

Literacy: Prerequisite for Optimal Benefit from Library and Information Science

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Abstract: The study discusses the fact that library is the backbone of academic, excellence and that its work is being complemented by information science through the use of the internet and other Information Technology (ICT) which help information users to save time, energy and resources in their pursuit of needed information. It has however been observed that despite this noble work, anyone who is not grounded in the area of literacy cannot easily access, talkless using the information stored in the library or available on the internet. Thus it will be a waste of time and other resources for various organizations and individuals to make information available through these channels if the targeted audience cannot tap such information and use it constructively. Therefore, this study suggests what should be done in the area of literacy that will help to make the services of the library and other information outlets fully beneficial to individuals and the society.

Key words: Literacy, prerequisite, ICT, library, optimal benefit

INTRODUCTION

Literacy simply defined is the ability to read and write (Hornby, 2000). In discussing literacy, Oyedeji (1997) refers to it as the skill of reading, writing and computing saying that, it is important and significant for people all over the world to have paid attention to it. He did not fail to mention the areas of its usefulness which include the following:

Literacy help individuals to learn independently in order to make decision for now and the future; it helps to develop the spirit of independence, confidence and self reliance; people know their rights, avert cheating and participate in decision-making; more knowledge and more information could also be got through literacy; it also helps in the area of improvement on health. Thus it is glaring that literacy is crucial to development.

Oyedeji (1997) is not alone in this line of thought, some other scholars too emphasise broad-based conception of literacy (Marsh and Hallet, 1999). That is to say that different experiences constitute a variety of literacy practices and all of them aid an individual in becoming an active meaning maker within his or her environment.

Marsh and Hallet (1999) are also of the opinion that it is necessary to establish literacy on a wide range of experiences that symbolize and represent meanings through nonverbal communication skills, gesture, movement, dance, music, listening, talking, drawing, painting, modelling, building, story telling, poetry staring, scientific and mathematical investigations, rituals and religious celebrations.

Marsh and Hallet (1999) go on to state that literacy can be conceptualized as a living fluid that takes its shape in daily experiences which can be further shapened.

Ezeokoli (2002) shares this belief that literacy is a fluid concept adding that it is not a static concept as new conceptions of it are emerging as the world progresses. According to him recent meanings of literacy include the following:

- Ability to listen to books (audio books) i.e., literate listening
- Ability to locate and compute information of various types from the inherent.
- Making meaning of the world
- Ability to make inference about texts read.
- Rate of reading and accuracy of spelling.
- Accessing information on computer and performing CD-ROM.

He goes on to say that the continuous broadening conception of literacy might not be unconnected with the fact that such factors as social needs, globalisation and available technology affect literacy.

Library and information science: In the past the library could be defined as a place where books are kept or a place where one sits and read. But the present day library is more than these as it acquires, organizes and conserves all available information in various formats ensuring that they are easily available to users presently and in future for research and other purposes (Nwezeh, 1997). To ensure that the right information gets to the right user at

the right time, the libraries classify and catalogue their holdings so as to let their users know the information materials that are available in them and where they can be located. Despite the spate of technological advancement, some libraries especially in the developing countries still render some of their services that can be done through automation manually. These include such services like registration, loaning and cataloguing. The library staff who are trained for these duties take care of them but when it comes to getting the needed information from a library without wasting time the library user has to interface with the library catalogue which is the key to the resources of a library. However, some users are unable to locate certain information materials that are available in a library just because they cannot access the library catalogue perhaps due to their level of literacy in this area.

The introduction of computers to the library and some other areas of life is viewed as a welcome development because of certain advantages of automation. Due to the introduction of computers to libraries, almost every area of work can be automated: be it administrative work; information about staff and other matters can be stored and quickly retrieved; in the area of acquisition of library materials, a lot of information materials can be selected and purchased on-line; the library catalogue can also be automated; certain duties in the Readers' Services division like registration of library patrons and loaning of books can also be computerised.

The introduction of computer and other information communication technology is seen as some people as a great development in the area of information dissemination and retrieval as information communication technologies have made it possible for a researcher in his or her office to access the full text digital contents of local and distant libraries and data bases using computers and the internet (Agboola, 2003).

Thus we see the library and Information Communication Technologies (ICT) complementing each other to make information available globally.

However, despite the fact that the world has become a big village where everyone can have access to information wherever it may be, through the worldwide web, it is not everyone that can benefit from this noble development due to certain hindrances.

HINDRANCES TO OPTIMAL BENEFIT FROM LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE

Faulty School Curriculum is one of the reasons why many people have not been benefiting and may not benefit from the opportunities offered by libraries and

information science. In Nigeria, for example, most state owned primary and secondary schools do not have libraries and as such do not inculcate the necessary skills needed for pupils and students to use libraries effectively even in later life. Also computer lessons are not given in this group of schools not to talk of pupils and students interfacing with the machine, how then can they benefit from the information available in this format and other related ones.

Another hindrance is the ignorance and non-challant attitude of government and policy makers. The fact that some policy makers are not much educated to the level of appreciating the importance of technology may be responsible for the negative disposition being displayed by some of them in making necessary provision in this very important area. The fact that most of the people in sensitive positions do not have their children in these public schools may be another reason for their non-challant attitude to the plight of children in this group of schools.

Lack of competent staff to handle the new information technology is also hindrance to the realization of the full benefits that may accrue to information users. Egberongbe (2003) in discussing the technology of Technical Services Workstation (TWS) in libraries observes that though it would bring new level of computing knowledge to staff, it requires a higher level of computer sophistication on their part. However, some organizations are very miserly in the area of training and retraining their staff while some staffs are also unwilling in sponsoring themselves for courses they feel will benefit their work place. This negative attitude on the part of both parties may not help the operation of their library and in the long run information users will be at the receiving end.

Even in the instance of the management of a library being ready to acquire the relevant information gadgets and sponsoring staff for training programmes there are certain individuals that can be considered to be technophobia that is, not being at ease to interface with certain technology that they view as being complex just because they are already used to doing things manually. If the fear of such people is not allayed through the right exposure, they may constitute a clog in the wheel of progress in the area of information dissemination and retrieval.

LITERACY IS THE SOLUTION

Egenge (2004) rightly observes that it is difficult to define the term literacy. Thus, for the purpose of this

discourse, a broad-based conception of literacy is to be adopted, as one needs to recognize the changing landscape of communication.

In order to change with the changing landscape of communication, use of library and computer literacy skills must be introduced into the curriculum of primary and secondary schools where they are not existing so as to equip these young ones with those tools that will aid life long learning. This is in agreement with Merchant and Marsh (1998) who see literacy skills as fundamental tools for life long learning.

In order to move forward developing countries must ensure that only those who are literate and can use their knowledge constructively are put in leadership positions so that these countries can be on a close pedestals if not same with their developed counterparts. Our leaders should stop their non-challant attitude to the fact that about half of Nigeria's populations are illiterates as revealed by Oyediji (1997) citing. Though that was some years' back the situation has not changed much. Many people go to school now but only few receive qualitative education as education, like many other sectors, is being privatized making qualitative education to be far from the poor masses that form a great bulk of the population.

Funds must be released by the appropriate authorities for the establishment of libraries and purchase of computers and other related technologies into public schools. Our leaders need to be literate in the scheme of things in this area and be learned enough to see that non-challant attitude is injurious to the country's progress in the area of the right information getting to the right user at the right time.

The training and retraining of library and information workers to make them computer literate and function effectively in the operation of computers and other sophisticated information technologies would help information seekers and users to get the best out of libraries as that will help to save their time and give them the needed information at the appropriate time.

Also, very good and patient instructors that can help show learners or those who have phobia for interfacing with complex technologies should be exposed to them to help them learn at their own pace until they reach perfection.

CONCLUSION

It has been observed that language is a key factor to literacy (Ezeokoli, 2002). Thus for maximum benefit from library and information science at any given time, a user must be literate in the use of relevant words that will aid easy professional and technical jargons, signs and symbols in order to interface with them and get the needed information. The users also need to grow with the language as technology advances, that is, he or she needs to be literate enough at all times in order to learn the latest development at any given time and get familiar with it in order to get optimum benefit from library and information science at all times.

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