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How COVID-19 Changed Our Library



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Introduction

Working in the most isolated city in the world, Perth, is where our theological college library is located, has been an experience not easily forgotten. Though our library is considered small we are one that is well-resourced. We get more than our fair share of inter library loans each year. We are thankful that we have not been impacted greatly by Covid-19 as has some of the cities on the east coast. Our college has a little more than 100 students (including full and part time), and serve other users: primarily alumni, pastors and other ministry workers.

Learning

Covid-19 brought about a steep learning curve of working from home, which has been tiring to say the least, as well as making use of new technologies (particularly Zoom) as never before for things such as morning tea and other bizarre events like celebrating birthdays. Online seminars, Zoom meetings and phone calls have become commonplace.

Learning to enable library service remotely has been taxing as it is not something we would have thought much about. Prior to Covid-19, most users are in-person users and they would usually borrow books or ask questions. Our services were not meant to work purely online as only one fifth of our collection are electronic, though we do have a number of electronic databases and e-journals.

The challenge at the beginning of lock-down was making resources available: whether purchased resources or resources provided by free-access provided by generous publishers or scanning chapters and uploading content to Moodle for students. As we do have not a distance-learning component of teaching, it was a steep learning curve for all faculty and time was of the essence as classes were only delayed one calendar week.

In tandem, there was a barrage of emails from users concerned about their overdue library books and whether or not they could access the library, and other worries

that students had concerning their assignments. And of course, inter library-loan services were stopped.

Innovation

During the lockdown period of less than two months, and staying home and getting increasingly claustrophobic, we were helping students scan articles from the library, enabling open access titles for use, and also ensuring that all e-books were accessible, particularly as we had e-books from various publishers.

Emailing all library users and borrowers concerning the status of the library and their library books was also paramount.

With the easing of the Covid-19 in our part of the world, we slowly opened the library with “click and collect service”, that was met with a lot of joy among those wanting more resources for their studies or just seeing some other familiar faces at college.

Service

Then, before the exams, we allowed the use of the library through a first-come first-serve booking system of library desks. This was to ensure we complied with the government’s directive on the number of people allowed in a building according to size area. It proved to be a good move for students and some actually used the library for taking exams as well. Students were to take exams with Zoom cameras on them and their surrounds.

Some students needed space for revising and getting more resources to complete their assignments – so the move to opening-up the library space helped.

With the first semester mainly operating online, the second semester started back on campus with many protocols in place, including socially distanced classrooms and chapel, socially distanced library furniture and computers. Students are to regularly sanitise hands and books are to under-go 48-hour quarantine. After which books are sanitised before shelving. Also, gloves were necessary for browsing any item in the library and users were to clean their desks with sanitiser after use, which are provided for them.

There was a lot of persuading our Covid-Response Team to open up more of the library services, though, even now, we have dropped the 24-hour quarantine of books but borrowed books are still sanitised. Only gloves have been dropped while sanitising is necessary and socially distancing rules are still in place.

In conclusion, all this has been a whirl-wind in terms of a learning curve, making new rules and practices. At one stage, library staff also had to wear gloves, masks and eye-protection gear to clean heavily touched surfaces when the library opened up for reserved desks use during exam revision time. After which, a dedicated cleaner comes to clean several times a day.

Through all this, gives one a sense of humility in serving our hallowed users and also a sense that we are not in control as we cannot see the 'enemy' as such. Keeping everyone safe is of paramount importance despite our mission is to provide the relevant resources for equipping effective Christian workers.

Much time and effort are spent in devising procedures to keep everyone safe and also allow them to optimally use the library. We have stopped all walk-in visitors. At one stage, only students can use the library. After that, we allowed ministry workers and alumni. Finally, the rest of the library users were allowed in. During Covid, we had to quite disappointingly turn away a lot of users who were wanting to come in or wanted some article from the library. Though we are still not back to normal and the public is still unable to use our library as a meeting hub but nevertheless, with our government SafeWAApp, we hope to keep everyone safe and also provide the best service we possibly can.

What we have learned is that we need to adapt, be flexible and learn quickly to provide and to tailor the much-needed service to suit all our library users as we have always tried to do. †

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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