

Information Literacy Review Paper

Mary Lynn McPherson

Assignment 4

DETT 611 9040 – April 3, 2016

Introduction

Information literacy is defined by the Association of College & Research Libraries as the ability “to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (1989, para. 3). They further state that to minimize “social and economic inequities” it is essential that citizens become information literate. Individuals who are information literate have “learned how to learn”; in other words they possess the skills to embrace lifelong learning (1989, para. 3). Librarians at the University of South Africa (Unisa) agree with the philosophy that information literacy builds critical thinkers and lifelong learners (Mnkeni-Saurombe, 2014). The purpose of this paper is to summarize the approach to literacy training at Unisa as published by Mnkeni-Saurombe (2014) in the article “Information literacy: A cornerstone for open distance learning (ODL) at the University of South Africa.”

Background

Educators at Unisa are faced with the results of political struggles and educational upheaval in Africa’s past, leaving students entering college underprepared for higher learning. Per Mnkeni-Saurombe, faculty at Unisa feel that the student population lack information literacy, as evidenced by plagiarism, lack of understanding regarding assigned tasks, and poorly executed assignments (p. 4). The author speculates that the reason for this lack of academic success is multifactorial, but points out that improved information literacy has been shown to enhance student performance (p. 4). The Unisa library system has a set of guidelines that direct

information literacy instruction, through which librarians provide training to students and faculty.

The research question posed by Mnkeni-Saurombe was whether “information literacy is an important part of ODL at Unisa from the librarians’ perspective” (p. 4). There were four aims to this study as follows: characterize the scope of information literacy training at Unisa, identify participants in this training, what information is provided in the training, and determine how librarians remain current personally in information literacy training, and their needs and challenges (p. 4). Unisa offers personal librarians “to support the research needs of the university by building relationships with the academics, researchers, students and library staff by providing subject specific knowledge” (p. 2). It is not made clear in the paper if there are additional “generalist” librarians at Unisa, but the author hints at this being the case (e.g., branch librarians).

Research Methods and Results

Using an online survey, 19 personal librarians were invited to participate in this project. Ten of the 19 participated, representing a 52% response rate. All data was reported in aggregate. The author concluded the respondents were qualified information professionals based on their academic backgrounds.

Results showed that 8 respondents were in agreement that information literacy training program in place at the time of the survey was helpful to both students and faculty associated with Unisa. Half of the respondents stated 25-50% of their work hours were devoted to information literacy training. Three of the respondents provided information literacy training

only to undergraduate students, 2 only to postgraduate students, and the remaining 5 provided training to both sets of learners. Half of the respondents also provided training to faculty (p. 5). The author concluded that sufficient resources were in place to provide information literacy training, and expressed a lack of clarity as to why the student population remains largely information illiterate.

The author also queried the personal librarians regarding their opinion on whether or not the information literacy training programs were integrated into Unisa's academic or research programs. None of the respondents knew whether or not information literacy programs were developed at senior management request, only one respondent felt the program had been developed in collaboration with other departments within the University, and no respondents had any idea whether or not the information literacy program was integrated into academic or research programs (p. 7). Interestingly, only one respondent stated they made an attempt to remain current in the field of information literacy training (by reading the literature, and participating in a discussion forum).

The author concluded by affirming that Unisa's open distance policy is commitment to a student-centric model, but the information literacy program is not optimal. She felt the personal librarians were doing their best to determine learner's needs in this area, but clearly more needs to be done. Specifically, Mnkeni-Saurombe concluded that the Unisa library needs to do more research to identify methods to best enhance information literacy skills, improve collaboration between the library and faculty, better integrate library services on the learning management system, and enhance Unisa's information literacy policy (p. 9).

Conclusion

This small project represents an initial attempt to determine the status of information literacy training at Unisa. In my opinion, the results provide little useful information. Despite spending what seems a reasonable amount of time on information literacy training, the respondents largely did not know how the literacy training programs were developed, and none of them knew whether or not the information literacy training was incorporated into the learning management system. It seems as though the personal librarians are trying hard, but they are practicing in a silo, and the end goal is not being achieved.

Indisputably, the educators and librarians at Unisa face a large challenge given the educational and political upheaval in South African in years past, which is still being felt at the college level. Despite this, I believe the author of this paper had solid suggestions for improvement – revisit the University’s policy on information literacy, collaborate with the educators fully, and integrate the content throughout the curriculum.

Speaking personally, I believe I have a high degree of information literacy, and was a little annoyed at the 5 week course requirement when starting with UMUC. However, I must admit that it was very useful. I was asked to complete tasks that required completion of online tutorials, and assignments that required I use that skill set. I will also say that most courses since that time have reinforced the need to flex those intellectual muscles to get the job at hand done. If I hadn’t been made to do that, I probably would not have purposely gone to the library site on my own.

I have enormous respect for librarians. I was the nerdy kid who volunteered in the library from elementary through high school. I am a rabid bibliophile, and usually have 3-4 books going at any one time (the completion of this paper is warring with my desire to continue the narration of “Outlander,” which of course I read 20 years ago!). I was entranced by the idea of a “personal librarian,” which we do have at the University of Maryland, Baltimore. The personal librarian for the School of Pharmacy is named Kim, and I have her on speed dial. I am planning the development and roll-out of an online Master of Science degree in Palliative Care, and one of the first people I met with was Kim. As a matter of fact, I’d like to escalate the “personal librarian” up to “concierge librarian” so she’s at my beck and call! The library may have some thoughts on that too, however!

I applaud Ms. Mnkeni-Saurombe for taking early steps into investigating barriers to enhancing information literacy at Unisa, and I wish them much success in moving forward.

References:

Association of College & Research Libraries. (1989). Presidential Committee on Information Literacy: Final Report. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/whitepapers/presidential>

Mnkeni-Saurombe, N. (2014). Information literacy: A cornerstone for open distance learning at the University of South Africa. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 47(2), 156-165.