

Developing Information Literacy Programmes for Distance Learners: Accepting the Challenge at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine

Sharida Hosein

*Librarian, the University Libraries,
the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad*

Abstract

User education is an integral part of library services to all of its users. Most library instruction or bibliographic instruction programmes are designed to enable the users to make the most efficient use of their libraries and teach information literacy principles that will be useful even after leaving the academic environment, thus facilitating lifelong learning. For students studying via the distance education mode this type of instruction is equally important. Even if they do not have access to their university's libraries they will be able to use other libraries and other information sources, including the Internet. To teach the basic principles of information literacy, we at the St. Augustine campus of the University of the West Indies have developed a Guide to Finding and Using Information for Lifelong Learning. It includes guidelines on choosing the appropriate information resource for the question, evaluating information resources and preparing reference lists and bibliographies. It addresses print, electronic and online information sources. So far this guide has been used, with modifications, by the Medical Sciences Library for students in the postgraduate programme in Primary Health Care and Family Medicine. The aim of this paper is to discuss the issue of user education for distance students, and students' reaction to the Guide to Finding and Using Information for Lifelong Learning.

Introduction

The development of life-serving information gathering skills is one of the most important user services provided by academic libraries in face-to-face education (Watson, 1996). In training students to use information resources, libraries impart a lifelong skill and academic libraries have recognized the need for action to help develop the ability of distance learners to use library resources and services effectively. Libraries must therefore have a role in the education of students who are expected to learn traditional values of

critical assessment, independent discovery and rigorous thinking. Whether students are on campus or at a distance, these essential qualities of higher education can only be acquired through exposure to the ideas and insights of others (Wolpert, 1998). According to the ACRL Guidelines for distance learning library services: "The instilling of lifelong learning skills through libraries is a primary outcome of higher education. Such preparation is of equal necessity for the distance learning community as it is for those on the traditional campus" (ACRL, 1998).

Information Literacy and Libraries

One of the most cited definitions of information literacy is that put forward by the American Library Association (ALA) Presidential Committee on Information Literacy. This states that to be information literate a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information (ALA, 1989). If students are to continue learning throughout their lives they must know they have an information need and be able to access, evaluate, organize and present information from all information sources – books, journals, mass media, online databases, community experts, government agencies, the Internet and CD ROMs – all of which are effective learning tools (Breivik, 1999). Information literacy focuses on student empowerment to do independent, self-directed research and to contribute positively to society.

Libraries have been teaching bibliographic instruction and other information related skills for a long time and one of the tenets of bibliographic instruction librarians is that teaching library skills is worthwhile not only for classroom assignments but for lifelong learning. Librarians can show students how to systematically evaluate what they find (Engeldinger, 1998). Librarians also provide vital gateways to information and must play a key role in preparing students for the information demands of today's society. They can develop programmes to teach students the information literacy skills required for them to identify the nature of their information needs, to locate the needed information and synthesize it to meet their needs. Information literacy is directly related to critical thinking skills and emphasizes such activities as selection, rejection, evaluation, organization, topic definition and question definition (Harkness Connell and Franklin, 1994).

Information Literacy and the Distant Learner

There is no such thing as a "typical distant learner", but much research has shown that they are mature individuals, usually employed, with limited time for studying. They choose distance education programmes for the flexibility they allow and they are highly motivated. Like traditional younger learners these distance adult learners require ancillary services, especially library services, to help them conduct research and fulfil their assignments. These learners need to be taught information literacy skills so that they can effectively use the information resources available to them. More and more learners can rapidly access databases through personal computers or from their workplace. The librarian's role is to assist such learners by demonstrating how to use these data services and how to develop a search strategy that will allow them to conduct searches in the most efficient manner. Formal training in information retrieval skills must now go beyond traditional bibliographic instruction services in its goal to build the independence of the information-seeking student. This type of training is even more critical for the distance education student, who may never set foot on the traditional campus (Madaus and Webster, 1998).

Teaching Information Literacy to Distant Learners

The literature provides some examples of how various academic libraries have tried to meet the demand for information skills from their distant learners. The following example from the University of South Africa (UNISA) has some relevance to our present situation. Their experience showed that there was an increase in the number of students from environments where library services are either very poor or nonexistent and therefore many of their students do not know how to use libraries or their resources. Students

were unable to find material independently in the library even within the simplified arrangement of the Study Collection designed specifically for distant learners. Lecturers at other universities where UNISA graduates enrolled for postgraduate qualifications complained that these students did not have the necessary library or information skills.

The library therefore tried different methods to teach the students these skills. These included orientation lectures in selected first year courses where the initial group visit to the university campus was used to provide students with a basic introduction to the library service. They developed a workbook explaining the use of the library, posted it to 5,493 students in selected first year courses; they organized workshop sessions during study group visits and distributed pamphlets on various aspects of how to use the library. They did all of these things because they believe that learning how to use the library effectively should not only increase the students' chances of academic achievement but should also provide them with a lifelong advantage (Willemsse, 1991).

The St. Augustine Experience

At the University of the West Indies (UWI) St. Augustine we also recognize that information literacy is a requirement for independent learners, and information empowerment is crucial to their total development. Like most other academic libraries we have a long tradition of providing user education to our patrons. This started in 1964 with the library orientation tour and developed over the years into more formal training sessions where users were taught how to use the catalogues, basic techniques of searching for information and introduction to major sources of reference. Increasingly students are being taught how to search online databases and information sources, including the Internet, as the library acquires access to these resources.

Recognizing that distance learners deserve the same user education as face-to-face students we developed the "Guide for Finding and Using Information". The guide teaches the basics of bibliographic instructions and library orientation. It is a practical guide designed to make students competent in using libraries: using catalogues, locating information from various sources, evaluating information and presenting sources of information according to international bibliographic standards. It is intended to provide a framework to enable the student to:

- Effectively manage the process of finding information;
- Understand the various kinds and formats of information available and the tools that can be used to help locate them;
- Develop skills in searching for information and appraising what is found;
- Gain experience in using some of the more popular sources and tools.

It gives an overview of how libraries are organized according to standard classification schemes. The example given is the Library of Congress Classification Scheme as used by the University Libraries at St Augustine. In addition to this basic information most information sources are described and some of their advantages and disadvantages outlined. Anticipating the growing access to electronic information technology and online sources, the Guide also examines various types of electronic information, including the Internet. A checklist for evaluating printed and electronic information sources is provided so users can make objective use of the information they obtain.

The Guide provides comprehensive guidelines on referencing, giving examples of the standard format for writing up references from printed and

online sources of information. Examples of simple queries are given to illustrate the development of a search strategy by selecting and combining keywords. At the end a short workbook follows a search question through all of the steps of an enquiry until the final answer is achieved.

Testing the Guide

The Postgraduate Diploma in Primary Care and Family Medicine is currently taught at the Faculty of Medical Sciences, St. Augustine. There are nineteen students in this programme, all medical practitioners in Trinidad and Tobago. At the beginning of the programme, staff at the Medical Sciences Library (MSL) conducted an orientation exercise for all students. MSL librarians also facilitated Phase II of the first course, Learning and Teaching in Primary Care. Phase II is entitled Information Resources for Learning and Teaching in Primary Care. The three-week course is a practical one, the major objective being that the participants learn new skills and are introduced to new concepts in the use and management of health information resources. It covers such topics as locating and evaluating health information, retrieving information, and report writing and research. Content from the "Guide for Finding and Using Information" was used in the teaching of this course. The Guide was also amended to include additional resources relevant to health and medicine. At the end each student was given a copy of this amended guide along with a short questionnaire for evaluating its usefulness.

Most of the students returned completed questionnaires, mainly because I visited the class during one of its on-site sessions and collected the responses. I wanted to test the clarity, relevance and usefulness of the Guide to their present course and to their needs after finishing the course. I used a scale of 1 to 3 in descending order of effectiveness. Approximately 75 percent

of respondents agreed that the Guide was easy to understand and all of them thought that it was relevant to their needs at this time. Sixty-three percent thought that the information was very useful, while 37 percent said that it was useful to their course. There was a 50/50 split between those who thought the Guide would be very useful and useful to them after finishing the course. I asked for any additional comments regarding presentation, relevance and usefulness of the Guide for the course and for lifelong learning. Most of the students thought that the information was well presented and organized and hence easy to understand. Most thought that it was relevant to their present information needs and that it would be useful in the future. One suggested regular updating, especially on the recommended Internet sites.

Even though this was a small group and the results may not have statistical significance it does provide an indication that this approach is on the right track with respect to providing distance students with information literacy skills. It also indicates that such skills are considered necessary to satisfying lifelong information needs.

User Education in a Small State

By any definition Trinidad and Tobago is a small state and in the context of number of students enrolled, UWI St. Augustine is a small campus. In the case of the Postgraduate Diploma in Primary Care and Family Medicine smallness was an advantage. It was possible for the students to meet on the campus and have a face-to-face learning experience. They had all the opportunities for interaction with their lecturers, having a first-hand look at the library and its resources. During their programme they could visit the library and make use of the facilities, including a dedicated computer for carrying out information searches. It would seem that these students had the best of

both worlds, the flexibility provided by learning at a distance and the advantages of a face-to-face situation.

The majority of distant education students registered at the St. Augustine campus live within Trinidad and Tobago. They come to the campus for registration and during this orientation week they can join the library orientation tours. They are also invited to attend the library instruction seminars that are held during the first semester. No statistics are available on the number of students taking advantage of these opportunities to learn about the library and information skills. These students also visit the library occasionally when they have information needs that cannot be met by their course materials. It would seem therefore that our small size provides our "local" distant education students with more advantages than disadvantages. However, this campus is also responsible for students in other islands and at the moment the library does not have a strategy for supporting them. This is of concern and work is ongoing to develop a policy for providing for the information needs of all our students.

Harnessing the Potential of Information Technology to Meet the Challenge

The development of the "Guide for Finding and Using Information" is one step in that direction. In its printed format it can be sent to the students as part of their course packages. It is also on the library's Web site in PDF format and can therefore be accessed by anyone who has Internet access. The Library has made major strides in the development of its information technology capability over the past three years. The local area network is fully operational and so is the Intranet, the OPAC is now available via the World Wide Web. In addition our students have access to several online information services and there is an information centre where students with research questions can come to access the information

services to which the library has subscriptions, or any other Web site where they can find the information they need. It seems a natural progression, therefore, to make these facilities work in favour of our distant learners. It is envisaged that in the near future all of our students will be given authentication to access all the information resources available from the library wherever they are and at their convenience. This will go a long way in meeting their information needs. It will also make the teaching of information literacy skills an essential part of their education. As librarians we will have to accept the challenge to help our users become independent learners, making them information literate and prepared for lifelong learning.

Bibliography

ACRL (1998). "ACRL Guidelines for Distance Learning Services" (the final version approved July 1998). <http://www.ala.org/acrl/guides/distlrng.html>. 14 March 2000.

American Library Association, Presidential Committee on Information Literacy. (1989). Final Report. Chicago: American Library Association.

Breivik, P.S. (1999) "Take II - Information Literacy: Revolution in Education," *Reference Services Review* 27, no. 3: 271-275.

Engeldinger, E.A. (1998). "Bibliographic Instruction and Critical Thinking: The Contribution of the Annotated Bibliography," *RQ* 28, no. 2 (Winter): 195-202.

Harkness Connell, T. and Franklin, C. (1994). "The Internet: Educational Issues. (Libraries and the Internet: Education, Practice and Policy)," *Library Trends* 42, no. 4 (Spring): 608-626.

Madaus, J.R. and Webster, L. (1998). "Opening the

Door to Distance Learning," *Computers in Libraries* 18, no. 5 (May): 51-55.

Watson, E. (1996). "Distance Librarianship: A Perspective," in *Library Services to Distance Learners in the Commonwealth: A Reader*, pp. 9-39, edited by E.F. Watson and N. Jagannathan. Vancouver: Commonwealth of Learning.

Willemse, J. (1991). "University Library Service Dedicated to Distance Teaching: The University of South Africa Experience," *Library Trends* 39, no. 4 (Spring): 514-535.

Wolpert, A. (1998). "Services to Remote Users: Marketing the Library's Role," *Library Trends* 47, no. 1 (Summer): 21-41.