Information literacy for tertiary education students in Africa

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Ibadan, Nigeria: Third World Information Services, 2007. 193p.

ISBN 978 32836 3 4 (pbk.)

Price: unknown

So often when reviewing one feels the need to bewail the lack of locally-produced works that tackle the important topics covered by the text under discussion; "How sad", one writes, "that this information cannot be produced in a form that reflects our circumstances!" As far as information literacy is concerned, there have been several introductory textbooks

produced by local authors which have been well-received and are in use as main readings for the training of professional information workers and for general information literacy courses. Dr Ayoku Ojedokun has used his wide experience at the Kenneth Dike Library of the University of Ibadan and the Library of the University of Botswana to produce a text that can safely be added to this number.

The task is not easy, as anyone teaching information literacy swiftly begins to understand. Although the principles of information literacy can be applied almost regardless of culture, its practice and the way it is presented need careful and thoughtful presentation, if students are to be alerted to local circumstances and not to be deterred by inappropriate examples and services. However, a sanitised and diluted version is also inappropriate: the problems we experience in Africa relating to information literacy are just as complex as elsewhere – and they *are* different. Encouraging students to discuss the issues and relate them to their communities and social structures is an important step if they are to emerge, not only exemplifying the skills of information literacy, but also capable of passing those skills on to others.

Ojedokun makes clear in his Preface that this book is intended for both working information professionals and students, and has the goal of equipping both for life-long learning. Each chapter is well-supported with references and review questions which have been carefully chosen to provoke discussion and to be largely "future-proof" – that is, they do not mention many examples of technologies that are likely to date quickly.

Chapter 1 considers what the concept "tertiary education" means within an African context, relating this to the knowledge economy and national development, innovation and the development of human resources. The problems of use of Information and Communication Technologies on the African continent are outlined – though, for a South African audience, one would have to add that whilst all of the problems identified apply here, they are not necessarily quite so severe. Nevertheless, the point is made: our access to these technologies is more limited, and certainly more expensive as a proportion of income, than most of the developed world.

The concepts of information and of information literacy are covered in Chapters 2 and 3. Bearing in mind the intended audience and the way in which this text is planned to be used, the author has wisely chosen not to use an epistemological approach but to ground the discussion in practical examples and simple definitions. It would have been useful, however, to have included suggestions for further reading which could have embraced some of these more reflective approaches – *The philosophy, politics and economics of information*, by Professor Archie Dick (UNISA Press, 2002), for example. In discussing information literacy, Ojedokun identifies one of the key problems of the field: what is meant by the "literacy" concept in this context? He uses the Shapiro and Hughes (Shapiro, Hughes 1996) model, which develops a taxonomy of seven "literacies" and highlights the way in which information literacy skills are now heavily involved with most aspects of curriculum development. This is a good choice, since the approach provides a systematic structure for developing information literacy programmes and also provides scope for discussion. The "Big Six" (Eisenberg, Johnson 2002) steps of information literacy skills – Task Definition, Information-Seeking Strategies, Location and Access, Use of Information, Synthesis and Evaluation (TILUSE) – are then fully-explored in ways that will be helpful to those developing information literacy curricula and to those learning the skills and wanting a reason for their development. Examples using the African context accompany each step.

Chapters 4 and 5 provide a framework for understanding the different types of information source, their uses and means of gaining access to them. The conventional "primary", "secondary" and "tertiary" framework is used and there is coverage of the importance of "grey" literature, non-book and electronic sources and people, as well as the more familiar sources. In a revised edition, it would be desirable to explore more fully the concept of people and the community as an information source, especially in the context of oral cultures. This could provide valuable case-studies on the need for verification and the effect of social organisation on patterns of transmission and belief.

Information search strategies and their development are described in Chapter 6, following a conventional study sequence (preparation, query formulation and so on). The astute teacher will want to expand considerably the points made about definition and understanding of search terms and to illustrate the problems inherent in the use of both controlled vocabularies and natural language. The author provides a table of search tools that includes several sources including types other than search engines, which is expanded and explained further in Chapter 7. The author cautions against the unthinking use of search engines when it would be more appropriate to use a structured search tool such as a Subject-Based Information Gateway (SBIG) or Virtual Library; however he asserts that "Search engines are currently the best means of finding information from the web" (page 104). This is certainly contentious and hardly coheres with the advice provided in this chapter; it would, however, make an excellent discussion point!

Evaluation is a key factor in selecting information sources to use. Chapter 8 provides a rationale and criteria for this task, following the usual conventions of coverage, currency and so on. The process of evaluating of web pages is supported by a useful table but the neophyte will need further assistance to understand the difficulty posed by the "free-form" structure of many web pages. A brief discussion of metadata – and how to view it – would be a useful addition.

The discussion of copyright (Chapter 9) is brief but will provide an adequate foundation if due care is taken in teaching to discuss legislation relevant to the local jurisdiction. Chapter 10 introduces the concept of citation and avoidance of plagiarism, providing clear examples of footnoting and endnoting styles; in particular, the use of the American Psychological Association, the Modern Language Association and the Harvard author-date system is illustrated in some detail.

The book concludes with a brief overview of the chapter review questions, a glossary of terms, an appendix of common Internet error messages and a skeletal index of twenty-nine entries. One hopes that a revised edition will include an adequate index, at least as an example of the importance of such devices in ordering our complex information world.

There are occasional "typos" (e.g. "Vein" for "Venn" on page 86, "cashes" for "caches" on page 88). Several of the web addresses provided in the references are out-of-date.

This text is largely to be welcomed. Used by a confident and competent instructor it will provide a largely-satisfactory adjunct to a course on information literacy; used for self-instruction it will provide a solid base for understanding.

References

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