

LIBRARY INSTRUCTION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY(U.S.T.): A NEED FOR NEW APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT

Instruction in library use is a persistent problem. This is revealed by the welter of writing and the extent of interest in the subject.

Now than before, bibliographic instruction stands at the cross roads of the 'information explosion'. This may, in part, be due to the accelerated volume of published information particularly in science, medicine and technology. To cope with the ever-increasing volume of knowledge, students need to comprehend the methods of information retrieval.

The UST stands out as the only university in Ghana that offers courses in technology in addition to science and medicine - all being disciplines where instruction in library use is paramount. Based on empirical research, this article focuses on the library instruction programme for freshmen at the UST and highlights its deficiencies. Recommendations are made for the improvement of the programme to make it comprehensive and effective.

Keywords

Library orientation, User education, Bibliographic instruction, User instruction, Library instruction, University of Science and Technology

INTRODUCTION

Library orientation and user or bibliographic instruction are often used interchangeably. The two are collectively referred to as user education. Traditionally, whenever either is used it is taken to mean instruction in library use. That is, the development of a pattern of habits that will lead the individual to information sources.

LIBRARY STUDIES

Instruction in library use is a persistent problem. For several decades, librarians and library researchers have been concerned with the need to teach readers how to use libraries effectively. But this effort is most often hampered by inadequately drawn orientation programme, lack of resources, absence of co-operation between library staff, faculty and students. For instance, whilst the library staff may be primarily concerned with the maximum utilization of the information resources possessed by the library, faculty and students may exhibit gross lack of commitment to the programmes. The latter, in addition, may only want to know how to find information, as quickly as possible in order to pass examinations. This diversity makes it difficult to integrate the varied needs of the three groups to offer a meaningful orientation.

One other problem is that libraries differ in sizes, and their operations as well as services provided may change. Above all, a change in the enrolment of students for a particular academic year may lead to a review of the orientation programme, the resources and teaching strategies. Thus, instruction in library use may vary from year to year and may have to be reviewed periodically. It is not something that could be taught once and for all. It is a continuous process. These recurring problems explain why the subject has generated much interest and diversity of coverage given it in writing, studies, surveys conferences and seminars by librarians and researchers to explore the best ways to maximize scanty resources and to find better ways to teach user education programmes.

HISTORY

Raseroka traces the roots of instruction in library use further back and observes that:

The literature on the need and importance of bibliographic instruction in academic libraries extends from the period libraries were identified as educational agencies.¹

In fact, the first formal attempt at instructing college or University students in the use of the library began at the University of Michigan where its first librarian, Raymond C. Davis for three years gave instructions to students. A more serious approach to this started in 1882 when the Board of Regent of the University established

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a regular elective course in the subject. Since this period, instruction in library use has been on the upsurge in all university and academic libraries.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LIBRARY ORIENTATION AND BIBLIOGRAPHIC INSTRUCTION

As mentioned earlier, library orientation and bibliographic instruction though traditionally have been taken to mean one and the same thing, the use is incorrect. They are two different things and therefore, the interchangeability is a misnomer. This opinion is shared by Scrivener:

Many writers on the subject treat it as a single or homogenous activity but there are two distinct, though overlapping facets. One is teaching the use of libraries, the other is teaching bibliographic or the use of subject literature.²

The former is library orientation whilst the latter is bibliographic instruction.

Fjallbrant³ and Fjallbrant and Malley⁴ see library orientation as the creation of awareness among students about the existence of the academic library - its organization, layout, and facilities; techniques of library usage and the services it offers. In short, it enables students to know 'WHAT' is available; 'WHEN' the library is open; 'WHERE' specific items are to be found; and 'HOW' to actually obtain and borrow the material required.

Carey⁵ expatiates this further and notes that the 'WHAT' question concerns the type of books and services the library offers. 'WHEN' primarily deals with the opening and closing hours of the library. 'WHERE' deals with finding the facilities and services that are needed. It also borders on understanding the pattern behind the organisation of the library. 'HOW' concerns how to use what one has found effectively with a minimum of wasted time. It may include knowing what kinds of documents are recorded in the catalogue (those within the library and those held by other libraries, how to find books recorded in the catalogue), how to trace abstracts, periodicals and other references.

In sum, library orientation acquaints the reader with the layout and the location of facilities, collections, sources and service points.

User or bibliographic instruction on the other hand is concerned with problems of information retrieval. According to Fjallbrant,

Bibliographic instruction is concerned with enabling the student to obtain information required by making use of the total resources and material available at the library.⁶

Besides introducing students to the concept of the library being central to their learning experience at the university it intimately acquaints them with how the literature in their subjects is structured and how best to make use of it:

This involves acquainting him with the principal sources of information (journals, handbooks, significant monographs...) and the keys to the litera-

ture, such as bibliographies, indexes, and abstracts, teaching him to use these keys for a literature search or to find a specific item of information; and it could also include such general techniques as methods of citation, compilation of bibliographies...⁷

In other words, user or bibliographic instruction introduces them to the concept of information processing.

However, for any effective utilization of material and graphic sources, library orientation and bibliographic instruction must be integrated. The integration of the two is what is often referred to as user education.

USER EDUCATION

User education is instruction given to readers to enable them make use of the library. It stimulates library use and the entire information and communication process.

User education is therefore the pivot around which effective utilization of information sources revolves. It is a continuous process based on the needs of the user and it involves various facets of communication.

BASIS OF USER EDUCATION

The basis to offer user education to readers or users of a library finds expression in an old Chinese proverb. It states:

If you give a man a fish
He will have a single meal
If you teach him how to fish
He will eat all his life.⁸

This invariably means that an instruction in library use and the use of books are an essential part of university education and the continuing process of self-education. Also such systematic instruction enables students to accomplish their work expeditiously in the library without resort to the use and reuse of a minimum number of library resources. It also emphasizes the concept of self-help.

It has been observed in contemporary Africa that relatively small part of the entire student population effectively utilizes graphic sources that abound in our libraries and as explained by Rasrocka, most students are not introduced to the use of the library in their educational experiences. This anomaly needs to be corrected as user education is seen as one of the most effective means to stimulate potential users and to introduce them to the vast amount of available resources, if the objectives of university education are to be met fully. Truly, the objectives of the university are met when potential users find their way through the jungle of printed and other materials that might be relevant to certain particular tasks and interests they may want to pursue. Above all, a comprehensive library user education motivates students to make efficient, independent use of the library's stock and services.

This invariably helps to avoid the simple use of pre-selected reading lists.

Josey is more blunt in his justification for user education:

It is sheer folly to spend thousands of dollars on materials and not instruct college students in how to use the materials.⁹

This means that graphic and bibliographic sources purchased, catalogued and stored are only useful when potential users utilize them, and this is exactly what user education aims at.

According to Fjallarant and Malley: another factor pointing to the need for user education is the growth of inter-disciplinary courses...such courses which cut across the traditional boundaries of subjects, create problems for the student in the location, selection and organization of the materials for study. The mere quantity of the material to be selected, because of the various disciplines involved, requires that the student should be helped to find his/her way. Not only quantity but the diversity of sources and format, make the need for help essential. Without training the student would be unable to make efficient use of all the information that is available and potentially useful.¹⁰

Of late there has been the need to train scientists in the use of libraries and literature. This is a result of the accelerated trend in prolific publication and findings of scientific investigation and the much talked about "Information explosion" in the science, medicine and technology. This urge is particularly high within these fields where it behoves on students to consult literature in order to make their own judgements and to learn about inquiry. This trend which has become the accepted standard for education in these fields is corroborated by Steele:

Theory and research have become essential to the traditional technologies and are a major consideration in the rapidly expanding newer fields and subfields. User education and the need for sophisticated skills in this area have come to be recognized by both faculty and students...¹¹

It is against this background that library instruction is planned and offered to students at the U.S.T. Library.

LIBRARY INSTRUCTION AT THE U.S.T. LIBRARY

The beginning of each academic year sees fresh students going through the compulsory ritual of library instruction at the library.

OBJECTIVE

In offering library instruction to the students, the U.S.T. Library assumes that the library is a full partner in the educational enterprise, and therefore students benefit academically from libraries; that without orientation, students will find difficulty locating and using materials. What is more, the absence of library instruction may

guarantee the non-use of at least some library services and resources.

ORIENTATION

The actual orientation takes off when the Lending/Circulation Librarian has written to the various faculties requesting them to make their students available for library orientation on dates agreed upon by both parties. Students attend the orientation session on the basis of the faculty in which they are enrolled. This formality comes off in the first week of the first semester. By convention, all the professionals on the staff with the exception of the Librarian and his deputy take part in the orientation programme. It takes place on the premises of the Library. Each tour involves a sizeable number of students, numbering about fifty.

On the scheduled dates when the students are assembled in the precincts of the Library, the staff member who is to take the students round first introduces himself or herself and then succinctly explains the objectives of the programme. Thereafter, he introduces the students to the concept of the Library being central to their learning experiences at the university. In other words, he tells them the benefits of being able to utilize facilities and resources in the Library both for formal studies and for their intellectual advancement. They are also made to realise that the staff are ready and willing to assist them when they are in difficulty. The tours also give the students actual physical and psychological experience of being in the Library building.

Students are shown the layout of the Library, the location of various collections and service points, the nature of the classification scheme used and the catalogues. The services the Library offers and how to use them are intimately explained. Further explanation is given on membership and registration procedure, borrowing privileges, how books may be borrowed, and the rules and regulations that guide the use of the Library.

Finally, they are taught how to use reference tools such as the library catalogues, periodical indexes, abstracting journals and periodical subject indexes, all in the single tour spanning forty-five minutes. At the end of it all, students are given the chance to ask questions on pertinent issues not clear to them.

Normally, a brochure - "U.S.T. Library Guide" which clearly sets out the layout of the Library, hours of opening, names and designation of the professional staff, organisation of the Library, general rules, regulations and sanctions, location of books and related materials, registration of readers and borrowing privileges, how to borrow books, how to find a book, explanation of the classification scheme, and other relevant information, is issued out to the students. But due to lack of funds to print them in sufficient numbers, the Library has neither printed nor issued out any to students for the past five years.

APPRAISAL

A cursory look at the instruction package seems to point out that the staff tend to agree that the students need to know enough to avoid pestering them unnecessarily. Evaluation is also a simple process, once the students ask fewer directional questions, the tour is indeed effective in the light of its objectives.

On the whole, the programme is inadequate and vaguely linked with the taught courses. These crop of students are not acquainted with the use of good and large libraries, and the use of bibliographic sources to exploit the resources of a large library; therefore the hurried manner in which the tour is conducted distances it from achieving the set objectives and in meeting the needs of the students. It needs to be emphasized that whilst the orientation is adequate for answering the 'WHAT', 'WHERE', and 'HOW' questions of library use, it is deficient of library skills instruction adequate for equipping students whose library background and use of literature and capabilities of using information and document retrieval tools is limited. Bibliographic instruction should therefore be emphasized.

It is contended that library use permeates all academic disciplines and therefore the goals of user education programmes must be closely built into all taught courses. However, this is not the case at the U.S.T. The programme is not subject-related, and not built into the taught academic courses. For this reason, the programme does not intimately acquaint the students with how best to make use of it. This deficiency in the instruction of library use deprives the students of obtaining information required in making use of the total resources and materials available in the Library. The students therefore continue to use and reuse only a minimum number of library resources. This partly explains why they always complain of inadequate bookstock and related materials. It also partly explains the students inability to use, particularly, the catalogues and hence each time they come to the Library, they endeavour to seek the assistance of staff in the use of the catalogues, without which one cannot easily identify, locate and retrieve books and related materials. One only needs to be within the precincts of the Library to appreciate this observation. Students come and wander about as if they are looking for lost items. This lends support to the failure of the concept of self-help which is one of the major pillars behind the Library's user education programme.

One other ingredient of a successful library instruction programme is that the staff of the library must be willing to offer the programme, the students must perceive its importance, and faculty of its role in the students' learning experiences.

At the U.S.T., the staff are always willing to offer the programme and this is attested to by the fact that every academic year, no sooner had the students arrived than the Reader Services Librarian writing to the Deans of the various schools, faculties and institutes to arrange for their students to come for library orientation. Though at

the scheduled hour for the programme, the students do come in their large numbers, one could however, note that, they hardly attach any credence and importance to the orientation. They see it as an exercise of no academic importance but perhaps one of the early rituals performed on their arrival on the university campus.

Firstly, the programme takes off at a time the students have not yet actually grasped the work to be done in the university, and do not therefore appreciate the role the library plays in their academic pursuits. They do not behave in educationally desirable ways, e.g. the pleasure involved in making use of library resources in order to find information to write a particular assignment. This means that at this point the students are not motivated to learn, and therefore whatever is taught is less accepted. This point is worth emphasizing because from experience, students learn more when they are motivated and that is the time they should be taught. This is the period learning is said to be affected by the affective domain.

Secondly, the programme is not arranged according to degree of complexity, and hence too much is heaped on them at a time. They are overwhelmed by the use of unfamiliar words, terms and concepts. This renders both teaching and learning ineffective since learning at this point is not affected by the cognitive domain.

Thirdly, the programme is not student-centred, neither is it problem-oriented. Student-centred programmes tend to draw contributions from the students and lead them from the known to the unknown. But in this exercise, the staff who takes the students through the tour sees himself as the one who possesses the technical know-how and the expertise, and sees the students as blank minds that should absorb in an endless talk of whatever he has for them. In such isolation, depriving them of participation, they do not see themselves as part of the programme. It is no wonder that they soon get bored and no longer pay heed to what is said in the course of the 'talk and tour' orientation. In other words, they easily fade into anonymity.

A problem-oriented programme has direct application to the problems students meet in their studies. It also takes the form of learning by doing. This is likely to be more effective than simply being told how to do a particular piece of work.¹² Learning by doing is in line with behavioural objectives as stated in the 'Guidelines for bibliographic instruction in academic libraries'.¹³ It is only when the objective is achieved that instruction course could be said to have altered a student's attitude towards the library and his or her use of the library's resources. The U.S.T. Library orientation programme is however deficient of these vital ingredients. The students are only told how to do a particular piece of work and not given the opportunity to do it under supervision. To this extent, students do not develop or build the confidence they need to freely use information and document retrieval tools without staff help.

Lastly, every efficient and effective programme must have a terminal objective. In other words, students

CONCLUSION

It is fervently believed that, something of this nature and in this direction would help expose students to intensive use of the Library. The burden of the staff always coming to the aid of students in the use of bibliographic tools would be minimized and staff time could be usefully invested in the provision of specialized services.

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