Chapter 33: The eLibrary and Learning

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“I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library . . .”
Jorge Luis Borges

1. INTRODUCTION

. . . although, one might add, not every library will be Paradise!

Discussion of libraries in general and eLibraries in particular can be found across a wide range of literatures, from the professional through the fictional to the fantastical (Terry Pratchett’s librarian, it will be recalled, is an orangutan whose limbs are ideally designed for retrieving books from the remotest shelf). The more serious literature may be less far-fetched—although some accounts of future libraries run Pratchett close—but its terminology frequently conspires to compromise communication. In a recent review of the literature on linkages between virtual learning environments (VLEs) and digital libraries, we noted:

“An immediate problem encountered when searching for published liter-ature was differing terminology. The ‘digital library’, it quickly became clear, is known . . . as the ‘electronic library’, the ‘virtual library’, the ‘distance library’ or the ‘online library’; the VLE as a ‘learning management system’, a ‘course management system’ (a subtle difference in emphasis!), a ‘managed learning environment’ (MLE), an ‘online learning system’ or ‘learning environment’, ‘instructional management system’, ‘courseware’, ‘learnware’ . . . .”

(Markland & Brophy, 2003)

Of course, in each case the favored term contains many layers of meaning. They are capable of, and indeed encourage, different interpretations by different observers in different contexts. To give but one example, in the U.K. the concept of the “electronic library” emerged in the early 1990s. But then it became fused with a major funding program in the higher education sector (the eLib Programme) which, while generally successful, revealed some of
the shortcomings of the purely electronic approach. As a result the term now
 carries an amalgam of negative as well as positive connotations in that country.
It will, to the initiated, inevitably bring to mind the Programme’s conclusion
that a “hybrid” library, delivering both digital and traditional sources, is most
likely to meet users’ needs. To someone who had never come across the Pro-
gramme such inferences would be far from obvious.

Yet all this is not to deny the validity of the eLibrary concept (the term
will be used generically throughout this chapter). It merely points to some
of the connotations the term may carry in certain communities and some
of the limitations it may signify. The perfectly valid question remains: How
might we define and design an effective “eLibrary” which would contribute
fully to the achievement of broadly based learning objectives? What, at its
best, would an eLibrary look like? Although some might argue that the
starting point should be elsewhere, we can begin to answer that question by
exploring more traditional understandings of the “library”, examining elec-
tronic “equivalents” and then considering the question of and how, and in
what manner, such models might be applied in the context of learning and
eLearning.

2. LIBRARIES

“Before the invention of paper the thin inner bark of certain trees was
used for writing on; this was in Latin called liber, which came in time to
signify a ‘book’. Hence our library, the place for books; and librarian,
the keeper of books.”

(Brewer’s, 1970)

It is common, at least in the academic sector, to refer to the library as
the “heart of the university”. The origins of this phrase are unclear, although
Grimes (1998) suggests that it is to Charles William Eliot, President of Harvard
University from 1869 to 1909, that the first documented occurrence should be
attributed. The metaphor was picked up in the U.K. and used in various reports,
including the influential Parry Report of 1967 (University Grants Committee,
1967), which led to considerable investment in university libraries. However,
as Grimes points out, the phrase has been used loosely and there is little
evidence that it reflects thinking at a strategic level:

“The metaphor implies that the academic library is of unparalleled
importance. Despite its persistence for more than one hundred years,
there is a considerable distance between the relationship it implies
and institutional opinion and practice. Evidence of this difference is
found in a number of areas. . . . Students and faculty alike fail to in-
volve library resources and services in regular learning and instruction,