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The role of university libraries in Latin America in the promotion of democracy and diversity

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Introduction

Because of the diversity of materials in their collections and because, among others, the main values of librarians is intellectual freedom, free access to information and equity in access, libraries in general promote values which are some of the issues included in this meeting, such as democracy and diversity, the last being related to the tolerance to ideas and beliefs different from ours.

Libraries, especially public ones, have as their main purpose the development of diversity of ideas among users attending them. Society is plural and libraries should show this diversity to the members of the community being attended.

Even though one of the main goals of university libraries is to support education and research, they cannot abandon their role as a place where different social policies, theories and ideologies meet. They are, however, a space to study different art and cultural schools and, in general, to analyze the trends of daily life in a society.

Below is a close view to some of the characteristics of university libraries in Latin America, from a general perspective, since the great diversity does not allow to easily establish constant features.

Latin America is a huge continent including countries with different economic and social development and, even though it is described as a unit, differences make sometimes generalization difficult. Nevertheless, this paper will try to find and state the characteristics of this kind of libraries which contribute to a higher level of tolerance and democracy in the area. However, stress is higher regarding the situation of university libraries in the countries where the authors come from, in which cases their experience is higher.

Latin-American Universities

Latin-American universities have a long history, starting from the University of Peru, the first to be founded, following the rules of that of Salamanca, in Spain, and up to the one in Mexico, which started working first, more than 450 years ago.

Organized in the same way as Spanish universities, where the establishment of professional schools is the main feature and lacking a group of general subjects, as is the case in countries with an Anglo-Saxon tradition, all students should approve the courses common to all disciplines.

Specialization appears in Latin-American universities earlier than elsewhere. Latin-American universities have followed the way of professionalization, which establishes that only after 12-year education in primary and high school will a student enter a professional school, where he/she will obtain the first degree necessary to work as a professional. Because of this, there is a weak or no relationship at all among professional schools and there is no general curriculum so as to have a uniform educational system, as is the case in the Anglo-Saxon educational system. Latin-American universities seem to be more similar to federations of schools rather than universities, as in the case of some other countries, and this structure will have an influence on university libraries, a situation which will be dealt with in later paragraphs.

In some places, as for example in the National Autonomous University of Mexico, the last three years of prior education (high school) are included in university studies. University studies are started, in many other cases, after the accomplishment of senior high school, that is, after twelve years of schooling.

Latin-American universities were considered, by liberal trends in XIX century, as a leader in teaching, or else as a protection for the conservative sector of society. It was there one of the places where XIX century ideological strife took place.

Universities have collected the most brilliant minds and the great intellectual leaders in American and allowed the advance of professional careers which guided American countries through democracy and progress.

As entities, universities have undoubtedly allowed and developed social mobilization. The most talented students from different social strata who have occupied the highest public and private positions have been educated therein. Entering the universities has allowed to fulfill social aspirations of students. Due to the republican structure of Latin-American democracies, which do not consider the existence of nobility, universities provide the society with new titles, based on academic recognitions, which allow social mobilization.

Some professions, as law, medicine and engineering, still have a good social standing. Some others have a lower impact on society, but are nevertheless important within social hierarchy.

There has been, among lawyers and physicians, a great amount of politicians in important positions in local, regional and national governments of Latin-American countries. Therefore, knowledge acquired at classrooms or in student mobilizations has had an effect on political moves in different countries. It is also true that not always have these moves conveyed countries to democracy, since some of the political leaders who studied at universities have promoted the establishment of cruel dictatorships.

In certain periods of our history, universities have faced the government; they have been accused, in some others, of a conservative or progressive attitude, since some groups within the universities pertain to political parties or organizations which try to change the course of the history of the country from their personal political perspective and make use of universities as a political instrument, due to both the political influence and the social, educational and cultural hierarchy of universities.

Teaching staff

Latin-American universities have faced many times a limitation of their academic development, due to a lack of sufficient full-time professors, a situation which makes them hire professionals who are practicing their profession as professors for only a few hours a week. This is a very general statement, since there are also universities with a full-time teaching staff, or else universities which have been creating academic bodies in charge of teaching which fulfill all the proper academic requirements and devote themselves mainly to teaching activities. To resort to professionals practicing a specific discipline in society allows the university to be immersed in social problems from which professors cannot escape, since professors are taking precisely their own daily experience into the university, and therefore not only theoretical problems are dealt with at the classrooms, but rather the reality of the society the university is working for.

Being a university professor is a great social honor, and it is frequent to find out that some professors are not working at the university for a salary but, rather, for the social prestige implied in this activity.

The lack of full-time teaching staff may partially explain the low research activity performed by Latin-American universities in general. However, some universities have reached an equilibrium between such teaching and research activities: the National Autonomous University of Mexico performs, by itself, almost 50% of national research.

Students

Students in Latin-American universities are the most active sector of the social community and, in addition to their studies, commit themselves to the political causes that, according to them, should be defended by the most illustrated community of society. Their activities deal with social, economic and political problems.

Most Latin-American students devote themselves partially to studies. It is normal that class hours are added up, so students will have time available for other activities. Flexible schedules give them free time to work, in order to pay their courses and help their parents for the maintenance of family expenses. There are also students who have enough funds so as not to work, but these represent a minority.

Generally, students in universities attend higher education institutions looking for the social mobility mentioned above, which will allow them to obtain a better position in society, since most of them are the first members of the family who study in a university.

The issue about social background should be made explicit. Otherwise, some of the activities performed by university libraries within social, political and economical parameters distinctive of Latin-American universities and, therefore, of their libraries would not be understood.

Sometimes students participate in a very dynamic way in political activities dealing with the social marginalization of broad strata of society, by participating in different student organizations. Sometimes Latin-American universities have been occupied by groups of activists who do not have anything or almost anything to do with academic activities and who are rather interested in making students participate in activities designed by such political groups. It is not frequent, but sometimes the police or the army have been forced to recuperate universities occupied by political groups. Cases such as the Central University in Venezuela, the San Marcos University in Perú or the National Autonomous University of Mexico do not occur everyday; however, they help us remember the fact that the universities are culture broths for political activity of parties.

Due to the low socioeconomic level of students, a considerable percentage of them cannot buy textbooks, which has important effects on the development of collections. However, this and other issues will be dealt with when library services will be analyzed.

In the case of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, we find that a high percentage of its students do academic homework at home, in the same space where the family eats, watches TV and meets for conversations. Perhaps this is the reason why a great number of students attend libraries to do their homework, and not necessarily to consult bibliographical materials.

University libraries in Latin America

The main users of university libraries are professors and students, and it is their mission to provide the information necessary for the development of teaching, research, and the extension and preservation of knowledge.

In order to better understand university libraries, these should be studied at their environment, from which they cannot be separated. University libraries is necessarily a reflection of the social, political, economical and cultural organization of each country. Deficiencies of Latin-American economies are reflected in the economical situation of universities, which allot small amounts for libraries because they do not have access to large budgets. If society does not appraise libraries in general, if this institution is not considered as a resource for social development, why should university libraries be considered as an important element of the activities of the institution, providing them with recognition, respect and support?

Now that the paradigm of the age of information establishes the access to information as the most important subject, which substitutes the preservation of information, the role of the university and, therefore, that of university libraries, consists in not ignoring the continuous importance of the preservation of knowledge through centuries.

This way, both universities and Latin-American university libraries face big challenges in order to adjust to modern patterns and, therefore, should favor the conditions for information access with the use of advanced technologies, each time more on an electronic, digital or virtual basis. At the same time, the increasing problem of taking decisions regarding documentary collections to be continuously integrated to those collections stored in physical installations should be continuously dealt with.

Personnel

Regarding those responsibilities related to university libraries, it can be said that only in the case of the most developed countries, specially Brazil and possibly Colombia, the personnel working at university libraries has been constituted by library professionals. In the last few years, there is a tendency in Mexico to gradually hire more professionals in management positions. Even though university libraries are the best ones, most of them lack of specialized personnel.

Collections

For the fulfillment of their role in the promotion of democracy and diversity, bibliographical collections, though limited, are the best in each Latin-American country. These are not very big collections and are not fully updated; however, they have made great efforts to support the teaching activities and the inceptive research. Considering the precarious economical situation of a high number of students, there is a trend for Latin-American university libraries to buy several copies of those books serving as textbooks. While this is an issue considered as an exclusive obligation of students, and the library has one copy of the textbook at most, Latin-American libraries have many copies of the same book. In this case, access to basic materials is favored, even though the possibility of buying a larger variety of works is sacrificed. Therefore, the higher the number of copies, the smaller the number of options of different works to enrich collections.

Precisely due to the students' limited resources, it is very common for they to photocopy the original books to obtain bibliographical material. In this case, universities should make efforts to reconcile the needs of students with the legitimate rights of authors and editors.

There is another limitation for the development of collections in the fact that most students in Latin America speak only Spanish, and Portuguese in the case of Brazil, as their working language, which makes the broad study of works written in other languages difficult.

Notwithstanding this, the high cost of materials, and also the development of collections is very irregular, in addition to those extreme cases where universities lack budgets to update their collections, there are many libraries which make huge efforts to have well evaluated and selected collections for the development of diversity and including materials in languages other than Spanish or Portuguese, which generates the need of broad budgets for such acquisitions.

There are also some samples of library systems including great possibilities to obtain bibliographical resources for their academic communities. This is the case of the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, and the National Autonomous University of Mexico. In addition to collections in traditional formats, these institutions have collections of automated data banks and a big collection of full-text periodicals, something not easily found in most developed countries. Practically all academic journals which are relevant for academic activities can be found within these collections. Therefore, each of these universities has approximately 6,000 titles of full-text periodicals to be used by the university community.

In addition, Brazil has developed a national network allowing the access to these digital resources and supported by Sao Paulo and the Federal Government's authorities, through the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Ensino Superior (CAPES) do Ministério da Educação [the Secretariat of Education's Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel].

Collections are daily enriched, including every kind of materials both in traditional format, such as paper, as well as in digital format.

Therefore, it cannot be said that there is only one level of development in bibliographical collections in Latin-American libraries, since there are libraries with very scant resources, and some other which can be compared to the world's most developed collections.

Buildings

The storage of collections in university libraries traditionally implies recurrent problems related to the need of physical space and installations. Many libraries have new, broad, comfortable, well-illuminated and ventilated spaces. In addition, university libraries more frequently offer services within buildings expressly built for libraries, where users can find not only traditional spaces such as service, but also places to rest, for the exhibition of books and other objects, and other spaces that can be found at modern libraries.

The evolution of traditional libraries onto digital libraries certainly poses new problems related to university libraries' physical space and facilities, due to the adaptation to be made in order for electronic and communication systems to properly function and other needs related to buildings' maintenance and adaptations, which may be very expensive.

Technological evolution of university libraries in Latin America

According to Cunha (2000), traditional libraries' collection and catalogue "use paper as support for the recording of information." In addition, traditional libraries "go beyond their physical space to obtain other information resources requested by users, who will obtain them depending on such resources' physical location and on the existence of copies; in addition, such libraries develop those access mechanisms necessary to find documentation. The paradigm of digital libraries is different from that of traditional libraries, since digital libraries do not need physical locations. As a consequence, digital libraries are mere collections of electronic mechanisms making satisfaction of information needs easier, by connecting resources and users."

The use of library-management systems is gradually being extended in university libraries. As well as in almost all countries in the world, automation started with products developed in libraries, with the help of professionals in charge of computing problems in universities. Nowadays, commercial software is gradually more used. For example, MINISIS was used during many years for the automation of libraries, but has gradually been left.

University of Colima in Mexico, which has an international center for the production of compact discs, represents a notorious example of development in automation. Lots of materials were produced within this center both for data bases and for collections of photographs and full-text periodicals. The use of the Web has gradually replaced, by means of CD-ROM technology, the use and production of bibliographic instruments.

In Mexico, on-line OCLC services are widely used to catalogue and search for information. Currently, 50% of total OCLC services employed in Latin America correspond to Mexico.

Many universities produce local bibliographical indexes. UNAM produces two local indexes, *Clase* and *Periódica*, which collect the production of academic periodicals in Latin America and contain analytical information regarding more than 2,500 Latin American titles.

Since a student does not commonly have enough resources to buy a computer and connect to Internet, possibly one of the most prominent characteristic of university libraries is the fact that they offer services with lots of computers aimed at serving students to fulfill these scholar needs. In addition to the acquisition by libraries of a high number of copies, university libraries help students by offering them computers where they will be able to access this kind of technology. Therefore, many students go to libraries to use computers, even though this activity does not have a strong relationship to traditional services rendered by libraries. It is thus the role of Latin-American university libraries to try to reduce the digital gap between those students who have and those who do not have access to computers and Internet. It is also convenient to remember that access to the Web in the most developed countries in Latin America, as is the case of Chile, Brazil and Mexico, does not even reach 7%, even though these countries are leaders in this aspect in the continent. This is why it is very important for libraries to include, among other services, the use of Internet. There are also cases such as Cuba, where the possibilities to obtain access to the Web are restricted not only by economic but also due to political reasons.

Some private universities request from theirs the students to have a notebook computer to be accepted. However, their commitment limits itself to establish a broad connection network for Internet, without supplying for the computer equipment, as is the case of public universities.

Cunha (2000) asserts that in 2010 almost all, if not all of Brazilian university libraries, will be completely automated, and many of them will be fully-digitalized libraries. This author says that libraries will need more financial resources in order to purchase a more potent and modern equipment; with cyberspace, the problem of digital libraries will be related to the financing of access to information flows, which will allow users to find their way through this intricate mass of available resources.

The situation gets worse when the environment of this kind of libraries is considered, since deficiencies in Latin-American universities are reflected in their universities, which in turn allot not enough resources to libraries, lacking as they do of proper budgets. If the society does not appraise libraries in general, if it does not see them as a resource for social development, it cannot be understood why it should consider them as important elements and recognize them, respect them and support them.

Kotler (1999, pp. 249-250) asserts that "... cyberspace will take us to an age when buying and selling will be made in a more automated and convenient way." He asserts that "... it is necessary to rethink the bases of those processes through which we identify, communicate and offer values to users, improve clients' and individual allies' management abilities and involve clients in the act of projecting desired products."

Sawhney and Kotler (2001, p. 221) consider that the age of information is also the age of information democracy, since information is becoming omnipresent and cheap. When the issue of marketing in the age of democracy and information is approached, it can be seen that users are obtaining information of a higher quality regarding marketing professionals and concurrence.

In The Statement of Rights for Users in the Age of Information, Sawhney and Kotler underline the following rights: to be informed, to have privacy, to be heard, to remain anonymous, to be cited, to share profits, to request responsibilities, and the right for their rights to be recognized.

Products and services rendered

In considering the importance of university libraries in the promotion of democracy and diversity, the role played by these libraries cannot be omitted, mainly those of public sector. Both for the development of collections and for the information products and services being offered, it is necessary to deal with society's needs, so as to determine, in turn, the applications of university-generated knowledge.

Regarding this point, university libraries in public institutions perform an active work for the lending of those materials necessary at university courses, as well as of some others which may replace or complement those assigned by professors. The University library becomes a rich possibility in order for students to be able to find materials allowing them to face opinions different from those stated at a specific course. University libraries meet not only the needs related to the different courses taught: they also help to fulfill both academic and other information needs. In trying to strengthen an idea, whatever this may be, a library can always be resorted to find different points of view that will help us to confirm or modify our initial notions.

Lending and other services rendered by these libraries allow students who cannot buy books or journals to easily find them.

Lending and all services rendered by university libraries have been greatly influenced by the evolution of information technologies and the advancement of telecommunications.

Free access to information

Regarding free access to information through Internet, information services rendered by Latin-American university libraries should comply with the guidelines of *IFLA Internet Manifesto*, approved by IFLA's Governing Board on March 27, 2002. This statement should be broadly spread if its objectives are to be fulfilled, and Latin-American university libraries are the best place to develop these principles.

The statement starts by saying that "free access to information is essential for freedom, equality, world understanding and peace." With the expansion of the use of information resources generated by Internet, it is extremely important to foster free access to information at Latin-American university libraries. The main paragraphs of such Manifesto are, therefore, included herein:

"Intellectual freedom is the right of every individual both to hold and express opinions and to seek and receive information; it is the basis of democracy; and it is at the core of library service.

Freedom of access to information, regardless of medium and frontiers, is a central responsibility of the library and information profession.

The provision of unhindered access to the Internet by libraries and information services supports communities and individuals to attain freedom, prosperity and development.

Barriers to the flow of information should be removed, especially those that promote inequality, poverty, and despair.

Libraries and information services are vibrant institutions that connect people with global information resources and the ideas and creative works they seek. Libraries and information services make available the richness of human expression and cultural diversity in all media.

The global Internet enables individuals and communities throughout the world, whether in the smallest and most remote villages or the largest cities, to have equality of access to information for personal development, education, stimulation, cultural enrichment, economic activity and informed participation in democracy. All can present their interests, knowledge and culture for the world to visit.

Libraries and information services provide essential gateways to the Internet. For some they offer convenience, guidance, and assistance, while for others they are the only available access points. They provide a mechanism to overcome the barriers created by differences in resources, technology, and training."

The Manifesto underlines the following principles on free access to information through Internet:

“Access to the Internet and all of its resources should be consistent with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human rights and especially article 19:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

The global interconnectedness of the Internet provides a medium through which this right may be enjoyed by all. Consequently, access should neither be subject to any form of ideological, political or religious censorship, nor to economic barriers.

Libraries and information services also have a responsibility to serve all of the members of their communities, regardless of age, race, nationality, religion, culture, political affiliation, physical or other disabilities, gender or sexual orientation, or any other status.

Libraries and information services should support the right of users to seek information of their choice.

Libraries and information services should respect the privacy of their users and recognize that the resources they use should remain confidential.

Libraries and information services have a responsibility to facilitate and promote public access to quality information and communication. Users should be assisted with the necessary skills and a suitable environment in which to use their chosen information sources and services freely and confidently.

In addition to the many valuable resources available on the Internet, some are incorrect, misleading and may be offensive. Librarians should provide the information and resources for library users to learn to use the Internet and electronic information efficiently and effectively. They should proactively promote and facilitate responsible access to quality networked information for all their users, including children and young people.

In common with other core services, access to the Internet in libraries and information services should be without charge.”

Final considerations

The beginning of XXI Century, characterized by the age of information, implies the needs to be adapted to new concepts and paradigms, and requests changes in people and organizations. As promoters of democracy and diversity or tolerance, Latin-American university libraries are within this context and need to adapt themselves to new realities if they are to be appraised by society in the dimension they should and can occupy.

The different barriers that can be faced by Latin-American countries cannot and should not impede the development of university libraries. However, it will be necessary to defeat challenges, whether these are economical, technological, social or cultural. It will be necessary that, in fully exercising democracy and diversity, those professionals working at these libraries review their positions, mental attitudes and experiences from a professional perspective, so as to better understand their users and provide them with better technical procedures.

The question remains about what kind of libraries will be able to offer better services for the democratization of knowledge and of society: those libraries which do not worry about the students' economic situation or those which do worry even if they have to sacrifice a certain kind of the works

offered. In such a politicized environment as that in most Latin-American universities, it is essential that libraries have a broad collection of texts, that such texts represent all possible political and ideological trends, and also that libraries are a place where different schools of thinking can meet each other, where humanities, social sciences, technology and natural sciences find the support necessary for their strengthening and culture.

Latin-American university libraries should be the ideal place to promote democracy, to strengthen one's convictions, to analyze those of others, and to make decisions about any issue on the basis of reasoning.

Libraries are a place for tolerance, for there thinkers, artists, theorists from several disciplines can be found who defend different points of view and help the student to accept other theories and to respect other ways of thinking.

Whatever the reality in Latin-American countries where libraries are found, adversities should encourage the desire to change such reality, whether through traditional or through virtual libraries.

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