative persons. Polish BIBWEB experience shows these requirements to be a considerable challenge to e-learning participants. Difficulties in communication among students and course supervisors put limits to the effective use of new technologies, exchange of ideas and broader cooperation.

E-learning is based on student's self-reliance, not loneliness. It is possible to pass the online course without any contact with other students and staff but such students must remember that this method allows to learn only the content of the course, leaving all doubts unexplained and unsolved. If they do not share their opinions and experience, they lose a valuable opportunity to gain additional knowledge. Often the forum of BIBWEB is used to exchange greetings among participants from various locations and such posts are not deleted as they are very important to the social aspect of the whole course – students need them to confirm their membership in a “virtual class” and recognize the presence of other course participants. However, very few people become engaged in the discussion of “the question of the month” introduced by the course moderators, although questions vary from the question about information society (the best opportunity to learn others' point of view on this subject) to the question about students' favorite websites (an opportunity to share one's interests and hobbies). Students who have problems with some course tasks use the forum to ask for hints (and usually receive them from other students) but rarely does it start a discussion on the subject related to the topic in question. It seems that the advantages of sharing thoughts and experience on the discussion forum are not obvious and they have to be further explored – this conclusion is confirmed by **ekz** company staff (responsible for German version of BIBWEB) who report even less posts on their forum than their Polish followers.

Distance learning methods are not shocking if students take into consideration that they are based on well known and widely applied pedagogical principles and the only thing that changes are tools and technologies used in it. Intimidating at first, they may become a real treasure to many social groups deprived of access to high quality learning: people from small towns and villages, people under social isolation, the poor, etc. If all European countries introduce free access to Internet in libraries and schools, professional online training and continuing education will be available to large number of citizens of various age.

Information literacy

BIBWEB offers most current knowledge in the field of information retrieval, processing and management allowing its users (librarians and non-librarians) to improve on their information literacy: *Recently supported and promoted concept of **information literacy** describes **the ability to find, evaluate and properly employ required information** [...]* *The concept is discussed in numerous government publications and information literacy is considered a key skill of 21st century employee, although librarians are not perceived responsible for the increasing information literacy of the society. Information literacy is important to the development of economy. The Association of College and Research Libraries ACRL in its 1998 report stresses that low information literacy among employees reduces company effectiveness and quality of its products and results in serious losses. Profit- and success-oriented companies should consider information literacy one of necessary requirements asked of their employees. Information literacy concerns*

education, professional skills and everyday life, being the spur for continuing education in all domains and on all levels of knowledge acquisition (Derfert-Wolf, 2005).

The demand for information literacy results from:

- *the communication and technology revolution;*
- *the increase in the amount of accessible information;*
- *the needs of modern market economy;*
- *the needs of modern information society.*

Economic, technological and social processes have recently forced American education system (on all levels from primary schools to universities) to declare information literacy an indispensable part of appropriate knowledge acquisition. In response to that decision school and academic librarians immediately proved their importance in shaping and spreading information literacy throughout the society (Jankowska, 2005).

The Open University of Milton Keynes in Great Britain (150 000 undergraduate, 30 000 postgraduate and 10 000 disabled students) – a university dedicated to distance learning – offers specialized courses on information retrieval, evaluation and management <http://www.open.ac.uk/mosaic/index.cfm> that clearly present the scale of online education in the modern world.

No one can escape from e-learning and information literacy and there is no point in delaying the moment of becoming familiar with the subject. Information professionals must be able to use most recent search and analysis tools and techniques and correctly evaluate all information they obtain. BIBWEB may help them to learn new technologies (the platform itself) as well as the methodology and content useful for their future tasks.

Students who enrolled to “bibweb” course were encouraged not only by the perspective of acquiring new knowledge on Internet and surfing possibilities but also a new mode of learning. The results of the afore-mentioned survey filled in by the participants on the completion of the course show that 76% of the participants of the first module, 74% – of the second one and 72% – of the third one declared their interest in e-learning. Except for providing students with the knowledge on World Wide Web, “bibweb” course points to the methods of acquiring “information literacy” skills. The participants of the course end it fully aware that newly acquired knowledge needs to be regularly updated. Judging by the results of the survey “bibweb” students appreciate the usefulness of that knowledge. The survey questions concern the evaluation of the usefulness of “bibweb” content and exercises in the professional life of the participants of the course. Ninety-three percent of the participants of the second and third module and 94% of the participants of the first module claimed “bibweb” content to be useful in their work. The similar values were obtained in the case of the question about the usefulness of “bibweb” exercises. The authors of this paper believe that the course structure makes its participants aware of the fact that should continue their learning process as well as teaches them how to do it. One of the most important results of the survey was self-evaluation of the course participants. Ninety-six percent of “bibweb” participants declared to be satisfied or fairly satisfied with their own progress (the indicator was identical in all modules). The answers to the survey are sent anonymously and voluntarily; all opinions they involve are treated as fully credible.

Advantages and experience brought by BIBWEB into the professional community of Polish librarians

It is by no means incidental that once Poland became the EU member the most important goal for Polish nation has been declared to be: ***the increase in human resources investments*** – *training as many people as possible in using Internet and education multimedia tools; promoting and implementing IT education at the level of primary education; popularizing modern technologies in the society; defining and supporting actions against marginalization of certain social groups (the disabled, the unemployed, ethnic minorities, rural area inhabitants) and educating those groups by means of e-learning* (Derfert-Wolf, 2005).

With reference to the above-mentioned goal the development of information literacy becomes the top-level project involving all social and professional groups and associations. Librarians cannot be left behind in this project, recognized for many years as information professionals and library collection custodians.

BIBWEB project developed under the auspices of the Bertelsmann Foundation, Warsaw University Library and the Polish Librarians Association (EBIB – E-Bulletin for Librarians) is an initiative of non-profit and governmental institutions intended to activate and encourage librarians to study Internet resources and modern information technologies. BIBWEB implementation has been possible with Polish and German funding and volunteer work of the members of Polish Librarians Association. The project partners worked hard to provide valuable user-friendly services and expect more long-term effects to be reported over time by BIBWEB students and staff. However, the most significant aim has already been reached – BIBWEB introduced a new method of learning, showing the pattern to be followed by all important public institutions. Librarians perceived as very conservative social group begin to participate in far-reaching projects resting on the cooperation of European countries. If the process is continued with the involvement of know-how learnt from foreign professionals and already known work methodology, positive effects may be observed in a very short time.

The evaluation of benefits brought to Polish librarians by BIBWEB cannot be performed without the consideration of the experience of project co-creators as well as its participants.

BIBWEB creators and managers' benefits result from the acquisition of new knowledge and skills in the field of:

1. the methodology of constructing distant learning courses (the structure of the course, teaching methods)
2. e-learning technology (knowhow of the electronic platform, software, functionality and capabilities of these tools)
3. the content management (translation from German, new content added, adjustment of the content to Polish library tradition and technological reality, content weeding and updates)
4. international project management (telework, negotiations, budget administration on the level of the European Union, work organization, preparation of training courses, seeking partners)
5. the coordination of novel technological projects (cooperation skills, problem solving, risk prediction)

6. the analysis of needs in the professional community of librarians (survey research, interviews, consultations)
7. the analysis of the effectiveness of the course and the certification of graduates (tests, exercises)
8. the communication and interaction with students (forum, chat, e-mail, phone calls, fax, meetings) – the staff acquire the skills of distant teachers (tutors)

Experience gathered by some Polish librarians (Toruń University Library) during the European project DEDICATE (Distance Education Information Courses with Access Through Networks) developed in the years 1998-1999 and financed by European Union Telematics for Libraries Fourth Framework (Rader, 2002) allowed them to compare various methodologies and approaches to distant learning. In DEDICATE project librarians were students and prepared courses for students while in BIBWEB they became supervisors, creators and coordinators of the project.

Benefits of BIBWEB participants reported in replies to the final survey:

1. The introduction of novel education methods for librarians from the smallest locations in Poland (villages, districts, capital towns of provinces)
2. The introduction of cheap education accessible 24 hours a day
3. The contact with the most modern technology and acquisition of experience on the use of the platform that may become used more willingly in the future
4. The possibility of fighting down the fear of new tools and Internet
5. The support of the government IKONKA project

It is believed that all these benefits together with benefits BIBWEB participants have not become yet aware of may result in librarians' willingness for the construction of other courses addressed to library users and their own professional community in order to improve their permanent education. Moreover, librarians will not be afraid to use courses offered by external providers.

Since BIBWEB course involves fairly universal content, Polish librarians would like to suggest it to other librarian communities which have not tried it yet. The future is worth doing it.

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