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Faculty-Librarian Collaboration on Developing Reading Skills in Tertiary Institutions

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Introduction

Rader (1996) observes that,

As higher education prepares for the 21st century, enormous changes are occurring due to technological development. Learning must now be continuous and almost a “way of being” with universities teaching their constituents to integrate learning opportunities into everything they do in order to be successful in the constantly changing work environment and in society (Vaill, 1996). Higher education is also looking closely at the business world, where strategic advantages are now more and more based on learning and teaching to take advantage of evolving technology, the Internet, the global marketplace, and the new economy (Harris, 1996).

The environment that Rader describes for the US is similar to that in Nigeria, with a demand for accountability, doing more with less, and an

expanding demand for distance learning. By Decree No. 1 of 1974, the National Universities Commission (NUC) statutorily became the sole agency responsible for advising the Federal Government on all aspects of higher education. By Decree No. 16 of 1985, the NUC was given the responsibility to lay down minimum educational standards for all academic programmes taught in Nigerian universities and to accredit those programmes. NUC now rates universities on criteria like percentage of academic programmes with full academic status; compliance with carrying capacity (measured by the degree of deviation from carrying capacity); proportion of the academic staff at professional level; foreign content (staff); proportion of students who are non-Nigerians; foreign content (students); proportion of staff with outstanding academic achievements; research output; student completion rate; PhD graduate output; stability of university calendar and student-to-computer ratio. The missions of universities and libraries is changing to meet the needs of the present environment (Schwartz, 1997).

Higher Education in Nigerian Universities

The Nigerian higher education system consists of universities, polytechnics, monotechnics, colleges of education and research institutes. Education is regarded by Nigerians as it is in other parts of the world, as the main instrument for social, political and economic development of the nation. A World Bank study revealed the increasing rate of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees on the Indian subcontinent (World Bank, 1998, p. 43). Oni (1996) states that

Nation states invest in university education because society expects it to contribute to national development in three principal ways. In the first place, society expects its university to produce the highly skilled personnel in technology, engineering, management and other professions. Secondly, universities have the responsibility of producing their own corps of academic personnel that is, the intellectual resource pool that will, through scientific research generate new knowledge and innovation to solve development problems. Thirdly, universities produce the teachers, administrators and managers for other levels of human resources development institutions. A university is able to perform these complementary roles if it has the necessary financial resources, equipment, and libraries operate in an environment that is conducive to academic work.

Oni (1996) quotes Yesufu (1996) on the condition of higher education in Nigeria:

The student-teacher ratios are worsening in virtually all disciplines. Laboratories are either non-existent or completely

denuded of essential equipment and experimental consumables. Libraries cry out for updating with current books, periodicals and research findings. Teachers are grossly underpaid and many have had to resort to migration to other countries to seek how to keep body and soul together, and further their intellectual development. Many others have abandoned academics to the greener pastures of the private industry, the banks and consultancies. Part time jobs and moonlighting have become the rule than the exception (Yesufu, 1996, p. 207).

According to Majasan (1998), Nigeria has not shown that it can satisfactorily organize education for survival with all the resources at her command. Information is power and those who control it can dominate, if not manipulate the information. The university system in Nigeria is still almost completely devoid of any information technology equipment or software. The consequences of all these are that the majority of young graduates of the educational system in Nigeria will remain under-educated, unprepared, under-employed, under-adapted citizens incapable of making their way in the global society. Illiteracy in information processing will place people in a position of inferiority (Opeke, 2004).

Librarians as Partners in Promoting Reading Skills

Libraries have always been at the center of the university community of scholars and students engaged in seeking the truth through new knowledge by promoting research findings and complementing the requirements of the curricular in pedagogic terms (Lawal 2004). Library professionals serve as a support system, providing assistance, encouragement and informal advisement to students. In addition, on many campuses, the library is the custodian of various resources that support learning, such as audiovisual laboratories and collections, writing and study skills centers and special collections. What do academic librarians really do? Their traditional tasks include reference work such as answering students' questions and directing them to resources, collection evaluation and development. These are important responsibilities, but the newest and perhaps the most interesting role is that of a liaison or specialist who works with students and faculty from specific departments and schools. This includes advocacy (e.g. representing the interests of their designated school or department at library and college-wide meetings), assistance, troubleshooting and more. In addition to traditional bibliographic instruction, many university librarians have become more active and involved in instruction. Aguolu and Aguolu (2002) further provided an insight into the educational role of libraries and librarians especially in institutions of higher learning by asserting that:

Many African students enter the universities without ever using any library either in the primary or secondary schools. Libraries

are often not available in those schools and where they are, their value and uses are rarely inculcated in the students. Absence of this important educational experience at the lower levels of education system has enormously increased the teaching functions of the university libraries.

One way of ameliorating the situation therefore is to teach the students on the "Use of the Library" as part of the General Studies Programme of the university. The staff, academic and non-academic is assumed to have had contact with university libraries either at home or abroad in the process of qualification but the "Library Guide" or other "Library Brochure" could be sufficient to assist staff requiring help on citation and bibliographic documentations. As a tool for educational development, the contribution of libraries towards successful research cannot be quantified. Research has a vital role to play in projecting scholarly work in the universities; libraries should therefore have informative resources capable of sustaining the processes of intellectual investigation.

Why is faculty-librarian collaboration worthwhile in language and classroom interaction? Librarians and teaching faculty have many mutual goals and concern. Both want students to develop a greater understanding of and respect for books, journals and other intellectual property. Both want to enhance student literacy, particularly information literacy and help students become writers, problem solvers, critical thinkers, self-directed and lifelong learners. Lastly, both want to build the social and learning community on campus. Librarians and faculty have a great deal to offer students and each other, especially in this "Information Age." To succeed in the university, students must be able to: 1) work independently on computers, using electronic databases, online catalogues and the Internet, as well as print resources; 2) evaluate, analyze and synthesize information and 3) understand issues of copyright, access, privacy, free speech, and censorship. Faculty-librarian collaboration can yield many creative projects that enhance instruction. These endeavours come in all shapes and sizes. They may be formal or informal, individual or institutional or an ongoing process. Traditional bibliographic instruction is very broad and covers topics like library services, general information on the library's web site, subscription databases and the use of Internet resources, which is often offered to incoming students. Course-integrated instruction is a newer, more focused option for faculty. These are customized teaching sessions that emphasize discipline-specific information literacy. The heart of this type of library instruction is the location and evaluation of resources including specialized journals, reference materials, and databases, such as PsycInfo, ERIC, and Science Direct.

In both developed and developing countries, there have been major attempts by librarians to promote reading and literacy through publicity campaigns which have involved libraries, library associations, the book

industry, business, foundations, the media and governments. Internationally, there have been UNESCO efforts with both World Book Day (April) and International Literacy Day (September). In the UK, their National Year of Reading (September 1998-August 1999) was a major effort administered by the National Literacy Trust, which distributed funds for innovative projects that stimulate reading. In Nigeria, since 1981, a Library Week is sponsored by the National Library of Nigeria and with the help from the International Reading Association. In South Africa, the United States Information Agency, the READ Educational Trust and local organizations worked with American Library Association's Peggy Barber to establish a major reading campaign in 1995.

Electronic Information Explosion

Some faculty-librarian teams have created multi-faceted, mega-Web sites for specific classes or disciplines. These sites may contain course- or program-specific data (e.g., syllabi), material on information literacy (e.g., evaluative criteria for use with print and Internet sources), annotated references and links to selected sources (e.g., Web portals, databases, directories, other Web sites). Sometimes there are complaints about technical problems or editorial choices on these sites, but most students appreciate this type of virtual collaboration. The current trend prevailing in the University of Jos library as reported by Akintunde (2002) captures succinctly the role of the fully digitized university library in pursuance of the goals of the university. The facilities provided by the university library are varied and up-to-date. They include 40 computers, 23 of which are Networked (LAN and WAN). Some of the computers in the university library are used for administrative record keeping, communication, technical processing of library materials and readers services. The university library has a computer laboratory, which attracts hundreds of visitors everyday who come to do literature searches, access both the internet and print documents. Generally all the networked computers in the laboratory have capacity to do multiple tasks, which include electronic mail (E-mail) services and web browsing.

The library at University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, has recently acquired a four-user LAN using the TINUB software. It features an Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC), which users can access with minimum guidance from the library staff. Recent accessions are being entered into the system, while retroactive conversion of records has also started. The library is also subscribed to TEEAL (The essential electronic agricultural library) a full text document delivery service covering some 70 frequently cited journals. Other CD-ROM databases held by the library include CAB Abstracts, Agrindex, Agricola, etc.

The University of Port Harcourt raised a proposal for a model Information and Communication Technology Centre (ICTC) in the year 2002. The Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Ltd (SPDC) and John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation saw the proposal as good and viable in

the present global world. They agreed to support it. The ICTC service of the University of Port Harcourt was formally opened on April 14, 2004. The completed renovation with equipment was supplied and installed by SPDC on behalf of NNPC/Shell/EPNL/Agip joint venture in collaboration with support from the MacArthur Foundation in the USA. In compliance with the National Universities Commission of Nigeria to provide computing facilities for academic needs, University of Port Harcourt had established three departments namely: Computing Services Centre, the Management Information System (MIS); the Nigerian Universities Network (NUNET) to link all Nigerian universities together.

Constraints on the Use of Libraries for Instructive Growth

Several impediments have been identified to include the following:

- low esteem accorded librarians
- underfunding of libraries and information services
- insufficient infrastructure and resources
- poor and inadequate telecommunications facilities
- poor level of computer literacy even within the academic community
- poor level of awareness of internet facilities among policy makers, government officials and the ruling class in general
- time commitment required to develop new courses especially with off-campus access
- copyright issues

Unfortunately, not everyone has embraced the idea of the teaching library and faculty-librarian partnership. Many professors underestimate librarians and view them as subordinates, sometimes as research assistants or babysitters for classes during out-of-town conferences. Some professors do not work with librarians because their students are part of a special population, such as honors or graduate students, who are mistakenly thought to be more knowledgeable and accomplished than typical undergraduates. Some faculty have simply never thought of how librarians could help them achieve course goals. Sadly, teaching itself is not valued on some campuses, so faculty may not choose to engage in cooperative instructional projects. Faculty may have encountered librarians who were unresponsive to faculty feedback and requests, had little enthusiasm for building coalitions, or may not have been interested in greater involvement in teaching as a discipline, but these should not affect collaboration.

The underfunding of libraries and information services has led to the continuous decline in the performances of students in the university. Inadequate funding for books, journals, and information technology facilities in Nigeria was decried by Ochei (2002), Zakari (2000) and Aina (2003). The lukewarm attitude of government, which has gone a long way to stall the provision of most of the essential facilities for the full computerization of the

university libraries, was also identified by Onyekwelu (1998) and Adedoyin (2001). The issue of manpower inadequacy is manifested by the fact that education for librarianship in Nigeria is grossly deficient in the area of computer applications. A cursory look at the syllabi of the seven universities in Nigeria offering courses in librarianship and information studies will reveal the deficiency in the area of computer applications or library automation. Most computer-related courses terminate at the level of appreciation of the capabilities of computers. Student-computer contact is virtually nonexistent as those resources are not within the reach of most departments. Thus, the few librarians who are computer literate in Nigeria today were either trained abroad or through private initiatives in the universities, private study or through the existing numerous and private computer business houses. The erratic nature of the electricity supply is a major bane of library automation in Nigeria. It is known that most establishments have had to incur additional expenses by way of purchasing a generator as a backup for energy supply. It is a national problem needing a national solution.

Recommendations

University librarians must acquire information resources that are relevant to faculty needs, and create a process that works with faculty. Faculty-librarian alliances should be evaluated frequently and revised as needed in terms of students' attitudes and participation, what they thought was useful or unhelpful, and learning and achievement, including appropriateness, caliber of sources used, and general quality of projects and products. University librarians must sustain the cooperative acquisition of library materials and electronic information resources by forming themselves into consortia as a means of uninterrupted access to information which might not otherwise be available.

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