



Preparing Library and Information Science Students for Orally Based Communities

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Abstract:

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) proclaims that every human being has a right to seek information. Notwithstanding this Universal Declaration, many people in the world are still deprived of information because of poverty, illiteracy or lack of infrastructure.

This paper explores the hypothesis that production of information professionals with orientation to serve the orally based communities is one of the solutions to accessing information services to orally based communities who happen to be deprived of this right in developing countries for example 31% of Ugandans were still being deprived of this right through illiteracy (Peoples Daily On-line, 2005). It is ironical that information provision is hardly guaranteed in the rural areas where the majorities who participate in agriculture - the major contributors to the National GDP- do reside.

Through literature analysis, focus group interaction, and unstructured interviews with colleagues at the East African School of Library and Information Science (EASLIS), the Departments of Library and Information Science of the Uganda Christian University (UCU), Kyambogo University, and major LIS employers in East Africa, the article revisits the definition of “orally based communities”. It further explains the elements/aspects that should be considered during the information provision process to the orally based communities; the type of knowledge and competencies required by the Information Professionals (IPs) to serve the orally based communities; the required curriculum content, and other pre-requisite issues required to implement such curriculum. Finally the challenges to the provision of information to the orally based communities and the strategies to surmount them are discussed.

Keywords: *Orally based community, illiteracy, curriculum content, Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), Universal Declaration of Human Rights, challenges and solutions.*

Introduction

Orally based community is synonymous to oral tradition, meaning cultural information passed on from one generation to another by story tellers. The forms of oral tradition include poetry (often chanted or sung), folktales, and proverbs as well as magical spells, religious instruction, and recollections of the past. Music and rhyme commonly serve as both entertainment and aids to memory. (<http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/oral+culture>. Retrieved, 7th April 2010.) In oral communities, oral tradition used to be the only means of communicating knowledge. However, to-day the prevalence of radio, television and newspapers has led to the decline of oral tradition, though it survives among old people and minority groups as well as among children, whose games, counting rhymes and songs are transmitted orally from generation to generation.

According to McLuhan (1977, 1982) the concept oral meant involvement, participation and expression as opposed to the print world which lent itself to linear thought, abstraction, and the separation of the knower from the known. In popular culture, though, widespread television viewing and use of video tapes for instruction and information, draw people away from text based entertainment and learning. These technologies have enabled many to skip learning how to read and write and still participate in communication.

To-day Computer Mediated Communication systems (CMC) such as Electronic Mail (EM) Computer Conferencing (CC) and Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) provide participants with different ways to transcend time and space - somehow a return to orality.

Preparing LIS students for orally based communities: aspects for reflection

“Preparing Library and Information Science Students for Orally Based Communities (OBC)”, has many aspects to reflect upon. First, the nature of the orally based users targeted by the library and information services. Second, the types of services that ought to be offered to the

OBC by the library and information services. Third, the readiness of the appropriate LIS curriculum content, to inculcate theory and skills required by those to provide the library and information services. Fourth, the availability of resources for teaching the curriculum which include: educators, the teaching and learning resources, and other facilities.

Briefly therefore, a LIS curriculum should be designed to translate knowledge and competencies to the potential Information Professionals (IPs) to enable them deliver the services to the orally based users. Furthermore, for the IPs' already in the field, Continuing Education (CE) to update knowledge and skills should be constantly organised.

Features of the Orally Based Communities

1. Oral communication of Information

In the orally based community, information/knowledge transfer is mainly through conversation or meaningful action strategies or visual encounter with information/knowledge objects.

2. Illiteracy

Illiteracy, the inability to read, count and write, reigns in such society. Illiteracy originates from lack of education itself a result of not going to school mainly because of failure to pay school fees. Illiteracy, sometimes is a result of truancy from school, lack of advice from parents/guardians to their children - itself a result of disinterest in education. Even the introduction of free education both at the primary and secondary levels in Uganda for example, has not wiped illiteracy off the face of the world. Another cause of illiteracy is relapsing into illiteracy, due to lack of reading materials and therefore practicing literacy to maintain it. Illiteracy is one of the scourges against humanity. Illiteracy mostly attacks the less fortunate and most exposed to the other scourges - poverty and disease - and more hostile in the rural areas where the majority of people toil to support agriculture, the backbone of

economy Illiteracy rate is still a force to reckon with: for example in 2005 it was 14.99% in Kenya (UNESCO, 2005) and 31% in the same period in Uganda (Peoples Daily On-line, 2005).

3. Yearn for Information

Like their literate counterparts the illiterates yearn for information to satisfy their knowledge needs but because they are illiterate and cannot source the information from textual or similar sources themselves they depend on others to get them the information or alternative means over which in many cases they have no control.

Heavy schedules of Work

Orally based communities mostly reside or are associated with rural areas where they are overworked because of engaging in demanding work such as agriculture both for subsistence and commercial purposes. They hardly have spare time to engage in social activities such as visiting libraries. Occasionally they find time for church and funerals.

Ignorance, poverty, and disease

Poverty is not restricted but is more rampant in rural areas. Sometimes these also exist in urban or sun-urban areas but they are suppressed because of other information, commercial, trade, sports facilities from which current news emanate.

Information Provision to the Oral Based Community: opportunities and threats

In the rural areas oral information proviosn practices are predominant. It is here too, that information is badly and urgently needed as an input to accelerate development. Consequently, best strategies must be implemented to provide the required information. Fortunately, in this digital era ICTs have made information access quicker and more efficient through mobile phones, radios, TV, films and video.

However, the plight in developing countries is the cost of hardware, software and the maintenance costs, too high to be afforded by the majority of people who are under the poverty line. Worse still, the basic infrastructure - roads, electricity, telephone, satellites, etc, do not exist in many places and where they exist they are too old, or malfunctioning too expensive to be afforded. Video shows, music, dance and drama. Consequently the rural people mainly depend on traditional oral means of disseminating information which include: community meetings, social occasions, churches, broadcasts, and extension and welfare officers, film. In Uganda, alternative information provision such as music, dance and drama have taken central stage in the information transfer process. The above strategies, though not very dependable, have closed the gap of information provision to the illiterate or information poor or those in remote rural areas where information facilities hardly exist.

Lack of LIS Professionals for Spearheading Information Management.

A vital factor influencing non-availability of information to the orally based communities is the lack of professional training to those who should manage the information transfer process. This factor raises the education and training of IPs so that they are quipped with knowledge and techniques to disseminate information through non-traditional ways.

The education and training of IPs has two aspects: an appropriate curriculum from which the knowledge and skills taught are derived; and the LIS educators to manage the process of teaching the potential IP trainees.

Curriculum to produce IPs for the Provision of Information to the Oral Based Community

Curriculum defined

Curriculum is the theory and practices that should be taught (content - core, electives, options), to potential students (IPs trainees); how that curriculum should be taught

(pedagogy); and the strategies for verifying that, what was taught was actually learnt and that those who were taught could establish the value of what they were taught (evaluation). Curriculum is periodically reviewed to cater for changes that necessitate new knowledge and competencies. The curriculum has other concerns including accreditation of the programmes, those who should teach the curriculum - lecturers, professors, etc, recruitment of the students, teaching facilities, attachment/internship, etc. which are not discussed in this presentation)

The Curriculum Development Process

The process of designing the curriculum involves various activities: first the consulting of the stakeholders - employers, educators, administrators, users, the alumni of LIS education institutions, the LIS profession, and the opinion leaders of the oral society, etc about the current and potential information needs. These information needs should be translated into the curriculum content that should include theory and competencies required.

Competencies required for managing information for the orally based communities

Competencies required for managing of information for the orally based communities include: communication skills, information literacy, computer literacy, skills for oral transmission of information, identifying the society cultural milieu, knowledge and use of the indigenous languages, knowing information resources, media communication techniques, alternative methods of information provision - music , dance, drama, posters, meetings, etc; selection , processing, retrieval and dissemination of information to the rural based communities and services to the disadvantaged; storage, conservation and preservation of materials, automation and networking, etc.

The adopted curriculum should have rules and regulation to manage it. In Uganda the Council for Higher Education (UCNHE), through accreditation ensures that all universities

should abide with specified standards set by and revised now and again, which concern issues of programmes, facilities, lectures, lectures-student ratios, etc

The Concern about LIS Educators/Trainers

The next issue of concern should be the teaching of the theory and competencies to potential IPs which requires: LIS educationists – lecturers, professors, facilities - lectures, laboratories, and library and information services. The LIS educators must be versed in knowledge and competencies and should have practical experience in the areas mentioned in the prior paragraph. To-day it is a requirement that these educators have both computer and information literacy, among other competences

Recruitment of the suitable Students

There must be a clearly stipulated policy about recruitment of the students to study the programmes. Foremost there must be a specified minimum standard of education for example an advanced Level Certificate with specified number of passes. Highfliers are required in the LIS profession because management of information is one of the vital contributions to development. The selection of such students is delegated to a Selection Board for example the Joint Admissions Board (JAB) in Uganda, which centrally selects students to public universities in Uganda. Private Universities have their own selection committees guided by the fact that a student to be admitted to a university must have specified passes at the required levels. Many students admitted to private universities may be of lower grades because the cream would have been already admitted by the Public Universities which have an advantage of Government sponsorship.

Evaluation of Students

Students are evaluated consistently while on the programmes of study so that their teachers and appropriate authorities could determine their progress and subsequently the standard of achievement before they graduate. Evaluation is continuous through course work, seminars and field attachments; rounded up with written and practical examinations at the end of the term or seminar, those who are successful are awarded their degrees and could now go and work under trained IPs and later after successful training could work on their own. It is hoped that at this stage the IP has acquired both theoretical and practical knowledge to guide him in performing his responsibilities.

Challenges and strategies to address them

“Preparing Library and Information Science Students for Orally Based Communities” has many challenges. Some are reflected upon along with possible solutions in the following paragraphs:

1. Languages

This challenge has mainly three aspects: lack of an indigenous official or national language acceptable by the majority of the citizens in the country. A clear example is Uganda where the official language is English while the National language is Swahili both languages functionally utilised by the minority in the Uganda. Another aspect is the multiplicity of dialects like is the case in Uganda where each dialect is hardly understood by the neighbouring districts. Production of literature in these dialects is difficult because of the small size of the market in which authors are unwilling to invest. Consequently there is hardly any literature for promoting and maintaining literacy among these dialects.

The most disturbing aspect is the lack of competency in use of these vernaculars. The so called “elites” in African nations are proficient in foreign languages but hardly know or speak

their mother tongue. This is because they start their education in foreign languages and speaking vernacular is sometimes punishable. The above problems are being addressed by enhancing publishing in local languages, and teaching vernacular languages from the Nursery Schools to roughly form four in primary schools. An encouraging development is that to-day vernacular languages are being taught at University level, for example, the Institute of Languages at Makerere University.

2. IPs Unwillingness to Work in Disadvantaged or Rural Areas

Many graduates hardly wish to work in rural areas where the majority of the population lives and therefore information provision should be emphasised. This is due to the disparity of the so called “civilization infrastructure and facilities” such as good housing, transport, social amenities and education facilities. This is a big “push-away” factor to the educated that as a result resist from working in these conditions. They prefer crowding in towns and cities and would rather remain unemployed than working in the “deprived” rural areas. Decentralisation of administration and consequently the required administrative facilities are gradually improving the living facilities in the rural areas, including those in Uganda.

3. Knowledge of Oral based LIS Training Needs

Apart from tracer and workforce studies by (Rosenberg, 1994), Aina and Moahi (1999) Kigongo-Bukenya and Lutwama (2002), Kigongo-Bukenya and others (2005), no recent studies have been undertaken to establish LIS education needs particularly those of the orally based community. Consequently theory and competencies are not adequately addressed which spills out into the lack of techniques to disseminate information to this disadvantaged group. New efforts must be made through research to establish the education and training needs of this important sector of the population in order that appropriate services are given to them.

4. Supportive Government Policies

Many a time issues related to libraries and information provision and literacy issues are not given due priority, because they are not “vote winning”. Consequently they are given less attention than that given to hospitals or schools. This is mainly due to the politicians little appreciation that those who provide information services really contribute, though unrecognized, a lot to a nations development since the merchandise “information” they manage is the raw material for knowledge. There is also inadequate pressure group or agitation from the information professionals to keep the government on its toes to cater for the instruments and means that promote library and information services, for example, laws, statutes, policies and adequate funding.

In the late eighties one of the authors of this article visited Jamaica and witnessed the most down to earth and rigorous literacy campaign to wipe illiteracy in Jamaica. It was spearheaded by the Jamaica Literacy Authority. It took literacy to the grassroots - the villages and slum areas, it provided funding, produced numerous relevant literature on which to practice literacy and avoiding relapsing to it again, both the Jamaican Library Board co-operated with the Library School at Mona Lisa Campus to give both basic education to the new information professionals in the making and continuing education to those already in the field to adopt techniques of eliminating literacy and maintaining it as well. Information services were brought to the grassroots who hitherto before were orally based. That was a milestone to achieve; a very difficult one but not an impossible one to emulate in our respective countries. This is the way forward for all of us.

Conclusion

Information is the “oxygen” of development. Since all people have the right to development, information must be freely accessed by all the people of the world. However, not all people

of the world access information as they should, because of many factors outstanding of which are illiteracy, poverty and language. It is therefore imperative that strategies should be found to access information to all as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights advocates. Modern Technology through films, video, talking books and other strategies is addressing this issue. However, due to limitations including poverty, lack of infrastructure, computer and information illiteracy, etc, access to information is yet universal. In these circumstances, it is important to create a critical mass of information professionals with knowledge and competencies to serve the orally based communities. This is one of the sure ways to access information to those with limitations such as illiteracy. This is an important milestone to reach on our long road to universal access to information; not an easy mission to accomplish; but not an impossible task to achieve.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR ATTENTION

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