

New Skills Bring New Opportunities

A case study on information literacy at the University of Zimbabwe

Elizabeth Mlambo, June 2010

Information Literacy is, in a sense, learning to learn. It has been seen as a vehicle for the empowerment of individuals. In 2004, the University of Zimbabwe embarked on an information literacy programme with the aim of empowering students so that they would be able to transform information and create knowledge to solve problems. One of the key aspects was the University's inclusion of information literacy in the curriculum. This case study examines the successes and challenges of implementing an information literacy course.

"To be information literate an individual must recognize when information is needed, and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use information effectively"

American Library Association, 1989

In 2004, the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) implemented an information literacy (InfoLit) programme with the aim of empowering students to transform information and create knowledge to solve problems. This followed UZ's 2003-07 strategic thrust which sought to emphasise ICT skills, requiring each student to pass at least one ICT course regardless of their discipline. The InfoLit programme contributed greatly to the literacy and ICT competencies of the students.

Integration into the curriculum

Integrating information literacy into UZ's curriculum began with a commitment at the institutional level linking the library with the Department of Communication Skills (DCS). As the largest library in the country and a leader in both electronic information databases and online lending systems, the UZ library staff had a wealth of information to share and now had an outlet to do so. While the librarians were teaching the InfoLit course to students, they were also helping DCS faculty members to improve and build upon their skills. These skills included the integration of electronic information into teaching and research. Building in these areas also helped the faculty in assessing student competencies in proper citing and following copyright protocol for intellectual properties.

The library's primary objective was to make a major contribution to the development of InfoLit through integration into the academic curriculum. A key aspect of the new curriculum was improving skills in searching and using the internet. Students need to have the skills to find and access information easily on the internet as the information changes daily. Because of its dynamic nature, the internet can be very difficult to search in an effective, time efficient way; information on the internet is not always of high quality and the useful and useless coexist, much as they do at flea markets. It is this kind of scenario that necessitates the involvement of librarians in

the teaching of InfoLit skills as developments in the use of ICT in higher education continue to move at a fast pace.

Information literacy classes 2004–present

The first group of InfoLit lectures started in August of 2004. The University librarian elected a team to design a syllabus for teaching InfoLit to undergraduates. The faculty librarians became faculty team leaders for their respective areas. Each team was responsible for:

- liaising with faculty administrators in the integration of InfoLit into the master timetable
- creating InfoLit registers and student groups
- sourcing and organizing computer labs for practical sessions
- teaching the InfoLit programme

The librarians involved in teaching the course attended a training workshop on teaching methods, course design, lesson delivery, assessment and evaluation at the University Teaching and Learning Centre (UTLC). This kept both their teaching skills and subject knowledge up-to-date. As InfoLit is a rapidly growing and evolving field, this was an important first step.

Challenges and constraints of implementation

Equipment

The most commonly faced challenge in implementing the InfoLit programme was the lack of access to computer laboratories. As the computer labs were already in use for teaching other IT-based courses and in high demand by students, this proved problematic. The library itself had a training lab and 13 computers; however, the average number of students per class was 40. Computer equipment wasn't the only problem, as printing facilities to produce lecture material and handouts for students were also scarce.

Bandwidth and power cuts

The scarcity of bandwidth caused some problems, including reducing access to the electronic resources and databases to which UZ subscribes. This is an ongoing issue for UZ as the bandwidth size is considered too small for university needs. Combined with frequent power cuts, many students have not had the opportunity of

hands-on experience with the computer and could not access the e-resources available.

Motivation

Apathy was one of the biggest challenges for the programme. Logistically, UZ was unprepared to take the InfoLit programme on board — slotting classes into the master timetables was a mammoth task and some faculties did not appreciate the importance of the programme. Many students felt the same way, referring to it as ‘the library course’ and viewing it as irrelevant to their faculty programmes. As a result, attendance was erratic.

The challenges noted above had a demoralizing effect on InfoLit teaching staff. In addition to an added workload, technical issues and lack of commitment made it difficult to teach effectively and motivate students.

Lessons learnt and the way forward

Collaboration

Collaboration with stakeholders is key to the success of the programme. Partnerships among librarians, the computer centre, faculty, administration and lecturers are very important and have been developing. The graded InfoLit programme has brought formality to information literacy and helped raise its profile.

Additionally, first year students enrolled in the course were soon helping second and third year students to access the online catalogue. The librarians and lecturers began to visit each other’s class sessions which brought attention to key skill areas (i.e. writing skills and proper citation).

Management support

The support of the University authorities was necessary for the success of this programme. If a move towards online learning is to be seen as strategically important, policy and practice should be coordinated at top management levels. It was critical that the library worked in tandem with other developments in the university, basing the InfoLit programme on the key deliverables of the University’s Strategic Plan.

Teamwork

To implement the InfoLit programme, the library built a team of section librarians that was committed to the vision. Each librarian then had a section team that worked to fulfil the mandate of both its section and that of the library in general. The strong commitment of the library team made the InfoLit programme possible.

Student commitment

Another lesson learnt was that when students were introduced to the internet their first reaction was to use it for entertainment rather than scholarly purposes. Library staff collaborated further with teaching staff to challenge students in searching for discipline-specific information.

Developing the Modules

The librarians developed a set of four modules, each designed for a specific target group.

Module 1

Target: Undergraduate, Diploma in Adult Education, B.ED, D.R.S. SSW students

Goal: To equip students with information organisation and retrieval skills

Topics: Information organisation, access tools, internet searches, referencing

Module 2

Target: 2nd/3rd year students

Goal: To teach strategies for accessing information

Topics: Topic analysis, access tools, search strategies, intellectual property, referencing

Module 3

Target: Post-Graduate students, part-time Adult Learners

Goal: To equip students with advanced electronic searching skills

Topics: Information retrieval, the internet, referencing systems

Module 4

Target: Research scholars, lecturers, administrators

Goal: To introduce specific, relevant search tools to create an understanding of how to make effective and appropriate use of information

Topics: Information retrieval, evaluation of websites, search engines

Conclusion

Implementing the InfoLit programme has not been without struggle. Winning over both students and faculty has been key to making the programme not only successful, but recognised within the University. The issues encountered in implementing the course need to be acknowledged and addressed at a higher level too. However, UZ is the first of the eight state Universities to make an active attempt at implementing this area of study. Credit goes to all the librarians who have participated in the programme and the authorities who supported the initiative right from the beginning.

Elizabeth Mlambo
Institute of Development Studies Librarian
www.uz.ac.zw/units/ids/

This case study is a brief. The full report can be found at:
www.inasp.info/new-skills-full-report

INASP’s Information Literacy materials:
www.inasp.info/information-literacy