Equipping Library Professionals for Imparting Information Literacy

Bikika Laloo

Abstract

Information explosion or the proliferation in the amount of information and variety of information sources, has made it even more vital today for individuals to develop information literacy skills. Libraries play a major role in imparting information literacy skills to their clients. This paper addresses two aspects of the topic at hand. First - that the library staff need to be information literate themselves in order to ably impart information literacy skills to their clients. Second - that imparting information literacy is multi-dimensional and that libraries and their staff need to approach the issue accordingly.

Keywords: Library Professionals, Qualities, Qualifications, Information Literacy

1. Information Literacy is Best Learned in and Through Libraries

A person's awareness of the specific information required and the pursuit and use of this information, is known as information literacy. It goes beyond just literacy, which is usually institution and time bound. In fact, 'correctly imparted' literacy combined with information literacy produce a truly educated person. Information literacy is life-long and can be learned in formal (educational institutions) and informal (everyday life) settings. Libraries usually impart information literacy under the purview of their user education programmes and also in routine interactions with their clients (members and non-members). A library is one of the best places to obtain information literacy skills, provided it fulfills the following requisites.

2. The Information Literate Library Staff

With information literacy being more emphasized upon today in all spheres of life, the question arises whether library staff is equipped to meet the challenges of imparting information literacy skills to their clients? In other words, is the library staff information literate themselves? Inconnection with this, following are some issues that need to be addressed:

a Staff Versus Professionals: There seems to be a misunderstanding of the term 'library professional. Everyone with degrees in librarianship does not qualify as library professional. It is a huge mistake to think that our degrees alone qualify us as professionals. In certain geographical area where rote learning and memorizing are still so common, a majority of graduates turn out clueless when faced with real life situations. Often, it becomes difficult to differentiate between the so called 'professional' and 'non-professional' employees in a library.

Everyone becomes mere 'staff.' The right academic and professional degrees coupled with the gift/qualities for librarianship(everyone is not gifted for librarianship) constitute the right qualifications. True library professionals will agree that they have a major role to play in society and that librarianship is not just about keeping hours and taking home a paycheck.

The right qualities and mindset such as a pleasing personality, a curious mind, street smartness, integrity and dedication are some of the qualities required from staff, in order to reach their full potential as library professionals. People with such qualifications are best suited for providing information literacy in libraries. Sadly, these qualities are missing in many staff members, thus lowering the prestige of the profession and the libraries.

b Walking the Talk: It is trendy to talk of information literacy in the library profession and rightly so. The danger arises when it remains mere talk and when library professionals resort to knee jerk reactions to these trends and pick them up without much thought and foundation. This has disastrous results and cannot be entertained, especially in a people's profession like librarianship.

No doubt, participating in professional development activities like training programmes, seminars, conferences and so on is very necessary and has been known to benefit both the library professionals and their clients. But, here lies the danger of attending such activities merely to collect certificates to fulfill institutional norms.

c Learning information literacy skills starts in Library Schools: Library schools worldwide are catching up with latest trends. In a wholesome curriculum, traditional practices and latest trends need to complement each other. A wholesome Library Science curriculum needs to give due emphasis to all papers in order to prepare students for the inevitable digital future.

Library Schools in many countries are now embracing new trends in their curriculum without discarding the core and traditional aspects that continue to be relevant. Practical experience in library housekeeping activities is emphasized upon and over the years, intensive computer practical knowledge (in the institution's laboratory) has been added to this in order to equip the students for working in automated libraries. Some of the developments that have been incorporated in Library School syllabi includes the following:

❖ Interactive classroom sessions to supplement lectures

❖ Hands on learning with various technologies within the classroom and library;

❖ Field visits, study tours;

❖ Seminars and workshops, with presentations from professionals as well as from the students themselves;

❖ Effective use of social media (among students; between students and teachers);

❖ knowledge transfer through interaction with working LIS professionals, i.e. Librarians and Library Science faculty from outside who come as visiting faculty;

❖ Emphasizing on soft skills so that products of library schools enter the profession with a service orientation; and

❖ All of the above aspects help to develop information literacy skills in the students, thus rightly preparing them for a fruitful career in librarianship.

3. Roles and Duties of Library Professionals in Imparting Information Literacy Skills

Having addressed the issues of qualifications and qualities among library professionals (assuming they fulfill the definitions of the term 'professional') above, next come their role and duties in imparting information literacy to their clients (members and non-members). These roles and duties have evolved in a way that the library professionals today are both teachers and facilitators. Following are considerations to take into account:

a Information literacy goes beyond library instruction: While library professionals worldwide are embracing information skills, yet there remains the misconception that teaching information literacy ends within the walls of the library, made available only to the library's members and using only resources available within those walls. In actual the opposite is expected of libraries today. In today's networked world, online instruction is becoming the norm, extension services like conducting information literacy programmes in the neighborhood and in neighboring villages are also good initiatives. Some libraries are using their spaces for social face-to-face interaction among members and even among non-members who may just walk-in. In such cases, library staff remain discreet facilitators for learning. Libraries need to embrace these trends or be considered redundant.

b Not just teaching but partnering: While one category of library staff would rather stick to the status quo and not venture beyond their routine work, another category, being over enthusiastic about catching up with all the latest trends, will go overboard playing their 'role' of 'information literacy teachers.'. The better role for library staff to play is that of partner and facilitator.For example, the library professional has a role in medical and engineering breakthroughs by sincerely and wisely partnering with the medical and engineering professional in their information search and use,and this applies to all other professions too.

c Traditional methods and latest trends need to complement each other: Some library professionals may be content in walking the well beaten track and refuse to follow latest trends while others may be in such a rush to be seen as 'modern' and 'advanced,' following any and every trend and debunking the 'outdated' methods, both end up killing the very spirit of Librarianship. It must be emphasized therefore, the traditional methods and latest trends need to complement each other.

d Information literacy need not only be ICT based: Again, there is the mistaken notion that handling information technology equals information literacy. While this is true to an extent, and libraries cannot fully function without Information Technology, yet the wrong use of such technologies would rather harm than help the profession. with or without ICT aids.

4. Conclusion

In a fast-changing world that demands precise and immediate gratification, information providers have to keep up or get out. True library professionals with the right gifts and the right academic and professional qualifications have a major role to play in such a society by continually partnering with members and non-members in their information literacy journey.

Most library staff in various libraries of the eight states of North East India boast of high degrees from premier institutes and long experience working in libraries. And this is laudable and necessary too, given the mandate from such bodies as the Universities Grants Commission. The challenge lies in whether our degrees and 'experience' actually qualify us as the 'professionals' described above (and in the literature produced worldwide)**.** If they do, we are on the right track. If they don't, it's time to pull up our socks and perform**.**

Further Reading

1. Tariang, B.L. (2012) Essays on Library and Information Science Education, New Delhi, Ess Publications, ISBN-10: 8170006767

About Author

Dr. Bikika Laloo, Associate Professor, Department of Library and Information Science, NEHU, Shillong
Email: bikitariang@gmail.com

Note:

Online version of this paper is available on Institutional Repository of INFLIBNET Centre. It can be accessed online by scanning QR Code or using following URI: http://ir.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/1944/2299