

Teaching Information Literacy (IL) As A For-Credit Course: What Librarians At The University Of Ghana Think

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Abstract

The study aims at highlighting the views and opinions of librarians at the University of Ghana on the viability and challenges associated with a proposed teaching of Information Literacy by librarians. The study adopted the survey questionnaire method in gathering relevant data. The researcher also employed personal experience and observation in the course of the study. The study revealed that majority of librarians at the University of Ghana do not see education or teaching as a key role, and therefore positively dislike the idea of being educators or teachers.

Introduction

Because librarians at the University of Ghana (UG) have the mandate to support student's information needs, they are being challenged in recent times to teach students skills that would enable them stay up-to-date with changes in the information landscape and know how to find and use information within it. The continuous growth of high-quality research materials available online has made the importance of information literacy increasingly apparent and, as a result, librarians are being challenged to instill information literacy skills among their students.

What currently exists at the University of Ghana Library can best be described as unscheduled bibliographic instruction. Elsewhere like the University of Botswana, Information Literacy (IL) is now part of General Education Courses 121 and 122 on Computing and Information Skills. Information Literacy now enjoys the highest-level support at the University of Botswana from the Vice-Chancellor and the Senate. This was achieved through lobbying the relevant authorities and enabling them to realise that information literacy skills were a pre-requisite for the university to produce high-quality graduates and achieve its mission and vision.

Driven by external factors like information explosion as well as internal factors like faculty recommendations on quality of students learning, and the role of the library in learning, teaching and research, there has been a feeling among some librarians about the need to offer students in-depth skills and knowledge of information resources in their subject field. Very often librarians at the University of Ghana can see that students do not know professional databases

relevant for their specialties and are not familiar with the ways of information search. Subsequently a proposal from some librarians seeking the authority and approval to teach course-based (2-credit points) - Fundamentals of Information Literacy has been submitted to the University of Ghana Academic Board for consideration. The proposal seeks to have information literacy credit-bearing classes become part of the University of Ghana (UG) curricula. It further maintains that by becoming part of the university's curriculum, the library can be looked upon as an active learning centre rather than simply a repository of books and journals (Burke, 2012). It is a way of librarians at the UG "not just thinking, but acting outside the box," a way of re-examining their roles at the university and adapting their work to a new age of research and scholarship. The consensus among both librarians and the faculty is that teaching of Information Literacy should be integrated or embedded into the subjects of the curricula and the need for cooperation between librarians and the faculty. What is not clear is whether it is the librarian or the faculty who should teach the Information Literacy course.

This study therefore seeks to examine the views and opinions of the entire librarians at the University of Ghana concerning the viability and potential challenges associated with the proposed teaching of Information Literacy by librarians.

Methodology

The study adopted the survey method, using questionnaire. The population of the study included all librarians working within the University of Ghana Library System (UGLS). The study used a well structured questionnaire containing 15 items questions designed to elicit information on librarians' views and opinions on the viability and challenges associated with the teaching of information literacy by librarians. A five-point Likert-scaled items asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with statements about a proposal to teach Information Literacy (IL). The researcher's own experience as a librarian was employed. Copies of the questionnaire were administered to all the 26 professional librarians within the University of Ghana Library System, out of which 25 were completed and returned, giving a high response rate of 96.2%. Respondents showed a clear personal interest in the study, and readily provided relevant information.

Review of Literature

Information professionals throughout the world are familiar with the term Information Literacy (IL) and it has seen wide and varied use since the term was first coined by Paul Zirkowski in 1974 (Andretta, 2005). It has been observed by Owusu-Ansah (2008) that the information profession has, and continues to put forward the information literacy, cause with a near-mission zeal although there exists a minority view which questions the worth of information literacy regarding it as merely a vehicle for librarians to redefine their roles in the digital age (Wilder, 2005).

In its Higher Education Competency Standards for 2000, US based Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (2002) defines Information Literacy (IL) as “an intellectual framework for understanding, finding, evaluating, and using information activities which may be accomplished in part by fluency with information technology, in part by sound investigative methods, but most important, through critical discernment and reasoning”. According to their definition the information literate person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information.

Very often, there is a tendency, particularly amongst academic/faculty to regard information literacy as mainly the development of IT skills rather than as an essential part of independent learning (Stubblings & Franklin, 2006). This is because information literate’s tools are regarded as largely technical but its field of interest encompasses the social and the personal (Whitworth, 2006). However, it is clear that information literacy is part of a bigger picture; part of a gigsaw puzzle which includes other literacies (including for example, academic, media and digital), new ways of approaching learning through critical thinking, reflective practice, collaborative learning and the key skills agenda all of which contribute to independent learning. Bundy (2004) states that, to address the challenges of an information rich society, students need to learn to identify pathways to knowledge and focus on the questions that rarely change, rather than on the answers which continually change.

The importance of Information Literacy (IL) training has long been asserted in library literature. However, convincing students that they need such training remains a challenge. Research has shown that one way of demonstrating the relevance of IL is to embed it within students’ courses and assessments. Yet, in order for IL training to be effective, it is also crucial

that students are engaged in the classroom and that they enjoy the learning experience. According to Cochrane (2003), the proliferation of information sources makes the problem of information overload even greater. The digitization of special collections, e.g., new archives and library collections means that the student is overwhelmed by the quality of available material. Allan Bundy (2004) said “sheer abundance of information and technology will not in itself create more informed citizens without a complementary understanding and capacity to use information effectively”.

Evaluation of web sites and information in general should become central to library programmes. Richard Sweeney, encapsulated it in Kenney (2004) by asserting that, the most effective way to draw users to high-quality research is both to help users to formulate Google searches and to think critically. For this to work librarians must have the confidence to teach this with the support of the academic staff. Hence, the emphasis and time spent by librarians within the skills should be adjusted according to the technological changes and need to communicate with the “Net Generation” of students (Kenney, 2004).

George & Bright (2006) in conducting a study of graduate students’ satisfaction with library collections and services found that graduate students do not come to the library as their first source of information, but rather consult with their advisors or professors. Students also reported feeling overwhelmed by the number of article databases and online sources. Leckie (1996) examined faculty assumption about the undergraduate research process and the problems that occur when faculty assign undergraduates to write research papers. She argues for a curriculum – integrated approach in which faculty take responsibility for teaching research skills and academic librarians serve as mentors and teachers of the faculty.

Shapiro & Hughes (1996) observe that, librarians responsible for instruction in academic libraries have set several goals for themselves: to teach students how to find, evaluate, and use information for problem-solving and decision-making; to create a cutting edge learning environment in which students can become independent learners; to integrate information literacy throughout the curriculum; and to advocate for a new curriculum that encompasses information literacy as a liberal art.

A survey of physical science graduate students by Brown (1999) revealed high levels of information literacy skills among respondents, although only half of them reported receiving library instruction. This raises the question of how these students acquired these skills, since

attendance at library instruction session was low. Some authors, such as Johnson & Webber (2003), and Owusu-Ansah (2004), argue that information literacy could be a subject in its own right and it can be taught in the form of stand-alone courses. Owusu-Ansah (2004) thinks that the library should offer an independent credit course in information literacy, one that offers in-depth engagement with issues inherent in and skills attendant to information literacy. McNamara & Core (1998), however caution that, to participate fully in providing quality learning environment for students, librarians must become trained and qualified educationists as much as their academic colleagues. The point is echoed by Biddiscombe (2002), who agrees that librarians need to be “pedagogically aware and to design services to meet the whole learning environment”.

In the view of Lippincott (2004), librarians must be fully prepared and feel competent to work with classroom faculty in teaching students how to use technology to access information and then how to utilize critical thinking in the selection of information. The author notes that there are a variety of factors that encourage success in cross-sector collaborative teams, including a “willingness to shape a common mission outside of the unit-specific mission; interest in sharing jargon and definitions of technical terms; willingness to learn aspects the other partner’s expertise; and ability to appreciate differences and not criticize or stereotype other’s professions” (Lippincott, 2004).

Result of Findings

The University of Ghana Library System (UGLS) offers one-shot library orientation programme for fresh students, mostly undergraduate at the beginning of each academic year. The assumption however, is that fresh postgraduate students are already familiar with the library system. The orientation is designed to teach fresh students how to locate information they need quickly and effectively. It usually covers the library’s systems of organizing materials, (the structure of the literature of the field), specific resources and finding tools (library catalogue, indexes and abstracting services and bibliographic databases) (Reitz, 2004). The orientation programme is however poorly attended, conducted in a hurry, ineffective and does not provide students with adequate information literacy skills.

In addition to one-shot orientation given to fresh undergraduate students, the library also provides library instruction on individual appointment basis for graduate students. Faculty

member(s) may suggest or require graduate appointment with a scheduled librarian who gives individualized instruction to the students, teaching them how to approach their research questions and use specific resources. The librarian also provides a customized guide that highlights the library's resources and/or research strategies in the students' course or subject area. At the time of the study the University of Ghana (UG) had not yet introduced Information Literacy (IL) as a credit-bearing course.

The United Kingdom's Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professional (CILIP) defines IL as "knowing when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner". Clearly then, IL is central to the mission of any academic institution, and not just a matter for librarians. Majority of respondents 21(24%) agreed to the need to make Information Literacy course mandatory or integrating it into regular courses at the University of Ghana. This they said would improve the quality of students' research competence. There were however mixed responses as to who should teach Information Literacy. While 16(64%) of respondents saw it as a responsibility of the academic staff (faculty) to teach Information Literacy as part of their curriculum, 6(24%) respondents were of the view that teaching Information Literacy should be a preserve of librarians. Some respondents 3(12%) were not sure whose responsibility it is to teach Information Literacy.

The belief of respondents who subscribe to librarians teaching Information Literacy is that, librarians should take on the role of educator in addition to their traditional roles of acquiring, organizing, storing and disseminating information. This belief corroborates Lantz & Brage (2006) who maintain that a librarian should be more than a keeper of books. They further argue that, all that is taught in college amounts to very little, but if librarians can send students out self-reliant in their investigation, they have accomplished very much. Respondents 6(24%) who propose the teaching of Information Literacy by librarians also observe that, such a new role would be a way of librarians asserting their evolving roles in more active ways, both in the context of the university and the increasing competitive markets for information dissemination and retrieval. They also argue that such a proposal when endorsed and implemented will enhance the status of librarians. To them, in their capacity as information specialists, librarians are uniquely qualified to teach Information Literacy. This finding corroborates Jane Kemp (2006), who, writing on the role of librarians as teachers vigorously asserts that academic librarianship will be immeasurably enhanced when librarians teach credit-bearing classes.

Majority of respondents 16(64%) however said they did not subscribe the idea of librarians teaching Information Literacy as a credit-bearing course. They further argued that teaching a credit-bearing course would require librarians getting involved in curricula planning and development, implementation, and assessment and evaluation of students' academic performance. This they said could divert the librarians' time and attention/focus away from their core responsibility as professional librarians.

These respondents, 16(64%) who did not subscribe to the proposal also explained that, they know the kind of academic they are dealing with at the University of Ghana, who would be unwilling to involve librarians in curricula design, with a feeling that it was a waste of time or inappropriate. The academics have always perceived librarians as service providers concerned with specific resources, such as books or e-journals, and not as teachers. In the view of these respondents, attempt to expand their instructional roles will be viewed by other academic departments as competitors of full time equivalent (FTE) rather than as forward-looking proponents of an innovative curriculum that incorporates information literacy. The finding corroborates Ivey's(2003) assertion that, though teaching faculty are appreciative of the support given by librarians; however, librarians are not universally recognized as playing an integral role in course planning and teaching.

On the issue of whether librarians at the University of Ghana have either library instruction or teaching experience, majority of the respondents 19(76%) said they had been involved in library instruction, at one time or another. Only 5(20%) respondents have actually been involved in teaching some aspects of information studies as part time lecturers with the Library and Information Studies Department, though admitted they have no training and qualification in pedagogy. The finding contradicts McMamora & Core (1998) assertion that, to participate fully in providing quality learning environments for students, librarians "must become trained and qualified as educationist as much as their academic colleagues.

Concerning challenges likely to confront librarians should they teach Information Literacy, 16(64%) of respondents said that the number of students at the University of Ghana who need Information Literacy skills is very large, while the resources to do this are small. They further explained that librarians already have a full load of responsibilities, and may not be able to give Information Literacy teaching and training the attention needed, much less find the time to work on wider and longer-term strategic considerations. Many respondents 13(52%)

complained that the library does not command the same respect and political power as the academic departments do. The faculties often do not appreciate the importance of libraries to the overall academic performance of an institution.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Majority of librarians at the University of Ghana do not see education or teaching as a key role, and therefore positively dislike the idea of being educators or teachers. Some librarians however have teaching experience, though yet to develop knowledge/skills in pedagogy, but they are outnumbered by librarians who lack confidence in their own teaching ability.

Looking at the logistics and the structures on the ground it seem any attempt to expand their instructional roles to include teaching credit bearing course in Information Literacy will be too much of an endeavour for librarians at the University of Ghana. Perhaps, librarians can offer the faculty a reasonable alternative – to provide them with materials, ideas, and instruction on how they can move toward resource-based active learning. Librarians can do this by offering workshops, serving as consultants, and assisting the faculty in a variety of ways. Relationship between librarians and the faculty should be strengthened to build a common understanding of information literacy needs and approaches. To meet students research needs, however the library rather needs to strengthen its existing non-course based, non-mandatory library instruction programmes and sessions to cater for the information literacy needs of as many graduate students as possible.

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