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Web-based Reference Projects: an Approach for Iranian LIS Departments

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Introduction

Since 1945, Library and Information Science (LIS) as an academic field has developed in a number of ways, mainly because of technology. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have had a huge impact on the field of LIS. LIS education had been one of the affected sub-fields. LIS curricula have been re-designed a number of times, as a reaction to ICT developments. Networking and programming courses for LIS students is one example of the changes.

A course consists of several parts, including: teaching new concepts, face to face or web-based discussion about the concepts, projects and term papers, and exams. Projects are the result of students' activities on a specific topic. These projects have changed radically as the information environment has developed. For example, a student project could be the production of an electronic information resource. Such projects could be produced in a number of courses, such as audio-visual materials, databases, digital librarianship, and reference tools. The latter is the focus of our discussion.

Reference courses are provided in LIS schools all over the Islamic Republic of Iran. Different instructional methods are applied and various approaches are adopted. Some of them focus on introducing reference sources. In this method, students learn that a given reference source can satisfy a user's information needs. Others pay attention to the production of reference tools by using print media; for instance, bibliographies. In this article, we propose a new approach: the development of web-based reference tools. In order to do this, several new concepts are introduced.

Web-based Reference Projects

Our intended projects can be classified in four categories, including:

- webbook

- webliography

- webopedia

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- webtionary

• Webbook: webbooks are digital equivalents of handbooks. Webbooks provide end-users with an brief and comprehensive collection of information about a given subject on the World Wide Web. Sometimes they concern some sub-field of a larger domain. In order to present information in an effective and simple manner, it should be a structured collection of web pages. Conceptually, webbooks have appeared as a type of digital books during the last decade (Card, Robertson, and York; 1996), but we refer to these sources of information as reference tools that can facilitate information/reference services on the World Wide Web.

• Webliography: a Webliography is an enumerative list of hypertext links and a gateway to ources of information on the Net, whether annotated or not (Alimohammadi, 2004a; Portland community college, 2004; Potts, 2004; Smith, 2004). Webliographies are in fact digital equivalents of bibliographies (printed lists of information sources). Bibliographies are secondary sources among print media and Webliographies are the same on the Net (Alimohammadi, 2004b; 2004c).

• Webopedia: a webopedia is a digital encyclopedia. The webopedia provides user with brief or detailed articles on all of the sub-fields of a domain of human knowledge. It is typically larger than a webbook/webliography. More attention should be paid to designing webopedias and a lot of space is needed to upload a webopedia to an Internet server.

• Webtionary: a webtionary is an online dictionary and should be accessible on the WWW. Webtionaries can be general or specific; mono- or multilingual. They are designed to provide costumers with definitions of an unlimited collection of words.

All these digital tools should be user-friendly and at least browsable, if not searchable. If the information system is to be browsable, it should have a meaningful title, a clear table of contents, a structured body, and an in-depth, detailed index. These characteristics are necessary to maintain a web-based reference tool's visibility among its competitors. A feedback channel should also be developed to help users contact the system designers and to facilitate an automatic opinion pool.

Final Note

This new approach should be adopted by LIS Departments all over the country . New approaches can help the Iranian LIS education system improve, by updating thecurriculum. Furthermore, doing web-based projects can help students develop their own skills and increase their chance to find higher/better positions in the LIS job market.

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