



Creativity and innovations in Ugandan libraries: case of Makerere University Library

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Abstract:

Library development has come a long way from the time of clay tablets and scrolls to the present times when ICTs are dominating the information scene. In every decade, there has been a tangible development ranging from the early technology of type writer use to the present era of virtual libraries. All stages have each left their mark and impacted on the success of library services. In the 21st Century, the dominant driver in library and information services is rapid technological advancement involving several technologies including mobile applications and social media. In Africa, apart from technological innovations librarians have creatively and innovatively improved upon service delivery using a variety of ways and approaches. The aim of this paper is to highlight the services/products and approaches that librarians in Uganda, particularly Makerere University have implemented to meet the ever changing needs of library users.

Introduction

There have been important developments in library and information services for a long time although creativity seems to be neglected in the Library and Information Science profession. For instances in 1814, Thomas Jefferson sold his collection to the Library of Congress to replace the books in the congressional library which had been burnt by the British. This was a creative act that has since influenced policies at the Library of Congress right up to the present time. The introduction of Knowledge Classification scheme by Melvin Dewey in 1876, the establishment of Carnegie libraries to serve as public libraries in 1879, the development of catalog code and lately the online catalogs do all demonstrate innovations in the library development. Furthermore development of reference services-online databases,

technological advances in library instructions, hybrid automated system at Brigham Young University –Hawaii are services which should be acknowledged as creative changes in the profession. (Riggs,1989).

In East Africa, episodes of creativity in libraries started way back in 1984 at the University of Dar es salaam library with the integration of ICTs in the library functions (Kiondo & Nawe, 2005), this innovation saw the workload of the librarians reduced. In Zimbabwe a library automation project started in 1996 at the University of Zimbabwe (Mamvoto, 2005). These are but some of the examples showing how libraries in this part of the world have been moving forward in their desire to serve their clients.

Background

Makerere University Library was established in 1959. It is the oldest, biggest and most modern academic library in Uganda, with 8 working sections within the library, 8 branch libraries and several Book Banks. All the sections and branch libraries are headed by professional librarians with the capacity to introduce technological or non technological innovations within their libraries. It is through their creative efforts that Makerere University Library (MakLib) derives its glory as the best academic library in Uganda. This paper is highlighting the creative and innovative services Makerere University library has successfully introduced. Both are technological and non technological in nature. As Asimov quotes,

“The work of the future will be creation, done by each in one’s own fashion. People will judge you not by how long you work or how many routine units you turn out, but rather by how much you increase the joy of the world. They will want to know how much of what you do gives pleasure not only to yourself, but to others. How much is useful? That is what will count.”

In that context Makerere University Library was privileged to capture and progress with Asimov’s way of looking at creativity and innovations.

Methods

This paper has been the result of the use of a combination of approaches and methods. First was the reliance on observations on developments in the library services. Second was actual participation in projects that brought about the changes. The paper is informed by experience and literature review of available evidence on the topic. Desk research by analysis of documents, journals, observation etc was undertaken based on the case study. The purpose was to get a deeper understanding and gain comparison with developments taking place elsewhere. Key to this understanding was two concepts; innovation and creativity.

Creativity

Creativity is bringing into existence something new, it is a new idea that can be used to solve a problem (Burke, 1994). All the new ideas that are introduced in the library may be referred to as creativity because it is through these ideas that a problem is solved.

Innovations

Innovation is the implementation of new ideas to produce a new service or product. (Martins, Terblanche, 2003).

Creativity and innovations are different from each other, but they are interrelated in one way or the other. In our rapidly changing library environment we can expect to see more creativity and innovation. Advanced technology provides an opportunity for greater librarian participation. (Riggs, 1989). “Creativity is about thinking of methods to improve our old products and services and putting the ideas into practice is an innovation”. Innovation is also modifying, improving the existing services or products (Avlontis et al, 2001).

Makerere University’s innovations and creativity

This section explains some of the innovations Makerere University Library has successfully produced.

1. IT system in the Library

With the advancement in technology worldwide, Makerere University Library has likewise innovatively integrated ICTs to meet the technological needs of the users. In 2001 an Integrated Library System (MAKLIBIS) was implemented to support the acquisition, cataloguing and circulations of information materials. The Uganda Scholarly Digital Library (USDL) was another product and serves as the repository where staff can archive their scholarly works, use of e-resources and wireless connectivity etc. These activities are creative actions by the librarians in order to keep improving service delivery and create efficiency.

a. ICT Services for the disabled

In order to meet the needs of students with disability, the library allocated an equipped computer lab. The lab has computers with a Job Access with Sound (JAWS) software to enhance hearing, and Open Book software e.t.c. These facilities provide a reading environment for our Persons with Disabilities (PWDS).

b. Incorporating Web 2.0 tools in the library

The idea of using web 2.0 in libraries is a new innovation that Makerere University library has implemented. Librarians have adventured and created blogs where librarians can interact with their users and also get feedback from them. In the blogs general information about the library are posted. This service is a new trend aimed to replacing the notice boards. When librarians interact with users, library management gets to know exactly what the users are saying about the library, hence create room for improvement.

2. Research Commons

Due to the increased number of researchers and postgraduate students, space that is convenient for knowledge creation, intensive study and facilitates research was needed. With funding from Carnegie Corporation of New York, MakLib allocated space for Research Commons (RC). Research Commons is space allocated to a specific group of people and offering a differentiated service. Research commons are different from the research commons (Daniel et al., 2009). MakLib RC provides specialized space and offers specialized support to graduate students and Academic staff to have a quiet reading. The commons are equipped with 150 computer work stations that are fully connected to free internet, a multimedia room where users can make Power Point (PP) presentations and group discussion rooms etc.

3. Outreach activities

These are activities carried out beyond the library and campus walls. These are meant to benefit libraries and librarians with limited access to the new developments in the profession. In this Library Outreach programme, the University Library implements a number of programmes aimed at enhancing the skills of those operating libraries or disseminating information. Examples of activities undertaken under this programme are:

a. Publishing program

The Library has successfully been engaged in a community outreach health Information program in which it publishes the *Uganda Health Information Digest*. This activity started in November 1996. To date this digest has been acclaimed by medical practitioners working far from libraries as a great avenue of providing them access to/ utilization of information relevant to their work. The Digest has enabled the sharing of relevant health information by medical and health workers throughout Uganda, particularly those working in rural areas with hardly any information support. "Information from databases, abstracts journals and other relevant documents, are compiled on identified health information needs and published". This activity is spear headed by one of the branch libraries at Albert Cook.

b. Strengthening small libraries

Makerere University librarians provide expert services to libraries, especially school libraries. For instance in 2010, the University librarians re-organized the collections (cataloguing, classifying, spine-label, shelve and prepared accessions list, etc) for two secondary schools in Kampala. This program has strengthened the small libraries and given them a sense of belonging. Though this is part of Makerere University programme of taking services closer to the communities, it has proved to be an important programme in revitalizing small libraries in the country.

c. Cross-border training

Makerere University Library has been able to share their knowledge and expertise with other librarians outside Uganda. It has done this specifically with Southern Sudan in a project called Juba Library Project (JULAP). Because MakLib wanted to provide more outreach services, Educating Librarians for the Future (EDLIB) project was started in 2010 to accommodate other librarians around Southern Sudan. The role of the librarians is basically to provide the technical and practical skills to the staff from Sudan. So far approximately 30 librarians were trained.

d. Capacity Building

To provide professional service delivery in academic libraries in Uganda, Makerere University Library designs programs on capacity building for librarians outside the University Library. These librarians are trained on the different aspects of the library, for instance e-resources, library automation etc. Such trainings are in form of refresher courses. These serve as a way of helping disadvantaged librarians keep up to date with the new developments in the profession.

4. Library cooperation

Through the umbrella association Consortium of Uganda University Libraries (CUUL), Makerere University Library is playing the major role of introducing to other Universities a service for which it has expertise. This is using e-resources. It is involved in coordinating the subscription, training and guidance of other University Libraries. The advantage of this service is that libraries in the consortium pay for the e-resources at a subsidized price and the other bigger percentage paid by Makerere University Library with funding from SIDA/SAREC.

5. Collegization of University Libraries

Formation of colleges is a hot issue in Universities, because many people fear change or are not sure of the future. Makerere University from 1st February 2011, adopted a college system, where different faculties had to merge to form colleges. Each college is to have a library and Book Bank with a librarian to manage them. However, there are policies on how the librarians will have to manage these libraries under the colleges without causing managerial conflicts. Conflicts may arise on policy matters or administrative procedures, i.e. does the College Librarian report to College Principal or University Librarian or both. The University Library under the college statue therefore ensured that in order for the College Libraries to be run effectively and efficiently, the College Librarians reported to the College Principal on general matters about the library and to the University Librarian on policy matters, this is an innovative decision which has seen the two units work together to develop the library.

Conclusion

Makerere University library has set a pace for other libraries in Uganda to follow. To be creative and innovative in our libraries will be a way to make our users feel at home while using the library. With the advancement in technology, we will creatively and effectively implement web 2.0 tools which our users are commonly using. When librarians continue thinking creatively then the library will be seen as a productive place rather than a place to find “dusty and old books on the shelves”.

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