

This is the LRC: a case study of an AV information service in the Anglophone Caribbean

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INTRODUCTION

The University of the West Indies (UWI) is one of three regional universities in the world. A regional university differs from other universities in that it seeks to cater to the tertiary level educational needs of a group of countries located within a specific geo-political space. Established in 1948, the three campuses of the UWI in order of their establishment are Mona in Jamaica (1948), St. Augustine in Trinidad (1960) and Cave Hill in Barbados (1963). The UWI serves 15 countries in the English-speaking Caribbean¹. These states were either former colonies of Britain or territories that still have a formal link with that metropolitan country.

The Cave Hill Campus has a student population of approximately 5,000 and 350 full-time academic, professional and senior administrative staff. A variety of undergraduate, postgraduate, certificate

1 The states served by the UWI are Anguilla, Antigua & Barbuda; The Bahamas; Barbados; Belize; The British Virgin Islands; Cayman Islands; Dominica; Grenada, Carriacou and Petit Martinique; Jamaica; Montserrat; St. Kitts & Nevis; St. Lucia; St. Vincent & the Grenadines; and, the Republic of Trinidad & Tobago.

and diploma programmes in the Faculties of Humanities and Education, Law, Physical and Chemical Sciences and Social Sciences are offered on this campus of the UWI. Medicine is offered through the island's main hospital, located on the outskirts of the island's capital, Bridgetown, some distance away from Cave Hill. As the Faculties of Law and Medical Sciences have their own libraries, the primary service cohorts of the Learning Resource Centre (LRC or the Centre) are the Faculties of Humanities and Education, Physical and Chemical Sciences and Social Sciences.

At its establishment the LRC had two sections - an Information Resource Unit (IRU) and an Educational Media Production Unit which includes a hardware pool to provide the equipment required to unlock the data held in the various AV² formats acquired by the LRC. Since then, the LRC has been expanded to include an Instructional Development Unit which seeks to help faculty members develop their andragogical skills. This paper examines the role and contribution of the IRU to the academic life of its host community, the Cave Hill Campus.

WHAT IS THE LRC?

Established in 1979, the mandate of the Centre is to provide a range of audiovisual services to support the teaching, learning, research and outreach activities of the campus. The uniqueness of the LRC is demonstrated by the absence of counterpart units on other campuses of the UWI. In addition, no mirror units have been identified in other Third World universities.

The overarching mission of the LRC is to improve the quality of teaching by faculty and to enhance opportunities for learning and research. All LRC activities and functions are tailored to meet this two-

2 The term AV refers to audiovisual materials, sometimes also called non-print or non-book materials. AV materials cover a gamut of products all of which have at least a visual component. AV materials may include sound and motion. For the purposes of this paper, the term AV covers those items so designated in the AACR2 cataloguing rules.

fold objective. All of the LRC's activities are guided by the curricular offerings and developments undertaken by the campus, locking the activities of the IRU into the academic programmes and programming at Cave Hill. This philosophy underpins the IRU's collection development activities, the range of formats it collects, the type of services it provides and its relationship with the rest of the campus.

COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

Scope

The scope of the collection is guided by the range of courses offered on the campus as well as by the availability of appropriate titles on the commercial market. The collection covers a range of subject areas such as Cultural Studies, Education, Film Studies, Belles Arts, History, Languages and Literatures in the Humanities, Biology, Chemistry, Computing, Mathematics and Physics in the Physical and Chemical Sciences; as well as Economics, Government, Management, Politics, Social Work and Sociology in the Social Sciences. These however are merely broad categories. Within each of these subjects/disciplines items referring directly to specific aspects and topics are acquired as necessary and available.

In addition to purchasing titles that specifically support curricular offerings, the IRU also acquires general interest items. Thus, in addition to educational titles, the IRU's collection includes documentaries and feature length films which its clientele would find useful, interesting and stimulating. Also impacting on the IRU's acquisition policy is a general understanding within the UWI that its information providers will acquire any Caribbean material which becomes known to them. Thus, the IRU purchases any AV programme on any aspect of the Caribbean that comes to its attention. This policy recognises that while a specific Caribbean title may not directly relate to the curriculum that such a title has the potential to be of some significance either programmatically or with respect to the heritage of the region.

Selection

In addition to the professional staff of the IRU employing the general principles of collection building known to academic librarians, faculty members are encouraged to recommend suitable titles for purchase. Students, especially those engaged in research are also sources of identifying suitable titles for purchase. Thus, the material selection policy of the IRU is quite liberal and democratic. A cardinal issue in the selection process however is whether the material is pitched at the appropriate academic level. Another consideration is whether the material enhances and enriches the curriculum in some way. This issue does not require a title to dovetail with the programme as taught on the campus - it may, for example, discourse a topic from another perspective thereby triggering discussion and debate, activities which are integral to the academic process.

Formats

The range of formats acquired by the IRU is dependent on the appropriateness of the material's content and also if the IRU has the required hardware to decode the format to be purchased. Experience and commercial trends have dictated which formats populate the IRU's collection. For example, until recently, VHS video tapes were the preferred format for releases that combined movement with sound. DVDs are now the preferred release format for such materials and therefore the LRC has had to develop a pool of DVD soft and hardware holdings. The video collection is approximately 3,000 titles while the DVDs total 275.

While the national video standard is NTSC (American), because of the range of the campus' curriculum and sources from which it acquires video materials, the IRU also purchases video tapes released in the PAL (British) and SECAM (continental Europe) standards. In order to utilize these formats as video standards are incompatible with each other, the LRC owns the appropriate hardware for each video recording system. DVD recording systems are similarly segmented but at this

time the LRC only has products which are compatible with the standards used in the United States of America. The LRC will acquire, as necessary, other DVD hardware.

CD-ROM and other interactive technologies have placed at the disposal of production houses alternative and enhanced formats for educational materials. As appropriate releases in these formats become available, they will be acquired by the IRU. In addition to providing motion with sound these interactive technologies allow students to become active participants in the learning process, rather than merely passive users. The IRU's CD-ROM holdings currently stand at 142.

The IRU's collection of sound carriers is extensive and includes audio cassettes, audio tapes, records (45 rpm and 33 a discs) and CDs. The record collection is particularly important as it represents the sonic heritage of the region, mainly calypsos and folk songs many of which are no longer available on the market. As a region steeped in the oral tradition such recordings are important containers of the region's patrimony and represent valuable primary source 'documents' on the region's history/ies, culture/s and society/ies. The number of sound carriers held by the LRC totals 6,048.

The collection also includes a range of graphic items such as glass slides, photographs and postcards. These are of considerable historical value as many of them date from the early decades of the last century. These images, numbering around 1,500, provide tangible evidence of the Caribbean of a bygone times and images of life styles that are no longer evident or practised. One of the questions frequently asked of the IRU relates to the cost of AV materials. While some individual some items are expensive, as they can be used by many people at the same time, the cost-per-user and use is reduced. In addition, as technology develops and more titles are available and purchased by similar units, many AV items are cheaper than their print counterparts, e.g. a video or a DVD of a Shakespeare play can be purchased for US\$19.95, whereas the print version of the same play sells for at least US\$10 more. Thus, AV materials are a cost effective way to provide academic information.

Other acquisition issues

The distribution of AV materials is completely different from that which operates for books. Individual production companies determine who or which company will have the right to distribute its products. Additionally, production distribution rights are accorded on the basis of geography. Thus, if a company has not be awarded the right to distribute a product to Barbados it is not allowed to sell the material to the IRU even if it is much closer than that which has been awarded the distribution right for the island. This can be problematic because the Caribbean is often clustered with Latin America for distribution rights, however there are several impediments embedded in this arrangement. These include:

1. Commercial trading arrangements between Latin America and the Anglophone Caribbean are not well developed, therefore the shipment of goods between these two regions are prone to long delays;
2. Because these trading arrangements are not well developed, the movement of goods between these two areas can be quite costly;
3. Many of the countries in both of these regions have currencies prone to instability, therefore payments for goods and services are affected by currency fluctuations and uncertainties; and
4. Differences in linguistic heritages and practice are the source of some stain on communication for business purposes.

While these are not core library activities they have a considerable impact on how any AV library service develops and operates within the Anglophone Caribbean.

TECHNICAL SERVICES

As the campus has an union catalogue, cataloguing and classification processes are governed by what obtains in the campus' Main Library,

thus the AACR 2 cataloguing rules and the LC system of classification are used. As the UWI's information providers (of which the IRU is a part) are members of the OCLC consortium, the IRU is also governed by the contractual agreements between the UWI and OCLC. Because AV items cannot be browsed like books, cataloguing entries for AV material have to be considerably more detailed than that which obtains for books in order for clients to locate segments of titles that are appropriate to their academic needs.

The UWI has recently installed the purchasing, cataloguing and client services module of the Aleph system. The IRU will ultimately utilize these packages in its service preparation and delivery.

In order to maximise the space constraints of the IRU, materials are stored according to format. Clients are informed of item locations through catalogue entries as each item has its format designation as part of its location symbol and cataloguing details.

USER SERVICES

Browsing facilities of the video collection are limited as users are able to glean only title, performer and release information from storage boxes. Sound carriers can only be accessed through the catalogue which lists album, track titles and the names of performers. These are usually sufficient for locating sonic products. Access to graphic titles is provided through browsing privileges. Where necessary, the required hardware is provided in order to facilitate use of the IRU's collection.

Because of space constraints, user demands and single title holdings, access is provided on a first-come-first served booking basis. Academic staff are allowed to borrow up to three items for three days materials they intend to use in their class. This enables them to preview titles and prepare the andragogical experience they are planning. Students are not allowed to borrow any of the IRU's collection unless it is to be used in a class as part of a class project/presentation. There is no restriction on the number of times that a member of the Cave Hill community may use any of the IRU's resources.

Both staff and students are permitted to use the viewing and listening spaces within the IRU. Additionally, IRU items are taken to classes when these are needed for the teaching/learning process. While some of the large teaching spaces around the campus have AV hardware installations, the LRC also has a floating pool of equipment which it delivers-on-demand so that the IRU's collection can be used in course delivery/activities.

IRU'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE CURRICULUM

The IRU supports curriculum delivery and academic work in many ways. Through its collection the IRU provides a range of enhancement materials which make learning and research more interesting; the AV materials held by the IRU are sources of alternative options for programmatic delivery; and, titles held by the IRU become re/sources for quick revision, e.g. in two hours one can revise an entire Shakespeare play during which one absorbs not only interpretation of the text, but also views costuming, body language, acting techniques and other factors associated with studying a play. Because of the technological techniques available to producers, AV materials are able to reveal many processes that cannot be seen by the naked eye, e.g. the pollination of flowers. Again through technological devices, process that take a long time can be speeded up so that viewers are able to see in a short time span an activity that would take some time to be effected e.g. plant growth and development. The incorporation of technology into academia also allows students to observe a process/activity that is potentially harmful e.g. the use of radioactive substances without unnecessary exposure to such materials. These factors also add to the cost effectiveness of the AV collection and services provided by the IRU of the LRC.

Material held by the IRU is also used to support or become part of the research process. References to IRU owned materials have appeared in or used for illustrative purposes in academic publications produced by members of faculty and professional staff.

In addition to providing academic support services, the holdings of the IRU are used to augment the campus' outreach activities in the

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community and also its public relations initiatives. For example, some of the IRU's cricket holdings will form part of a national exhibition which will be held in March/April 2007 as part of the Cricket World Cup, an international competition between cricket-playing nations which will take place in the Caribbean during that period.

SUCCESSSES

The IRU has been able to demonstrate the important contribution that an AV library service can make to teaching, learning research and outreach. Students find that individual titles are particularly useful in helping them understand a complex issue or assisting with visualising an activity which is outside of their lived experience. Faculty find that AV materials qualitatively add to the teaching/learning experience and researchers find within the LRC research items that are not readily available anywhere else on the island.

Over the IRU's existence, its professional staff has acquired considerable expertise in AV information services. These services have often been accessed by local institutions that have an AV information service issue. This is another way that the IRU contributes to Cave Hill's outreach activities.

CHALLENGES

While the IRU has had many successes, it nevertheless faces several challenges. Among these is insufficient staffing at all levels. Consequently, the Centre is unable to offer the level of extended opening hours for client access that it would like to provide. The lack of adequate space for client services, storage and administrative activities is another challenge. The lack of sufficient space severely hampers the quality of service that the IRU is able to offer. Once these issues are addressed, the quality and levels of service that the IRU can offer will be greatly improved. These issues can however be only modified at the institutional level.

CONCLUSIONS

Over its 28 years of operation, the IRU has become a critical support service for the campus. In addition to enhancing the academic life at Cave Hill, it has contributed to the development of new knowledge through references to its holdings appearing in academic work released by the campus' of faculty and professional staff. Such publications are used not only nationally and regionally but also internationally, giving the campus a presence in academia's global environment.

The existence of such a sophisticated information unit within a developing country also indicates what is possible once some of the necessary resources are made available. The services of the IRU also redound to the benefit of the library and information profession on the island as it demonstrates to the general public a range of alternative professional possibilities and options which traditionally are not part of the tapestries information provision and services.