

Blended Librarianship as a Fulcrum for Librarians' Relevance in a Developing Country

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ABSTRACT

The paper examined the emergence and important role of blended librarianship as a fulcrum of relevance for librarians in Nigerian universities. It x-rayed the global trends in blended librarianship vis-à-vis the Nigerian situation. Furthermore, the study considered perceived challenges libraries may be confronted with in deploying relevant ICT infrastructure geared towards transitioning from traditional to hybrid services provision for the successful implementation of blended librarianship. The paper recommended the design and implementation of an appropriate framework for the development of ICTs in Nigerian universities, urgency in the acquisition of new skill sets by academic librarians in Nigeria, while also calling on relevant stakeholders to review the current curricula of Nigerian library schools to reflect current realities in the work place.

KEYWORDS: *Blended Librarianship, Blended Learning, Librarians, Nigerian Universities, University libraries.*

INTRODUCTION

Rapid developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs) have brought about paradigm shifts in the operations and services of various industries, organizations and professions. Furthermore, the emergence of disruptive innovations has raised the stakes for organizations to both improve on operations and services or loose relevance and go extinct. Consequently, twenty-first century libraries are expected to change from being mere store houses of physical collections to blended systems where access is provided to a broad

range of different types of resources both physical and digital, driven by ICTs. In academic librarianship, the focus has changed to encourage teaching, learning and research by facilitating faculty and students' access to, conversations and interaction with knowledge and curricular information regardless of the medium (Bell& Shank, 2011). The latter further opined that 21st century library users, especially in academic settings are digital natives who prefer virtual spaces for professional, social, cultural and academic gatherings, where they can interact and collaborate with peers,

professionals and faculty on issues of interest. For libraries to increase patronage in the face of current digital realities and competition from alternative sources of information, they must follow the tides and meet their users in the 'market place'. This is the essence of blended librarianship.

Blended librarianship has been viewed as the magic formulae that will help librarians remain relevant and impactful in higher institutions of learning (Dabengwa, Rajub and Matingwinaa, 2019).

Bell and Shank (2004) noted that blended librarianship is a novel solution to the threats of the academic librarian's existence; these threats include "(a) Challenges with ways to harness and weave new technologies into the existing fabric of high-quality information service delivery; (b) the increasing competitive information environment in which the academic library is no longer the de facto resource of the first choice; and, (c) the eventual marginalization of the academic library in the university or college".

Bell and Shank (2007) opined that the concept of blended librarianship entails a system and process whereby an academic librarian (called blended librarian in this case) 'combines the traditional skill set of librarianship with the instructional technologist's hardware/software skills, and the instructional or educational designer's ability to apply technology appropriately in the teaching-learning process'. The latter further clarified that blended librarianship is not the same as multitasking; it is about infusing instructional design and technology into the practice of academic librarianship, in order to make the library more relevant and better positioned in the teaching and learning processes.

Based on the concept, Bell and Shank (2011) opined that academic librarians can play the role of instructional technologists and instructional designers who aid faculty to bridge the gaps in the teaching and learning processes. The concept promotes the integration of librarians and library resources into the teaching and learning processes using electronic platforms.

Blended librarianship is a novel concept in a developing country like Nigeria. However, it holds a lot of advantages for the existence and continued relevance of librarians in academic settings. Like other institutions and countries, there is a need for academic libraries in Nigeria to make necessary adjustments and adopt new methods and models for efficient information service delivery.

Cox (2018) argued that institutional leadership no longer view the library as an indispensable part of campus due to the availability of other sources of information for teaching, learning and research. However, for libraries to remain relevant, they must respond adequately to the emerging paradigm shifts (Iwu-James, Yacob & Ifijeh, 2020). It has become important for libraries and librarians to demonstrate their readiness to remain as a strong and indispensable part of all learning, teaching, and research in their institutions. Therefore, this paper advocates that university libraries in Nigeria can leverage on blended librarianship to play much more important roles in their communities and remain relevant in the scheme of things.

GLOBAL TRENDS IN BLENDED LIBRARIANSHIP

In today's world, ICTs have made it possible for people to interact, share and collaborate efficiently without necessarily moving from one place to another. The platforms to interact, share and collaborate across boundaries, through the use of ICTs, have given libraries the opportunities to provide novel services to enhance user satisfaction. One of such disruptive innovation lies in the concept of blended librarianship. Though the concept is relatively new in a developing country like Nigeria, it has been in practice in developed countries of the world. Generally, blended librarianship entails combining the characteristics of traditional librarianship and the characteristics of 'embeddedness'; 'embeddedness' implies directly involving librarians in the teaching, learning and research spaces of their users through ICTs (Inuwa & Abrizah, 2018). The emergence of blended librarianship has brought about changes in job

titles of academic librarians. These include liaison librarian, subject librarian, learning support librarian, information advisor amongst others; these titles signifies the integration of newer academic functions into traditional non-academic roles (Dabengwa, Rajub & Matingwinaa, 2019). The concept presumes a partnership and collaboration between the librarian and faculty. Bell and Shank (2007) observed that 'while the faculty is the expert on the subject matter, the blended librarian is an expert at organising the learning needs of students in a way that achieves the best in the teaching, learning and research process'.

The 'embeddedness' in blended librarianship is mostly facilitated by e-learning platforms (also known as virtual learning environments). Literature on current trends in various countries appear scarce. Dabengwa, Rajub and Matingwinaa (2019) noted there is partial implementation of blended librarianship methods in Zimbabwe, an example of trends in developing countries.

THE NIGERIAN SITUATION

From inception, Nigerian University Libraries have played the role of providing information resources for academic and research purposes. This has been through traditional and manual methods until recently, when they began to adopt automation (Iroaganachi, Iwu-James, & Esse, 2015). The latter further noted that though majority of the libraries have adopted some forms of automation, ICT adoption in most university libraries is at its primitive stage. Consequently, while basic library operations like cataloguing have been automated, information service delivery is still been carried out traditionally or at best asynchronously.

Adekunmisi and Odunewu (2016) studied the application of web 2.0 tools in Nigerian academic libraries; they observed that the implementation of web 2.0 applications was very low, if not nonexistent in the libraries. Traditional library services like reference and circulation activities are mainly carried out through manual methods. ICT-based embedded librarianship practice appear alien. A literature search shows that there have been no

documentation of any Nigerian University Library engaged in the practice of ICT-based embedded librarianship. This may not be unconnected with the inability of universities and their libraries to surmount the challenges hindering ICT adoption as well as apathy towards libraries and librarianship (Ifijeh & Yusuf, 2020).

PERCEIVED CHALLENGES HINDERING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF BLENDED LIBRARIANSHIP

Implementing blended librarianship holds a lot of advantages for the Nigerian university system. However, there are a number of challenges that should be addressed, for implementation to take place. The most critical challenges are enumerated and discussed below:

Relegation of libraries and librarians

In many Nigerian Universities, subject/course departments and lecturers are viewed as the most important components of the University community. Libraries and librarians are considered as supportive units/staff. Accordingly, the University Management prioritize and provides more resources to these 'most important components' than supportive units like libraries. Though librarians are categorized as academic staff, they are not giving equal opportunities as other teaching faculty members. There are disparities and discrepancies in nomenclature, appointments and privileges. Most times, libraries and librarians only become important and relevant during accreditations by regulatory bodies. Consequently, it will be a difficult task to persuade university authorities and lecturers to integrate librarians into the teaching-learning process in the form of blended librarianship; this is simply because they do not consider librarians as qualified faculties who should be directly involved in teaching (Agbaja, 1999; Itsekori, 2011).

Lack of Technological Infrastructure

Adoption and use of ICT-driven learning methodologies are not achievable without basic and required infrastructure. Unfortunately, there is acute shortage of infrastructure in Nigeria; over the years, there have been very

poor levels of electricity supply in the country. In recent times, the challenge has become worse with electric power supply from the Nigerian national grid fluctuating between 3600 and 3700 megawatts of electricity generation to serve a population of about one hundred and eighty (180) million people (Ifijeh, Iwu-James & Osinulu, 2015). From the aforementioned, it is clear that the level of power supply cannot cater for household use alone, not to talk of technological and industrial usage. The use of other electricity sources like generators has not helped to solve the challenge, because they are very expensive in terms of procurement, fuelling and maintenance.

Ogege (2010) noted that Nigeria is among the lowest ranked countries in the world in terms of electricity generation, supply and consumption. There is also the challenge of lack of information and communication technology (ICT) facilities.

Eke (2011) posited that lack of technological facilities disrupts information services delivery in academic libraries.

Davies et al. (2019) observed that technological infrastructure that could enhance educational and socio-economic developments in Nigeria and other developing countries, has not received the required attention from relevant authorities. Libraries are subdivisions of their parent bodies and several of their projects depend on decisions from such bodies. When these bodies do not provide necessary infrastructure, libraries appear as though they have no capabilities to execute ICT projects.

Ifijeh and Yusuf (2020) observed that many Nigerian universities do not have basic e-learning facilities. Under this circumstance, the latter opined that it is extremely difficult for universities and libraries to offer ICT-based services.

Inadequate ICT Skills of Librarians

The need for librarians to be equipped with ICT skills cannot be over emphasized. Librarians' lack of ICT skills is not unconnected with the obsolete curricula in use in Nigerian library schools. The curricula of Nigerian library schools have not been reviewed to reflect the

workplace realities of the 21st century. Consequently, many librarians lack the requisite skills to operate in ICT-driven environments. A review of literature shows that a number of librarians in Nigeria lack ICT skills needed to provide efficient library and information services in support of teaching and learning. Librarians should acquire new skill sets necessary to operate in an environment of constant change and future (Ifijeh & Yusuf, 2020).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In an era where library users have become digital natives, and alternative sources of academic and research information have become rampant, librarians must take the responsibility of positioning themselves for global visibility, enhanced user patronage, increased customer satisfaction and retention, and support from the parent institution. Users are the reason why libraries exist; blended librarianship is essentially about taking library and information services to users where they are. Therefore, the adoption of blended librarianship offers the library a unique potential for transformation. It is in the light of this that the following recommendations are made. Firstly, there is a need to design and implement policy framework for the development of ICTs in Nigerian universities. The relevant agencies like the Federal Ministry of Ministries of Education, Science and Technology, as well as the National Universities Commission should take appropriate steps to rework and implement the National Information and Communication Technology policy as it applies to the tertiary education sector. The policy should cater for affordability of ICT facilities, as well as creation of access and utilization of ICT. This is in line with trends in other developing countries that are improving on ICT acquisition, access, and utilization.

Achugbue and Akporido (2011) argued that other developing countries like India, Bangladesh, and others are gradually bridging their countries' digital divides through the formulation and implementation of ICT policies. The development of human capacity to exploit the benefits of ICT is crucial for the

implementation of blended librarianship. There is a need to urgently review the curricula of Nigerian Library Schools, to become consistent with changing trends from traditional to digital library services. In addition, Nigerian university libraries should engage in the provision of in-house training for their staff. They should follow the example of the National Library of Uganda, which has taken up the challenge of providing in-house ICT training for librarians (Beyond Access, 2012).

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