

Lessons Learnt from Library Sessions and Implication on Teaching of Information Literacy Skills in Higher Education: A Commentary

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Abstract: *Information literacy skills in higher education is an important skill needed by all students as demands for literacy skills keep getting higher. The description of what used to be literate keeps changing as technology keeps unfolding and putting demands on academic librarians and their ability to provide literacy that can stand the test of time. Students from varying environment with digital divide still abound and coupled with lack of basic information literacy skills struggle in their academic engagements. Academic librarians inundated with varying questions around lack of information skills must be proactive and think outside the box if they are to provide academic solutions. Librarians are now required to consistently improve their knowledge and be more resourceful if they are to provide aids to students' information gaps and lack of literacy skills. This paper is a commentary that uses Dervin sense making as a guide.*

Keywords: Information literacy, Library sessions, academic librarians, diversity of learners, Dervin's sense making, higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning information literacy skills has never been more relevant as information technology continues to permeate every sphere of human endeavour creating a further digital divide that has the tendency to get wider. The initial divide as postulated by Prensky (2001) and expanded by several researchers (Goldbold, 2006) related to the digital skills and ability to use information in digital formats. In today's 21st century, information technology has metamorphosed into Artificial intelligence (AI) with its attendant merits and demerits; and has questioned the tenets of academic integrity, equity and fairness (Currie, 2023). How would students who are still struggling with digital divide navigate the current challenges that would centre around AI and other digital landscape. This paper is not around AI, but it centres around lack of literacy skills among students, digital divide, and the implication for academic

librarians. Although library sessions have for long presented a platform for teaching students information literacy skills; however, question that come up during and after library session provide a thought for reflection as they show that there is more to be done in equipping students with information literacy skills required for learning and for the workforce. There is also a need to equip students for the future as information technology keep advancing and changing the landscape of learning and teaching (Leaton, 2020; UK Parliament, 2024). Higher education already has students struggling to keep up in varying divides (Bourdieu, 1997 as cited in Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Ferguson, 2019; Cultural Learning Alliance, 2019) and there is need to prevent any further divide that would affect learning and engagement. This paper addresses questions asked from library sessions, which centre around information literacy skills and diversity of learners in higher education. Dervin's theory of sense making is used as a guide for the study and shows how students make sense of their past and present environments to bridge their information gap.

Dervin's model of Sense making and diversity of users

Wilson (1999) posited that each user would have an information behaviour with the attributes of information need, seeking and information use. The need behaviour of Wilson was termed as "gap" by Dervin (Godbold, 2006) and stated to be what students from diverse background struggles to bridge in a new environment. Each gap is unique to each user as they are all influenced by their experiences and the effect it has on them in their new environment. While Dervin (1983) brings up a model of sense making through which people make sense of their situation and find ways of closing the information gap, Wilson in the 1999 model provides processes that users pass through to solve their information need (Godbold, 2006); and these processes are likened to attributes of information literacy skills. They are starting, browsing, chaining, differentiation, extracting, verifying and ending of the search (Godbold, 2006). These could be part of processes applied by users while making sense of their situation; if they allow the gap in their new environment bolster them to find solution instead of seeing it as a hindrance. Notwithstanding, these processes might need to be expanded as there are variety of gaps connected to each user's experience that would not likely follow the same process. More so, the human society has changed drastically and keeps expanding the landscape of information technology in education (Leaton, 2020; UK Parliament, 2024). Each user would therefore have information needs that have evolved and which are reflected through the questions asked during Library sessions and consultations.

The questions asked during library sessions provide ideas on the techniques to be applied while teaching information literacy skills. It also shows the areas students have gaps in and their eagerness to make sense of it and close the gaps. More so, the responses they receive would aid in their sense making and the knowledge they acquire to close the gap. This is because Dervin's model of sense making states that sense making would end with each environment that created each gap, while a different gap in a new environment is to be made sense of all over again. Hence the user would have to assess the new gap to know if it is such that could be bridged by the user or one that is very large and so requiring assistance from an expert; thereby reflecting the statement by Ranganathan (Chhetri, 2023) that a Library is a living organism that is always evolving to satisfy information needs.

Diversity of Users in Higher Education

Prensky (2001 as cited in Spiegel, 2021) categorised learners as digital natives and digital immigrants; a divide that determined how they behaved towards digital information; although there have been arguments around the terminology used which has led to further categorization and description (Helsper & Eynon, 2010; Brown & Czerniewicz, 2010). While Helsper and Eynon (2010) argued that any age category can belong to digital nativity, Brown and Czerniewicz (2010) asserts that digital nativity has been replaced by a net generation who are of the elite and bourgeois class; and whose digital skills are attached to the class they occupy. Although this paper is not focussed on social class and digital group category, however it has an overlap as it shows the background differences of learners in higher education; those exposed to technology at early age due to certain privileges and class and those that are struggling to get education and so coming in terms with information technology.

Prensky (2001 as cited in Spiegel, 2021) categorisation of digital natives and digital immigrants was given more expatiation by Bourdieu (1997 as cited in Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Sullivan,2008). Bourdieu's cultural capital (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Sullivan,2008) posited that capital was responsible for privileges enjoyed by people in the society; this includes the privilege of having digital skills. This assertion connects with Bandura's social cognitive theory (Nickerson,2024; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020) which states that behaviour including skills, is an interaction of a person's personal factors, environments including present environment, and behavioural patterns. This means that with certain category of students, certain skills would be expected to come naturally; while with other category of students, they would need to be taught (Chhetri, 2023). This is what was stated in Ogba (2019) as factors affecting the academic engagement of undergraduate law students, which would require information literacy intervention as a bridge. It is only when bridges are erected so they can connect to the current expectation in their new environment, that engagement can happen with ease.

Questions asked and lessons from Library sessions

The library reflects and reacts to information needs of its diverse users by constantly providing best practices that caters for them. These best practices many times are reflections from Library sessions or consultations. This paper looks at questions and statements that have often come up during library sessions and consultation and how they were managed. They have been summarised under the headings: Writing and paraphrasing: a simple technique to apply; how to formulate a research topic, the use of ChatGPT in writing, how to initiate a search, where to get definitions of terms, where to get case studies for academic writing, and when students are confused.

Students who are often faced with the task of writing academic papers do not know how to begin and how to paraphrase (Fernandes, 2012; Wahtuningsih, 2018); this is a case for information literacy skills. According to Fernandes (2012) and Wahtuningsih (2018), these students require systematic training by librarians who have the expertise to take them through library sessions, workshops and writing activities. However, this might be difficult in academic environments that do not have adequate platforms for teaching information literacy skills; and there is the fear that Library sessions alone would not be adequate for closing information gaps

in areas that require consistent training (Maybee, Kaufmann, Tucker & Budd; 2023). Some of these areas that have often come up are shown below.

Writing and Paraphrasing: a simple technique to apply

Students have often asked these questions: How can I write 3000 words? How can you just write? How do you paraphrase? They have also made these statements: well, I have Chat GPT to use [for writing and paraphrasing], I can use Chat GPT to paraphrase. This clearly shows the primary area of information need, which is different from the normal day to day need for books and other resources. They do not know how to write and paraphrase; and though it is understood that not all librarians have the skills to respond to these types of questions, however there are some tips that would guide students in this area; tips that would go a little further to what a Librarian would typically do in responding to such questions.

The typical way a Librarian would respond to these questions

Librarians would typically direct them to information sources and to resources that would guide them and provide answers to their questions. While these are all germane to learning, they do not answer the immediate question or provide immediate hope needed urgently as students who are battling with time would have to read up these bulky books as a way of satisfying their needs. It is assumed that students would rather not read them at that point and would prefer to keep grappling with their needs; except if the direction to book resources and sources are provided early enough before academic activities become intense. However, it should be noted that when students ask these questions, they are seeking for hope in the faces of Librarians and the assurance that there is a solution for their needs. Hence when they are immediately provided with tips on how to do it in something that I have termed “learn on the spot”; and then provided with materials that would further guide them, their needs become lighter and any anxiety they had is resolved. This is because students asking these questions are already struggling with deadlines to meet and would not have immediate moment to assign to learning new skill. At this point, any resource they are being directed to should be bullet points or summarised notes that requires a moment to read through.

How these questions can be answered

In providing a “learn on the spot” answer to questions on paraphrasing, a Librarian can compare writing to storytelling, gossip or anything that connects them to reality. If students can listen to stories, witness occurrences and narrate in their own words, while differentiating and showing the gaps in the narration, then it’s easy for them to paraphrase; all they require is a boost of confidence.

Students should “learn on the spot” by reading to understand each document, make connections to other documents to further understand the idea and conclusion being put forward, and then write at each stage what they understand in their own words and attach codes that would group like ideas together; this makes it easy to refer to them while writing. It also makes it easy to know documents that provide basis for gaps and differentiation, including their citations. Hence it becomes easy to know what each document said and how it differs from another one; then students can start telling their story. Students should also be informed to start their academic

story with providing description and definition of terms so that their audience understand what their story hinges on.

How to formulate research topics

Students who are faced with the task of formulating their own research topic often find it difficult to do so because they do not know how to; they have not been taught. Hence when they come to academic librarians, they should “learn on the spot” how to do this and be provided with summarised resources or “bullet point”. A simplified solution is provided below.

Simple solution

In providing an immediate assistance, ask students the broad area where their interest lies and if they have any interest or experience in any specific area of the nomenclature. More questions should follow on the group the topic relates to and whether they want to carry out research on them. However, whether there is an area of interest or not, the subject terms formulated should first be put on a search box of a search engine; like “academic search engine” or in any database. This would bring up diverse topics on the broad area and students can further refine their search. More so, there would be diverse research ideas from which such student could choose from. Special encyclopaedias, thesaurus and textbooks are useful resources that would help in bringing up research ideas and concepts (Leong & Muccio, 2006). Students should know that they can refine their topics as new ideas come up; but should bear in mind that research topics normally have these features:

They are:

- a. specific
- b. manageable
- c. have keywords that reflect the research elements
- d. have a scope and hence a focus that relates to place, subjects, purpose and is not normally beyond 15 words.

Then topics can always be sent across to a Librarian for a review.

The use of ChatGPT in writing

Students have often made comments on the use of ChatGPT; and it is obvious from their comments and questions, that they fancy it and consider it a solution to their writing needs. This means that they need to be educated on the use of ChatGPT, so they use it in a way to maintain academic integrity.

How to respond to comments and questions on ChatGPT

Questions around ChatGPT should be answered by stating the dangers of using ChatGPT for academic writing and the applicable use in research. ChatGPT currently has copyright issues because of how it pulls out resources from diverse sources and merge them to respond to a query; it also has a feature that makes it hallucinate, hence it makes up answers that looks correct but erroneous. As a result, it would make up unverifiable contents and references that

are misleading but comprehensive; hence it is easy to find out when research papers are written with ChatGPT. More so, ChatGPT cannot provide a research conclusion that is reflective of a study. In responding to use of ChatGPT for paraphrasing, students should be taught how to paraphrase in simple steps explained in previous section and informed that they can use ChatGPT to get research ideas on a topic, and then carry out a search in academic databases so that they would be sure of the references they are providing and also be able to provide research conclusion that is not misleading.

How to initiate a search

Students often get confused on how to initiate their research; they do not know the processes to use. The steps below can aid.

- a. Break down the topic into searchable parts and concepts.
- b. Meditate on the topic and bring out questions and more search focus.
- c. Bring up connections from documents, that needs to be researched on.
- d. Always get definition and descriptions of terms while reading.
- e. Find out from the topic if there are essential resources and information required.
- f. Know the sources for any type of resource.
- g. Know that every academic writing requires secondary and primary resources.
- h. Always get primary resources to authenticate facts in secondary resources.
- i. Write down jottings in organised way and put down codes to remember the ideas in them.
- j. Always associate ideas from each source with their citations.
- k. Then start writing as if you are telling a story, you have knowledge about them already.
- l. You can always refer to your organised jotting and carry out a quick search to further authenticate.
- m. Know how to use search techniques especially Boolean (AND/OR) and colon (:)

Where to get definitions of terms

Students often find it difficult to know where to get definition of keywords, terms or concepts. The tips below would help.

- a. Textbooks: textbooks on subject research interest can provide definition through the glossary. Table of contents would also show if there were broad or specific areas from which a desired definition would likely come from.
- b. Academic search engine: Students can use “Google Scholar” to find definition by using search technique. The search technique “colon” (:) works for me; dash (-) would also

work. The search term, colon and then definition. For example: “Personal Factors: definition”

Where to get case studies for academic writing

Case studies are evidential proof of what is in textbooks and are often required for authentication. They are empirical or field work that has been carried by professionals in diverse disciplinary areas. Students often do not know where to get these types of resources because they are not patient enough to look through the head notes to each database listed under their discipline or use required search technique.

What to do

Students should read the headnotes attached to each database listed for their discipline, then select the ones that provides case study descriptions like evidence, case studies, clinical research evidence, evidence based, research data, research and statistics and many other keywords. The terminology used is associated with each discipline and they are all primary resources and evidential proof in their raw state. They are not books nor articles, their category is empirical, proof, cases being studied and mainly by professionals in the field.

When students get stuck to a particular database, they lose out on the benefits of using other databases, because they do not understand the strength and limits of each database.

When students are confused

When students are confused about their actual need, they lack understanding of what they are and so cannot communicate it in such a way to receive aid. However, by asking further questions or carrying out brief informal interview, they begin to understand what their needs are and can confirm it; it then becomes easy to aid. A student in need of a textbook might be confused on how to bring up a research topic or how to summarise a content. A student in need of a textbook might be looking for definition of terms. A student that mentions a one-word broad information area as a topic might be confused on how to bring up a research topic and the sources to use. Hence it is important not to overlook subtle signs but to follow them up with questions until the primary need is known.

Implication on teaching of information literacy skills

The teaching of information literacy becomes a positive response to lack of information literacy skills required for academic engagements. It is required more to bridge the information gap created through students’ background and social environments and to meet up with the consistent development of information technology (Gavvsidappa, 2021) According to Gavvsidappa (2021), information literacy skills acquisition is responsible for the use of digital resources for learning. This is because digital skills are an attribute of information literacy skills. More so, an earlier study in Kim and Shumakar (2015) found that students whose modules consistently included information literacy guided assignments appreciated information literacy instructions and did better in their assignments and grades compared to those whose modules were not. This is because they had requisite skills to use the digital environments for learning and the skills required to get needed resources from diverse sources.

Information Literacy skills has been defined by Skyline College (2024) as the ability to find, evaluate, organise, use and communicate information of varying formats for varying purposes. CILIP (2018) defines Information literacy as the ability to think critically and make balanced judgements about any information, thereby empowering us to develop informed views and engage fully with the society. Information literacy is defined for the purpose of this section as the developed ability to find, evaluate, critically assess and connect information relevant for varying purposes and be able to carry out informed engagements and decisions needed at each critical moment. In interpreting these definition, varying skills like critical thinking, writing skills, digital skills, research skills, reading skills, communication skills and many more have come up (CILIP, 2018; Skyline College, 2024); and these have implications for Librarians as digital landscape keep widening and students in higher education who are required to keep up are still struggling to keep up with old digital skills and divides (Ferguson, 2019). It then becomes an issue for research and further discussion on how academic librarians are going to handle the present and future challenge and possible threat of further division that would come up due to inadequate literacy skills provided to students at the right time.

CONCLUSION

Information literacy skills has always been an asset that keeps up with the changing landscape of information technology; hence it has always evolved to cater for the varying needs of users. These users, however, vary and so do their needs which are products of their background experience. The background experiences that students have could provide aid in their academic engagement or it could be impediment to their ability to engage and interact. Whichever way it is, the teaching of information literacy provided in ways that it can communicate to students is an important asset that needs to keep improving to satisfy information needs and bridge diversity of gaps.

Declaration section

This section Is not required as this paper was not funded and it did not require any ethical considerations since no private data was used.

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