Something good happened in 1989 for post-secondary libraries and their users in British Columbia, under the provincial Social Credit government. The Ministry of Advanced Education and Job Training announced an ambitious 'Access for All' vision, and the concept of the British Columbia Electronic Library Network (ELN) was born. But unlike many good concepts, ELN was fortunate to be given both an appropriate organizational home and funding.

Since that time, ELN has operated as a project of the Open Learning Agency in British Columbia, a post-secondary institution devoted to delivering flexible courses, programs and services for distant learners, often in partnership with other educational and private sector organizations. ELN's objectives are to extend the collective resources of the province's post-secondary libraries, to make these resources available to students and researchers regardless of their location in the province, and to enhance resource sharing among libraries through the innovative application of technology. Like the Open Learning Agency, ELN works in partnership with other organizations to achieve these goals.

Funding

Over the last six years, successive ministries in two different governments have supported ELN through modest project funding. ELN, in turn, has demonstrated that a relatively small budget, combined with a workable governance structure and the collective efforts of participating libraries, can dramatically alter the resource sharing landscape of the province. Innovation need not carry an exorbitant price tag.

Today, ELN is funded by the British Columbia Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour. ELN's 1995/96 budget allocation from the ministry is approximately $390,000, which represents less than .06 per cent of ministry operating grants to post-secondary institutions.

Approximately 60 per cent of ELN funding is devoted to projects, while the remaining 40 per cent covers salaries and benefits for the staff of 3.6 full-time equivalents (FTE) (manager, two librarian/analysts, and secretary). ELN serves 28 member libraries (Appendix A), 25 of them in provincially-supported universities, colleges, and institutes.

Projects and services

The following projects and services reflect ELN's success in implementing practical, affordable and sustainable new services for post-secondary students, faculty and staff in British Columbia.

1. Serials, Media, and Outlook union databases

ELN produces three union databases, updated annually, that combine more than 2 million catalogue records from almost 60 libraries and make these available to post-secondary students, faculty and staff throughout British Columbia.

- Serials database: includes records for more than 200,000 journals, and held in 28 post-secondary libraries and Vancouver Public Library.

- Media database: includes records for more than 55,000 educational videotapes and films held by 25 post-secondary institutions, plus the catalogue of videos and films available for ordering through the Advanced Education Media Acquisitions Centre, a ministry-funded service that negotiates film and video duplication rights.

- Outlook database: includes records for more than 2 million items, representing the combined collections of 53 British Columbia libraries, including public and the non-university post-secondary libraries. The database is a collaborative venture with the Library Services Branch, Ministry of Municipal Affairs.

Libraries extract records from their own catalogues, and submit them to Auto-Graphics Inc., a California-based company engaged by ELN to process the records and
produce MARC-format tapes. ELN then contracts with the University of British Columbia (UBC) Library to mount the tapes on an ELN database server at UBC, build indexes and make the databases accessible via the Internet (telnet to eln.bc.ca), using the UBC Library system's search and retrieval interface. The Media and Outlook databases are also made available to libraries on CD-ROM.

The ELN union databases are used extensively in British Columbia libraries and media resource centres. The databases allow students and researchers to identify relevant material beyond local library collections, and help libraries expedite interlibrary loan. These databases are also important tools in cost avoidance for libraries since information about resources held elsewhere in the province are more readily available to staff engaged in purchase and collection management decisions.

2. Consortium access to reference databases

Seed funding from ELN has allowed libraries to embark on a provincial approach to database licensing, gain experience with network security, connectivity and service issues, and plan for longer term shifts in their institutional budgets to accommodate more electronic resources.

Through ELN, member libraries and their users have access to a suite of reference databases (primarily commercial index/abstract databases — Appendix B) at advantageous consortium rates. This project was initiated in 1994 through a combination of seed funding from ELN ($60,000), a special grant from the Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour ($55,000), and contributions from ELN member libraries ($169,000).

ELN works with member libraries to reach agreement on database priorities and cost-sharing models, and negotiates licenses with publishers and database vendors. It also co-ordinates work with the systems departments at three library host sites (Simon Fraser University, UBC, and University of Victoria) to load, update, and make the databases accessible to authorized users via the Internet on already installed hardware and software systems.

Through this initiative, post-secondary users anywhere in the province have access to a larger, more diverse body of research that any single library could afford, in a way that minimizes duplication and overall costs for licenses, data storage and system/contract administration. In addition, ELN project funds have supported development work at UBC and Simon Fraser University to link the Serials union database with many of the reference databases. As a result, users derive added value from commercial databases through the inclusion of serial holdings information from ELN libraries.

Current ELN priorities include pilot projects to incorporate full-text image databases into the service, and negotiation of new licenses for nursing and medical databases.

By 1996, it is expected that the reference database project will operate on a full cost recovery basis, with participating libraries sharing all license and support costs. Partnerships with other organizations, such as Public Library InterLINK (a consortium of 12 public library systems in the British Columbia lower mainland) are also under way, with the goal of extending the database licenses to selected public libraries and sharing costs among all participants.

3. Online Journal Access (OJAC) Service

OJAC is an end-user journal article requesting and delivery service, developed by Simon Fraser University Library and managed by ELN. OJAC began in 1992 as an ELN-supported pilot project, with the libraries at Simon Fraser University, University College of the Cariboo, Fraser Valley University College, and the Open Learning Agency as its first participants. OJAC now operates as a full service in 20 post-secondary libraries, with ELN responsible for co-ordinating policies, procedures, and billing/reimbursement for participating libraries.

OJAC permits users to combine database searching, retrieval of citations, and document requesting in one online session. OJAC is based on the links established between the reference databases and the Serials union database, with an added software component, developed by Simon Fraser University, to handle document requesting.

As a result of this project, a user can search a database such as Canadian Business and Current Affairs, capture references to relevant articles, see which ELN libraries in the province hold the materials, then transmit the captured records and an electronic request for the documents directly to a supplying library. Supplying libraries, in turn, employ a number of technologies (ranging from traditional photocopying and priority courier service, to high resolution image transmission over the Internet) to deliver the requested material to the student's home library.

OJAC reduces users' time and effort to obtain material not held locally. OJAC also significantly reduces the amount of staff intervention required at both requesting and supplying libraries, allowing libraries to manage more user requests at a lower per-transaction cost compared with conventional interlibrary loan transactions.

4. Development and delivery of high quality training programs

Rapid changes in technology and electronic information have underscored users' needs for timely, flexible and ongoing training on using network tools and resources. ELN has developed and delivered Internet training programs to staff in participating libraries, equipping staff to teach their own users more effectively.

In support of these programs, two ELN training manuals (Internet Basic and Internet Research Tools)
were published and marketed by the Open Learning Agency. More recently, a partnership with the British Columbia Standing Committee on Educational Technology (SCOET) has provided funding to enhance the content of these manuals and convert them to electronic formats (ASCII for a gopher site, HTML for a World Wide Web site, and Windows help file) for use in all British Columbia post-secondary institutions.

5. Development of new resource sharing models/structures

While all of ELN's services support resource sharing among libraries, ELN plays a larger, ongoing role in helping libraries adopt new visions and resource sharing models.

In 1992, ELN commissioned a major study on resource sharing, conducted by Basil Stuart-Stubbs and published by the Open Learning Agency. The report, entitled, Library Resource Sharing in British Columbia Post-Secondary Libraries, provided an overview of resources held in libraries, as well as the complex, diverse, and sometimes fragmented interlibrary loan processes in place. The 15 recommendations that emerged from this report have helped move ELN and post-secondary libraries in new resource sharing directions.

Following from the Stuart-Stubbs report, ELN struck a subsequent task force in 1994 to propose requirements for co-ordinated resource sharing policies and methods for post-secondary libraries. The group outlined a vision of an ideal resource sharing structure and service model, and also recommended the next steps in achieving those visions. As a result of those recommendations, ELN is now engaged in two initiatives that will help libraries reshape their services.

The first initiative began officially on Oct. 1. On this date, ELN assumed management responsibility for the British Columbia Post-Secondary Interlibrary Loan Network (NET), a service established by the British Columbia Ministry of Education in 1977 and managed since then by the UBC Library. NET has helped develop standard interlibrary loan policies and procedures for participant libraries, and has provided training, accounting and administrative services. The integration of NET into ELN allows for better co-ordination of existing resource sharing services, and sets the scene for a restructuring of interlibrary loan fee structures and formulas among provincial participants.

The second initiative is a pilot project with the Library Services Branch, British Columbia Ministry of Municipal Affairs, the agency responsible for British Columbia public libraries. Beginning in January 1996, 10 post-secondary libraries will use and evaluate an automated interlibrary loan management system called FileServer, developed by Auto-Graphics Inc., that can be integrated with the Outlook union database. ELN will support the pilot project through seed money for start-up license costs, training, and project management services.

The FileServer system is already installed and used successfully by public libraries in British Columbia. System features include the ability to capture records from Outlook onto an electronic request form, automatic transmission of outbound and inbound requests from a central server, automatic forwarding of requests to lending libraries, and statistical and management reports generated by the system.

Expected benefits of the FileServer system for post-secondary libraries include reductions in labour-intensive keying and repetitive messaging, improved request tracking, faster turn-around time, request load leveling, and streamlined communications among post-secondary and public libraries.

What makes ELN work

There are many factors that contribute to ELN's success in British Columbia. Chief among these are:

- provincial funding and centralized administration
- concentration on projects that optimize libraries' current strengths and investments in collections, technologies and human resources
- focus on affordable services and practical results
- appropriate structures for governance and member participation

Funding and administration

Provincial funding is critical to the operation of ELN. However, this funding is not the result of unique generosity or wealth on the part of the British Columbia government. ELN secures its project funding on a year-to-year basis, rather than receiving base funding or an ongoing operating grant. This requires ELN to pay very close attention to the priorities of the ministry, and to ensure not only that ELN activities are aligned with these priorities, but also that ELN communicates effectively the value of its services to ministry officials, post-secondary administrators, member libraries, and related organizations.

ELN's strategic plan is a key document in securing its fiscal resources, and forms the basis for ELN budget preparation, activity, evaluation and communication. ELN's current plan was developed in 1994, with the participation of ELN staff, member libraries, related library and educational organizations, and ministry representatives. The plan sets out goals to 1997 along with annual objectives that are specific and measurable. Now almost two-thirds the way through this plan, ELN is preparing for another strategy session in January, at which time about 40 participants will review ELN goals, priorities and objectives, and develop the framework that will guide the organization to the year 2000.

Provincial funding supports the central ELN office and staff,
who play a unique role in preparing proposals, negotiating and managing contracts, co-ordinating ELN projects, and consolidating the efforts contributed to projects by staff in participating libraries and related organizations. The dedication of staff resources to collaborative services recognizes that this role cannot always be borne by individual libraries whose first priority must remain their local institutional needs.

Optimization

While ELN is geared toward helping libraries innovate, the most successful services often begin by building on libraries’ current strengths, and by leveraging institutions’ investments in collections, technology and human resources. In this way, ELN recognizes institutional priorities/capabilities, and seeks to meld them with provincial resource sharing objectives.

This often takes the form of pilot projects that expand services already in place in one or more libraries, with seed funding to bring other participants on board and to administer the service provincially. This allows libraries to participate in a measured way, to evaluate benefits of alternate consortium approaches without terminating local services, and to be involved in developing recommendations for service refinements and expansion.

Affordable services

ELN’s goals envision a future where all member sites are connected through a seamless electronic interface, and where ELN is an integral part of a multi-type library network providing equitable and affordable access to information. As ambitious as these goals appear, ELN also recognizes that, in the words of Walt Crawford, “the real future is one of many small solutions,” rather than any one grand or all-encompassing future suggested by terms like ‘the virtual library’ or ‘universal scholar’s workstation’.1

ELN’s focus on practical results — the establishment of union databases, negotiation of core database licenses, streamlined document requesting and inter-library loan services, development of training programs, and infusion of funds toward specific pilot projects — also takes into account the needs of libraries and users that are least ‘connected’ or privileged (for example, institutions without dedicated or high-speed Internet connections, or without a large base of microcomputer equipment). The choice of platforms for ELN databases and services is geared to allow participation by the smallest, as well as largest, institutions, and by users with the most basic, as well as advanced, equipment. This approach has been key to building the level of commitment and political support among users that ELN needs for its ongoing operation.

Appropriate structures

ELN’s lines of accountability are clear and straightforward, as well as somewhat unique, compared to similar organizations. The ELN manager reports directly to a designated officer of the Open Learning Agency and, through this officer, to the Open Learning Agency board and the ministry. In practice, however, ELN’s governance structure is much broader and more inclusive than these official lines would suggest.

As a service organization for the library systems of the province, ELN must operate as much as possible with the full knowledge and support of its members and other stakeholders. To accomplish this, ELN is guided at the policy/priorities level by an advisory committee (with broad representation from the library and educational community in British Columbia) and at the project and operations level by several working groups and task forces who provide member expertise in specific areas. The library system managers at the three host sites also work with ELN staff to ensure that ELN services are implementable and sustainable, as well as compatible with technological developments at the local level. Altogether, more than 100 staff from member libraries and other organizations contribute time and expertise to ELN committees, working groups, task forces, and specific projects.

The future

Much has changed since ELN was established in 1989. The importance and impact of the information highway is now widely recognized. Diverse sectors provincially, nationally and internationally are working toward ubiquitous Internet connectivity, often competing for advanced technology funding to support new teaching, research and commercial initiatives. For post-secondary education, user demand for flexible learning opportunities, interdependence among disciplines, rapid technological change and fiscal restraint by government will increasingly shape program and service delivery.

In this rapidly changing environment, ELN and its member libraries face incredible challenges and opportunities. On one hand, ELN’s services may be threatened by dramatically reduced provincial funding to both ELN and its member libraries in the coming years. On the other hand, ELN is uniquely positioned to further its role, building on its success in fostering co-operation among autonomous institutions, partnering with related library and private sector organizations, creating affordable new electronic services, and demonstrating libraries’ ability to serve educational needs better collectively. If the last six years are any indication, ELN and its member libraries will seize the opportunities, rather than be daunted by the challenges. 

References

APPENDIX A

ELN Member Libraries
British Columbia Institute of Technology (Burnaby)
Camosun College (Victoria)
Capilano College (North Vancouver)
College of New Caledonia (Prince George)
College of the Rockies (Cranbrook)
Douglas College (New Westminster)
Emily Carr Institute of Art & Design (Vancouver)
Justice Institute (New Westminster)
Kwantlen University College (Surrey, Richmond)
Langara College (Vancouver)
Malaspina University-College (Nanaimo)
Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (Merritt) — affiliate member
Northern Lights College (Dawson Creek, Fort St. John)
North Island College (Courtenay)
Northwest Community College (Terrace)
Okanagan University College (Kelowna)
Open Learning Agency (Burnaby)
Royal Roads University (Victoria)
Selkirk College (Castlegar)
Simon Fraser University (Burnaby)
Trinity Western University (Langley) — affiliate member
University College of the Cariboo (Kamloops)
University College of the Fraser Valley (Abbotsford, Chilliwack)
University of British Columbia (Vancouver)
University of Northern British Columbia (Prince George)
University of Victoria
Vancouver Community College
Yukon College (Whitehorse) — affiliate member

APPENDIX B

ELN Reference Databases
ABI/Inform
Applied Science and Technology Index
Art Index
Biological and Agricultural Index
Canadian Business and Current Affairs
Canadian Research Index (Microlog)
CARL UnCover
Education Index
ERIC (Current Index to Journals in Education and Resources in Education)
General Science Index
Humanities Index
PsycInfo
Readers' Guide Abstracts
Social Science Index
Full Text Databases
(Pilot projects, commencing October 1995)
Business Periodicals Global (full image)
KIOSK: CBCA

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