

USER EDUCATION FOR FRESH STUDENTS AT THE BALME LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF GHANA: OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The Balme Library is the main library of the University of Ghana library system and has, over the years, been organizing a user education programme for fresh students at the start of a new academic year. Unfortunately, a critical examination of the programme has revealed certain difficulties as the university and, indeed, the library undergoes rapid changes. The challenges, no doubt, have the tendency of affecting the library's effort at inculcating in the students skills of independent information search. The article highlights these challenges and comes up with some measures to help in tackling the problems.

KEYWORDS: INFORMATION LITERACY, BIBLIOGRAPHIC INSTRUCTION,
LIBRARY ORIENTATION, UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES.

Introduction

It has become an annual exercise for the Balme Library, the main library of the University of Ghana library system, to organize a user education programme for fresh students at the start of every new academic year. The same could be said of many other academic libraries in the world that also embark on similar exercises.

The discourse on user education, it must be emphasized, has been enhanced by a great deal of literature on the subject matter, and it is quite common to come across such terms as 'library instruction', 'reader instruction', 'library orientation' or 'bibliographic instruction' being used in place of user education. However, user education must be seen more as

a generic term incorporating many library activities geared at empowering fresh students and, indeed, other continuing students, to make judicious use of library resources. Library instruction or bibliographic instruction and library orientation must, therefore, be regarded as a subset of user education. A new emerging term, which seems to incorporate virtually all what user education seeks to do, is '*information literacy*'. Thorhauge (2003), quoting Association of College and Research Libraries (U.S.) defines information literacy as "a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information." However, since the focus of this paper is on user education, the issue of information literacy could be dealt with at a future date.

Literature Review

To begin an examination of some salient literature on user education, it will be proper to, first, delve into the realm of definitions so as to put the issue into perspective. Restricting herself to the use of 'reader instruction', Mews (1972) defines the term as 'instruction given to readers to help them make the best use of a library, particularly an academic library of some size and complexity.' Secondly, the **Harrod's Librarians' Glossary** (1987) defines user education as 'a programme of information provided by libraries to users to enable them to make more efficient, independent use of the library's stock and services.' Not the least, Fleming was quoted by Fidzani (1995) as defining user education "as various programmes of instruction, education and exploration provided by libraries to users to enable them to make more effective, efficient and independent use of information sources and services to which these libraries provide access."

From the definitions cited, it seems the bottom line in the whole user education exercise is about empowering new students with knowledge and skills to enable them make judicious use of resources in an academic library.

Giving a historical background to library instruction, Lorenzen (2001) says that library instruction in academic institutions could be traced to the 17th century in Germany. However, academic library instruction was for most part dormant in the library profession until the 1960s. From this period onwards, a series of articles on user education or library instruction began to appear in journals of librarianship, such as **Illinois Libraries; Library Journal; Library Association Record; College and Research Libraries; Aslib Proceedings**, etc. Other notable publications also appeared on the book shelves such as those by Mews (1972), and Fjallbrant and Malley(1984).

Mews (1972), for example, argues in her book that reader instruction (or user education) is not a new phenomenon and that 'consultation with the scholar librarian of a learned library has taken place since libraries began.' Yet many students, Mews continues, find large libraries daunting, and tend to wander round the stacks in a haphazard way and get the notion that there is "nothing in the library" of use to them. Finally, the writer adds that the 'information explosion' and the great increase in student numbers since World War II have combined to render the need for instruction more pressing.

Fjallbrant and Malley (1984) put forth several arguments as to why user education is considered necessary for students. First, the writers say early attempts to explain the importance of user education were based on the belief that to know how to use a library was an essential part of 'education-for-life'. It is to prepare students for the continuing process of self-education after formal studies. Secondly, recent trends in higher education have increased the need for helping the library user. For instance, the emphasis on self-education has led to the increased use of tutorials, seminars, projects and guided reading as teaching methods and less reliance is being made of formal lessons and lectures. In this scenario, the learners or students require to be taught how to find material relevant to their needs in the library. It is by so doing that students are able to prepare and take a full and active part in the new ways of learning.

The third factor pointing to the need for user education in academic libraries, according to Fjallbrant and Malley (1984), is the growth of interdisciplinary courses in the universities. Such courses, which cut across the traditional boundaries of subjects, create problems for the students in the location, selection and organization of the material for study. The mere quantity of material to be searched (because of the various disciplines involved) requires that the student be helped to find his/her way.

Other reasons advanced by the writers for user education are: the need to teach students the nature of the library's retrieval and circulation system; the move away from the traditional storage role of the library to that of service provision; and that, library buildings are not always the easiest of places to understand and find one's way around. Even before these publications could come out, the famous **Parry Report** (Great Britain, 1967), had already argued for reader instruction in academic libraries. The **Report** says; 'there is widespread ignorance among students about the use of library tools and services' and, that, 'they should be given instruction in the use of library resources.'

There is no doubt that the literature cited above make a strong case for user education in academic libraries. However, there were other publications very critical of librarians engaging in library instruction and these include Schiller (1965), Biggs (1979) and Wilson (1979). These critics contend that by engaging in academic library instruction, something is taken away from the information obligation of the academic library. Again, the critics argue that information mediation is a highly skilled profession, and one that takes much education and experience to master. It therefore cannot be taught to indifferent students wandering around the library. The last major critique of the user education is that academic libraries are trying to use library instruction to justify their status on campus as teaching faculty or, that, academic librarians are using instruction as a way to increase their status on campus.

Be that as it may, academic library instruction has stood the test of time despite what the pessimists made us to believe. In fact, user education by academic libraries has been given a new fillip by the emergence of new information technologies. For instance, the virtual demise of card catalogues in some libraries and the introduction of on-line versions, the advent of the Internet, the emergence of on-line distance education, etc., have strengthened the resolve of librarians to embark on a relentless user education programme. They have even changed the ways of going about it!

Statement of the Problem

As a service-oriented organization, an academic library should subject some aspects of its operations to periodic scrutiny. This is to ascertain whether, indeed, the services being provided are achieving their stated objectives or otherwise. It is in this vein that user education for fresh students in the Balme Library, which has consistently been mounted over the years, is being assessed. Besides, the writer had been an active participant in the planning and execution of user education in the Balme Library for several years. This puts him in good stead to discuss the user education programme in the Library.

A cursory look at the exercise gives some indication that the programme is facing some challenges as the parent university and, indeed, its main library undergoes changes. For instance, one can mention the increasing number of fresh students admissions over the past few years and, of course, the limited human and material resources available to the Library to undertake the exercise. These challenges must be brought up for discussion so that relevant measures would be proposed as a way of overcoming some (if not all) of the challenges. This is the assignment that this article sets out to accomplish.

The Balme Library and User Education

Officially opened to the academic community in January 1960, the Balme Library is the main library of the University of Ghana library system. University libraries, all over the world, derive their mission from that of the parent organization, the university. The Balme Library, thus, stocks the relevant information that supports academic and research work in the University. Its current stock is in the region of some 360,000 volumes, made up of textbooks, periodicals, pamphlets, theses, newspapers and microfilms. To the *bona fide* users, namely faculty members and students, the Library also gives them an opportunity to borrow some of the books, especially those on the open shelves. In addition, the Library provides Internet-related and on-line database services of which the students and the faculty patronize for study, research and knowledge dissemination.

Many authorities have advanced arguments (as the introductory section shows) as to why it is of importance for an academic library to organize a user education programme for students, especially freshmen and freshwomen. These arguments equally apply to the Balme Library situation, and it will be quite monotonous repeating them here. However, one peculiar fact should be stated here. For the majority of fresh students admitted to the University of Ghana, Legon, it is the first time that they will encounter a well-organized library with so large a collection, at least within the Ghanaian context. Their situation is further compounded by the fact that in many of the secondary schools that they come from, the libraries there are nothing to write home about. Inadequate library collections, poor organization, unqualified personnel, etc., are the stock in trade of school libraries in Ghana. The Balme Library is, thus, under an obligation to instill in the fresh students the techniques of literature search, while, at the same time, making them aware of their responsibilities in respect of the use of the Library's resources.

The Fresh Students of the University

The fresh students are the new batch of students admitted to the university to pursue various course of studies at the diploma, first degree and second degree levels.

With the exception of a few diploma and graduate students who look more matured, most of the fresh students are quite young, in their late teens or in their early twenties. From hindsight, one can say that most of the undergraduate freshers have not completely shirked their secondary school mentality and they need a lot of promptings to do the right things.

Another phenomenon worthy of note has been the gradual increase of fresher intake by the University for the past few years. This has put a strain on the resources and facilities of the University, including that of the Balme Library. Table 1 shows fresh students' admission figures for the last three years, as well as their gender.

Table 1: Admission of Fresh students to the University of Ghana and their Gender

Year	Students Admitted	Male	Female
2004	7755	4580	3175
2005	6963	4204	2759
2006	7890	4626	3264

Data from University of Ghana Basic Statistics Booklet, 2004-2006.

Again, the high figures associated with the University admissions, are also reflected in the registration figures of fresh students by the Balme Library, although it should be stated that not all the freshers admitted register with the Library.

Table 2 presents the fresh students registration figures for the Library for the past three years.

Table 2: Registration Figures of Fresh students by the Balme Library

Year	Number of Students Registered
2004	4000
2005	3960
2006	4304

Data from Balme Library, Reader Services.

A new development associated with the increased fresh students' population has been their official non-residential status. The University's statistics indicate that 66.83% (2004), 66.12% (2005) and 62.72 % (2006) of the overall student population (including freshers) were non-resident. This development was as a result of inadequate official residential facilities to cater for all students, though this phenomenon is not peculiar to the University of Ghana. The effect that this phenomenon has on the Balme Library's user education will be discussed later.

A negligible number of the fresh students are graduate students and, for many of them, they had their first degrees from the same university. The Library, thus, organizes a special user education for them just to meet their peculiar information needs.

The Nature of User Education

The user education programme of the Balme Library has the following components: a talk to the fresh students by the University Librarian; registration of fresh students as *bona fide* users of the Library; showing of library orientation film to fresh students followed by a conducted tour of the Library; and electronic resources training for graduate students.

The programme begins, as indicated, with a lecture to the fresh students by the University Librarian. This opportunity is given to the Librarian by the university authorities as part of the larger orientation programme organized for the freshers by the University. The Librarian's talk, basically, highlights the role of the Balme Library in the academic life of students, the services available to students, library rules and regulations, as well as the sanctions meted out to library defaulters.

The next phase of the user education programme is the registration of fresh students as users of the library resources and facilities. The registration process takes place in the Library and the freshers are required to provide a passport-size photograph and also show evidence of having paid university/hall of residence fees. Each student is also given a copy of *An Introduction for Readers* handbook. The handbook is a publication by the Balme Library which provides pertinent information about the Library, its collection, the use of catalogues, services available, regulations, offences and sanctions. In the not too recent past, the Library used to give each registered student a Library Card upon the payment of a fee. This card was used for all borrowing transactions in the Library, and library staff could even inspect those cards as a basis for entering the Library. Unfortunately, the Library card notion has been suspended and replaced with the University ID Card. The main reason for its suspension was to stop saddling the fresh students with several fee payments at every registration point on campus, in addition to the controversial Academic Facility User Fees.

The third phase of the programme entails conducted tours of the Library for groups of students. The essence is to familiarize the new students with the physical arrangement of the Balme Library. It starts from the ground floor to other parts of the Library. The tour is made as interactive as possible by the library staff eliciting questions from the students and giving appropriate answers.

Mid-way through the tour, an **Orientation Film** of the Balme Library is shown to the students. This is a 20-minute film depicting the Library's resources, how to locate information through the use of the library catalogue and the procedure in borrowing a

library book. This film seeks to reinforce what has been told the students earlier during the tour. The orientation film was introduced at the start of the 2002/3 academic year. Hitherto, the orientation programme had been carried out manually by library staff to the fresh students, in groups of about 20.

The tours continue, after the film, where the students are taken to various sections of the Library by staff to observe at first hand the special collections and shown how to locate information in the library catalogues and, lastly, how to check out library books. In view of the large number of fresh students involved, the orientation programme runs for about a month, including evenings and Saturdays.

Mid-way through the first semester, the Library organizes a training programme, in the afternoons and the evenings, for fresh graduate students on how to access academic information in electronic format, such as the Internet and other on-line databases. This is the major user education programme organized for graduate students by the Library as most of them, as former students, are conversant with the traditional orientation programme of the Library. The essence of the hands-on training programme is to impart quality literature search skills to the graduate students. For many of the participants, however, the training offers them the first time opportunity to get introduced to the new technology and its use. The programme lasts for about two weeks. Previously, or until the introduction of ICT in the Library's reference work, the Reference Librarian used to organize bibliographic instruction to fresh graduate students, mostly in the use of periodical indexes and, also, introduced them to inter-library loans and document delivery service.

The foregoing account highlights the manner in which user education is conducted at the Balme Library. It becomes amply clear that, apart from the screening of an orientation film and, also, introducing fresh graduates to on-line information resources, the whole exercise is manually carried out. In other academic libraries, especially in Europe and North America where most of the libraries are automated, user education there takes on a different dimension. The emphasis of user education in these highly computerized and information rich libraries is to teach the fresh students how to log-on to access data in their OPACs, introducing them to local and external on-line databases, and inter-library loan and document delivery services. The other objective that the libraries seek to achieve is to ensure that the fresh students become more effective, efficient, and independent in their search for information. After all, only few of them will end up coming to the Library because many will access their literature needs remotely through their personal computers. Importantly, the user education is carried out not only for on-campus students, but for the

numerous distant learners as well, who are now a vital component of university students in their society.

Challenges Facing User Education

A critical review of the user education for freshers at the Balme Library reveals some inherent difficulties which have come to the fore within the past few years. These challenges are summed up as follows: the stress that the library staff go through during the exercise; the timing of the user education for the numerous fresh students; and the flaws identified in the newly-introduced orientation film. In addition, and not sounding pessimistic, an upcoming challenge that the Library has to grapple with is the intended automation project and the kind of user education to be given to fresh students (and even continuing students and faculty).

In the first place, the increasing fresh students admissions in the University for the past few years have put enormous strain on the library staff who undertake the exercise. Although it must be admitted that not all the fresh students offered admission to the university do come for the programme, at least, a majority of them do so. The drudgery of walking to all floors and sections of the Library so many times as part of the traditional walk-around tours is too much for the weary legs of the staff involved. One even wonders what the problem will be like when the Library extensions are completed and the Library becomes bigger. The guided tours are interlaced with an hour or so of talks by library staff informing the fresh students about library resources, services, regulations and sanctions. Within a period of one month, the Library's user education programme officially comes to an end, although the Library continues to register the fresh students as library users.

Secondly, the user education coincides with the official university orientation week, where the fresh students are introduced to various academic and non-academic issues confronting many a university student. While this is going on, some late-comers will then be going through registration formalities in the departments and at the halls of residence. Whether these batches of late-comers are motivated enough to come down to the Library to go through user education formalities is difficult to comprehend. The frustrations of most fresh students are further compounded by their non-residential status. For those non-resident fresh students going through the user education programme, it could be deduced that their attention, largely, centre on where to lay their heads or how to get easy public transport in Accra to get home.

From the above scenario, it becomes quite clear that the capacity of many fresh students to absorb the message of user education is reduced considerably. The reason is not far-fetched: the students are preoccupied with so many activities, which will help them to adjust to university life. In short, the psychological state of many fresh students is not conducive for them to absorb any meaningful information on user education. However, one hopes that the attempt by the university authorities to make all fresh students admitted to be resident on campus with effect from the 2007/08 session may yield positive results by, at least, enabling the Balme Library to have near total coverage of all fresh students in its user education exercise.

The above assertions are being made in apparent reference to the kind of statements the fresh students utter and their general comportment when they visit the Library. Such statements like: *'I took part in the library orientation but cannot find my way out'*, *'I'm lost about everything in the Library'*, *'I did not take part in the orientation programme'*, etc., are commonly made to library staff. At other times too, staff on duty at the reference desk see many students (obviously the freshers) walk straight to the locked cases of 'past university examinations questions' and try to serve themselves in total disregard for the staff. When their attention is drawn to follow the right procedure, they become surprised! A little probe into such behaviour shows that the offenders might have forgotten about this aspect of the user education, or, they never availed themselves of the user education opportunity.

The third difficulty facing the Library's user education programme centres on the orientation film introduced a couple of years ago. The major arguments advanced for its introduction were to make the exercise less stressful to both library staff and fresh students (compared to the sole manual orientation exercise) and, also, to stop "spoon-feeding the freshmen", as the traditional walk-about tours seek to do. From the arguments, it can be inferred that the orientation film was meant to replace the then manual orientation exercise. The question to ask is: *to what extent was the film a good substitute for the conducted tours?*

The candid opinion of this writer on the matter is that the film failed to properly address the manual orientation substitution issue. This is the result of some production flaws in the film which tend to overshadow the good intentions of the film. For instance, the film does not give a detailed account of how to locate an item in the Library using the subject catalogue, though this is addressed in the manual phase of the orientation. Besides, the problem of eating, drinking, and the use of mobile phones in the Balme Library is becoming

unbearable, in spite of the Library's effort to curtail the practice. The orientation film should have, therefore, been a good medium to caution the new students about such negative practices. Unfortunately, the film fails to tackle them as well.

The other criticism of the film is that it is only of 20 minutes duration. This is too short a time to inform the students adequately on how the Balme Library goes about meeting their information needs and, also, their obligation to the Library and the University as library users. This must be compared with the manual orientation exercise which takes, averagely, one and half hours and during which period a lot of information on the Library is given out.

In the light of these criticisms, the Library is compelled to continue with the conducted tours alongside showing of the orientation film. This is the only way of ensuring an effective user education programme for fresh students in the University.

The last challenge which may seem not immediate but one that is likely to crop up in the not too distant future, is the on-going library automation project. This project involves, among others, the replacing of the age-old card catalogues with an on-line public access version (OPAC). The Library is currently making trial runs of its OPAC (*UGCAT*, a web-based OPAC), and some students have since started using it for searches. Soon, the use of the UGCAT by students will be overwhelming. There is the need for the Library to start planning towards giving education to all library users (fresh students, continuing students, and faculty) on how to access information in the UGCAT and to guard against abuses. Any delay towards this exercise will prove burdensome to the Library and its staff in future.

Overcoming the Challenges

There is no doubt the challenges mentioned above may have wholly or partly affected the capacity of the Balme Library to deliver effective and efficient user education to newly-admitted students in the University. A not so efficient user education programme will, somehow, diminish the reputation of the Library within the academic community. It must also be pointed out that uninformed fresh students tend to be the worst offenders when it comes to flouting library rules and regulations. Eventually, these inefficiencies put so much pressure on the *avant-garde* staff at the reference section, who are compelled to give constant attention to uninformed students most of the time. Time thus wasted could have been used on other pressing reference duties.

Conclusion

User education in an academic library for a new batch of students, like the one organized at the Balme Library, must be carefully planned and executed so as to achieve maximum results. Anything short of this can cause a great deal of stress to the library staff and harm the Library's reputation within the academic community.

Recommendations

Having identified the challenges facing user education at the Balme Library, it is equally prudent to come up with measures meant to overcome the challenges or strengthen the user education programme. In the first place, a lot has been said about the timing of the user education programme at the Library which coincides with the official orientation programme drawn up for fresh students by the University. Therefore, to reduce the numbers taking part in the orientation week, and to make it less stressful for the library staff and students, for instance, fresh students residing in the Accra-Tema area could be asked to report to the Library (a week or two before the start of a new academic year) to go through the exercise. Later, the Library could concentrate on the other fresh students from outside the Greater Accra Region when the University officially opens for academic work. By so doing, user education for the freshers will become more meaningful and achieve the desired ends. Still on the timing of the programme, if the Balme Library strongly believes that user education could make more impact after lectures have began, then, it should initiate the necessary moves to sensitize the faculty and university authorities on this.

Secondly, the Library handbook, *An Introduction for Readers*, usually given to fresh students on the day of registration/orientation, should be dispatched to them early as part of other documents sent to newly-admitted students by the University. The handbook, it must be recalled, contains important information about the Library, its resources and services. Early dispatch of the handbook to the fresh students will enable them to digest such information before they come down officially to partake in the user education.

Thirdly, to make the user education more practical-oriented, the Balme Library could team up with the University's Language Centre, which offers a course in study skills to the fresh students. In fact, the Library-Language Centre collaboration used to be there in the past but, for whatever reason, the collaboration fell through. The time has come to revive it as a way of re-engineering user education at the Library. On the other hand, the Balme Library, with the necessary consultations, could mount a course-credit programme

on **Information Literacy** for fresh students at the start of the academic year. This course must be made compulsory for all freshers because, as Fjallbrant and Malley(1984) stated, “*to know how to use a library was an essential part of ‘education-for-life’*”.

Furthermore, some writers on user education have argued that giving library instruction or orientation to fresh students once during the orientation week is not enough to equip them with thorough independent library search skills. In this regard, Thompson (1979) intimated that “*for reader instruction to be effective, it must be offered at a number of different levels.*” This means that as continuing students, for example, reach their major fields of specialization, an academic library must organize a tailor-made library instruction programme to satisfy their special needs. The current situation in the University of Ghana is for some concerned lecturers requesting the Balme Library to organize such an instruction. However, there is the need for the Library to be pro-active in this endeavour and formalize it as part of the user education for senior students.

The last, but not the least suggestion is that although the idea of putting on film the library’s orientation programme was laudable, the flaws in it must be corrected. This, in effect, calls for the introduction of a new film that rectifies all the flaws mentioned earlier and that takes into consideration new developments in the Library and, of course, of an appreciable length of time.

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