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Teaching and Assessing Information Literacy in Orally-Communicating Rural Environments: A Model

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Abstract

In reviewing the various contexts of published models and frameworks for information literacy, the consistent dominance on formal education and professional workplace practises were noted. The total absence of an information literacy model that addresses the information experience of rural dwellers became a clear gap. Consequently, an analytical research approach was adopted to introduce a new model of information literacy – a model that does not override other existing models but provides a new way of thinking about information literacy in orally-communicating rural environments. The proposed model comprised of three rungs – awareness, access and utilisation rungs – and offered a framework for teaching and learning about information literacy in communities where information and knowledge transfer is predominantly done through verbal communication. The paper defined the key terms in the model, hinted on how the model can be used, and recommended further research to contest or strengthen the model.

Keyword

Information literacy model, information literacy, orally-communicating rural publics, rural dwellers, oral societies

Introduction

Models serve as rule of thumbs in a practice. People who reside in rural areas or villages, especially in developing countries like India and Nigeria, and depend mainly on verbal communication to disperse information constitute the orally-communicating rural publics. Whereas information literacy models and frameworks are widely published, a model that encapsulates the landscapes of learning and practice of information literacy in orally-communicating rural environments is completely unavailable. Yet, information literacy has been declared a necessity for life-long learning (Garner, 2006). And naturally, learning can occur formally or informally and cannot be confined to textual and technological scenes. As such, thinking about information literacy and information literacy practice from its predominantly textual perspective is not inclusive and thus, decontextualizes the ontological characteristics of the practice. This is the gap that spurs the researcher into thinking on how information literacy might be occurring among rural dwellers that are largely illiterates, and depend not on textual and technological resources to access or disperse information. Consequently, this theoretical paper discourses the phenomenon by looking through the philosophical frame of constructivism, with particular inclination to the “personal relevance and social impact frames” that is proposed for information literacy education by Bruce, Edwards, and Lupton (2006).

Objective

The sole objective of this present paper is to introduce a new model of information literacy – a model that does not override other existing models but provides a new way of thinking about information literacy in orally-rural environments.

Method

To fulfil the objective of this paper, the analytical research design was adopted. The proposed model was developed and improved upon by the researcher in the course of doctoral (field experimental) research. The organisation of this paper is simple and successively presented under suitable sub-headings. The introduction section offered background information to the paper. The objective section pinpointed the aim of the paper, and is followed up by the method adopted to compose the paper. An overview of the varied concepts of information literacy ensued. A context-based discussion on the published models and frameworks for information literacy was done. Afterwards, the gap in the existing models and frameworks was highlighted. The proposed model was presented and described. And the conclusion part summarises the overall content of the paper, complemented with recommendations.

Information literacy: A conceptual variance

The definitions of information literacy after its foremost description by Paul Zurkowski in 1974 have varied across scholars, organisations and contexts (Owusu-Ansah, 2005). Foremost definitions described the term basically from the educational context and consider it as set of skills required to access and utilise information effectively. This is particular to textual and technological platforms of information. But, given to emerging

concerns to justify that information literacy is an indispensable practice for life-long learning (Garner, 2006), and a prerequisite for personal and vocational empowerment (Bundy, 2004; Eisenberg, Lowe, & Spitzer, 2004), there has arisen conscious attempts to re-define information literacy. On this ground, new concepts have emerged. For instance, Bruce et al. (2013) have used the concept of informed learning to argue that information literacy is not only about skills but includes peoples' overall information experience and character of using information to learn. Hepworth and Walton (2013) have a similar view in stating that information behaviour explains information literacy. Kuhlthan (1993) sees information literacy as a learning process that could occur in any setting and, inferably, among any group of people. Bruce (1997, 1999) consider it as a thinking and reasoning oriented process that people manifest in their professional life in order to succeed. Mutch (1997) sees it as the associated processes of knowledge creation and learning process cutting across explicit and tacit contexts. To others, information literacy is all about effective engagement and experience with information (Andretta, 2007; Bruce, 1999; Lloyd, 2010a; Lupton, 2008). While these conceptual divergences have correspondingly influenced empirical works done on information literacy, there is a consensus that information literacy conception changes in different context (Edward, 2007; Lloyd, 2007).

Review of the published models and frameworks for information literacy

A bird's eye review of published information literacy models and frameworks is imperative in abstracting and generalising a new model. The basic thing a model does is to provide some rule of thumbs as guideposts or principles for evaluating a practice. In view of this, this review examines and defines the contexts of various published models of information literacy.

Following the coining of the phrase *information literacy* by Paul G. Zurkowski in 1974, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) model of information literacy became one of the foremost models to be published. Hitherto published as a sequence-based competency standards for higher education students (ACRL, 2000), the ACRL competency standards ceased to be in force from June 2016 as it has been replaced with *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (ACRL, 2016). Unlike the abolished standards of information literacy which were pigeonholed on specific performance indicators and learning outcomes, the present framework allows for flexibility in relation to situations on ground at the implementing institutions. The framework consists of six non sequential frames and portrays information literacy as a knowledge practice that might occur in different contexts. It considers vocational education and profession-wise trainings, but still docks on formal environments of education and professional work.

The information literacy model of Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Institute (ANZIL) is another model that emerged. It is broader in scope as it considers participative citizenship for social inclusion, creation of new knowledge, and personal, vocational, corporate and organisational empowerment (Bundy, 2004). The model emphasises on learning for life and sees information literacy as an exercise that does not depend mainly on fluency in use of information and communication technology, but rather revolves on critical discernment and reasoning necessary for deciding correctly and using information effectively. But despite the broadness of terms used in its definition, the model

ends up to summarise information literacy as an intellectual framework and thus, inferred to be academic centric.

The Chattered Institute of Library and Information Practitioners (CILIP) model of information literacy is another prominent model. The model sees information literacy as an essential activity of those working in schools, public libraries, commercial institutions and the government sectors. Its definition and context is pointed at educational environments (CILIP, 2004).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) would not be left out of the discourse. In 2008, its department for Information for all Programmes (IFAP) adopted the commissioned work of Catts and Lau (2008) which examined possible ranges of contexts to be considered in outlining holistic information literacy indicators. The work observed the oral tradition environment and concurs with Campbell (2004) to state that a person in a society that disperses information orally can possibly “be information literate ...” (Catts & Lau, 2008, p. 20). However, the work notes the attendant limitations of oral societies as it fears how often people in such societies will depend on information literate fellows to benefit from information. Hence, they suggested that UNESCO should focus only on written words and ICT as contexts for information literacy.

In 2011, The Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) published seven pillars of information literacy as core models (Bent & Stubbings, 2011). The attempt was a felt need for nomenclature change to make its previously published information skills for higher education become relevant in the present-day era of information literacy. What were outlined as pillars of information literacy – identifying, scoping, planning, gathering, evaluating, managing and presenting – were basically contextualised on ICT and textual resources as domains of information.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) made its own attempts to recommend information literacy models for the librarianship profession and the society at large. The various views of IFLA on this subject are reported in the publication of The American Library Association (1989), in Garner (2006), in Lau (2006), and in Johnston and Webber (2003). While IFLA does not dispute that information literacy is social-spatial (as upheld in Garner, 2006), the Association acknowledges the education-centric identity of information literacy more than it admits the manifestation of the practice in social spheres.

Other information literacy models include: The National Information Literacy Framework, Scotland (Irving and Crawford, 2007); The National Information Literacy Framework, Wales (Welsh Information Literacy Project, 2011); A New Curriculum for Information Literacy (ANCIL) by Secker and Coonan (2012); The Big6 model of information literacy by Mike Eisenberg and Bob Berkowitz (<http://big6.com/pages/about/big6-skills-overview.php>). We have come to understand that these models, and a host of others we came across but are not mentioned in this review, were developed basically to fit the formal education environment.

However, some rules of thumbs for information literacy have also emerged as theories. Annemaree Lloyd’s works explore and promote the idea that information literacy practice is a contextual phenomenon that most times includes bodily engagements, and

argues that information literate people are those who know and navigate information landscapes successfully (Lloyd, 2006, 2007, 2010b). In other words, information literacy occurs differently for different people in different situations. Meanwhile, Bruce (1997, 1999) draws from her qualitative ethnographical study on groups of experienced information users to conclude that information literacy is relational and has seven faces. This implies that any face or faces of information literacy offer sufficient outcomes to assess information literacy and conclude on the occurrence of the practice. Similarly, the six frames for information literacy education (Bruce et al., 2006) offer teacher-learner-oriented frames for linking up information literacy theory with actual practice. Each frame contains distinct characteristics that reflect the practise-wise manifestations of information literacy in varying contexts. The researchers adapted a table to highlight in each frame how information literacy should be viewed, the context of information, the curriculum focus, what to teach, what to learn, content and assessment (Bruce et al., 2006).

The gap in existing models and frameworks of information literacy

As researchers keep diverging from the traditional idea of information literacy as a set of prescribed skills for learning about and using information in technological and textual contexts, it becomes obvious that no single model of information literacy can be comprehensive and broad enough to guide the practice. It is not doubted that information literacy practice occurs in various environments – in education, workplace and everyday contexts (Lloyd, 2010b). And going by this fact, the focus of my doctoral research (on orally-communicating rural people) is in the domain of “everyday context”. My doctoral research shows that information literacy education and practise is feasible in rural settings as a socially-based phenomenon. The obvious facts uncovered in the doctoral research so far provides the ground for thinking farther than Catts and Lau (2008) who ruled out oral societies from the range of contexts for setting out information literacy indicators. In a nutshell, the gap is clear so far: there is no model of information literacy that mirrors the orally-communicating rural publics. This is why this paper is offering a new model in view of the argument that having an all-inclusive model of information literacy is not feasible.

A new model for information literacy

The information literacy model proposed herein provides a framework for teaching and learning information literacy in communities where information and knowledge transfer is predominantly accomplished through verbal communication. Such communities are evident in many developing countries and cannot be overlooked in the knowledge society. The model consists of three progressive rungs on which information literacy instructions and outcomes can be framed in orally-communicating rural contexts. The first rung is the awareness rung which encompasses the various ways of understanding information environments, what Lloyd (2006, 2007, 2010a, 2010b) opines as “...knowing about information landscape”. The second rung is the access rung which demonstrates knowledge attained in the first rung by underscoring the navigation processes in an information environment. The third is the utilisation rung and is characterised by actions and experiences that signify actual information utilisation.

The constructivists learning theory is well manifested across the three rungs, acknowledging in each rung the conception that information literacy is an object of teaching as well as an object of learning (Limberg, Sundin, & Talja, 2012). Teaching and learning in each rung produces elements of mental alertness, physical actions, and attitude change; indicating that information literacy goes beyond prescribed skills to encompass multifaceted ways of interacting with information (Bruce, 1997, 1999). This complexity offers information literacy assessors a range of scales to assess information literacy, maybe, as low scale (mental alertness), as middle scale (mental and physical action), and as high scale (mental, physical action, and attitude). Assessors must decode the attributes of each scale in every rung and separate them accordingly, in a case of scale-wise determination of information literacy through the model. Otherwise, assessment method is flexible, and can be approached in any clear format.

Apparently, the model serves two main purposes: first, it is a framework for information literacy education in orally-communicating rural settings; secondly, it is a yardstick for anyone to assess and report on information literacy practice among orally-communicating rural publics. The model has been tested in social contexts that consist of rural dwellers of varied biographical variables. To deploy the model, care should be taken to ensure that the rungs focus upon specific social issues of importance to rural dwellers. Social-oriented information needs of rural dwellers emerge out of personal relevance. No wonder Bruce et al. (2006) reasoned on “personal relevance” and “social impact” as distinct and possible frames for studying information literacy. Though their idea on each of the frames lends to discipline-wise categorisation of learning in formal educational environments, the model proposed here lends from the personal relevance frame as specific social issues of importance to rural dwellers, and from the social impact frame as a purview on how information literacy aids effective participation of rural dwellers in societal development. Both perspectives shaped the design of the information literacy model proposed in this paper. The model is thus presented.

Rung one – awareness

Learning information literacy: the instructional scope.

Social domains of information:
Considers a definite community. Teach learners the varieties of functional information-cum-knowledge generating institutions (including established individuals) available in that community, and highlight their social interests.

Goal of information in their domains:
Teach learners the social-based aims or objectives of the available information-cum-knowledge generating institutions, and relate each institution's aims to the scope of information and knowledge it generates.

Subjective relevance of information in their domains:

Teach and analyse to learners the focus of each of the available information-cum-knowledge generating institution, and draw instances that relate each institution to learners' personalised problems.

Value of information in their domains:
Teach learners the economic worth of information-cum-knowledge generated by each of the available institutions.

Authorities of information in their domains:

Teach learners the expertise-wise credibility of each of the available information-cum-knowledge generating institutions, and educate them on how to match their information need with every institution.

Outcomes – an information literate:

Scans his environment to identify some institutions that are likely to offer him the information that might be suitable to solve a known problem.

Understands the scope and purpose of information offered in every domain.

Relates domain-wise scope of information to his observed problem or personal work.

Describes the type of information he wishes to obtain.

Understands which source of information is reliable to be depended upon or, defines a source' professional area of interest to determine whether the information offered by the source can be trusted.

NB: A source of information might be an institution or individual. And most times, a source at hand may not be the original source. But in understanding the public role of the source at hand, potent clues on the credibility of the original source might be gained.

An example of appraisal question.

Which institution(s) do you think will offer you the information that will be most suitable to solve your observed problem?

What are the public roles of the said institution(s)?

Does the role of the institution(s) fit into the purpose for which you need information?

What is the specific information that you need?

Why would you trust the information if you receive it?

Rung two – access

Learning information literacy: the instructional scope.

Outcomes – an information literate:

An example of appraisal question.

Contacting with respective domains of information:

Teach learners the scope of their rights to approach a domain for information as well as the obligation of available information-cum-knowledge generating institutions to release information to interested publics.

Knows how to enter into an information domain, interact with the right people inside the domain, and communicate in the format acceptable in the domain.

Have you visited or interacted with the experts for the information you need?

Completion of criteria and processes in respective domains:

Teach learners some common conditions and procedures they need to fulfil in seeking for and receiving information from each of the available information-cum-knowledge generating institutions.

Fulfils domain-wise conditions and procedures for accessing information.

What are the things you were required to do before you can receive the information you seek?

Information manifestation in respective domains:

Teach learners the different possible forms of information: as verbal instruction, as an object, as a combination of both, and so forth; drawing instances from various information-cum-knowledge generating institutions available in the community.

Knows the exact format of the information he seeks.

Describe the format of the specific information you require?

Evidence of information reception in respective domains:

Teach learners an-on-the-spot tactics for matching obtained information with observed need. Expose learners to some internalised questions they might ask before concluding to take an obtained information home.

Knows when he is in possession of the complete and required information despite the format of the information.

How would you know that you have the information you seek?

Right to utilise information in respective domains:

Teach learners how to know when it is legitimate for them to utilise obtained information vis-à-vis the prevailing criteria for information access in various information-cum knowledge generating institutions.

Understands his right to utilise obtained information.

Differentiate when you have a right to utilise information from when you have no right?

Rung three – utilisation

Learning information literacy: the instructional scope.

Outcomes – an information literate:

An example of appraisal question.

Information use method in respective domains:

Teach learners the systematic methods of putting information into use, drawing instances of information in various information-cum-knowledge generating institutions available in the community.

Complies with the prescribed systematic methods of using information to accomplish a pursued goal.

Describe the prescribed procedure for using the information you have obtained?

Benefit assessment in respective domains:

Teach learners some of the resultant benefits of using information, drawing instances of information in various information-cum-knowledge generating institutions available in the community.

Describes the impact of information in solving a definite problem, or narrates the benefits derived from the utilisation of information.

Describe the effects that the information you obtained produced in your work?

Knowledge conception:

Teach learners to take note of their challenges and experiences which might occur in the course of using information.

Describes the challenges that emerge or the new insights gained when applying information on a problem.

Explain the things you learnt or your regret as a result of using obtained information?

Knowledge communication:

Teach learners the importance of communicating their challenges and experiences that they might gain while using certain information.

Informs others (including experts in a given domain, where necessary) of his experiences in using information and how it affected or improved his information use, and even guides colleagues who experience similar problems.

How many of your friends have you told your experience with the information you used, and what did you tell them?

Wise knowledge recycling:

Teach learners the importance of practising what they know. Encourage them to adopt the habit of reaching out for information; to visit information-cum-knowledge generating institutions of their interest and seek for information, and thus, learn and re-learn along the process.

Improves on information engagement in a given domain, and even applies his familiarity with processes in a given domain to other domains of information.

When you notice a problem in the future that requires information to solve it, describe the possible actions you might take?

In the above proposed model, an information domain refers to a specific sector in a society which generates or disperses information. It is considered a social domain when the responsibility of that domain is designed to benefit the public. Information-cum-knowledge generating institutions therefore refer to established groups or individuals saddled with the

task of generating and dispersing information or knowledge to the public. Furthermore, the teacher in this model denotes the facilitator of information and might be an individual, especially a person serving at the instance of an institution. Librarianship as a profession is a well-suited institution to undertake the responsibility of teaching information literacy to orally-communicating rural publics.

To deliver information literacy instructions to rural dwellers, a rural information service approach can be deployed. Such approach considers the local relevance of information in discourse; thinks upon an immediate situation and the available information domains, as well as the social-cultural factors prevailing in a given rural community. Furthermore, a specific information need must be defined and confirmed to be a necessity among a reasonable number of people in a given community before information literacy instruction that is based on the identified need is administered. Hence, in teaching information literacy with the model, the instructional scope should provide the learner enough knowledge to subsequently demonstrate information literacy and evaluated for information literacy under each domain of information.

Conclusion and recommendations

The absence of an information literacy model that addresses the information experience of rural dwellers instituted the objective of this paper. Whereas a review of published models and frameworks for information literacy showed a consistent dominance on formal education and workplace practises, the total absence of a model that will relate to rural people who depend on oral communication for information and knowledge exchange is noted. And based upon the idea that information literacy is a relational and contextual occurrence, this paper presented a model on which information literacy can be framed in orally-communicating rural publics. Against situating the model to a particular country or region, the rural presence, illiteracy and career pattern which are evident and almost similar in many developing countries of the world makes it imperative to generalise the model. Thus, the model is hereby recommended to researchers, institutions and policy makers across the globe. A furtherance of research to contest or strengthen the model is required.

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