The British Library and E-Learning

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Lynne Brindley has been the Chief Executive of The British Library since 2000. Since her appointment, Lynne has led a major strategic repositioning and modernisation programme to ensure that the BL continues to provide relevant services to users in the 21st century, and that the library is recognized for its contribution to research, innovation and culture. Lynne came to the BL from the University of Leeds where she was Pro-Vice-Chancellor and University Librarian. She previously held positions as Librarian and Director of Information Services at the London School of Economics, Principal Consultant at KPMG, and Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Director of Information Services at Aston University. She may be contacted at: The British Library, 96 Euston Road, London NW1 2DB, UK. Tel. +44 (0)20 7412 7262. E-mail: Chief-Executive@bl.uk.

Introduction

The British Library is a major international research library, a national cultural institution, an essential resource for science, technology and innovation, and a key component of the UK library system.

Figure 1 gives an overview of our five key audience groups (researchers; business; libraries; education; public) and a summary of the services we offer each group. As you can see, we are responsible for providing services across a wide spectrum of needs.

As a knowledge institution, the support of learning through our collections and services is a core element of our role, and everyone who uses the Library's collections and services is in some sense a learner, whether:

- the researcher in a pharmaceutical company who orders a journal article from our collection to learn about a new scientific development
- the businessman who comes to look at market research reports on our electronic databases to help him write his business plan
- the schoolchild who visits our public exhibition galleries and is inspired by the historic documents on display.

Advances in technology are helping us to improve access and service provision to all our audience groups – electronic article delivery; virtual exhibitions online; improved online catalogues and searching facilities, etc. In some sense, all of these could be said to be examples of 'e-learning'.

Figure 1. Our audiences and the services we offer them.

I would like to focus on e-learning in relation to our educational programme. This programme is designed to support the young learner (secondary level upwards) and the independent adult learner.

What Do We Mean When We Talk About E-Learning?

The Internet and electronic resources are opening up new kinds of learning opportunities and new models of learning. There are many different forms, ranging from 'formal' e-learning closely tied in to school curriculum or university courses, to more informal learning such as lifelong learners or hobbyists using the Internet to explore topics of interest.

What Does E-Learning Offer Us That Isn't Possible With Traditional Textbook-only Learning?

Individualized learning – technology can enable a more personalized learning experience to help support independent learning – for example, students can elect when to take a test on materials they have been studying to progress at their own pace, or gather resources related to their own interests to build up a personal collection of learning materials. The BL's *Collect Britain* (which I will describe in more detail later) encourages users to collect and build their own set of favourite resources from the images and texts on the site.

Group learning – online learning can incorporate discussion forums or spaces for groups to share their learning experiences. At the BL, our learning site features spaces for groups to share their research projects in progress, perhaps exploring new avenues in response to questions from other learners visiting the site. We also have an online teachers forum, which includes teaching resources, information about using the library and online discussions. Such group areas can help learners in developing communication and team skills.

Virtual learning environments – online learning can include virtual learning environments, such as e-conferences or access to experts.

Learner support – e-learning can also incorporate advice, guidance, planning. For example, in the UK, the *People's Network* is planning a National Enquiry Service. At the BL we would need to avoid replicating other kinds of learner support, but we might want to help learners to negotiate and make meaning from the information available on our own learning pages.

Flexible study – in practical terms, e-learning enables provision which is oriented to the learner, online/offline, distance/campus, continuous/interrupted.

Tools for teachers – online learning can also bring customizable resources closer to teachers and lecturers. For example, the BL's *21st Century Citizen* website provides downloadable task sheets and resources for use in the classroom.

What is our Overall Approach to Learning at the British Library?

Our mission is to:

- Be a centre of excellence in source-based and investigative learning, driving curriculum innovation and supporting creative teaching.
- Inspire students to progress in order to make full and creative use of the British Library's research resources.
- Help transform the e-learning landscape by providing digital images, texts and sounds supported by innovative pedagogy.
- Be a great place for a group visit, with engaging displays and with sessions led by professional cultural educators challenging learners to think big and think differently about 'the world's knowledge' that is contained in our collections.

Our expertise at the BL in providing support for research informs our e-learning strategy. Our high-level aim is to be a centre for excellence in research and source-based learning. We feel that this is where we can bring our particular knowledge and resources to bear and provide something different and valuable to learners.

The unique and richly diverse materials in our collections are something that learners cannot access elsewhere. We are building our online learning programmes around this unique content (for example historic documents or sound recordings). Building on the diversity of materials in our collections, a common thread running through our e-learning activities is to inspire thinking about diversity and cultural exchange.

We are using primary sources as the starting point for debate, for individual interpretation and for further research.

To draw our e-learning programmes back to our core identity of a research library, our main focus is on developing research skills through individual research. A focus on self-directed learning is a good fit with the key nature of research, and information literacy, relevant to the BL as a research library. Generic skills that enable learners to think critically, deal with complexity, identify problems, interpret images, texts and sounds, and acknowledge differences of interpretation, surround the engagement with primary resources associated with research libraries. By focusing on these core skills, our learning materials will be relevant to both young and adult learners.

We have a rich collection of e-resources for students, teachers and lifelong learners, which includes an archive of 1000 pages of curriculum resources – texts, images, sound and maps – to support the exploration of curriculum topics such as English and History.

Last year we launched a new online learning resource – *21st Century Citizen* – to support the Citizenship curriculum (www.bl.uk/learning). The activities encourage an enquiry-based approach to learning and are based on themes such as: British origins and movement; Language and identity; Democracy and documents; Families; Utopia; Crime and community.

Students are asked to consider a range of historical evidence, linked to topical editorials. For example, in exploring language and identity, students can study source extracts such as pamphlets, adverts and recordings of dialects, to explore the role of language in citizenship as well as their own attitudes to the ways others write and speak.

Our learning site is also interactive. To support their debates students are also able to take part in online polls and surveys. Students and teachers are encouraged to share their work and ideas through the 'Showcase' and 'Ask a question' areas.

Another important web-based resource for learners is '*Collect Britain*' (www.collectbritain.co.uk).

This is the Library's biggest digitization project to date, made possible with GBP 3.25 million funding from the New Opportunities Fund. When the site is complete in autumn 2004 it will contain over 100,000 images and 350 hours of sound recordings, including photographs, manuscripts, paintings, Victorian ephemera, sound recordings, maps and newspapers, building a rich picture of the UK's regional history. For example, a recent addition to the site has been recordings of dialects from northern England, made in the 1950s and today, charting the changes in the regional dialect. These can be enjoyed by academics researching language change or by the casual browser.

Visitors to the site can use the search facility to look for resources relating to a particular place or topic (and results can then be sorted by title, date, genre or collection). Visitors can also explore the resources which have been specially selected and grouped thematically, including:

Special collections – including 19th century landscape engravings, London street maps, or rare early wax cylinder recordings of song, music and speech from five continents

Themed tours – on subjects including 'Lost Gardens' and 'the East End of London'. For example, maps, drawings and eye-witness accounts chart the growth of the East End, from the villages and green fields where 17th century diarist Samuel Pepys took country walks, to the expansion of the docks and the social deprivations of 19th-century industrialization. The digital images are accompanied by commentary setting them in context and you can take part in online quizzes to test your knowledge at the end of each tour.

Virtual exhibitions – or you can take a tour around one of our virtual exhibitions, such as the 'Literary Landscapes' exhibition. Contemporary views and maps are used to bring to life the topographical backgrounds to works by six favourite classic authors, including Chaucer and Wordsworth.

To give you a flavour of the kinds of resources we will be developing in future, we are about to begin a project to digitize further materials for learners.

With funding of GBP 3 million from the Joint Information Systems Committee we are able to proceed with two major digitization projects. The funding will enable us to make available in digital format parts of our newspaper and sound collection.

This will be a valuable contribution to our web-based resources, and the items will be of interest across the learning spectrum, from Higher

Education through to Further Education, students and lifelong learners.

We plan to digitize some 1.8 million pages of 19th century newspapers. This will neatly complement our digitization of newspapers from our Burney collection of 17th–19th century newspapers.

The funding will allow us to digitize nearly 4000 hours of music and spoken word from the UK and overseas. Examples of content to be made available include: performances of Beethoven string quartets, offering the opportunity of research into the evolution of performance practice; interviews with UK jazz players and promoters and visual art interviews from the1990s.

The final choice of content will be made in consultation with the academic community – we have two panels who will advise on the final selection.

Whilst we can reach a wider audience via our online learning programmes, we recognize the importance of real-world, experiential learning and I would like briefly to mention this here. We offer onsite education programmes at the Library, and are also working in partnership to develop educational resources for use in classrooms.

To take one example, I'd like to tell you about some of the learning activities and resources we developed around the *Lindisfarne Gospels*. The *Gospels* is one of Britain's greatest artistic masterpieces. Written between 715 and 720, the manuscript was executed in the Monastery of Lindisfarne, on Holy Island, off the coast of modern-day Northumberland in North-East England. It is famous for the superb quality and amazingly intricate design of its decorated pages.

Last year we staged a major exhibition on the *Gospels* at the BL. Students were able to visit the exhibition and to take part in our onsite workshops on 'Reading Patterns'. The workshop develops children's visual literacy skills by proposing the idea of pattern as code in different historical and cultural contexts. Children work with an artist to find visual patterns in a range of world sources including illustrations in *Gospels* and Qur'ans, photographs, maps, stamps and music. The workshop was an excellent partner to the exhibition, but is a core part of our ongoing education programme, as it focuses on generic research and interpretation skills.

We also ran two summer schools on 'reading patterns' for students from a local school. Each week-long course involved 20 students, aged between 8 and 10 years. The summer schools were part of a larger 'summer university' in the local area which aimed to give students an intensive learning experience using 'accelerated learning' – a mixture of physical, musical and visual ways of learning as well as words.

We have also developed 'resource boxes' for schools (ages 5–18), working in partnership with the North East Museums Libraries and Archives Council. The resource boxes contain a variety of materials inspired by the *Lindisfarne Gospels*. These include lesson plans, classroom ideas, images, games and even a CD with sounds of wildlife from Holy Island. They have been created and assembled by a North East education consultant, who worked closely with libraries, museums and schools in the region.

The boxes are being distributed to museums and school library services across the North East. Any school can borrow them from their local resource centre. The project is one of a range of regional programmes whereby we incorporate BL expertise with local knowledge to make resources more accessible and relevant to users in the regions.

To coincide with the exhibition we also produced a wonderful facsimile copy of the *Gospels* which is currently touring around public libraries in the North East. Because it is a facsimile copy, people can actually handle the pages, and it is proving an extremely popular exhibit.

We also have a virtual version of the exhibition online (which you can still visit), with images and commentary. Some of the most beautifully illustrated pages can be seen on our website and pages can be turned in a realistic way with the mouse (using 'turning the pages' technology).

To provide an inclusive learning programme we need to ensure that we provide learning resources and experiences which are accessible to a wide range of informal learning groups (see Figure 2).

To date, our educational programmes have been developed with formal, discrete groupings of
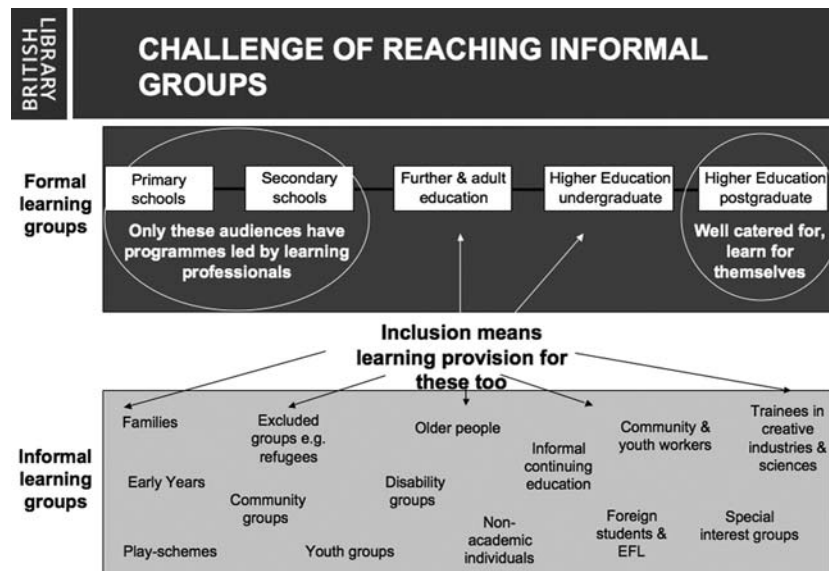
Figure 2. Challenge of reaching informal groups.

learners in mind – such as primary or secondary school children (some of the key groups on the learning spectrum are shown at the top of the diagram). Currently, we provide professionally led programmes for schools and our resources are used by the Higher Education community (typically postgraduate researchers and academics) to underpin their research.

We want to be able to provide education programmes that are relevant to a broad spectrum of learners. Inclusivity is high on the agenda of government and other funding bodies, so it is also important that we can demonstrate we are meeting their objectives if we are to succeed in raising funding for new programmes.

In practical terms this means that we may need extra resources to develop and run programmes for these different groups. We also need to think about how we shape our programmes and materials in order to appeal to these other learning communities.

Something that we think will help us to address the question of accessibility is the new framework which was launched by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council in March this year.

Inspiring Learning for All is a vision for accessible learning in museums, archives and libraries. It is founded on four broad and overlapping principles, which together describe the characteristics of an accessible and inclusive museum, archive or library. These are shown in Figure 3.

The framework is designed to stimulate practitioners working in museums, archives and libraries to focus on and improve the way that learning is supported by helping them to:

- evaluate what the organization does against a set of best practice processes
- support learning more effectively both on and off site
- evaluate the outcomes in terms of the learning and awareness of users
- demonstrate their commitment to supporting and enabling learning as a lever to funding and recognition

Inspiring Learning for All adopts a broad definition of learning: 'learning' is not used only in sense of formal curriculum, but in the sense of everyone accessing information, cultural resources or entertainment in order to develop as individuals. *Inspiring Learning for All* recognizes that people learn in different ways and require a variety of stimuli to engage them in the learning process. It stresses that museums, libraries and archives need to: remove barriers to access; cater for individual learning styles (not just ages); create exciting environments; use innovative methods; value learning experts, consult with users and reach out to new users.

We are currently assessing how best we can apply the framework across the Library. It is an approach that libraries and museums can apply to all aspects of their work – whether e-learning or onsite exhibitions.
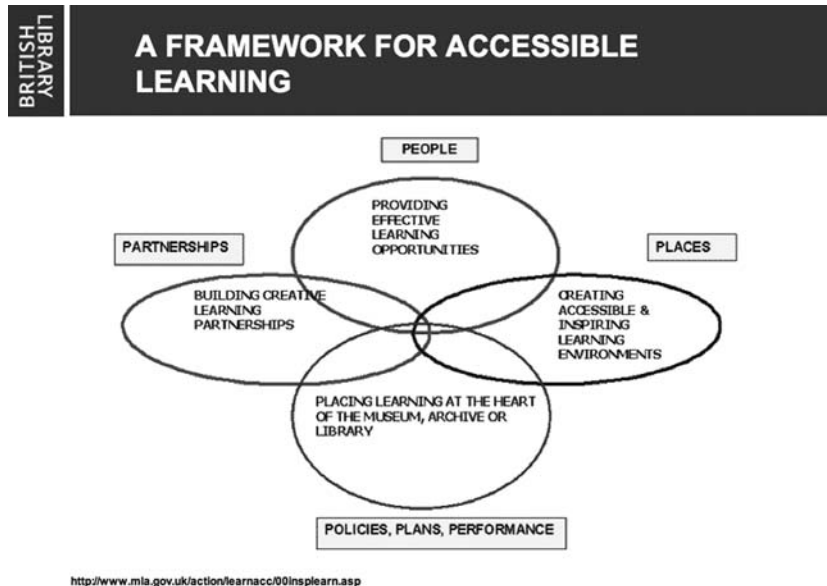
Figure 3. A framework for accessible learning.

I hope that this has given you a flavour of some of the activities and programmes that we are developing at the British Library. All of the online resources that I've mentioned can be found at our website – www.bl.uk (learning resources are at www.bl.uk/learning).

To finish, I'd like to leave you with some questions which the new e-learning possibilities raise for all of us.

How does e-learning change the educational role of national libraries?

- For the BL, e-learning provides us with new opportunities to engage with wider audiences.
- We can make the resources we have stretch further – it is viable for us to reach students, lifelong learners and the general public via digital channels, in a way that is not possible through a single physical location. We can repurpose work; e.g. the digitization of a medieval manuscript – initially for scholarly research – can also benefit students who can use the source material online to study changing language, or meaning through images.
- Therefore there is a greater responsibility on us to take advantage of these new possibilities to open up the national collection and, through appropriate selection or interpretation, make it accessible to a wide range of people (not just a national audience either, but internationally).

Should national libraries interpret their heritage collections as museums do?

- We believe that it is important to provide some kind of interpretation and guidance alongside our resources – for example, we arrange materials in themes and topics and also suggest choices of tasks and learning goals. However, we do not want the learning experience to be passive. We want to help the learner become an active interrogator.

Should libraries deliver learning programmes directly or let others package the library's resources?

- We believe it is important that we interpret BL sources in an inspiring way, in order to show other people what is available and what is possible. However, we are also keen to work in partnership with others to develop educational resources from our content.
- By developing our own programmes, we can shape something distinctive which draws upon our unique strengths.
- We believe that it is important we develop our own skills in the interpretation of sources, so that libraries will be used to the full in future.