The role of the librarian in online learning: Learning Resource Centres in Vietnam

Myly Nguyen

Research Candidate for School of Business Information Technology

Internet Services Coordinator

RMIT University Library Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT

At present in Vietnam there are a number of library building projects in progress at four regional Vietnamese universities. These libraries, styled as "Learning Resource Centres", have been developed by an Australian university on behalf of an American philanthropic organization, and the projects include not just the construction of the library facility but the acquisition of print and electronic information resources, implementation of IT infrastructure, and the development of professional expertise amongst the LRC staff to manage and deliver a range of information services.

The Learning Resource Centres have been consciously modeled around the concept of "student centered learning", so that the floor layouts, design of workstations and the open access availability of print materials are all focused on encouraging independent student use of resources in all its forms, and on offering students alternatives in the way they approach their learning requirements.

While these concepts alone represent a strong departure from typical Vietnamese library services, the Learning Resource Centre projects have also included a focus on developing information literacy

skills amongst the student community, and on the role of the librarian in bridging the gap between the student and the information resource.

This paper examines the future role of the librarian in the online learning environment which is being created by the development of the Learning Resource Centres, and discusses the skills which will be required so that the new style of library service will have an impact on student learning.

INTRODUCTION

Purpose: This paper examines the future role of the librarian in the online learning environment which is being created by the development of the Learning Resource Centres (LRC) in Vietnam, and discusses the skills which will be required so that the new style of library service will have an impact on student learning.

Methodology: Focus groups were conducted in November 2005 with Vietnamese librarians in regional and metropolitan areas to ensure a mix of participants with varied perceptions. The interviews aimed:

- to identify the key trends and changes which have occurred during the development of Learning Resource Centres in Vietnam
- to explore librarians' expectations in the changing 'information environment', with a focus on new roles, skills and capabilities.

Findings: Development of physical building and electronic resources in LRC has changed the structure of information services and access significantly.

Skills and knowledge acquired in:
- information resources and organization;
- understanding user needs and matching of user needs to information; and
- information technology

will affect every aspect of the LRC functions.

Yet, clearer image of and respect for librarians as professionals needs to be effectively promoted and supported by the university. Training programs for librarians must be flexible and effectively adaptive to change, in response to the rapid advance of the role of information and communication technologies.

Value: Results of this study may enable librarians in the LRCs to actively participate in the educational process and to be effective and efficient in the use of information.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Vietnamese universities are undergoing a lot of complex changes in responses to institutional, social, political, economic and international transformations. The basic structures of the university such as courses, class books and textbooks are re-examined and are no longer defined exclusively by the culture of print (Frye 1992). The growth of information technology and electronic resources has greatly affected the learning environment. The changing conditions in the teaching and learning, technology, and sociology of knowledge are having a tremendous impact upon university libraries. Despite the work accomplished by international educational projects, academic libraries in developing countries are still facing problems with the flow of information (Keren & Harmon 1980; Eres 1981; Dubey 1986).

Universities are struggling to provide basic libraries, hemmed in by rules and regulations, traditional modes of learning, lack of library management and information technology training and acute lack of financial resources. As Tran (1999) reports, library collections in Vietnam are inadequate in size. They are held back by a lack of resources. Library standardization programs are not in place. Library professionals are lacking in skills to plan and implement these programs. Thus, there is a large gap between the demands for professional skills and the transformation of traditional librarians into modern university teaching and learning.

In the Vietnamese National Assembly in December 2000, the government, particularly the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has recognized the fundamental role of information technology and resource-based learning in the transformation ahead. It has indicated its intention to have the universities of Vietnam linked to each other and to the world through online access, and to reform the higher education sector to modernize university management and teaching and learning methods. RMIT International University Vietnam, together with the Atlantic Philanthropies Foundation, implemented a visionary program to assist key universities in Vietnam to transform their learning environments by developing a network of Learning Resource Centres (LRCs).

The function of libraries has changed from the traditional study hall to centers which facilitate active learning and provide access to a range of learning resources.

By focusing on digital information products and services, an independent resource based-learning environment in the LRC has been created. The transformation from the current situation of the use of print resources in a closed library situation to active participation in teaching and learning through open access requires significant changes to the expectations and skills of leadership of the library service.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Changes in libraries

Librarians recognize that rapid change is a way of life in libraries and information services today. Yet in times of rapid and continual change, it is easy to be so absorbed by growing workloads, daily decisions and individual change projects that people lose perspective on the change process as a whole. For this reason, it is important to step back occasionally, and to think about the nature of change in general, and about its effects on organizations and individuals. Further, it is no longer just senior library and information service managers, who must be able to manage change well, but all librarians, and indeed all library staff. Change today is not only inevitable, but continual. It is unrealistic to expect a break from change, or to count on a period of consolidation. While these statements may be daunting, their truth is apparent if people consider the range of pressures for change which all libraries experience (Gallacher 1999).

These pressures come from outside the organizations, originating in the wider environment in which libraries operate, as well as from inside libraries themselves. The pressures include potential threats to people's viability and security, as well as opportunities to consolidate position and to develop. Most senior library managers today operate in an arena where internal and external pressures are recognised, monitored and used to inform library planning and decision making. However, it is also important that all library managers, if not all library staff, understand these pressures if they and their organizations are to be leaders and beneficiaries of change, rather than victims of it (Gallacher 1999). External pressures on libraries come from changes taking place in the environment in which libraries operate. This environment has a local, national and global context.

External changes are those which, in general, librarians do not initiate, but it must be foreseen and interpreted, and which often require people to initiate additional change as a response. These environmental pressures are many and wide-ranging, it includes: political developments, such as local government reorganization, with major implications for public libraries; new legislation for industry or the health service, with knock-on effects for the libraries which serve them; or government initiatives for lifelong learning, which affect all sectors (Gallacher 1999). It also includes economic changes, such as new methods for the government funding of education, which profoundly affect school, college and university libraries; and global or national trends such as recession and inflation. Moreover it includes social trends, such as changing populations in the catchments' area of state schools or public libraries; the move towards a customer focus in all services, and the demand for services for disabled people. Lastly it includes technological developments, such as local and international networks, electronic publishing and the advent of self-service technologies (Gallacher 1999).

Internal pressures for change come from within the library itself. They originate with the recognition

of problems or weaknesses in the library, or of strengths which lead to consolidate or build on achieving success. Weaknesses are evident in situations such as user complaints, a falling-off of use, or poor staff morale, all of which put pressure to change methods if people wish to provide an effective service. The strengths can also pressure people to change. For example, a successful service may require changing the methods in order to meet increased demand and avoid a drop in service quality. Usually, this will mean planning changes in the way the service is run, and/or the way it is funded, even though the present system is working well (Gallacher 1999).

Another situation where the strengths lead to changes is in the recognition of people's potential to apply these strengths to new circumstances. For example, a number of public libraries are carrying out Internet searches for their users, or opening cyber cafés, capitalizing on the information searching and teaching skills of their staff. Developing such services may be useful for income generation, as well as enhancing and promoting our role as information providers or intermediaries, regardless of the medium (Gallacher 1999).

Changes in technologies

Information and communication technology has dramatically altered the process of teaching and scholarly research. Paradigmatic shifts resulting from the introduction of new and evolving technologies will continue well into the twenty-first century.

Digital information and resources have permeated scholarship in so many different ways that often people struggle to clearly identify the impact and articulate the implications. Libraries as supporters of teaching and scholarship have come to rely increasingly on digital information both as supplements to and parallels of print materials. Libraries also are encountering new resources that are born digital and have no print or analog equivalent that they exist only in digital form. The relative ease with which digital resources now can be created also means that the ability to create, amass and store digital materials far exceeds our current capacity to preserve even that small amount with continuing value (Thomas 2002).   To say that libraries have been influenced by new technologies in recent years is a generous understatement. More accurately, libraries have been and will continue to be significantly changed by the introduction of electronic and network resources.

This change will evolve through a two-phased metamorphosis.   Libraries were in transition from a period of modernization where new technology is applied to the existing, traditional functions of the library, to an era of transformation where applied technology changes library functions at a fundamental level. New technologies can easily automate existing library functions and services but information and communication technology can also create the conditions for innovation. Conceptually this is best described as automation or renovation versus innovation (Thomas 2002).

Library services are still undergoing considerable change as they consider, experiment with, and

integrate emerging technology. Like other organizations, libraries have begun to rely on many new technologies without always understanding the long-term implications of this dependence. A key element of this transformation is a growing reliance on technology. Why is our increasing reliance on technology such a pressing issue? Over recent years libraries have grown increasingly reliant on digital materials. As the price of print materials such as scholarly journals increases, and the accessibility and functionality of digital resources becomes more attractive, libraries are investing more and more heavily in new technology.

Libraries also must come to terms with their reliance on digital technology as the primary means of creating and storing their own organizational records. Online public access catalogs, acquisitions files, administration files, and even library policy material are now regularly found only in electronic form (Thomas 2002).

Transformation of library profession in Vietnam

With the introduction of information and communication technologies, Spencer (1998) states that digital technology, especially online technology, changes the role of the traditional library into an effective and efficient library. Those changes in libraries have affected the structure and system of librarianship (Gorman 2001). Libraries in Vietnam are becoming a learning technology, learning skills services and learning resources centre within that context and according to the nation's vision of Information Technology development (Resolution 49/CP)

According to Vu (2001), computer networks, library management systems, electronic resources and the acquisition of software to improve access to information are big challenges that are facing Vietnamese librarians and information specialists. A lack knowledge and skill in information technology and electronic services could cause difficulties in planning and managing the development of learning resource centres (Tran & Gorman 1999).

Newman (1991) believes if perception of new roles for librarians in the advancement of information technology is defined; this will play a major part in the creation, dissemination and utilization of knowledge and information management in Vietnam. As electronic information provision brings new responsibilities to the traditional librarian role, Rice-Lively and Racine (1997) also point out the opportunities for library professionals to take a more pivotal role in developing new skills in teaching and learning.

In this respect LRC staff needs to learn new skills and become familiar with new information products and the infrastructure that delivers them. The new way of communication has grown an existing librarian from a collector and preserver of information resources to an information professional, "to acquire, give access to, and to be carriers of knowledge and information in all forms" (Craver 1994).

Library professionals in Vietnam need to develop the "new awareness, new attitudes and beliefs" (Fowell & Levy 1996) to face the realities of technological change and cultural differences in ways of seeking information. Their roles, skills and capabilities in this new perspective need to fulfill its potential, and need to be addressed to fit in with the new services, in particular, developing and delivering the learning support strategies for their institutions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Busha and Harter (1980) in basic concepts of research for librarians have stated that qualitative research methods are designed to help researchers understand people and the social and cultural contexts. Because of the complex nature and variety of roles that today's librarian plays in Vietnam, qualitative analysis was proposed to identify key roles, core information skills and core competencies.

Participants for the study were among the librarians working in Learning Resource Centres and Central Library. As qualitative research can be understood in terms of the means of collection and type of data collected, a focus group technique was selected to gather information about librarian's perception of new role. Their reactions and feelings about services and concept of new online learning environment also applied.

Results of this study may enable the librarians in the Learning Resource Centres to actively participate in the educational process and be effective and efficient in the delivery of information services. The data collected hopefully will be of particular interest and benefit in developing training and staff development courses in the LRCs in the future.

Focus group participants

Nine focus groups were conducted in LRCs across Vietnam to ensure a mix of participants with varied skills and experiences. These were: Can Tho University LRC, University of Da Nang Learning & Information Resource Centre, National Library of Vietnam and RMIT International University Vietnam LRC. Each focus group contained eight to ten of a total of 81 participants. The majority of participants had degrees in other disciplines rather than qualifications in librarianship. Qualifications ranged from certificate to higher degrees and age ranged from 21 to 55 years. It was important to find participants who are likely to have opinions about the research topic, so data can be collected on precisely on the topic of interest (Williamson 2002)

Focus group participants were provided brief key perceptions and trends of the LRC projects. An important factor to note is that the focus group was conducted in Vietnamese, providing an

opportunity for discussions amongst participants and researchers without a language barrier. As well as expressing collective views, focus groups facilitate the expression of individual differences (Strauss & Corbin 1990). A tape recorder was used to record and the recorded discussions transcribed into lists of responses for each of the questions.

KEY FINDINGS

Open-type questionnaires with five-point Likert type scale were used first to find out the most important impact on LRC services. The respondents answered all questions and the Likert type scale indicates significant changes in LRC as a result of philanthropies educational project. *(See Appendix A)*

Participants then asked to discuss the structured key questions on recent role changes and expected future challenges

The mix of responses for the key questions demonstrated the diversity of library perceptions and experiences. Individual transcripts off each focus group session and sumarised the key findings based session results.

Recent role changes

- Role has shifted from gathering information to organizing and coordinating information
- Performing literature searches on ranges of databases
- Know how to find information and identifying essential information
- Aware of copyright laws in technology access and usage
- Conduct information literacy programs
- Range of technological skills are required with the emerge of electronic services
- Expanded to physical design and evaluation of information services and systems
- Involved in collection development
- Involved in the creation of electronic resources
- Become multi-skilled and independent
- Pursues learning opportunities, personally or through formal training
- Communicates openly, directly and clearly with users and colleagues
- Manage one's own time and the time of others
- Understand knowledge of LRC policies, procedures and service standards

Expected future challenges

- Works collaboratively with academic staff

- Facilitate information literacy programs
- Data retrieval as many resources required by academic staff are in languages other than Vietnamese
- Use of electronic database and web-based information delivery
- Cataloguing and classification - how linked, data structures and meta-data
- Monitoring and improving information quality
- Staff serve toward the goal, rather than a specific job description

Gaps identified in current knowledge and skills

Skills gaps were identified in the areas of information services, information resources and organization; information literacy and information technology. The core skills highlighted are

- Technology skills
- Team building and networking skills
- Leadership and group facilitation skills
- Communication and interpersonal skills were perceived as essential, and were especially emphasised in relation to liaising with academic staff.

Focus group participants also highlighted the need for understand learning methods, particularly in using online learning, as a pre-requisite to designing subject guides or induction programs online.

As electronic resource become prominent in the collection, the librarians in this focus group reported that they now have new responsibilities that include evaluating and deciding whether to subscribe to electronic resources, figuring out how to integrate electronic resources into their collection, and training users to effectively use electronic resources.

There is an increasing need for librarians with information technology background to be responsible for Integrated Library Management Systems and to integrate electronic resources into LRC collections, as electronic services take on a more salient role.

CONCLUSION

The result of the focus group provides a good transaction of insight into the library and LRC throughout Vietnam. Librarian today needs a solid foundation in information services and resources, extensive knowledge of Internet and Web-based databases, and the advent of the virtual library. Beside with the changes of technologies also comes the changing role of librarians in the new learning environment. They are requiring knowledge and skills to fully engage with and be integrated into the LRC.

Clearly the skill sets required for the efficient and effective operation of LRC will depend in large measure on the mission and structure of the LRC, the range of services provided and its relationship with the campus library and other sections of the university. Evidence from this study reinforce the expectation that librarians in Vietnam likely to need training and development in technological skills and the use of electronic resources. Nevertheless, the rapid growth of new electronic information resources and new possibilities for document delivery, and the onset of ever more sophisticated search engines have ensured that nobody can be complacent about the future. Along with the extended range of technological skills required in LRC, this study also indicates that not clearly enough emphasis has to date been placed on such aspects as communications, teamworking and instructional skills.
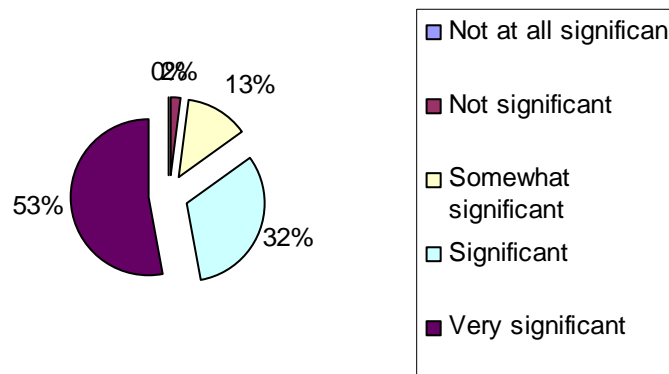
Librarians in Vietnam still have several gaps to bridge and many will have to involve themselves in professional development in order to be proficient with new services, new networks and new tasks. Lack of knowledge & skills leave many of existing librarians feeling extended into different directions, which can be frustrating and stressful.

With the new learning environment, the librarians are also being required to learn new skills and take on new job responsibilities. Furthermore, standards and key principles for libraries in higher education should be established and designed, such as the role of information literacy in the effectiveness of a LRC and its librarians. To achieve that goal, they will need recognition and support from universities and the governments.
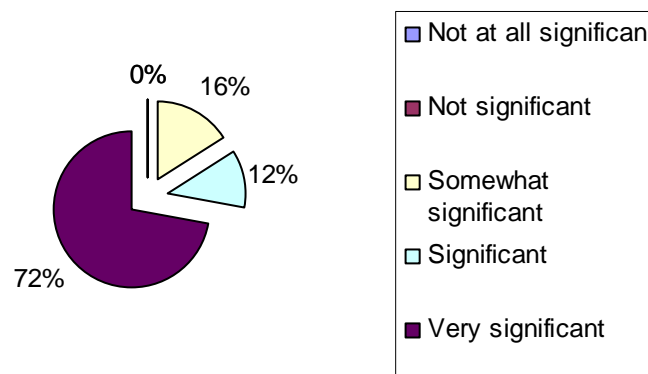
APENDIX A

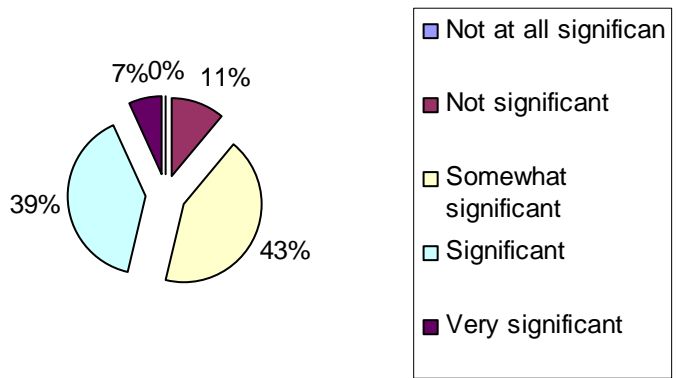**Respondent's on how significant of LRC to the services**

How significant have developments of physical building in LRC changed the methods of operation of traditional library (shelving, classification, study space, etc…)

- Not at all significan
- Not significant
- Somewhat significant
- Significant
- Very significant

0% 2% 13%
53%
32%

How significant have developments of print resources in LRC changed the structure information services and delivery (loans, collections, acquisitions…)

- Not at all significan
- Not significant
- Somewhat significant
- Significant
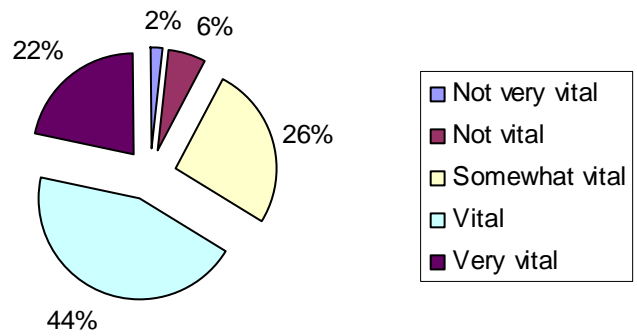- Very significant

0% 16%
12%
72%

How significant have developments of electronic resources in LRC changed the structure information process and access (staff resources, licensing, network security,…)
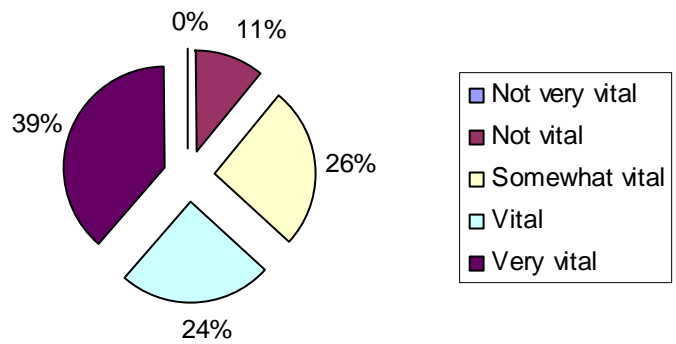
7% 0% 11%

39%

43%

Legend:
- ■ Not at all significan
- ■ Not significant
- □ Somewhat significant
- □ Significant
- ■ Very significant

Respondent's on how vital of LRC to the university

How vital is the LRC to the teaching of undergraduates

2% 6%

22%

26%

44%

Legend:
- ■ Not very vital
- ■ Not vital
- □ Somewhat vital
- □ Vital
- ■ Very vital

How vital is the LRC to the teaching of postgraduates

0% 11%

39%

26%

24%

Legend:
- ■ Not very vital
- ■ Not vital
- □ Somewhat vital
- □ Vital
- ■ Very vital

How vital is the LRC to researchers in the university

REFERENCES

Bridges, K., Expectations of librarians in the 21st century Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2003

Busha, C.H., Harter, S.P. (1980), *Research Methods in Librarianship: Techniques and Interpretation,* Academic Press, New York.

Craver, K.W. (1994), *Library Media Centres in the 21st Century: Changes and Challenges,* Greenwood Press, Westport.

Dubey, Y.P. (1986,) *Information Poverty: a Third World Perspective, Pierian Press*, Ann Arbor, MI.

Eres, B.K. (1981), "Transfer of Information Technology to Less Developed Countries: A Systems Approach", *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 32 (2), pp. 97-102.

Fowell, S. & Levy, P. (1995), "Developing a New Professional Practice: A Model for Networked Learner Support in Higher Education", *Journal of Documentation*, 51 (3), pp 271-280.

Frye, B.E. (1992), "The University Context", *Library Hi Tech* 10:4 (40), pp. 27-37.

Gallacher, C 1999*, Managing change in libraries and information services*, Aslib, London.

Gorman, M. (2001), "Technostress and Library Values", *Library Journal*, 126 (7) pp. 48-52.

Keren, C., Harmon, L. (1980), "Information Services Issues in Less Developed Countries", *Annual*

Review of Information Science and Technology, 15, pp 289-324.

Newman, B. (1991), *Am open discussion of knowledge management*, [Online]
Available at: http://www.km-forum.org/what_is.htm (Accessed 15 May 2005)

Rice-Lively, M.L., Racine, J.D. (1997), "The Role of Academic Librarians in the Era of Information Technology", *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 23 (1), pp 31-41.

Spencer, J. (1998), *Who Moved My Cheese? : An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life*, Putman, New York.

Strauss, A., Corbin, J. (1990), *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, Sage, Newbury Park.

Thomas, CF (ed.) 2002*, Libraries, the internet, and scholarship: tools and trends converging*, Marcel Dekker, New York.

Tran, L.A. (1999), "Recent Library Developments in Vietnam," *Asian Libraries*, 8, (1), pp. 5-16.

Tran, L.A. & Gorman G.E. (1999), "The Implementation of information Technology in Vietnamese Libraries: Results of a Survey," *Asian Libraries*, 8, (10), pp. 380-395.

Vu, V.S. (2001), "*Electronic Libraries and Dublin Core: The Case of Vietnam*", Conference Papers of 3rd CO-EXIST SEA Workshop and DC Conference, Tokyo, Japan, October 23-26.

Williamson, K. (2002), *Research Methods for Students, Academics and Professionals: Information Management and Systems*, 2nd ed., Centre for Information Studies, NSW.