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Establishing Library Learning Commons in Universities of India: A Case Study of BHU Library System

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Abstract

Traditional libraries have recognition as a physical space, as a physical collection, and as a traditional scribe in the era of industrial society and before. At present, the paradigm shift due to the advent of computer technology, information technology (IT) and information communication technology (ICT) has changed the way of information seeking, reading habits, learning methods, and even social connectivity and interactions of the society. Furthermore, these changes can be seen in the reading habits, information search, learning and teaching methods of students and faculty members engaged in higher education and research works. These transformations in users laid academic libraries to adopt new collections, services, tools and techniques, and more skilled staffs. It has also forced academic libraries to redesign their existing services, resources, and physical spaces with the addition of digital services, digital resources, and virtual spaces. All these tend to transform service delivery models and to reshape the reading areas according to the learning and reading habits of the users, especially digital native and net generation users. The Learning Commons (LC) is one of the new services which came into existence due to these transformations. Library Learning Commons (LLCs) are collaborative learning spaces in libraries for both students and faculties which provide a convenient, comfortable, flexible and more productive environment for learning, reading and research work. The purpose of this article is to provide a perspective on informal library learning commons developed in BHU Library System and to find the feasibilities to acquire new techniques and services to cope with the continuous paradigm shift towards the digital environment.

Keywords: Information Commons, Learning, Learning Commons, Library Learning Commons, Academic Library, Libraries, Academic Library

1. Introduction

Libraries have long recognition as a space where books, periodicals, and other reading materials are placed to read and borrow i.e. library as a space, the physical location, the building. Whereas, the books contained in a library are the great mass of learning or knowledge i.e. library as a collection. Similarly, library has the agglomeration of librarian, staffs and the tools to procure,

arrange, curate, and retrieve the resources i.e. library as a scribe. Hence, a traditional library has recognition as a physical space, as a physical collection, and as a traditional scribe. The paradigm shift due to the advent of computer technology, information technology (IT) and information communication technology (ICT) has changed the way of information seeking, reading habits, learning methods, and even social connectivity and interactions of the society. These transformations in the society laid the libraries to adopt new collections, services, tools and techniques, and more skilled staffs. Libraries are forced to change his traditional look and become modern in order to change in the society. Further, Roberts (2009) states that “the trend in academic libraries to combine digital library services along with traditional library services are evolving. This evolution is due to changes in technology and changes in perception about information use and knowledge creation” (Roberts, 2009). Thus, the modern libraries require physical as well as virtual space, physical as well as online collection, and skilled librarian, skilled staff, and advanced tools and techniques.

Sinclair (2007) believed that students having social software, spaces and instructions are the presenting themselves in a global community, skilled in written and visual communication and critical thinking (Sinclair, 2007). The reading habits, information needs and information seeking behavior of students and faculty members at present are influenced and changed due to the adoption of latest IT, ICT, social media tools for study and research work (Sheikh, 2015). These changes greatly affected the higher education’s teaching methods as well as the academic libraries. It has forced academic libraries to redesign their existing services, resources, and physical spaces with the addition of digital services, digital resources, and virtual spaces. All these tend to transform service delivery models and to reshape of reading areas according to the learning and reading habits of the users, especially digital native and net generation users. The Learning Commons (LC) is one of the new services which came into existence due to these transformations. Library Learning Commons (LLCs) are collaborative learning spaces in libraries for both students and faculties which provide a convenient, comfortable, flexible and productive environment for learning, reading and research work (Karasic, 2016). The purpose of this article is to provide a perspective on informal learning commons developed in BHU Library System and to find the feasibilities to acquire new techniques and services to cope with the continuous paradigm shift towards the digital environment.

2. Learning Commons: Literature Review

The related literature search on Library Learning Commons or Learning Commons in Libraries results with the prevalence of two parallel terms “Information Commons” and “Learning Commons”. The analysis of recent literature on both topics is done in order to get insight into the conceptual difference between them.

The conceptualization of “Information Commons” (IC) is the brainchild of Donald Beagle of University of North Carolina who has first used the term in 1999 in two parallel levels viz. physical level as well as virtual level. At physical level the term is used to denote a new type of physical facilities specially designed to organize workspace and the service delivery while at virtual level it is meant to the widest possible variety of digital services can be accessed via a

single graphical user interface (GUI) and potentially searched in parallel via a single search engine from any networked workstation (Beagle, 1999). In addition, Cowgill et al. (2001) defined IC as “a specific location designated to deliver electronic resources for research and production that is maintained by technically proficient staff” and emphasized on the proficiency of staff in handling of e-resources and digital services to ensure best resources to the right user. Similarly, MacWhinnie (2003) described IC as “a model of integrated technology and information resources, a transition of library resources, facilities and services with the purpose of providing the best resources and the best services for users with the shifting emphasis from ownership of information to access to and management of information”. Further, he cleared IC as a centrally located space with a combination of reference services and information technology in which computer workstations are arranged with help desk and print reference sources to provide access to online catalog, internet, online databases and productivity software to prepare assignments, technical help and research assistance (Macwhinnie, 2003). While, Singh and Singh (2014) stated information commons as a centralized location to search, retrieve, use and create information with the help of appropriate technologies which constitutes physical space, physical media, digital resources, digital services and training & support.

Beagle et al. (2006) in “The Information Commons Handbook” stated learning commons as an “Information Commons organized in collaboration with learning initiatives sponsored by other academic units” (Beagle, Bailey, & Tierney, 2006; Sheikh, 2015). At this point, Caniano (2010) suggested IC as an original idea and the LC as a later evolution. Roberts (2009) described LC as a place that exists in the library and created to support the teaching because the faculty and administration recognize that students learn in dynamic ways. Further, “the learning commons are a natural progression from the information commons model, especially because the technical infrastructure is already in place. She explained IC as online portal for library users to provide information literacy or a cluster of computers to access online catalog and databases. Thus, IC provides assistance in knowledge searching and browsing. Whereas, LC are spaces equipped with tools, technology, and design for knowledge production and learning assistance. In this sense, LC model converts library in a laboratory for knowledge creation. However, both LC and IC are the centre of knowledge creation and intellectual simulation (Roberts, 2009). IC is more information-oriented while LC is more learning-oriented especially collaborative learning. In more general, Library Learning Commons is the space in libraries for collaborative learning and knowledge creation.

There is lack of literature regarding implementation of learning commons, even information commons, in Indian academic libraries. However, there is existence of online catalog, online resources, databases, cyber study centres etc. which are the constituents of an ideal IC or LC. But, the conceptual models of ICs and LCs are growing and will gain ground in near future. Though, Banaras Hindu University has a large setup of infrastructure which can be utilized to provide such service. The present study is used to explore such feasibilities on the basis of the available resources i.e. physical space, virtual space, virtual media, digital services, and others.

3. Learning Commons @ BHULS

Banaras Hindu University Library System (BHULS) having one central library and 40 branch libraries residing in institutes, colleges, faculties, south campus and departments is the largest university library system of India. The Banaras Hindu University Library has a unique collection

of Manuscripts, Books, Theses, Periodicals and Journals (hard copies and online) ranging from almost all disciplines of Ancient Indian Culture, Philosophy, Religion, Arts, Humanities to Modern Sciences (Singh & Singh, 2015). It has collection of more than 1.5 million printed and online documents with significant information services and more than 150 staffs to serve about 30000 students, 2000 teachers and 5500 non-teaching staffs. The Sayaji Rao Gaekwad (Central) Library was established since inception of the university and has a heritage building with traditional look. However, the library having large physical space, large physical collections, and plenty of staffs to serve, it has emphasis on growing its virtual space and digital document collections and decreasing the printed document collection steadily to meet the requirements of users for more and more digital documents. Initially, the virtual space in library was established with ten computers with internet access, one printer, with SciFinder, PubMed and ScienceDirect databases to university students, especially for research scholar, and faculties with the help of UGC funding. After that, BHULS has subscribed e-resources which results in rich collection of databases by addition of consortium access e-resources provided through E-ShodhSindhu.

3.1. Constituents of Learning Commons:

LC constitutes physical spaces, physical media, digital media and services. These are well occupied by BHULS and can be represented as in figure 1.

3.1.1. Physical Space for Digital Assistance

Choy and Goh (2016) states that “the transformation of traditional library space usually starts with re-configuring collection, study and reading spaces to more collaborative and technology-enriched space”. Furthermore, Ugwuanyi et al. (2011) emphasized on the renaissance in library building and suggested for a hybrid library building with print, audiovisual, digital resources and services for survival of academic libraries (Ugwuanyi, Okwor, & Ezeji, 2011). Thus, the physical spaces in academic libraries should have access to public catalogs, databases, electronic file management, file transfer, file compression, screen reading, public printing on cost basis, e-mail access, form filling, job searching, multimedia tutorials, online lectures, video instructions, electronic courseware access, access CD-ROM databases, internet access, library services access (Singh & Singh, 2014).

The transformation in library services of Sayaji Rao Gaekwad Central Library of Banaras Hindu University started with the provision of cost basis internet access to students, researchers and faculties in 1999. Now, the library premises have high quality and high-speed internet connectivity through LAN and WLAN and allow connecting handheld device from every nook and cranny.

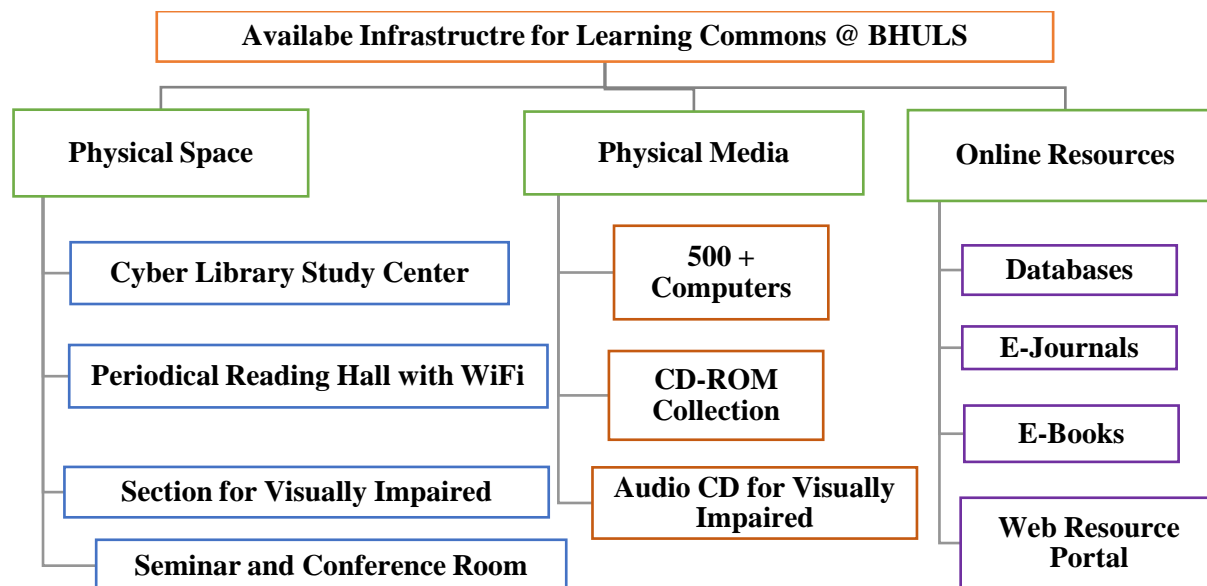


Figure 1. Infrastructure for Learning Commons

Central Library has a collaborative learning space named as “Cyber Library Study Centre” which is situated at annex building. It is fully air-conditioned double storied building with more than 15000 sq. feet area having a capacity of more than 400 workstations (see fig 2). Each workstation has a PC connected to broadband leased line internet connectivity to ensure the seamless access to information resources. Additionally, the same concept at small level is adopted by department and faculty libraries to develop learning commons for students, research scholars and faculties of the departments such as in Women’s College Library and Hindi Department Library. It has improved the behavior of users towards access to information and also the academic and research performance (Singh & Singh, 2014).

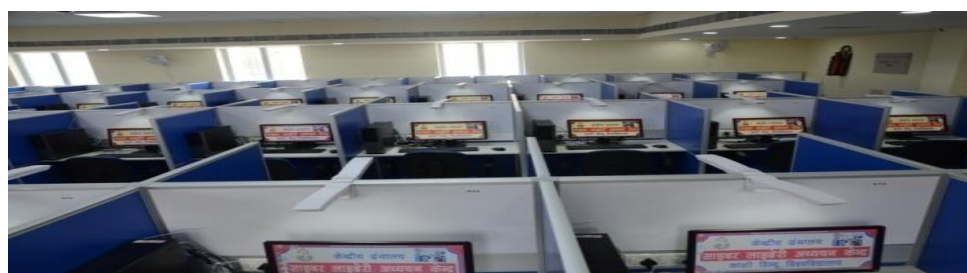


Figure 2. Inner view of Cyber Library Study Centre

The periodical reading hall of the Central Library is renovated and redesigned for sitting capacity of more than fifty students and have Wi-Fi zone for connectivity of handheld devices. This hall is specially designed for research scholars and academicians to read not only the subscribed journals print journals but also the online journals. A separate physical space is also allotted for visually challenged students and has advanced tools and techniques for reproduction of audio books on demand. There are more than ten workstations for recording and service. At present, about 400 students are being served with the help of more than 2000 audio CDs of 500 books. In spite of these, a conference room with a sitting capacity of 150 users is also redesigned and

maintained by the library for the purpose of organizing workshops, conferences, seminars, and lectures etc.

3.1.2. Physical Media for Digital Assistance

BHU Central Library has a rich collection of physical devices to generate, reproduce, consolidate, browse, search and retrieve the digital information. These devices can be tabulated as:

Devices	Quantity	Specifications
Computers	500+	2GB RAM, 140-500GB HD drive, 2.6 GHz processor, Windows XP, Windows 7 OS
Printers	50+	
Scanners	10	Book Eye, Book Eye3, HP Scanners, Barcode Scanners
Servers	5	With different capacity for different purposes
Connectivity		CISCO Core Switches, Cisco Firewall with fiber optic connectivity
CD-ROMs	550+	CDs which are delivered with books are collected and documented.
Audio CD-ROM	2000+ of 500 books	Conversion of text book to audio book is done by Sound4Cruzwel software.

Table 1. Physical Media

3.1.3. Online Resources

The library has a portal named as “Cyber Library” (see fig 3.) to access online bibliographic databases, full-text databases, indexes, abstracts, e-journals, and e-books of various subjects. This portal consists of the digital documents listed in table 2.

Forms	E-Resources
Databases	Annual Reviews, CAB Abstract, ErMed, GALE, Indian Citation Index, MathSciNET, NOPR, Pubmed, Scifinder Scholar, Springer Protocols(1980-2013), Web of Science, Indian Journals and NotNull
E-books	Sage E-Books, Springer E-Books, Taylor & Francis, Cambridge University Press, Encyclopedia Britannica, Pearson E-Books
Digital Libraries	Digital Library Of India, World Digital Library, Universal Digital Library, Project Gutenberg
Search Engines	SCIRUS, and JGATEPLUS
Open Access	OpenDOAR, DOAJ
Publishers	American Chemical Society, American Institute Of Physics, American Physical Society, American Society Of Civil Engineers, American Society Of Mechanical Engineers, Annual Reviews, Banaras Law Journal, Cambridge University Press, Economic & Political Weekly, Emerald, Institute Of Physics, Jstor, Manupatra, Nature, Oxford

	University Press, Portland Press, Project Euclid, Project Muse, Royal Society Of Chemistry, Sage Hss Online Journals, Science Direct, Science Online, Siam, Springer Link, Taylor And Francis, Westlaw India, Wiley-Blackwell Publishing
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Table 2. E-Resources Through Cyber Library Portal



Figure 3. Cyber Library Web Page

3.1.4 Other Digital Services

The digitization of physical assets of the library like manuscripts, rare documents, and theses has been started since 2007. Now, a full maintained digitization lab is established in the library. More than 15000 documents are digitized till date. Library has created a digital library of manuscripts which is accessible within library premises while institutional repository of academic research output viz. ETD, research articles, pre-prints and post-prints etc. are maintained (see fig 4).

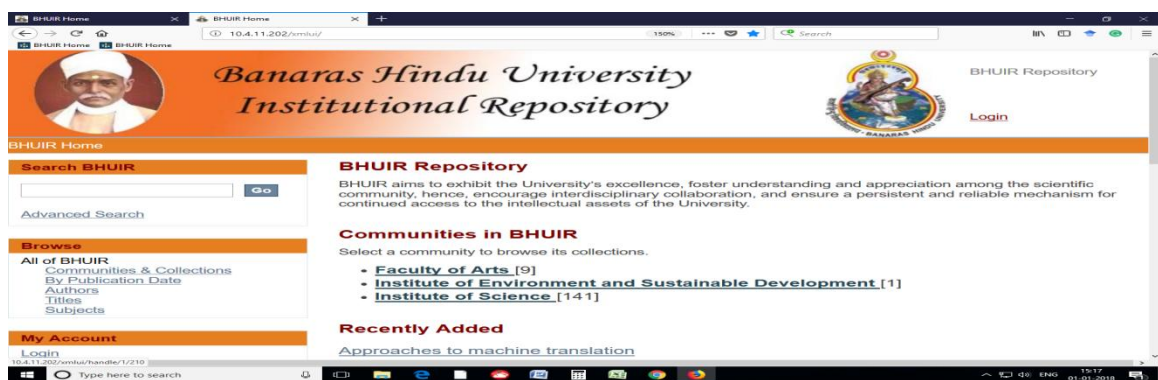


Figure 4. Banaras Hindu University Institutional Repositories

The central library of the university is fully automated including charging /discharging. It has computerized reference desk and skilled staffs to help the users within library hours. WEBOPAC and M-OPAC are accessible in both campus-wide network and global network to search the catalogue and to know the member status anywhere anytime.

It is beyond doubt that the resources and services provided by BHULS are very useful for users not only for academic purposes but also for career building. The users of “Cyber Library Study

Centre” utilize the digital, online and internet services in the harness of other information services such public computing, IRS, E-mail, job searching etc. (see fig 5).

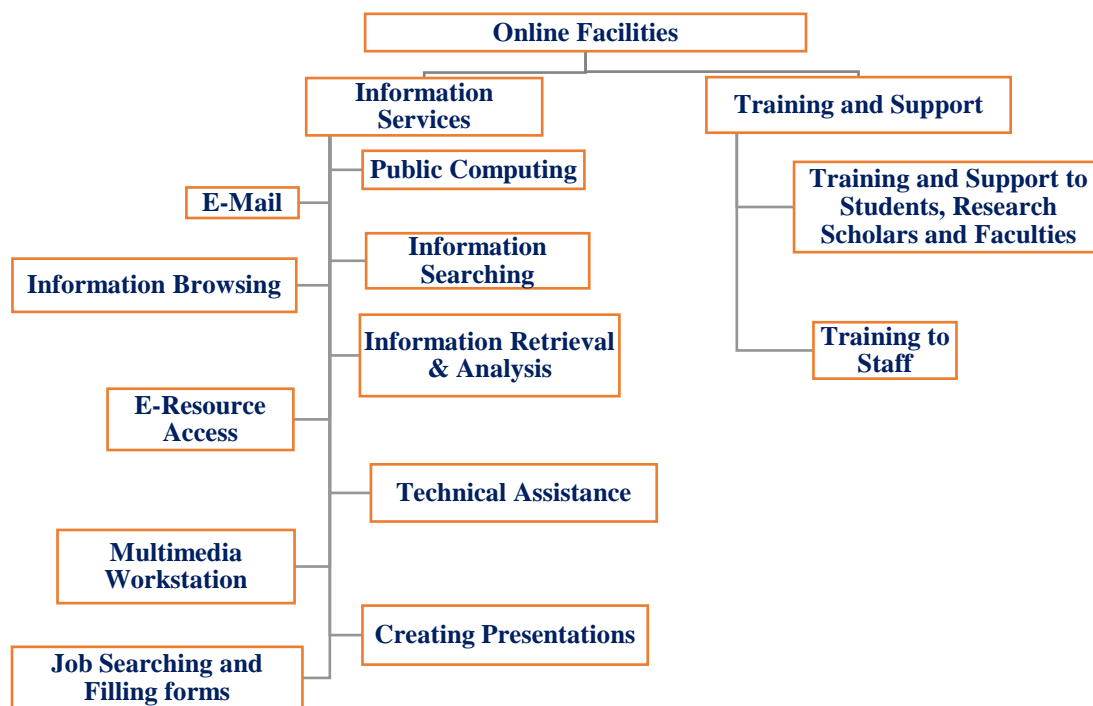


Figure 5. Usefulness of Existing Facilities

3.2 Training and Support

While emphasizing about the importance of information literacy, media literacy, information search techniques and search skill development, Singh (2015) elaborated that in higher education and academic libraries of India, the information and media literacy is the primary concern nowadays. Beagle (1999) discussed that the information commons creates “a synergy between the user support skills of computer staff, the information skills of reference staff, and the productivity skills of media staff. To provide help and assistance to the users regarding his/her different queries, it is necessary to the library professionals to be information literate and skilled in information handling, information browsing and searching, and information retrieval and analysis etc. Library professionals working in the BHULS undergo training programs on the handling of digital data, new technology and tools and other digital literacy time to time. Alternatively, at present, most library and information professionals are “digital immigrants” i.e. are not “born digital” but have become digital, have immigrated into the digital realm and are well equipped to guide patrons in both digital and non-digital realms as well as all areas in between (Bailey & Tierney, 2008). On other hand, BHULS continuously organize information literacy programs like “Authors Workshops”, “USAID Information literacy program on Agricultural Information”, “Springer protocol workshop”, and “Subject-wise information literacy program”, etc. to develop skills of computer use, information searching, browsing, retrieving, scholarly writing, referencing etc. among the academic community, students and research scholars in order to access right information at right time.

4. Future Prospects

Sheikh (2015) state that “the core motives of establishing these commons were to improve the library services, growth in research productivity, increase of library usage, to facilitate the users in their academic activities, and to meet the challenges of the digital age”. In the ever-changing environment of the digital technologies, university libraries are bound to acquire new techniques, services, and technologies to fulfill the user’s requirements. BHULS breaks through its traditional image by enriching it’s e-content and becomes a modern library system having enough digital environment for academic community. It is seeking to implement the self-charging /discharging system, anti-theft mechanism, m-OPAC and availability of dedicated WebOPAC for institute and faculty libraries which have its own server (Singh & Singh, 2016). While, in the context of LLC, the library has enough infrastructure to develop formal learning commons which can be set up with a separate collaborative learning space having proper user instruction, strong multimedia support, projectors, web portals, and subject gateways etc.

5. Conclusion

With the help of large physical and digital space with internet connectivity, Wi-Fi enabled reading areas, rich collection of digital documents, technologies and services, implementation of mobile technology, multimedia tools, and staff assistance, BHULS has large infrastructure which is being used with the combination of the e-resources, digital spaces, services, activities, staffing, and many more and constitutes informal learning commons. However, users are seeking for formal collaborative learning space which is well equipped with latest technologies and tools to stimulate active learning, collaborative learning strategies, highly interactive work, and provide both formal and informal work areas and meeting places for students and faculty (Weiner, Doan, & Kirkwood, 2010). It requires visionary planning for future changes and certain amount of willingness to take risks (Roberts, 2009). However, Thomas et al. (2015) observed that the “collaborative use of the Learning Commons increases slightly in the late afternoons and evenings but the quiet study is by far the most preferred use”. Though, Libraries and other information institutions have pressure to rethink and remodel their existing information services while advocacy of existing services is also an important element because if users are made aware, the optimum utilization of the services and further demands can be ensured (Singh & Singh, 2015).

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