

Challenges and Strategies for Non-Metropolitan School Library in Digital Era

Development of Digital Resources and Information Literacy

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Our school is situated in a non-metropolitan city in central Taiwan, with a thousand students in total. Most of the students are from less privileged backgrounds. Facing a limited budget and shortage of manpower, the school library still strives to provide useful services and activities for its users, school staff and students, so that they can benefit from the abundant digital resources and various forms of access to knowledge in the 21st century. Through the services which we provide, we hope to develop their information literacy and work efficiency, thereby increasing their competitiveness in the digital era. To achieve these goals, we have to enrich the electronic resources and develop a truly digital library.

1. Introduction

Cyberspace, D-world and E-learning are the three key buzzwords for school libraries these days. They also represent major challenges for a non-metropolitan school library like ours. In the face of information overload, library users need to develop information literacy and skills to deal with all of the new kinds of knowledge carriers. A school library should aim to serve as an efficient platform to disseminate information and as a flexible access to knowledge for its users.

Despite being a populous island with advanced telecommunication technology, a digital divide still exists between its schools in Taiwan. This is because of the regional disparity of resources that still exists. Our school is situated in a non-metropolitan city. For various reasons, it has never been the top choice ever for those students who are eligible to attend. Consequently, the school development has been restricted by the lack of financial support and staff resources.

This study takes the school as an example to demonstrate how digital resources may be developed in order to improve the information literacy of library users. We aim to establish a simple digital learning platform for staff and students, where both parties can produce and access multi-media teaching and learning materials. With such a platform, the traditional mode of teaching and learning will be radically changed: both students and teachers will be actively involved in the constant interaction of teaching and learning by taking part in a variety of activities. This will lead to a whole new experience of teaching and learning for both sides. Through the development of such resources, we hope to address the digital divide caused by the regional disparity of resources.

2. Methods and approaches

In order to support the development of information literacy among our library users, it is important to raise their awareness of the existence of various forms of access to knowledge. Our library has initiated several major steps to achieve this goal.

Firstly and crucially, all library staff shared a common belief in the importance of library's initiative. Given our finite facilities and manpower, we prioritized from among the possible services and activities we considered offering. Our initial enthusiasm and subsequent commitment to our common mission and patience has proved as important as professionalism defined in more narrow terms.

Secondly, we linked a variety of free electronic databases to our library website, in order to facilitate their use by staff and students for teaching and research. Significantly, we also convinced the school authorities to allocate an annual budget for online database subscription for our users' benefit. For example, our subscription to UDNdata began in July 2006. This step has proved especially advantageous for thematic teaching, learning and research.

Thirdly, to encourage students to explore the newly available resources in the library, we held introductory workshops. During the 'How to Use Library' sessions, we guided students step by step through the use of various digital interfaces. This enabled them to familiarize themselves with various approaches to indexing and searching. We also made the format of and instructions for the school book-review writing competition the same as those of the nation wide high school on-line book-review writing competitions. By doing so, we hoped to encourage students to learn how to follow on-line instructions. When students were not familiar with the online interface and found it difficult to upload their reviews, trained student volunteers provided timely assistance to their peers in the library.

Fourthly, we have established a Library Club for students. This promotes online reading and searching information from a variety of databases. It also provides an opportunity for the students to acquire experience of digital recording and video editing. In the longer term, they will also be able to take part in producing multi-media teaching materials.

Finally, we launched a simple digital learning platform. We held a seminar for students to introduce the basics of this new learning platform and its operation. We uploaded some online modules, and encouraged students would start to interact and learn online. We also engaged interested teachers by video recording their classes. The recordings were then edited as digital teaching materials by members of the Library Club and could be used and reviewed by students after class.

3. Results and discussion

Having implemented the first three approaches, we observed some significant achievements. For instance, the number of submissions from our school to the national high school book-review writing competition has increased threefold: from 81 for the '9504' round to 243 for round '9511'. The need for assistance when uploading submission has also decreased noticeably.

The impact of the learning platform on our students is, however, less easy to evaluate. We have to recognize the unfortunate fact that many students in our school are from less advantageous backgrounds. Often, these students lack the resources to benefit from the new learning platform at home. However there is some evidence to suggest that the digital learning platform is beneficial to those students with access to it at home. Even for students with relatively low levels of academic success, the digital learning platform has served as a useful and convenient channel for them to review the lessons on their own. Yet given the limited scale of the study, the overall impact of the new platform on the general population of our school needs further investigation.

4. Conclusion

To summarize, like money new reading behaviour and information literacy do not grow on trees. The development of information literacy and making the best of the new learning trends of D-world and E-learning in cyberspace have become crucial missions for a school library. We believe that with a clear vision and a workable plan, a small school library like ours can overcome limited resources and support and play an important role in developing the digital literacy of its users. Most important of all, we will be able to make some headway in addressing the hard reality of the digital divide.