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Electronic Library Services as Part of the University’s Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

University libraries are traditionally important support and service organizations for all members of university life. The ongoing electronic revolution in all fields of information and knowledge management makes it both necessary and possible for libraries to find better ways to support learning and research within academia. This paper describes the strategies that can help a university library transfer the traditional library services and collections into an electronic environment.

The ETH Library has defined two dimensions for future development: new services and virtual space. All activities are firmly based on the core competences of a traditional library. New services include departmental libraries or building up of an picture archive. Developments in the virtual space are electronic collections, integration of abstracts and indexes in the library catalogue or electronic document delivery.

Most interesting, however, are initiatives that go far beyond the traditional library by bringing together new services and the virtual space. Here the ETH Library is launching three major projects: E-Collection, EPICS (Interactive Picture Information System for Teaching and Research) and MyLibrary.

The projects E-Collection and EPICS are part of a broader concept of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich called ETH World.

INTRODUCTION

ETH Library or ETH-Bibliothek is the main library of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (Eidgenoessische Technische Hochschule, ETH) Zurich. It is primarily dedicated to provide relevant information to all areas of science and technology as covered in teaching and research at the ETH. Furthermore, it has a key role as Swiss national centre for sci-tech information.

With collections comprising over 5.6 million items, 6’500 current print journals and 3’300 e-journals, the ETH Library belongs to the largest sci-tech libraries of Europe.

As for every university library, the collections and services are designed to support learning and research at the ETH. As both learning and research change throughout the years, all libraries need to reassess their user requirements, reevaluate their services and make sure their priorities are in line with the overall aims of the university. At the ETH Library this cycle of reassessment, reevaluation and rethinking is a constant process within the management team.
STARTING POINT FOR NEW ACTIVITIES

New learning environments at the ETH encourage collaborative and interactive learning, web-based teaching, and integration of multimedia in classrooms. Interdisciplinary courses and projects help students gain a more comprehensive understanding of science and technology. The ETH Library realizes, that in order to support these innovative forms of learning and teaching, collections and services have to be made accessible in new ways.

The management defined two dimensions in which the library wants to develop in order to offer maximum support for innovative learning environments. These two dimensions are new services and virtual space (fig. 1). During this process of defining new, future-oriented fields of activity, it was important to keep in mind that all innovations need to be built on the firm basis of traditional library collections and services. These core competences, such as good print collections, adherence to international standards, long term stability, reliable user services and professional staff are important prerequisites for the development of new services and spaces.

![Fig. 1: New dimensions for library development](image)

NEW SERVICES IN A PHYSICAL SPACE

Within this context, new services build on traditional activities and are manifested in a physical space. They are designed to support new forms of learning. At the ETH Library these initiatives include planning larger departmental libraries in place of smaller more subject-specific libraries. These new libraries encourage interdisciplinary research and offer more professional assistance in order to train students in their information and knowledge skills. The extension of the current picture and photograph collection to form an up-to-date image database is another important activity in this area. This was done in line with the realization that visual aids are becoming more significant in new learning environments.
TRADITIONAL SERVICES IN A VIRTUAL SPACE

Building on its long tradition the library is expanding rapidly into the virtual space. The core competences that are now being stretched to cover a new dimension include the library catalogue (OPAC), the collections and document delivery.

- The OPAC now includes all print and online holdings, and will in future contain abstracts and indexes. Abstracts and indexes give users a better idea about the contents of a book and help all users select the relevant literature.
- Journals, a document type formerly only available in print format, are now accessible electronically and represent a very useful and well-accepted service in the digital space.
- The library is exploring the usage of other new media such as e-books, e-textbooks and digital reference works.
- Document delivery, traditionally performed by photocopying, is now being done electronically using pdf-files and e-mail. A very popular service within the campus for journals not yet available online.
- Digitization of ETH doctoral dissertations gives easy access to theses written at the ETH since 1999.

All these activities are not new services or collections in the sense that they were hitherto unknown or inexistent. However, transferring them from the physical or print environment to the virtual space has given them a new potential.

NEW SERVICES IN A VIRTUAL SPACE

The most challenging and exciting dimension to be explored is the definition of new services in the virtual space (fig. 2). As with all the other new fields of activity described above, it is important that the library builds on experience and expertise available within the organization. Furthermore, initiatives in this area have far-reaching implications for all areas of library work. Projects of this kind are typically strongly IT-based and absorb considerable amount of both financial and human resources.

The ETH Library has defined three major projects in this area: the E-Collection, EPICS and MyLibrary. Two of these projects are realized within the framework of ETH World, which is the university’s major strategic initiative to prepare the ETH Zurich for the information age. Its objective is to create a universal virtual communication and co-operation platform, supporting the activities of students and scientists working or studying at the ETH.

- The E-Collection offers members of the ETH Zurich an alternative publication platform. Grey literature is centrally recorded and stored on long term basis according to international standards.
- EPICS (Interactive Picture Information System for Teaching and Research) is a picture information system which forms part of the ETH World infrastructure. The interactive online picture database can be used as part of teaching and research within coursework at the ETH Zurich.
- MyLibrary stands for the personalization of the library’s digital collection. Users have the possibility to design their own web-based access to library services and collections. Personalized access can be defined for individuals, groups or courses.
CONCLUSION

In order to support new learning environments, libraries are developing new activities in various directions. The ETH Library has defined two dimensions that form three new areas of activity. All these initiatives add value to existing services and collections. They encourage active learning and promote knowledge and information skills of students and teaching staff. These initiatives require new standards, personalized services, acquisition of copyright cleared material and interactive tools. Although these services were designed primarily for students and staff members of the ETH, users outside the university can also benefit from many of them, such as document delivery, electronic dissertations etc.

Fig. 2: Initiatives for new services and virtual spaces