TEACHING OF LIBRARY SKILLS IN AN INTER-DISCIPLINARY CONTEXT: a theoretical and practical perspective from Kenyatta University

Grace W. Kamau
Mary A.W. Muiruri
Alice R. Bulogosi

Abstract

In this article, we present experiences of teaching library skills at Kenyatta University. The introduction of a mandatory foundation course for all first year undergraduate students admitted in state universities began in 1991. This change provided an opportunity for the Librarians at the university to participate in the teaching of library skills, a component of the foundation course. The recognition of the role of the library in the students’ learning is seen in the right direction. Previously, it was virtually impossible to integrate library skills course with academic programs. The opportunity to teach students how to become effective seekers and users of library resources need not scare librarians. This offers us the opportunity to appreciate the huge challenges students encounter as they embark on their academic programs. A number of issues considered critical in this activity include students’ academic characteristics, attitudes towards library skills course, teaching methods, course materials, syllabus, time allocated and training. Suggestions are made on how to address challenges likely to be encountered in library skills instruction.

Introduction

In the context of this article, “Library Skills” refers to any planned activities that are designed to teach the library user how to make maximum use of library resources. The education system in Kenya has changed from 7-4-2-3, to 8-4-4. The old system provided a seven-year primary education, four-year secondary level, two-year advanced level, and three-year university education for a basic degree. The new system gives eight years of primary, four years at secondary and four years for a basic university degree. The change was in recognition of the inadequacies of the 7-4-2-3 system that was too content oriented. The emphasis is on the acquisition of both knowledge

* Grace Kamau is Senior Assistant Librarian, Kenyatta University Library, Kenya.
* Mary Muiruri is Assistant Librarian, Kenyatta University Library, Kenya.
* Alice Bulogosi is Assistant Librarian, Kenyatta University Library, Kenya.
and skills, two vital ingredients in modern life. After the education system changed from the 7-4-2-3 to the 8-4-4 system, it was found necessary to introduce the communication skills course in all state universities for undergraduate so that they could cope efficiently with their studies. The introduction of library skills as a component of communication skills with effect from 1990/91 academic year provided an excellent opportunity and challenge for librarians in these institutions to help the new student develop the necessary skills for survival in a constantly changing world.

In the context of Kenyatta University, the library skills course aims at equipping the students with necessary knowledge and skills to effectively use a library. The course covers the following areas: how to use the catalogue, how library materials are organized, finding and using reference sources, developing a search strategy, and how to prepared citations. This article discusses both the theoretical and practical aspects of teaching library skills at Kenyatta University under the following: background to the course, rationale/objectives, students’ academic characteristics, students’ attitudes towards the course teaching methodology, course review, evaluation and difficulties encountered. Suggestions are made on how to address challenges likely to be encountered in library skills instruction.

**Background**

Since 1986 Kenyatta University has experienced a number of challenges. We have witnessed tremendous increase in the number of undergraduate students admitted to the university. In 1985 the University admitted about 1,000 undergraduates. In 1986 the figures increased to 1,700 undergraduates and in 1987 the figures increased to 3,000 and rose to over 10,000 in 1995. This increase was not matched with the availability of professional librarians to assist students. As a result, most of the students encounter difficulties in using libraries for their learning. As there is no developed school library system in Kenya, the majority of these students arrive at the University with almost no notion of how a university library can contribute to their academic programs. University libraries are huge and contain thousands of volumes of learning resources in different formats. The vast collections tend to intimidate the new students.

As library staff dealing with students on a daily basis, our experience has shown that majority of students face great difficulties in using the library to find items on their reading lists while undertaking individual assignments and for general educational purposes. Similarly, the orientation programs given to freshmen are ineffective because they come very early in the students’ life at the university, and are often very short, as they are crammed in the first week.
Prior to the academic year 1990/91, serious attempts were made to integrate library skills course within the academic programs but without much success. The introduction of the library skill course therefore provided us with the opportunity to teach the course to undergraduate students in their first year.

Rationale/Objectives of the Course

In today’s world of “information explosion” and widening curricular horizons, there is a growing need for students entering tertiary level education to be confident library users. Majorities of the new students come to the university with little experience in library use. Students entering Kenyatta University come from differing and varying learning backgrounds that reflect inequality in learning opportunities because the school library system is not developed in the country. All these factors place great demands on students as they search for information for their learning needs. The need to equip them with the necessary skills is now recognized as important.

Trends in recent years toward student centered learning demand that students develop capabilities to use libraries efficiently and effectively. The objectives of the Library Skills Course are to enable the students to: first, appreciate the vital role information plays in their learning at the university and beyond the campus. Second, acknowledge differences in approach to teaching in secondary schools and the university, and recognize the emphasis on individual student’s responsibility for their learning. Third, be able to identify parts of a reference item on reading lists. Fourth, understand the concept of classification of library materials and the arrangement of books on shelves. Fifth, identify and use reference materials and periodical. Sixth, define a search strategy. Seventh, cite references used in writing term papers/projects and eighth, learn how to compile a bibliography.

Issues

The inclusion of library skills in the foundation course for all first year students provided librarians with challenges and opportunities to participate in the new changes. The challenges, however, brought to the fore a number of issues pertinent to library skills instruction.

Students Academic Characteristics

The organization of library skills course takes the academic programs offered at the university into consideration. The programs fall into four broad subject areas namely: Arts, Commerce, Education and Sciences. Subject
combinations are often varied depending on the faculty in which the student has registered. Students are taught in-groups and group-formation depends on subject combination. Ideally, specific groups could be formed according to the needs of particular courses and information requirements of students. But this has not been the case due to the large numbers of students vis a vis the available number of librarians to teach the course. As such, students are grouped according to closely related subjects, for example, Botany/Zoology/Chemistry/Physics/Mathematics; Appropriate technology/Mathematics/Physics Kiswahili/Philosophy/Religious studies Economics/Business studies/Mathematics/Sociology/Geography and any other subject; and Literature/French/English language/Kiswahili/History.

Such subject combinations often presented problems in timetable schedules and group size. The classes were often large (80 - 100 students) and this made it difficult to practice transfer of skills.

**Student Attitudes towards the Course**

From the evaluation exercises, which we conducted at the end of every academic year to gauge student's attitudes towards the course, students found the library skills course very useful to their learning as shown in the following table:

**Order of Relevance of the skills in the Communication Skills Course**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SKILL</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>43.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Rukangu, S.M. (1992:3)

**Teaching Methodology**

Teaching of library skills in national Universities in Kenya varies from one University to another depending on the number of librarians available to teach. These librarians also perform other duties. University library
organization and the overall university organization also influence teaching library skills - some universities are located on various campuses, while others are on a single campus. According to Ndegwa (1980:7)\(^2\), methods chosen depend on "availability of space, number of students, subject being dealt with, time allocated to the course, availability of teachers, and personal preference of the individual teachers".

A variety of methods have been used in teaching the skills. Regardless of the approach used, various methods should be used to supplement each other for an effective user education program. Cowley and Hammond (1987:26)\(^3\) state that "there should be a variety in the techniques used as no one method is suitable for all situations". The traditional lecture method widely used in academic programs in the universities was found inappropriate in library skills instruction. In view of the demands of a skill-based course, it was decided that a combination of several teaching methods be adopted in order to impart knowledge and provide an opportunity for the students to practice the skill. The basic approaches used were question and answer; theory; classroom tasks; and practical sessions in the library. This was in recognition of the current developments and trends in library skills instruction that learning itself is an active process. Cowley and Hammond (1987:26)\(^4\) support the view that "instruction sessions should be punctuated with practical tasks designed to test understanding and provide stimulation."

Due to large groups and the time allocated to the skills, it was impossible to have many practical sessions. In future, groups could be smaller to allow more practical session with support of professional librarians based in the library. Additionally, there is a need for closer collaboration between library staff and faculties for subject specific tasks or research topics.

**Syllabus**

Initially, the library skills course was developed by Communication Skills Department without the input from librarians. As a result, the first course outline prepared before the academic year 1990/91 commenced, was fragmented and lacked detail. It covered broadly the area of accessing library collections and utilizing library help services. After teaching the course for one year, it became evident that there was need to review that syllabus in order to make it logical and comprehensive. The reorganized syllabus comprise of the following areas: introduction and rationale for the library skills course; interpreting references from a reading list; the library catalogue; organization of library materials; doing a library search; referencing techniques; locating and using reference sources and periodicals.
Time Allocation

Initially, the skills were allocated six hours over a period of six weeks but this time was inadequate, hence impossible to cover the syllabus. It became necessary to review this since the syllabus had been reorganized. In the following academic year 1991/92, library skills was allocated ten hours over a period of ten weeks. Even with the additional four hours, it was difficult to organize practical sessions. Instead, students were requested to allow us use part of their free time, an arrangement that did not seem acceptable to them. As such it became difficult to punctuate theory with practice. Ideally library skills instruction needs to be taught from the first to the final year of study. This would give students the opportunity to learn advanced skills in searching for information needed in their areas of specialization.

Resources

The success of library skills instruction depends to a large extent on availability of librarians willing to teach and materials relevant to the needs of the course.

Personnel

When the course was begun in 1990/91, seven librarians were assigned the task of teaching the skills in addition to handling library duties. Due to the large number of students enrolled for the course in the first semester (1800 students), the arrangement was unsuitable in our context. Since students were taught in groups, each librarian had six groups; and this translated in teaching six hours a week for ten weeks. The heavy teaching load presented difficulties. After several deliberations, it was decided that four members of staff be seconded on a full-time basis to the Communication Skills Department to teach library skills. It should be noted that any attempt to teach this course had to seriously consider staffing implications. Library staff should be involved in the teaching of library skills and they should be trained in teaching methods as training helps to create awareness of change. It helps staff to be more flexible in their approaches and also builds confidence. The type of training provided will depend a great deal on the local situation. Such training programs should consider the development of skills necessary to work individually as well as in-groups. Conflict may also easily arise when senior staff are released from library duties to participate in the planning and teaching of the course.
Teaching Materials

The British experts developed two basic textbooks consisting of a workbook and resource book before the course was launched. These materials were unsuitable for an undergraduate course. After using the materials in the first year they were reviewed. A Teacher’s Guide was also prepared. Other materials were developed for the students.

Role of Faculty

The results of a survey carried out at Kenyatta University on library skills gave a positive picture. A total of 69 lecturers were surveyed through a structured questionnaire. Out of this number, twenty five responded that the skills are very important and only two showed them as important. The recognition of the importance of the skills by the faculty was seen as significant and encouraging.

The faculty further emphasized that students need to develop capabilities that can enhance their use of libraries for their learning, apart from the general guidance given through the provision of reading lists, tutorial presentations and the search for information for assignments and making notes.

They were asked to rate students’ work after undergoing the instruction; the overwhelming response was that there had been remarkable improvement and generally satisfied with the quality of work presented. This was a clear indication of the impact of the skills on students’ work.

Evaluation

According to Fjallbrant and Malley (1984:94), evaluation is concerned with the collection and analysis of information about the input, in terms of educational potential, the valuables affecting the educational process, and the product or output. The evaluation of the library skills was integrated with other communication skills. Evaluation was considered very central to the activities and was undertaken in four ways:

- Administering of the continuous assessment tests in the first and second half of the semester.

- A project paper with well designed parts that were supervised before a student could move on to the next stage; for example, identifying relevant sources; making notes from these sources; writing an outline; writing the text; and compiling a bibliography.
- A written examination paper of two hours’ duration given at the end of the semester;

- A structured questionnaire administered in the last week of teaching before examinations are taken.

**Course Review**

The course is reviewed at the end of each semester. The review usually focuses on the syllabus, time allocation, resources, and teaching methodology.

**Conclusion**

Whereas change will continue to occur in education provision, librarians have to address issues of developing students’ capabilities in using libraries. But before this task is undertaken, the following things should be considered:

(i) It is suggested that skills and a needs analysis be done to establish student’s needs before teaching begins.

(ii) For the students to fully utilize the skills taught, it is necessary to establish contacts with the subject lecturers who can provide information like reading lists and topics for assignments on a regular basis.

(iii) Professional librarians be involved in the teaching of the course.

(iv) Suitable texts for the course should be produced.

(v) Librarians be trained in teaching skills.

**References**


5. Rukangu, S.M. op, cit. p. 4

**Bibliography**


Ndegwa, R.N. User education and the use of media (Discussion paper no. 2) Nairobi: Kenyatta University Library, 1980.

Ochoggia, R.E. “Planning a library user education programme”. *Information Trends*. 3 (3) 1990: 105-111