

The Role of Academic Librarians in Teaching Information Literacy Skills to Distance Students in Tertiary Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of academic librarians in teaching information literacy skills programme for distance students in tertiary institutions. The advent of Information Communication Technology (ICTs) has transformed the way librarians acquire, store, retrieve and provide information to its client. The paper identifies the characteristics of distance students and the need for information literacy skills. The paper further examines the principles of teaching information literacy skills and methods of impacting information literacy skills. Based on this advent of ICT, there are challenges that academic librarians faces. The paper also entrained the challenges facing academic librarians in information literacy skills. For effective teaching of information literacy skills to part-time students, the paper recommends collaboration of faculty members and all stakeholders involved in distance education. The paper also recommends a survey of the level of information literacy skills among distance students and among academic librarians.

Keywords: *Academic Librarians, Information literacy, Distance students*

1. INTRODUCTION

Distance learning is the education received by learners who seldom come in contact with the teacher. This had been found to be a very convenient way of providing continuing education and self development opportunities for workers and adults. Many of these part-time programmes in higher tertiary institutions are degree awarding. Some Nigerian Universities have been offering part-time degree programmes for over decade (Mabawonku, 2003). These distance education programmes ranges from sandwich, weekends and distance education online. The degrees awarded on these programmes are considered to be of the same quality with that of full-time degree. Based on the same quality of education received by both part-time and full-time students, there had been rapid increase of part-time and distance education students seeking information online. This had posed some challenges for academic librarians in teaching information literacy technological skills (ICTS) to students who may never walk into the physical library to seek for information for research purposes. It is imperative that librarians understand the necessity of teaching part-time students information literacy skills. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (2000) stated that information literacy competencies for distance student should be comparable to the standards set for on-campus students and that teaching information literacy is our responsibility (Librarians).

2. THE NEED FOR INFORMATION LITERACY

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is the biggest achievement in this evolution of mankind. Haneefa & Shukoor (2010) states that information technology is any system designed to gather, process or distribute information. It also involves the science and skills of all aspects of computing data, storage and communication. Information Communication Technology is a combination of tools and procedures that

facilitate the generation, acquisition, storage organization, searching, retrieval and transmission of information. ICT is now playing a major role in the management of information. By the application of it, the modern technological developments are being exploited to record, process, store, transfer and retrieve information. The library is now operating in an environment in which innovative use of information technology had come to stay.

The library is the heart and soul of the tertiary institutions. There is no doubt that information environment is become increasingly digital and information communication technology has a wide ranging impact on library and information work. With the advancement of computers technology, information storage had kept on changing during the past 50 years. Over the years, the shift has taken place from paper to electronic media. Libraries of old times, were predominated by the documents in paper form but with the growth of the internet, it had inspired many libraries to make documents and resources from their collections available online to the public as well as worldwide with the aid of the Open Access catalogue (OPAC). Libraries and information services, local community information centers, bibliographic databases and electronic reference works are all now made available through remote login (Sharma, 1999). The library status is no longer solely defined by the collection it housed, but had included online resources which are now easily made available to remote users.

The technical development in the libraries, therefore calls for information communication literacy skills for these group of students who once a while, come in contact with the physical institutional libraries. Most of their research works are done outside the school environment, where they try to get current information on their different research area. Ramsay & Kinnie (2006) stated that, rather than expanding all of our energy trying, rather ineffectively to bring these students into the library,

we should bring library services and instruction to the students.

Information literacy is therefore needed for the individual to access information in this digital age. Ojedokun (2007) stated that information literacy is the ability of the individual to recognize the need for information, knows how to find, evaluate, use and subsequently communicate information effectively to solve particular problems or to make decisions. It is the ability of the individual to access information from the Internet or the World Wide Web, Online database, for research. To be information literate, it requires a new set of skills. These include how to locate and use information needed for problem solving and decision making effectively and efficiently (Etim, 2007). It is very clear that information literacy is a prerequisite for distance students to access the digital library.

3. PRINCIPLES OF TEACHING

In teaching information literacy skills to a class of students whether on-campus or at distance students, there are some basic principles that should be applied. Wilder(2008) citing May(2007) stated the following, as some of the basic principles that should be applied in teaching information literacy to distance students. That we must use a variety of methods to reach out to students with different learning styles which include reflective, impulse, abstract concrete,, holistic, Visual auditory and kinesthetic .Other variables to consider in selecting the method of teaching is for academic librarians to carry out research to determine who are these distance students in your institutions?, what are their age groups, gender and background? What types of courses are they taking? Are they pursuing undergraduate degrees post graduate degrees, or continuing education? Are they taking all their courses at distance or few? Do they have means of getting to the campus library or they must obtain all of their information on-line? When do they need information and reference help? After researching about the distance students, the academic librarians can now make assumption about their learning styles.

It is interestingly to know that the latest generation of learners grew up with video games and great deal of technology. They tend to be kinesthetic learners who are highly visual and prefer to learn in group situations. Because of these multiple devices used by this generation, often simultaneously, these students are great multi- taskers. These generalities should be kept in mind when creating instruction for distance students. One needs to consider that many of the distance students are not traditional students. May (2007) stated that many of the distance students, are females ages 25-54 carrying a full-time class load coupled with full time employment and family obligations. This demographic , exhibits a wide array of learning styles that must be considered when teaching information literacy .Ideas to be considered includes, audio files, video files, discussion services and interactive tutorial in the lessons. A multi-dimensional approach is necessary to serve all students.

4. THE ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN AS AN EDUCATOR OF INFORMATION LITERACY

With the advent of digitalization of libraries, librarians should possess the basic skills to function effectively in the age of new technology. Academic librarians are expected to possess the following basic skills:

- **Computer Literacy Skills:** This involves understanding and operating the computer. The basic skills includes, teaching users how to retrieve information from the net, communicate effectively using computer hardware and software.
- **Information SKILL:** This is the ability to locate, evaluate and use needed information effectively which forms the basis for lifelong learning.
- **Network Literacy Skills:** This is higher than technical and computer literacy skills. It includes networking skills, general internet skills, desktop publishing skills, content development and digitization skill, web-based services and virtual learning skills (Obianuju, Obijiofor, Nwegbu, &Ogechukwu, 2001).
- **Use of Software/Operating Systems:** Librarians should be able to operate the available soft ware's that will make information available and accessible on the net.

5. CHALLENGES

The advent of the computer cum ICT has become such a household word in the developed world that universities see it as an invention in providing their services. For the library, several systems have been developed for their various house-keeping chores and more are still being refined. The use of technology is increasing and it is now possible to deliver training to a widely dispersed audience. Computers have made forays into the library world over. Almost all the operations in a library can be computerized to achieve more efficient functioning. With this development, librarians then became educators in a globalized learning environment (Obianuju et al., 2011).

This development poses some challenges to academic librarians. Obianuju et al. (2011) stated the following as some challenges of academic librarians in providing digital services.

- **Lack of Computer Literacy and Information Literacy:** Some librarians suffer from either computer illiteracy or information illiteracy or both. Some have refused to take the bull by the horn by making efforts to obtain training in both computer literacy and information literacy.

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Librarians cannot give what they not have. The present day librarian must acquire skills that go beyond shelving and shelf reading.

- **Challenge of Acquiring New Skills and Teaching Strategies:** Librarians' new perspectives and skills training to operate effectively within a dynamic internationally based context. This was also emphasized by Mohammed and Shukkor (2010) that library professionals should go beyond just the use of only Microsoft Word.
- **Constantly Changing Technology and Lack Of Standardization of Hardware and Software:** Technology is on a rapid change. New model hardware is springing up now and then. This also applies to software. Librarians must be abreast with these inventions. Nwalo (2009) stated that with constantly changing of library soft wares, and other technological garrets, librarians need to constantly attend workshops and conferences to update and upgrade their skills in information technology.
- **Poor Infrastructural Facilities:** Alakpodia (2010) states that poor infrastructural facilities had posed librarians to be handicapped to keep abreast with the trend of librarianship. Librarians need new perspectives and skills training to operate effectively within a dynamic international context. Librarians can only give out what they have. Skills to provide these services must be acquired.

In acquiring technological skills by librarians in this digital age, Agbanu, Ofordile & Osuigwe (2011) also emphasized the urgent need of librarians acquiring new skills. "That librarians need sufficient knowledge about new technologies not only to use it in the work environment but also to guide others especially library users".

6. COLLABORATION

Impacting successful information skills to distance learning students, it requires the librarians, faculty and administrative support to work in union (Buck, 2006). Wilder (2010) states that, collaboration is difficult in distance education not only for the students who are at distance but also the faculty members who are often adjuncts. But one means of helping to bridge the distance gap is by creating designated library contact. This person is the "go to" for all library questions relocated for distance education. This person is also responsible for educating adjunct faculty members to the service available for distance students (Buck, 2006).

May (2007) states that, one means of creating a spirit of collaboration is to offer services to the faculty. This offering is to create web pages which are the channel of getting your foot in the door with faculty members.

The librarian had to discuss what should be the content on the class page with the instructor and encourages the instructor to include library resources appropriate for the class. The librarian should also take time to ascertain the level of information literacy of the students in the class.

Buck (2006) in Wilder (2010) also states that one means of increasing collaboration is through taking part in training. By participating in pedagogical training opportunities, librarians receive more respect from faculty members. It is very important that librarians should be able to present ideas for information literacy training that are both pedagogically sound. Attending workshops with faculty members is another opportunity of librarians getting to know members of faculty.

Wilder (2010) further states that, collaboration with faculty members alone is not enough. It is necessary to collaborate with all those involved with distance education programme. This includes school administrators, instructional designer, academic advisors, technology staff and all that are involved in distance education.

7. METHODS OF IMPACTION

The teaching of information literacy can take the following and more forms. Evans (1999) classifies the instruction of information literacy into formal and non-formal.

- **Informal Instruction:** This is sometimes called one-on-one instruction. It is a kind of informative help usually provided by the reference staff. It is sometimes quite detailed and often referred to as the most effective instruction, but it usually occurs on demand at the point at which a client wants or needs to use a library source.
- **Formal Instruction:** This includes library tours and orientations for groups, formal classroom instruction within a school or academic institution, workshops, tutorial for groups or individuals. This also includes library orientations, tutorials computer assisted instruction and electronic classrooms.

8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the process of creating a successful information literacy programme for distance students is long and complex. A distance learning programme has many issues unique to on-campus programmes, yet many of the basic steps are the same. One basic principle is to accept the necessity of the programme, to see the necessity of distance students being information literate. Collaborating with stakeholders will help to determine the methods, adequate facilities and skills to carry out the programme effectively. Constant evaluation of the programme and information literacy level of the students will help to ensure the success of the programme.

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