INFORMATION LITERACY GAP : CHALLENGES IN BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

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Abstract

Information literacy has become a crucial issue today for development and progress. It is the information gap that divides the nations into rich and poor. Even at the individual level to become an independent lifelong learner it is essential to achieve a high level of information literacy. Information Literacy programmes are under way across the globe. An attempt is made in this paper to find out the challenges in initiating Information Literacy programmes. Such a study is important because for the ultimate success of the Information Literacy programmes it is significant to know and understand the possible challenges. An analysis of eleven case studies on information literacy originating from different countries is studied. The paper identifies and presents eleven challenges in initiating Information Literacy programmes. It concludes by give raise to certain issues that emerge.

Keywords: Information Literacy, Information Literacy -Case studies, Information Literacy-Challenges.

1.   Introduction

In the twenty first century, information literacy has become a crucial issue for the political, economic, social and cultural development in all countries. Information literacy is a global phenomenon today. It is information gap that divides the nations and the citizens of a nation into rich and poor. It is information literacy that helps in closing this gap.

In this paper eleven case studies on information literacy originating from different countries, both developed as well as developing, are analyzed (See Appendix A) . The purpose of the analysis is to identify the challenges faced in bridging the information literacy gap. Initially this paper discusses 'What information literacy is' and 'why information literacy is important.' Subsequently, the major focus of this paper is on challenges faced in different countries while initiating Information Literacy programmes. Lastly, the paper concludes giving raise to certain issues that emerge.

2.   What is Information Literacy?

The term information literacy was introduced in 1974 by Zurkowski who was the president of the US Information Industry Association to refer to people who knew how to apply information resources to their work [1]. Even after three decades of its first use information literacy as a concept is still evolving. Various attempts have been made by experts to explain this concept of information literacy. Often information literacy, library literacy, media literacy, computer literacy, network literacy and digital literacy are erroneously used as synonymous terms [2]. Library literacy relates to the competency in the use of library resources and services. Media literacy refers to the ability to evaluate the information received from different mass media of information. Computer literacy denotes the skills in manipulating the computer hardware and software. Network literacy refers to the ability to navigate the Internet and digital literacy refers to the ability to explore the digital information. Whereas information literacy is a wider concept that encompasses all of the above mentioned literacies and goes much beyond [3]. It is about using information effectively and intelligently. Often some librarians find it difficult to differentiate between library instruction and information literacy. Library instruction is about teaching the use of the library. Information literacy, on the other hand, focuses on student empowerment to do independent and self-directed research [4].

According to the American Library Association "To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information. Information literacy is the ability to access, evaluate and use information from a variety of sources" [5].

The above statement of ALA is widely accepted as definition of 'Information Literacy'. The concept of information literacy is also very clearly articulated in the information literacy model that is formulated by Standing Conference of National and University Libraries, U.K. (SCONUL). At the base of the model are basic library skills and IT skills. At the highest level is the 'Information Literacy'. Between these two levels are the seven headline skills that take a novice to the levels of an expert. The seven skills that make a person information literate are the ability to [6]:

1.   Recognise information need

2.   Distinguish ways of addressing gap

3.   Construct strategies for locating

4.   Locate and Access

5.   Compare and evaluate

6.   Organise, apply and communicate

7.   Synthesise and create

Although the concept of information literacy is evolving owing to the tremendous progress in Information Technology but computer, digital or network literacy can never be equated to information literacy. A mere profusion of technology without the corresponding capability to use information effectively would not result in informed citizens.

3.   Why is Information Literacy Important?

It is only a thinking community that can progress and grow. Even at the individual level, in today's increasingly complex world with an equally complex information environment, only those who are information literate can be successful. A brief overview of importance of information literacy is presented here.

- To be an independent lifelong learner it is essential to achieve a high level of information literacy [7].

- Equity of opportunities among citizens is extremely important. One of the ultimate benefits of information literacy "is to help close the gap between the information poor and the information rich" [8].

- Information literacy is required to have a critical thinking approach. An approach that would lead to economic and cultural progress of a nation.

- Information literacy is important for a strong democracy.

- A sheer abundance of information in electronic format has made information literacy increasingly important. Traditional print resources could be subjected to a quality assurance process. Whereas, on line e-resources in the form of web pages look alike. "With the Internet sources, none of the quality assurance mechanisms can be assumed. The onus is on the user to apply a critical faculty" [9].

- Information literacy is also important to understand the "difficult questions of ownership of information and copyright" [10].

- Students should learn to respect the author's rights. The "cutting and pasting" culture that is widespread among the students can be addressed with the help of information literacy programmes [11].

Importance of information literacy can be summed up in Bundy's words, "… Information Literacy is a prerequisite for – participative citizenship; social inclusion; the creation of new knowledge; personal empowerment; and learning for life" [12].

4.   Challenges in Bridging the Divide

Owing to the importance of information literacy active Information Literacy programmes are under way across the globe. An analysis of the case studies on information literacy originating from different geographical, political, economic, social, cultural, demographic and educational backgrounds display a range of challenges. An attempt is made here to collate all these challenges because for the ultimate success of the Information Literacy programmes it is significant to know and understand the possible challenges.

4.1   Political hurdles

The basic challenges are posed by the government, bureaucrats and politicians of a country. Do they really want their citizens to be information literate? If they believe that they may end up loosing more by having an informed people they may discourage rather than encourage any programme that may lead to information literacy. A case study from Spain reveals that "… libraries in particular went through a severe period of backwardness and deprivation in the mid-twentieth century due to Franco's coup and dictatorship (1936-1975)" [13]. Thus, until 1980 in many regions in Spain the library collection and services were poor. Libraries were meant only for preservation and the notion of user education was nearly absent. Hence the basis for an effective Information Literacy programme was missing in many regions within Spain until 1980s.

4.2   Inadequacy of technological infrastructure and IT skills

As digital literacy and network literacy are also encapsulated in information literacy, one of the big challenges to information literacy is the lack of technological infrastructure. In India there are extremely developed institutes like IITs and IIMs where technological infrastructure is immensely developed and they compete with the international standards. At the same time there are numerous institutions with poor technological infrastructure. Today there may be thousands of people using computers in India, but at same time, there are millions in the country who have never used a telephone even once! There is unevenness in the IT development. A case study from India reveals that even "Today in 2005, many libraries are still on dial-up" and "IT facilities like telephone, fax, scanner etc. is relatively low" [14]. Another case study on Information Literacy in Indian universities reveals that, most of the college libraries in India are poorly equipped with IT infrastructure. Resultantly the students who pass out from these colleges also lack the ICT skills [15]. A case study from Kenya also reveals that many university students are "unfamiliar with IT, new university students are reluctant to use electronic sources, the main reason being a lack of database search skills, unawareness of what to expect…"[16]. Lack of such IT skills pose a challenge to Information Literacy efforts. In fact, it is interesting to note that even in the developed parts of the world, i.e., a case study on online Information Literacy course from New Mexico, USA, reveals that, "computer technologies proved to be the first difficulty for some students, despite the fact that the course's web site was done strictly in HTML and was not passworded or part of a courseware package" [17]. Such students had to first address the technological issues before being able to understand the lessons.

4. 3   Traditional system of education

To prepare students for a life long learning and to make them independent and self-directed learners, resource based learning is the best approach. Countries that still follow a traditional education system that is based on "memorizing instructor's notes" do not "encourage student initiative and critical thinking" [18]. A study reveals that many school teachers rely "on the textbook and traditional class room teaching" [19]. One of the major problems for the Information Literacy agenda in Spain was also found to be the "widespread use of textbooks in traditional teaching methods and the corresponding, almost total absence of resource based learning" [20].

4.4   Lack of collaboration between libraries and teaching faculty

To integrate information literacy skills across the curriculum, a strong collaboration between librarians and teachers is essential. However, when this understanding and collaboration between teachers and librarian is superficial or wanting, that can be a major threat to Information Literacy programmes. The case study from Spain shows that in the primary and secondary education sector there is a lack of understanding between the librarians and teachers which has been a cause of problem in initiating Information Literacy programmes [21]. A study from California USA reveals that such efforts towards collaboration between librarians and teachers "have met with uneven success."[22] The reason for this uneven success is because many librarians do not understand the educational practice and are unable to translate the concept of information literacy into the terms of the different subject domain. At the same time many school teachers do not appreciate the concept of information literacy.

4.5   Low literacy rate

Literacy rates in general are above 95% if not hundred in developed countries. In developing countries on the other hand the literacy rates are very low. For example, according to 2001 census figures, in India the literacy rate was 65.38%. Even within India, the Southern states have higher literacy rates compared to some of the Northern states. Information Technology has penetrated the Southern states like Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh that are more literate. In a small developing country like Morocco literacy rate was only 50% according to a UNESCO report from 2003. It is difficult to introduce Information Literacy programmes in developing countries where literacy rates are very low [23]. In such countries the first challenge is to improve the literacy rate.

4.6   Lack of libraries

Lack of libraries especially school libraries, which are the basis of information literacy, are a big challenge in developing Information Literacy programmes. In many developing countries lack of school libraries is a common phenomenon. Even the case study from Spain reveals that, "At the turn of this new century, school libraries are still not very common" in many regions in Spain [24].

4.7   Low demand for library services

The lack of libraries often leads to low demand for library services. In a case study "…general lack of interest in using libraries" is reported as a problem in developing "information skills among students and citizens" [25]. A case study from Kenya also reveals that "… lack of awareness on the part of the students of the role of librarians in providing guidance in information use" is an impediment in taking forward the Information Literacy programmes [26].

4.8   Lack of financial and human resources

The staff in the libraries and teachers in the schools and colleges are often inadequate in the developing countries. Funds for even some basic activities like printing a library manual for students is often inadequate or absent in such countries. In India, the states that are doing well and the institutes that are affluent have splendid libraries. At the same time, even in India, many libraries are "reeling under budget cuts resulting in reduction of subscriptions to journal titles" [27]. "The main barrier that university libraries face in providing Information Literacy programmes are a lack of both financial and human resources, and inadequate support by their parent organizations, in terms of both policy and materially" [28].

4.9   Inadequacy of time devoted

Some case studies also reveal that time devoted by libraries or academic institutions for such Information Literacy initiatives are not adequate to evaluate and "follow up the effectiveness of learning experiences" [29]. Only in some developed countries information skill classes are integrated in the academic curriculum. Even where they are, information literacy classes occupy only a small fraction of the academic timetable. Such single Information Literacy sessions in a semester are inadequate to really develop information literacy skills. In many libraries of developing countries the traditional user education programmes are demonstrated as Information Literacy efforts. Even for such attempts it is found that, "… time allocated to the lecture, demonstration and tour is inadequate to impart useful skills to new university students" [30].

4.10   Low level of publishing

Information Literacy programmes can gear up only in places where there is an abundance of reading material. Book production in the developed countries is very high compared to the developing countries. "The low level of 'publishing' production adds another hurdle in planning IL in developing countries" [31].

4.11   Students' attitude

Lastly, a severe challenge that Information Literacy efforts face is the assumption among students that " mastering ICT tools is the same as mastering information access and use" [32]. For the success of the Information Literacy efforts an attitudinal change among people is important.

5.   Conclusion

The challenges presented above are the actual ground realities experienced in Information Literacy studies in different parts of the world. It is not possible for any individual library to overcome these challenges single-handedly. This gives raise to certain issues. Is Information Literacy a library issue? Can libraries achieve development of information literacy among citizens in isolation from the other formal sectors of education? Why Information Literacy initiatives are taken only by library professionals? Why teaching faculty is not taking the lead in Information Literacy initiatives? As a mere traditional librarian-student encounter in library orientation or bibliographic instruction is not enough to take a student to the expert level of information literacy, it gives raise to another vital question. Do all librarians have the expertise to teach students how to analyze, evaluate and use information effectively? It is indeed difficult to find easy answers to these questions.

Appendix - I

List of Case Studies Analyzed

- Ashoor, Mohammed-Saleh. (2005.) "Information literacy: a case study of the KFUPM library". *The Electronic Library*, 23, 398-409. Retrieved in November 2005 from Emerald Database. [A case study from Saudi Arabia]

- Dennis, Nancy. (2001). "Using inquiry methods to foster information literacy partnerships". *Reference Services Review,* 29, 122-132. Retrieved in November 2005 from Emerald Database. [A case study from Salem, Massachusetts, USA]

- Farmer, Lesley S.J. (2003). "Facilitating faculty incorporation of information literacy skills into the curriculum through the use of online instruction". *Reference Services Review*, 31, 307-312. Retrieved in November 2005 from Emerald Database. [A case study from California, USA]

- Hadengue, Véronique. (2005). "E-learning for information literacy: A case study". *Library Review*, 54, 36-46. Retrieved in November 2005 from Emerald Database. [A case study from Switzerland]

- Hernández, José Antonio Gómez & Ureña, Cristóbal Pasadas. (2003). "Information literacy developments and issues in Spain". *Library Review*, 52, 340-348. Retrieved in November 2005 from Emerald Database. [A case study from Spain]

- Hua Yi. (2003). "Individual research consultation service: an important part of an information literacy program". *Reference Services Review*, 31, 342-350. Retrieved in November 2005 from Emerald Database. [A case study from California, USA]

- Kavulya, Joseph Muema. (2003)."Challenges facing information literacy efforts in Kenya: a case study of selected university libraries in Kenya" .*Library Management*, 24, 216-222. Retrieved in November 2005 from Emerald Database. [A case study from Kenya]

- Manuel, Kate. (2001). "Teaching an online information literacy course". *Reference Services Review*, 29, 219-229. Retrieved in November 2005 from Emerald Database. [A case study from New Mexico, USA.]

- Nyamboga, Constantine M. (2004). "Information skills and information literacy in Indian university libraries" .*Program: electronic library and information systems*, 38, 232-239. Retrieved in November 2005 from Emerald Database.[A case study from India]

- Salisbury, Fiona & Ellis, Jenny. (2003)"Online and face-to-face: evaluating methods for teaching information literacy skills to undergraduate arts students". *Library Review*, 52, 209-217. Retrieved in November 2005 from Emerald Database. [A case study from Australia]

- Sriganesh, Vasumathi. (2005). "Challenges of bridging the information literacy gap for the practice of evidence based healthcare in India". Retrieved on November 10, 2005 from http://www.icml9.org/ program/track9/public/documents/Vasumathi%20Sriganesh-105007.doc**.** [A case study from India]

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8. Ercegovac, Zorana. "Information Literacy: Teaching now for the year 2000" *Reference Services Review*, 26; 1998; 139-142 & 160. Retrieved in November 2005 from Emerald Database.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Hadengue, Véronique. "E-learning for information literacy: A case study". *Library Review*, 54; 2005; 36-46. Retrieved in November 2005 from Emerald Database.

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14. Sriganesh, Vasumathi. "Challenges of bridging the information literacy gap for the practice of evidence based healthcare in India". 2005. Retrieved on November 10, 2005 fromhttp://www.icml9.org/program/track9/public/documents/Vasumathi%20Sriganesh- 105007.doc.

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32. Hernández and Ureña, Op. Cit.

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