

FROM LIBRARY SKILLS TO INFORMATION LITERACY: CONSIDERATIONS FOR MAKERERE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY AND FACULTY

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Abstract

Makerere University has moved from manual based operations to automated systems and thus entered into the complex information age. All records, including library, are being computerized. This is the backdrop against which the author writes. The paper brings out the evolution of the concept of information literacy. The concept of globalisation as the driving force of the information society is highlighted as well as Castell's theory of the information age. While being information literate may mean different things to different people, it is a competence that can no longer be ignored by academics and intellectuals as it impinges on the aspect of lifelong learning. Its attributes have been discussed, including the ability to critically utilize information for daily use as well as for democratic and civic responsibilities.

Key words: *information literacy, netiquette, lifelong learning, globalisation*

1. Introduction

I was prompted to write this paper to share some of the experiences as a practicing librarian, a former instructor in the library skills course and the library user education program and also to voice some pertinent issues that arise out of my experience as a practicing librarian. I have always been involved in the library user training programs which take place at the beginning of a freshman/woman's academic career, but in 2001, I was invited by the Faculty of Arts, Institute of Languages, to participate in another of their programs, the University wide communications skills course. This course was composed of several modules including writing, reading, speaking, listening and the skill that I was teaching: library skills. This skill was introduced as a result of observations from the late Dr. Kasalina Matovu that "Students leave the University at the end of three years and they proudly say, they have never stepped in the library". I was told to come up with a syllabus for library skills and in my submission, I included an introduction to the various sections of the library and their services, and other informational resources that the library should offer but does not have, online resources, accessing library resources, acknowledging intellectual property rights in assignments and other academic projects, and finally a library guide/tour. This was all supposed to be done in 3-4 hours. Although it was a brilliant initiative, the time allocated was not adequate to cover all that should have been covered especially with a class of over 100 students. I was also supposed to set an examination on this skill, which later turned out to be optional. For those few who attempted it, results were dismal.

My mind also goes to the user education program, which the library runs annually for freshmen and women: interest is minimal and the classes are usually too large and time allocated too short for adequate guidance. My conclusion was that whatever skills we are trying to impart will not have much impact on the students or their academic outcome, if conducted in the same format and in the same periods at the beginning of their academic careers, without clear evaluation guidelines, and, with optional attendance.

Another observation is the tendency for lecturers to send students to the internet without any clear guidance on the sites and the quality of information that can be retrieved. They are usually given one address, google.com. This may come from the impression that computers create: that library research activities can be accomplished quickly and effectively.

These challenges led to the idea of expanding library skills for both students and staff, based on the concept of information literacy. If these skills could be introduced as a university wide initiative with a more organised syllabus and practical applications, they could change the way students value and utilize information, and the attitude of academic staff towards the library. As librarians, we can take the lead in this initiative by helping information seekers select and reject information sources and use critical thinking skills to develop frameworks in which information can be understood. The expectation is that this initiative would improve the use of both print and online resources.

2. Evolution of the concept

In order to understand the notion of Information Literacy, we need to contextualise the concept of literacy. Literacy was initially defined as the ability to read and write, but this definition always possessed a dual nature, implying an ability to read with meaning and to understand as the fundamental act of cognition (Gilster, 1997). Another scholar into this concept, Bawden (2001) also asserts that it has taken over a more prosaic meaning, that of being able to make effective use of information, gained from written material, thus the term 'functional literacy', originally introduced by UNESCO to imply a purposeful skill to contribute to the public good. Bawden situates the development of the concept of information literacy, by Zurkowski (1974), with the emergence of educational reforms in the USA. He saw its emergence from the transformation of library services to a more innovative private sector information provision and the associated policy issues. Zurkowski visualized people trained in the application of information resources to their work as 'information literates' since they would have learned techniques and skills for utilizing a wide range of information tools as well as primary sources in molding information solutions to their problems. Information literacy was thus associated with effective use of information within a working, probably commercial environment, specifically for problem solving, and further extended to functions of citizenship to guarantee the survival of democratic institutions (Owens, 1976).

This skill has increasingly fascinated the academic world because of its close association with lifelong learning and it was identified as playing a fundamental role in the creation of an independent learner and informed citizen (American Library Association Presidential Committee On Information Literacy, 1989). Information literacy is thus a term that is portrayed to have several meanings and perspectives to different users, and is thus controversial in definition. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, (IFLA) which is the umbrella body for librarians has allegedly not yet come up with a definition. Christine Bruce (1997) on the other hand, places its origins in the influence of five other concepts emerging from the information society and they include information technology literacy, computer literacy, library literacy, information skills and learning to learn. She then proceeds to present seven models/faces of what her study perceived the term to include. The faces include information technology for information retrieval and communication, finding information, controlling information, building up a personal knowledge base in a new area of interest, working with knowledge and personal perspectives adopted in such a way that novel insights are gained and using information wisely for the benefit of others. She presents the complex reality that being information literate means different things to different people depending on the context and on the individual's beliefs about what constitutes success with information (Hinchliffe, 2003).

Kuhlthau (1993), however, views it as a way of learning, rather than a discrete set of skills and Christine Bruce (1997) also placed it within the thinking-reasoning process that the students engage in as they deal with subject matter.

Much of the literature places it as a core educational goal which should figure as a central component of the academic curriculum as well as for lifelong learning. Some of these arguments are also reflected in the American Library Association Report in which authors expressed the following about the American society:

- The enormous impact of the information explosion on all people; in their individual lives, businesses, and even functions as 'American' citizens.
- The need for all people to become information literate, which means that they are not only able to recognize when information is needed, but they are also able to identify, locate, evaluate, and use effectively information needed for the particular decision or issue at hand. The information literate person, therefore, is empowered for effective decision-making, freedom of choice, and full participation in a democratic society.
- The nation's economic independence and quality of life was becoming increasingly dependent on all of its citizens becoming lifelong learners-something that would have to start with a basic change in the way young people learn. "To respond effectively to an ever-changing environment," the report concluded, "people need more than just a knowledge base, they also need techniques for exploring it, connecting it to other knowledge bases, and making practical use of it. In other words, the landscape upon which we used to stand has been transformed, and we are being forced to establish a new foundation called information literacy" (American Library Association report, 1998).

Three themes have however, dominated research on this concept and they include; information literacy as a process, therefore its skills must be taught in the context of the overall process, must be integrated within the curriculum and reinforced both within and outside of the educational setting in order to be successful, and that these skills are vital to future success (Plotnick, 2000). Information literacy skills have also been extended to good citizenship and the survival of democratic institutions, which is important to all societies. The paper will try to situate it in a changing world as outlined in the next section.

3. Information literacy and lifelong learning

3.1 Globalisation and the Information Society

Studies on Information literacy seem to situate it in the ongoing discourse by academics, intellectuals and other people who are trying to conceptualise change in the World order in form of the Globalisation process, which started in the 1960s and 70s. Although Globalisation is a much contested concept, it has been variously conceived as an action at a distance whereby actions of social agents in one locale can come to have significant consequences for distant others, a time-space compression (referring to the way in which instantaneous electronic communication erodes the constraints of distance and time); a shrinking world (the erosion of borders and geographical barriers) to socio-economic activity (Held, David & McGrew Anthony, 2000). Globalisation is the driving force of the Information society (Glastra, Hake and Schedler, 2004), and the development of a 'Network society' which Castells (2000) predicted in his trilogy. Castells argues that the modern world is a function of three colliding forces; the rise of electronic communications networks, various social and cultural revolutions and the economic restructuring of western economies during the 1980s. He portrays the network as the prime organizational form of the information age. His predictions of the new economy indicate that three fundamental features characterize it; it is informational, the capacity of generating knowledge and processing/managing information determine the productivity, and, competitiveness of all kinds of economic units. Secondly, it is global in that its core strategic activities have the capacity to work as a unit on a planetary scale and it is networked.

Castells' predictions may augur

from the network society because of inadequate and unevenly distributed access to computers and networks and other usage opportunities and also lack of basic skills. The issues he points out that bring about exclusion include functional illiteracy triggering mechanisms of unemployability, poverty and ultimately, social exclusion in a society that increasingly relies on some minimum capacity to decode language. Functional illiteracy is a fundamental obstacle to integration in the formal labour market, at whatever level, and is strongly correlated with low-wage employment and poverty.

3.2 The need for lifelong learning

In connecting to the information network, Makerere University is trying to tap into the new economy which envisages information as a raw material. This economy however, through the use of information and communications technologies, has undoubtedly and inevitably exposed us to a complex world of information, which has become more difficult to negotiate. As Moore (1998) pointed out, there is undoubtedly a lifelong need to be informed and up-to-date which can be frustrating with the wide variety of information sources available. Effective and efficient use of these resources will thus be influenced to some extent by skills of users, thus the 'crave' for lifelong learning and 'eternal' or 'professional' studentship. Organizations (including universities), thus, no longer only need to react to change but should be able to anticipate these changes and act proactively to be in the forefront of developments (White, 2002). The spread of the information revolution has also confirmed beliefs that the world was fast becoming a shared social and economic space (Held, David & McGrew Anthony, 2000).

It has also been observed that 20% of professional skills become obsolete after each year of graduation as revolutionary changes in the external environment continuously influence the training of future workers for the world of work (White, 2000).

Information is also increasingly being stored in electronic rather than print form (Shelda, Wood & Bandura, 2001) and some of the world's information is being made available only by electronic access (Cook, 1995). It is therefore imperative that students from the very beginning of their academic careers, adopt a critical approach to information to develop the ability to evaluate the information they encounter for authenticity, accuracy, credibility, authority relevance, concealed bias and logical inconsistency (Grafstein, 2002) and this is the challenge to Makerere University.

4. Examples of attributes of an Information literate person

Although, information literacy may hold different meanings to different users, it is inevitably one of the skills that are vital for the information age, which we unfortunately cannot pull out of. Researchers into this concept have already expanded it to include functions of good citizenship and democracy, implying that several other literacies are embedded in making a person information literate. There are several models of information literacy, but the paper will use Doyle (1994)'s insight into some of the attributes of an information literate person. They include the ability to:

- recognize that accurate and complete information is the basis for intelligent decision making;
- recognize the need for information;
- formulate questions based on information needs;
- identify potential sources of information;
- develop successful search strategies;
- access sources of information including computer-based and other technologies;
- evaluate information;
- organize information for practical application;
- integrate new information into an existing body of knowledge; and,
- use information in critical thinking and problem solving.

If we consider what it takes to arrive at these attributes to make a person fully functional in any given environment, we find that a person will inevitably require some other related literacies, for example proficiency in internet / digital or network literacy in order to locate, access and use information in a networked environment, computer literacy in order to create and manipulate documents and data via word processing, spreadsheets, databases and other software tools, library skills or as Kuhlthau (1987) referred to, proficiency in the inquiry process, visual literacy, in order to understand and use images to think, learn and express themselves, media literacy in order to access, analyse and produce information for specific outcomes, civic literacy in order to know and actively participate and initiate change in communities and the greater society as a foundation by which a democratic society functions, legal literacy to enable people guide themselves through the legal process, ethics and communication skills. Information literacy thus revolves around several other literacies and competencies and thus should not be emphasized in isolation.

5. Insights on how it could be done

While the library has a very important role to play, in helping users recognize accurate and complete information, identifying potential sources of information, organizing and evaluating information, it cannot operate in isolation of other competencies that are necessary to make a person fully information literate. The shared goal of the university ought to be producing information literate graduates and faculty. The first task for the library is therefore to sensitize faculty on the importance of information literacy skills, which are ideally transferable in any situation.

Studies indicate that building successful information literacy infrastructure begins with the creation of a foundation of strong faculty-librarian relationships in conjunction with faculty development programs and a close cooperation. Teaching, however, appears to be engraved in the minds of the academic faculty and classroom and experience shows that librarians are hardly regarded as being on equal footing with classroom faculty (Owusu-Ansah, 2004), especially teaching involving awarding of credits. There appears to be conflicting perceptions and attitudes about librarians and their teaching capabilities, and this disputed status has in some instances been found to be a barrier to the development of collaborative teaching partnerships between academics and librarians (Ivey, 2003). While essential ingredients of collaborative teaching partnerships include a shared understood goal, mutual respect, tolerance and trust, competence for the task at hand and ongoing communication, in Makerere as well, librarians have been challenged to prove their academic status, which is a way of proving their contribution to the academic outcome.

Librarians certainly have a teaching role to perform, as they are always in close interaction with problems that clients have in carrying out research/enquiry based tasks and a role that focuses on information and the skills needed to access and use it. They thus need to open communication channels with faculty to change the 'attitude' and some options suggested include joining hands with the university administration, identifying 'hot' initiatives/projects, for example the I@Mak project for decentralization, to see how information literacy can be incorporated to strengthen the project and collaboration with faculty in developing instructional websites.

Bundy (1999), proposes that librarians need to be assertive about their educational partnership role, rather than propose themselves as support agencies with self-limiting roles focused on information management and delivery. Information literacy is thus an issue for librarians, but not a 'library' issue. It is an educational, societal and democratic issue which should be of fundamental concern to all those who call themselves educators.

6. Other considerations for the information literacy program

Within this paper, I also wish to air my personal observations with the Makerere University network, which could perhaps be incorporated in the information literacy training. The special emphasis is on the issue of ethics. If the network will influence minds and decisions, what about our conduct, how shall we behave in our new cyber communities? One of the rules of the highway indicates that we ought to adhere to the same standards online as we would follow in real life, (Shea, 2004). But in real life we do have some form of etiquette, implying "the forms required by good breeding or prescribed by authority to be observed in social or official life or rules governing socially acceptable behaviour" (Webster, 1996). In this case, the society (Cyberspace) is divided into different ethnic groups and customs, so there ought to be a set of rules for behaving properly online. Any skill that prepares users for the information age should also include an element of online etiquette, also referred to as 'netiquette' and as Preece (2004) suggests, it is not just nice to have, it is necessary, given that internet users come from many cultures and walks of life. Netiquette thus refers to a

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