MAKING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN GHANA INFORMATION LITERATE AND INFORMATION COMPETENT: THE ROLE OF LIBRARIANS

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Introduction

The role of information in a society and in the life of every individual cannot be overemphasized. Every individual, no matter the status, age, sex, etc., has a peculiar need for information. According to Lenox and Walker (1992), we live in the "Age of information" with so much information coming our way each day that we are overwhelmed by the sheer mass of it. We are confronted by the "traditional sources of information" (books, magazines, journals and even oral history) and the "common-place sources of information ie. television, radio and electronic information databases. In the face of so much information is the need to possess the information processing skill to have access to the right information at the right time and at the right place.

Lack of this skill which has resulted in information illiteracy and incompetence as exhibited and observed among University students, is the focus of this paper. It begins with the definition of the terms "information", "information literacy" and "information competence", outlines the root causes of the absence of information seeking skills among University students and suggests possible solutions to the problem.

Information, Information Literacy And Information competency

Information illiteracy and incompetence, as exhibited among students is considered a problem. This is because information literacy and competence are essential to explore the mass of information coming their way each day. Information is an abstract and intangible word which scholars, over the years, have approached differently. For the purpose of this discussion the definition by Kaniki (1992) will be adopted. He defines information as "ideas, facts, imaginative works of mind and data of value potentially useful in decision-making, question answering, problem solving etc. which can reduce uncertainty". (p.83)

Knowing how to learn, to explore, to express, to dissect and understand information is termed Information Literacy, by Lenox and Walker (1992) and the ability to identify, find, use and manage pertinent information, to one's advantage, is what Kaufmann (1991) defines as Information Competency. Within this framework, information literacy and information competency then become tools of personal empowerment as they place knowledge and power of how to gain and use information, to solve a particular problem or to make decisions, in the hands and minds of the researcher. This generates information awareness which is the ability to recognize that problems may be solved by accessing and using a particular piece of information, Harris,(1991).

Information awareness forms an integral part of education because education is a process of systematic training and instruction whereby a person gains more information and becomes knowledgeable. However, Lenox and Walker (1992) argue that information is not knowledge till it has been filtered through one's experience and applied to one's own life. It is therefore imperative that in their training, students learn how to access information to solve whatever problem or uncertainty they might face. Lenox and Walker (1992) believe this is necessary because "the dynamic and changing information environment of the last quarter of the century makes the acquisition of information literacy during formal education both a practical and a moral right." (p.1). This would eradicate information poverty where students exhibit low level of information awareness, inadequate access and underdeveloped ability to exploit information. At this juncture, we should pause to take a look at the social setting in which a Ghanaian student finds himself.

Social Situation In Ghana

The Ghanaian traditional society, like most other African societies, is an oral based society. Tradition is handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth and this accounts for the respect accorded to the elderly in the society because they are seen as embodiment of wisdom and history. In a traditional mode of thought, therefore, is the concept of obedience and acceptance of ready formed ideas from people in authority, without subjecting these ideas to critical analysis.

Even though one can say that in these modern times, the respect accorded the elderly in society is gradually eroding, it has nevertheless resulted in the lack of interest in reading among students. This is because they are usually content with whatever notes that are handed down to them from their teachers or lecturers. In a study by Kotei and Twumasi, (1979) attempt was made to find out why there was lack of interest in reading among Ghanaians, between the ages of 16 and 56. Respondents were of the opinion that, in the traditional and urban settings, the elder oriented attitude prevails. This does not encourage people to seek information from books, journals and other reading sources. Respondents were of the conviction that so long as in the Ghanaian society the heads of families, corporations, government departments and other agencies hold this traditional view, which does not encourage enquiry, the idea of seeking information from printed sources will be put at a low priority level.

The Ghanaian society, therefore, is not known to be reading-oriented. In very few homes do children see their parents reading, let alone being encouraged to read. Therefore reading habits are not instilled in children from childhood. It has been established that there is greater reading interest among Ghanaian adult population who generally wish to further their education and public libraries are mostly patronized by such clientele preparing for examinations, Kotei and Twumasi, (1979).

The Problem

This is the typical social situation in which a student finds himself which poses the problem being addressed in this paper. The University student, for example, is considered to be at the top of the academic ladder and ought to undertake independent research. All through

school, the curriculum and its contents do not encourage reading orientation. Students usually copy notes from teachers, even in the universities. This does not motivate reading outside these notes let alone bring up new ideas which might eventually challenge what has been dictated by their tutors. In effect, though the educational system encourage and promote life-long appetite for learning that requires complex information skills, they do not equip students with a life-long ability to get, understand, manipulate and manage information.

As has already been mentioned there is so much information that it is necessary to identify and choose the specific information one wants and needs. This is poorly executed by most students because attention has not been paid to the acquisition of fundamental skills to help sort, discriminate, select and analyze the mass of information they see, hear and read.

Let us take for example, the student who gains admission to the university as a freshman. During the first week of the first semester, this freshman is given some orientation, including a few hours tour of the main university library. Within these few hours, he/she is expected to know how to use the library, the resources it holds and services available. Most of these students come from secondary schools that never had libraries and where they did exist, they were more or less reading rooms, poorly equipped and organized, and without full-time qualified library assistants or teacher-librarians. To such students, the mere size of the University library building, is intimidating enough not to mention the difficulty of finding one's way about. This compounded by the embarrassment of displaying one's ignorance, puts them off ever wanting to use the library.

It is the contention of this paper, therefore, that this brief user education is not enough to make student aware of the essence of information, or to motivate them to seek information, considering that the habit is being inculcated at a rather late stage in their lives, and eventually make them information competent. It is, therefore, time for new thinking of radical ideas for a change, placing more emphasis on skills that would enable students to get, use and manage information throughout their lives.

The absence of the skill to explore the holdings of libraries, to seek pertinent information and the lack of interest to search, is evident in the choice of long essays or project topics in the University of Ghana. In the Sociology Department, for example, where students are trained to identify phenomena as a problem and to argue out why they are a social problem, essays most often deal with current issues. Examples are teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, AIDS, functional literacy programmes and child immunization. Selection topics centre round students' hometown, optional subjects and professions only. Students in the Police Administration course, for example, write about problems relating to criminal investigations and frequent transfers of personnel. In most cases, the attempt to gain easy access to information, leads to a situation where the "unknown" is never explored.*

As a result of this attitude, the library is not conceived as an integral part of research and academic work. Therefore, the insufficiency of books, lack of current periodicals or other problems associated with the running of University libraries have not been identified as issues to be addressed in long essays and project works.

This atitude can be attributed to student's perception of education; formal schooling is seen

as a means to an end, that end being the satisfaction of economic and social needs. This is evident in a study by Boateng (1993) of 96 undergraduate students, to find out the main determinants of choice of subjects in the first year, and to identify the consequences of this behaviour on student's academic and social lives. He found out that the main determinant for choice of subjects is employment prospects, followed by social prestige. Academic competence was cited as the least determinant for selection of subjects. Where students were denied their first and second choices of subjects, they become frustrated and this is reflected in their academic careers.

To the question, if they would consider a change of subject should they gain admission to pursue a post-graduate course, 45.8% said they would change to a subject that enhanced their employment prospects, 22.9% said they would not consider a change, 18.8% were not decided and 12.5% said they would want to broaden their knowledge, Boateng, (1993). All these go to emphasize that academic interest has little influence on the choice of subjects and that education was not perceived as acquiring life-long skills to explore the mass of information in this "age of information explosion". It could be supposed that this accounts for students flocking the library and lecture rooms during the last few weeks of a semester to read references they have been given by their tutors and to collect last minute information. As the popular adage goes, they "chew, pour, pass and forget".

A Recommended Curriculum

To curb the problem of information illiteracy, there is the need to incorporate information skills into the curriculum of schools. Students must go through a period of teaching where basic information handling skills are introduced as fundamental components of education. According to Lenox and Walker, (1992)

> "whether information comes form a computer, a book, a government agency, a film, a conversation, a poster, or any number of possible sources, inherent in the concept of information literacy is the ability to dissect and understand what you see on a page or television screen, in posters, pictures and other images as well as what you hear". (p.5)

Information illiteracy, argues Kaufmann, (1991) is as costly to individuals and to society as reading illiteracy is today. Teaching information literacy goes beyond teaching students how to use the library. It encompasses concepts and principles of bibliographic instruction, to a curriculum that involves information strategies designed to help students formulate the right questions and to teach them how to use pertinent information to answer these question.

This could be achieved in a curriculum where students are introduced to how to find their way in libraries, the use of the circulation desk, reference area, card catalogue, stacks, reserve room and services in the library. Then they could be introduced to basic reference works like the dictionary, encyclopedia, biographies, almanacs, yearbooks, atlases and gazettes. Students could also learn the outline of classification schemes to help them search and find library materials. After these, search for information through the use of bibliographies, abstracts and indexes and the basic points to be borne in mind when evaluating relevant and reliable sources of information could be taught. Students could also learn how to organize and present information, for example, how to present bibliographies at he end of their research work, dissertation or these.

These lectures could be both practical and theoretical and could be held both in the library and the lecture rooms. It is however essential that frequent and practical examples are cited, to relate information seeking to the various subjects being offered on the campuses.

Benefits Of The Recommended Curriculum

A programme such as the one advocated here, will equip students with skills that would enable hem become information literate to pursue individual research and delve into the "unknown". Imagine students walking up to the library requesting a book entitled "West African History" by a particular author, for example. Assuming that book in not available but the catalogue indicates that there is another book by another author or possible by the same author entitled "History of West Africa" which deals basically with the same subject matter. In most cases the latter is refused on the grounds that "our lecturer did not mention that one". It is essential that this kind of attitude is erased so that students can explore the "unfamiliar" and be encouraged to integrate prior knowledge with new information.

If students are not prepared or equipped to explore the unfamiliar, how can scholarship make headway in developing contries like Ghana? Information literates are said to be people "who have learned how to learn because they know how knowledge is organized, how to find information, and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them: Breivik, (1989) In Kaufmann (1991,p.38).

This programme would also end the tendency of students requesting for book by colours - "Madam, please, I used a book yesterday, I don't remember the author or the title, but I know the colour is red". Believe it or not it does happen even among students who are pursuing second research degrees. Information has reached such massive proportions that it is beginning to overwhelm our traditional information system, Maxwell (1990) In Warren, (1992). There is the need to move fast before students are introduced to computers and Compact Disc -Read Only Memory (CD-ROM) where searches can even have to be truncated to explore the enormous bibliographic data stored on these technologies.

Staffing

Designing an information competency/literacy programme requires good curriculum planning and most importantly good instruction. Few teachers or lecturers today, having gone through the same system of education, (it can be assumed), understand or display competency in basic information skills. Librarians and library educations, who have devoted their lives to making information accessible, are the best group of people able to provide these skills. Librarians are seen as keepers or dusters of books but it is time for the society to get convinced that librarians should be creators of such a programme.

At the secondary school level, teacher-librarians should take up the teaching of information literacy and campuses that house library schools could introduce and carry out this radical and new schedule. In the Universities, these could be taught just as African Studies is taught according to the University of Ghana Act 1961, which stipulates the following among the aims of the Universities
> "... so far as practicable students should be given an understanding of world affairs and in particular of the histories, institutions and culture of African civilizations"
> University of Ghana, (1993,p.56).

Similarly information skills could be introduced as an integral part of all courses irrespective of the level, i.e. degree, diploma etc, to teach students how to learn.

The Role Of Librarians/Library Educators

To achieve this aim, librarians on the other hand could begin to take the initiative to become pioneers of such a programme because they have an important role to play in fostering information literacy. There is the need to recast the image of librarians and see this as a task and an urgent imperative to ensure that students become information literate and competent. September (1993) is of the view that the library profession must be awakened to the need to claim for itself the role of agents of change who can make positive contribution to this process to transition.

Librarians and library educators should begin to discuss these issues because their role is critical and they hold the knowledge and tools required to create and provide a first rate programme and produce a core group of students who would be information literate and information competent, to break this vicious cycle. Education begins with knowing how to collect and evaluate information and the best legacy to leave students, future decision-makers and policy setters for the next century, is to prepare them to become

> "critical thinkers, intellectually curious observers,   creators and users of information, and citizen thinkers who routinely feel the need to know, who know how to access the data, yet who also challenge the validity of information, who seek corroboration before adopting information who understand the political, social, and economic agendas of information creation and dissemination, and who constantly see, re-see and re-form information to meet their needs for problem solving and decision making", Lenox and Walker, (1992), p.4).

In short, the skills that librarians possess must be taught and shared with others, particularly students as an ongoing process to prepare the latter for the demands of today and tomorrow's information society. There would be bottlenecks, of course, considering the work schedule of librarians and the staffing of library schools. But again, time is running out and as Kaufmann says "opportunities to serve as catalysts for this important change is speeding by". (p.38)

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to raise major issues, arguing for a need to inculcate information handling skills into the curriculum of schools to make students information literate and information competent in order to create information awareness to eradicate information poverty. It is the hope of this paper the these issues will be widely discussed. Inevitably, some of the issues have been dealt with superficially, but to develop them would require a treatise rather than an article.

Notes
1.   Information gathered in a chat with Tom Kumekpor of the Department of Sociology, University of Ghana.

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