Library and Information skills training at the Polytechnic of Namibia Library

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Abstract

This article examines the importance of 'information literacy' skills in the 21st century. It discusses the metamorphosis that information assimilation has undergone in the past fifteen years, thus highlighting the role of information literacy in 'lifelong learning'. The article defines information literacy and highlights the difference between information literacy, 'library literacy' and 'computer literacy'. It discusses lifelong learning, its relationship to information literacy and the role of academic libraries in information literacy training. Finally, it traces and explains the evolution of the information literacy or Library and Information Skills Training service at the Polytechnic of Namibia Library since 2007.

Introduction

User education, a more traditional term for 'information literacy', has always been an important service offered by university libraries worldwide, with traditional library instructors mainly teaching patrons how to find information in printed formats like books and journals, and how to search the manual library catalogue.

However the introduction, in the late 1970s, and the increased use with each succeeding year, of computer technologies in virtually every sphere of academic life in general, and academic libraries in particular, has resulted in notable changes in the methods used for information use instruction. Instructors today have to take into account the fact that information is now readily available in many different formats, including print and electronic, that it comes from various sources including libraries, media houses and the World Wide Web, and that it requires new skills to optimally access it.

Academic libraries in the information age

This rapid development of information and communication technologies ushered in the 'information age', which resulted in the aptly named 'information explosion' which, according to McIlroy (2009):

Created a situation where it has become impossible for an individual to keep up-to-date with the changes in any topic area, unless that topic is so minute in its focus that only a few dozen are following it and contributing to the existing body of knowledge.

In the academic world, the vast quantities of available information often proved 'too much to handle' for many students and even for some lecturers, culminating in a widespread feeling almost of powerlessness. To these users the information search and retrieval process had become extremely demoralizing and often frightening. This was especially true for students entering university after graduating from technologically poor secondary schools. Not only did they now have to learn how to use the computer, they also had to find ways to navigate the 'clogged' information highway.

The realisation about what students had to go through, in order to complete assignments and projects, made the need for 'information literacy' skills training very obvious to many faculty members. With these skills students would be able to search for, locate, retrieve, analyse and use information effectively. Unfortunately, although some of students were able to acquire these skills on their own, many others were not. Instead, they required assistance from facilitators like librarians. By assisting students to become information literate, these facilitators accelerated their evolution into 'lifelong learners'.

Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning is an important habit which "promotes the development of knowledge and competences that will enable each citizen to adapt to the knowledge-based society and actively participate in all spheres of social and economic life, taking more control of his or her future" (Harvey, 2004, p.).

Candy (1995, p. 2) is of the opinion that lifelong learning is becoming more and more important in today's world due to:

- The continuing shift to an information society.

- The competing influences of specialization.

- Increasing internationalization.

- The explosion of knowledge and technology.

- Microeconomic reform and the changing workplace.

- The emergence of new occupations and careers.

In a study conducted in 1993, Candy (1995, p. 3) and his colleagues isolated the five skills and abilities that they felt an individual needed in order to cope with lifelong learning. These are:

- An inquiring mind.

- 'Helicopter vision'.[1]

- Information literacy.

- A sense of personal agency[2].

- A repertoire of learning skills.

Lifelong learning, that is, the habit of adding to one's knowledge, abilities and skills

1   This is the ability to "view from a vantage point, as if in a hovering helicopter, and see in sharp outline the big picture review" (ET Bureau, 2009)].
2   This is the "capability to originate and direct actions for given purposes. It is influenced by the belief in one's effectiveness in performing specific tasks, which is termed self-efficacy, as well as by one's actual skill" (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006).

throughout one's lifetime is, according to Bervik, "the goal for which 'information literacy' is an essential enabler" (n.d., p.1).

Information literacy

The American Library Association (ALA, 2006a) defines information literacy as "the set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze, and use information." It further states that, acquiring these skills helps individuals to empower themselves (and their employers or organisations), assists them in the problem-solving and decision-making processes, and encourages them to develop critical thinking skills. It also ensures that each individual becomes "strongly aware of the relationship between learning and real life, recognises the need for lifelong learning, and is highly motivated to engage in the process, and has the necessary confidence and learning skills" (Knapper & Cropley, cited in Knapper, n.d., p. 131).

Information literate graduates are very well prepared for life in the 'real world'. They are able to search for and read through arguments on various topics, to analyse these arguments, and to form their own opinions, based not only on their reading, but also on their life experiences and, it stimulates excitement in them about the whole information search and retrieval process (ALA, 2006b).

Regrettably, "due to the relative newness of the information society, information literacy is often completely overlooked in relevant dialogues, research, and experimentations" and, in many institutions, students are still given pre-packaged information (in the form of study guides, set textbooks and study packs), which does not help them to appreciate the need to acquire and continually update their "information management skills" (ALA, 2006b).

Academic libraries however, recognized the importance of information literacy skills at the onset of the information age, and they soon began to offer Information literacy classes to both students and staff, often on a voluntary attendance basis. Sadly, many students would still rather forego these classes, in the mistaken belief that because they know how to use the library and because they are computer literate, they are already information literate.

However, library literacy, computer literacy and information literacy, although related, are totally different concepts. Library literacy refers to one's "ability to use a library's collection and its services" and computer literacy refers to one's possession of the "technological know-how to manipulate computer hardware and software" (Humes, 2002-4). Information literacy, on the other hand, "initiates, sustains, and extends lifelong learning through abilities that *may* use technologies but are ultimately independent of them" (Bundy as cited in Peacock, 2007). Information literacy "is not a technique, but a goal for learners" (Gilton as cited in Humes 2002-4).

At many institutions, information literacy is taught within the library, often seen as "a dynamic gateway to information", that provides "an active laboratory for students and faculty to explore, investigate and retrieve information wherever it may be found: locally or virtually" (Angeley & Purdue, 2000). Information literacy skills are taught mainly by librarians, who are widely recognised as being "intimately concerned with information" (Angeley & Purdue, 2000), and who were early leaders

"in conceptualizing the idea of information literacy and its relationship to lifelong learning" (Beherens, 1994 as cited in Humes 2002-4). Almost from the start, discussions about information literacy included a focus on how librarians could facilitate the acquisition and use of information (Humes, 2002-4).

Information literacy at the Polytechnic of Namibia

At the Polytechnic of Namibia, information literacy training was introduced in 2007, in a bid by the Library to help facilitate the institution's vision, mission and goals.

Vision and Mission

The vision of the Polytechnic of Namibia is "to be a premier university of science and technology, educating leaders for the new economy", and its mission is to promote national competitiveness by providing multiple opportunities for excellent education, applied research, innovation and service" (Polytechnic of Namibia, 2009, p. 9).

"The new economy will be managed by knowledge workers – those who are well educated and well skilled" (Tjivikua, 2009, p. iii), so the Library aims to provide a learning support service that will facilitate the Polytechnic's production of such workers, who will be lifelong learners, with strong information literacy and other life skills.

The Polytechnic Library

The Polytechnic Library was always a core part of the institution, but with its move to a new location in 2005, it became even more so. The first Polytechnic Library was established at the old campus, opposite the Centre of Life Long Learning, in a part of the women's hostel, a location which was very unsuitable for the kind of services the Library had to offer. The Management of the Polytechnic realized that they would not be able to deliver the expected outcomes to students if they did not have a proper university library. Therefore, construction of the new library began in 2004 and took 18 months to complete, with the official opening occurring on 7 October 2005.

The Polytechnic of Namibia is growing; so the Library serves an institution which has developed considerably in both quality and quantity since 1992. The Polytechnic now has 5 schools -Business and Management, Communication, Engineering, Information Technology and Natural Resources & Tourism - each with between three and seven departments. In 2009, the Polytechnic enrolled around 10,000 students and offered more than 100 qualifications including "27 Certificates, 22 Diplomas, 35 Bachelor degrees, 6 Honours degrees and 4 Masters degrees in thirty-one programmes" (Tjivikua, 2009, p. iii). It also runs programmes through the Centre for Teaching and Learning, the Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning, the Graduate School of Accounting and the Centre for Entrepreneurial Development. Furthermore, the Polytechnic aims to add value to its programmes through other centres like the German-Namibian Centre for Logistics (GNCL), the Namibia Business Innovation Centre (NBIC) and the Graduate School of Business (Tjivikua, 2009, iii).

User Education

Students of all the above-mentioned Schools and Centres have always had access to a strong user education programme, run by the Library, in order to assist patrons to use all its resources, services and facilities to their fullest. The user education programme consists of: -

1.   Library Orientation: This takes place on the first Saturday of the first semester of the academic year, after first year student registration is completed. Through orientation, the Chief Librarian or the User Services Librarian gives a briefing to incoming students, about the Library's collections, services and facilities.

2.   Library Tours: These are part of the Library's orientation activities, which can also be arranged at other times on request. During a Library Tour, Library Assistants take groups of students around the Library, physically and orally introducing them to all that is on offer.

3.   Online Guides: To further strengthen user education, various guides, developed by the Chief Librarian, have been posted on the Library's website, thus making them available for consultation by library patrons. These guides cover topics like the Library's classification system, how to access and use the Library's Online Public Access Catalogue, and how to access and use the Library's electronic resources.

Library & Information Skills Training (LIST)

In addition to general user education services, an information literacy programme was introduced to the Library in the 1st semester of 2007. This programme was launched because, although many of the needs created by information and communication technology advances were met and/or provided for in the new library, the Library Management acknowledged that, in order to assist their users to optimally use these technologies and the information that comes with them, they needed to extend and develop their user education programmes through a Subject and Research Services department. This department established in October 2006 and currently manned by 2 Subject Librarians, offers information literacy classes, better known as LIST or Library and Information Skills Training, to students and staff.

The LIST programme is carried out in a number of different ways: -

1.   Group Training in an Electronic Classroom: Students are trained in computer laboratories, where they are expected to practically apply what they are taught. When the LIST programme started, classes were at first offered to students only if and when a lecturer requested them. However, by 2008 an agreement had been reached with the English Communication, Nature Conservation and Land Management Departments as follows:

•   Students taking Communication Skills classes must attend LIST sessions once a week for 6 weeks during each semester.

- 1st year Nature Conservation students must attend LIST classes once a week, for the 13 weeks of the first semester.

- 2nd and 3rd year Land Management students must attend LIST sessions once a week for 6 weeks in the 1st semester.

- Other groups of students continue to attend LIST classes by prior arrangement between the Subject Librarians and their Lecturers.

2. *The Reference Interview*: Subject librarians conduct in-depth reference interviews with staff members and students (mainly 4th years) on request, in order to assist them with literature searches, referencing and other research issues.

3. *Individualized Training*: Training is given to individual staff members and students as and when required/requested.

4. *Guides*: Electronic and print guides have been compiled to assist users with the information search and retrieval process. These include guides for distance learners, guides for new staff members, online user guides for various electronic databases and citation guides.

Topics covered in the LIST classes include the following:

1. Accessing and using the Library's collections, facilities and services.

2. Accessing and using the Library's Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC).

3. Online searching and retrieval.

4. Preparing and following a search strategy.

5. Utilising search tools.

6. Evaluating internet sources.

7. Citing sources.

In order for LIST classes to succeed, facilities are needed, and fortunately the Polytechnic Library has excellent facilities, although at time, some of the information literacy classes contain more students than there are computers. The Library has two computer laboratories/classrooms, each with 30 to 40 computers.

Future plans: integrating information literacy into the curriculum

The Polytechnic Library continues to market its information literacy classes to staff and students. Hopefully soon all Library users will fully appreciate their value, especially in today's economically challenged environment. As we are all aware, in 2008 the world was faced with a global recession and the emergence of a new economy, 'based primarily on the production and strategic use of information and knowledge' (Abdullah, Kassim, Saad, & Tarmuchi, 2006, 219). The Polytechnic of Namibia Library aims to help graduates not only survive, but to thrive, in the new

knowledge economy, by equipping them with the necessary information literacy skills.

As a natural progression to this, the Library encourages all students to take part in library and information skills training sessions, so that upon graduation, each student can describe him/herself as an "information literate lifelong learner." The Library also recommends the setting up of subject specific information literacy classes since "achieving information literacy requires an understanding that such development is not extraneous to the curriculum but is woven into its content, structure, and sequence" (Bundy as cited in Peacock, 2007). In fact, isolating information literacy training from subject specific information may cause it to lose its power as a tool to synthesize information into knowledge (Grafstein, 2002, p. 200), and overall, information literacy classes are more interesting, relevant and make more sense to students when they are linked to assignments and/or projects that they are required to produce.

The Library would like to set up an institutionally approved Library and Information Skills course, to be attended by students in a particular year of study (e.g. 2nd or 3rd year), to enhance their research skills when they do their final projects in the 4th year. The programme could be based on any of a number of different formats, including any or all of the following, which can be found at the University of Auckland (2006):

Generic: Voluntary, extra-curricular classes or activities, with no connection to a student's course of study.

Parallel: Extra-curricular classes or activities developed to complement a specific area, course or assignment, which may be voluntary or compulsory.

Integrated/ Classes and activities developed jointly by subject librarians and

Embedded: academic staff to achieve course objectives and outcomes, with learning activities being incorporated in subject-based assignments and forming part of the course assessment

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Library supports the Polytechnic's aim to produce graduates who are lifelong learners. A study of the literature indicates that Library and Information Science and other writers believe that information literacy skills enrich a student's higher education career, and that it facilitates their research and learning activities. Therefore, the Library recommends that all students be urged to attend Library & Information Skills Training/ information literacy sessions, so that they leave the Polytechnic as information literate graduates. With information literacy skills they will have the ability to easily realise when they need information for a particular task, where to find it, how to access/retrieve it, how to evaluate it, how to arrange it, how to use it to solve various problems and to make decisions, and how to acknowledge where they got the information from. Information literate graduates will not only prosper and grow in the new knowledge economy; they will be a credit to the institution.

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