

Information Skills Classes in Public Libraries

Ng Siong Ngor

Auckland City Libraries, New Zealand

E-mail: siong.ng@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper discusses (a) the importance of teaching information skills to the community in public libraries; and (b) discover the reasons for it and the challenges librarians face when delivering information skills classes. This paper is based on case studies as it is from the writer's experience, observation and events in New Zealand public libraries. This approach is used as there is not much literature in this area in comparison to training and teacher education. Conducting information skills in libraries is a new development as previously, libraries' role is viewed as only providing books. With the increased number of self help channels such as self check machines and online banking, libraries play a part in developing a society which is knowledge and accessible. However there are limitations as it takes time and staff need to be confident to be able to assist patrons. This area of research is relatively new and information skills classes are a new service that public libraries offer to their community. Although it has limitations in being generalized, it could be a good foundation for future research.

Keywords: Information literacy; Information skills; Public libraries; Library instruction; Internet; New Zealand.

1. Introduction

The e-revolution is changing the whole of society: an increasing number of jobs now requires Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills and knowledge, E-learning (or distance learning) is becoming more popular in many countries, and Google, as well as other Internet search engines, is widely used as a source of information by many people. However, with millions of adults still unfamiliar with ICT, progress towards breaking the digital divide is still a long dream away. For example, in New Zealand, the 2006 census records only 1 million out of 4 million as having access to the Internet in their household (Statistics New Zealand, 2007). Recently there was tension between Telecom and New Zealand government to break Telecom's monopoly on its line to ensure better and cheaper Internet and phone services. This is supported by Communications Minister, David Cunliffe, who states that New Zealand is ranked 22 out of 30 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries for broadband uptake (Thomson, 2006). The government acknowledges that the government sees this as critical national infrastructure, without which the country will not be able to compete internationally.

In public libraries, Liu et al. (2006) state that, "public libraries are the logical places for people in the communities who need public digital resources to have access to these. Due to improvements in computer and telecommunication technologies, and support from philanthropic gifts and government grants, many more urban and suburban public libraries in the USA have been able to provide free access to digital resources." As public libraries are a source of public digital resources and librarians are moving towards promoting life long learning, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the importance of teaching information skills in public libraries and to evaluate the current methodology used in information skills teaching. Finally, the paper also identifies and seeks solutions to barriers faced by teachers of information skills

2. Methodology

This paper is based on case studies as obtained from my personal observations and experience working in a public library. This method was used because it provides practical, hands-on examples for working librarians and information specialists. According to Roselle (1996), case studies bridge the gap between principles of librarianship as taught in library and information courses and the realities of library life. This method is also supported by McClennen and Memmott (2001), who used case studies to develop a model that was used to describe the various roles played by participants in the digital reference process and the ways in which those roles interact.

3. Research Questions

This study examines the following questions:

- i. Why do librarians need to promote information skills classes in public libraries?
- ii. Who are the learners and what are their needs?
- iii. What kinds of information are learners looking for?
- iv. How well are these services meeting their information needs?

The importance of information literacy has not been emphasized and kept pace with the proliferation of electronic materials and the growing complexities of the information needs of their users. By examining the above questions, this study aims to provide useful observation and processes for libraries and information institutions concerned in their endeavors to meet the information needs of their users.

(a) Why do librarians need to promote information skills classes in public libraries?

From my experience, people are interested in ICT for three main reasons: for the purposes of obtaining employment, communication, and educational purposes. For example, the increasing number of job applications that are advertised only on websites and which only accept online applications has motivated the public to either learn or improve upon new and existing skills. This is supported by Liu et al. (2006), who conducted research on the purposes for which a community uses digital library services. Liu's (2006) paper stated that 43% of the respondents used the Internet to search for information on subjects such as employment, investment, or taxes. Electronic learning (e-learning) such as digital photography, posting messages onto a blog or delivering an entire learning programme online also continues to grow. E-learning has the potential to overcome barriers when taking part in education and training (Clarke, 2007). Moreover, the convenience of public libraries makes it easily accessible for the learners.

(b) Who are the learners and what are their needs?

The majority of the students that attend my information classes are above the age of 50, although other common attendees also include new migrants, the unemployed and students. The majority of students are probably over the age of 50 for a number of reasons. First, these students were not born in the era of computers, and wish to up skill their computer knowledge so as to communicate with family members via email and other online communication devices. This is supported by the study which Clarke (2005) conducted. In that study, the main reason that learners seek to gain IT skills are for job, family and curiosity. In the New Zealand Herald recently, it is stated that "65 per cent of people 50-plus are using the internet every day and their usage increases as they get into the 60 to 70 range" South (2007). Second, our courses are conducted during the weekdays and during working hours as these proved to be the most suitable time for these learners.

(c) What kinds of information are learners looking for?

Based on my observation, the most common types of information that learners seek access to are current events, job announcements and personal use such as e-mail. This is contrast to Liu's (2006) research in which the respondents reported a great deal of differences in the types of information they sought. The main three categories of information in that study were public information, library resources and current events/news.

(d) How well are current ICT training services meeting information needs?

Major initiatives have been taken to ensure that access to technology is available to all people. In Auckland City, the Community Development and Equity Committee endorsed more than \$25 million to enhance the city's community facilities, and projects funded include the provision of free Internet access at all Auckland City Libraries (City Scene, 2006). This is similar in US, where the government has established 6,000 online centres in libraries and community locations to offer free straightforward access. The aim is to remove the barrier presented by low incomes community (Clarke, 2005). Clarke (2005) also argued that the access is probably ineffective in reaching people who have little confidence in their ability to learn how to use ICT or have little interest in technology.

There are many examples in the literature of libraries that focuses on services and accessibility for disabled users in a library environment. Recently because of the increasing growth of online learning and services, libraries have started to bridge the gap by making teaching sessions more accessible (Forrest and Simpson, 2007). This is such as making the course information available in digital format and providing a library environment with appropriate furniture, lighting and computer equipment.

In Auckland New Zealand, most of the ICT training sessions are held at the library. The maximum number of attendees per class is six students and they are trained by two tutors. This give tutors the opportunity to assist students at a more personal level. The tutors acknowledge that every student learns at a different pace and that having a small class enhances the learning process, as tutors are able to monitor each student's progress. At other libraries, there are separate rooms that cater for classes, and this is ideal as both tutors and students are able to concentrate without interruptions. Training sessions should preferably be hands-on classes and should allow each student to have a separate computer to practice upon.

When planning for information skills classes I have used the following model. There are many models available but the reason this model was chosen is because it is simple to use and best caters to the teaching of basic skills.

4. Seven Pillars Model for Information Literacy

The Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) advocates a seven pillars model for information literacy. The model consists of the following basic library and IT skills:

- Recognise the information need
- Distinguish ways off addressing gap
- Construct strategies for locating
- Locate and access
- Compare and evaluate
- Organise, apply and communicate
- Synthesise and create

The first four points are commonly used and emphasized while the last three points are mainly used by advanced researchers. Webb and Powis (2004) supported this and

illustrated that other than these theories the trainer should try to provide a mix of teaching and learning activities in order to accommodate diversity. Webb and Powis (2004) elaborate by encouraging “trainers to include activity, theory, thinking space and relevant examples in a session and do not just talk about examples but illustrate them with a handout that includes diagrams or a visual representation or what you are covering: allow plenty of time for practice”.

To illustrate how this model can be used, I set out two real-world examples below.

(a) Case Study One

A group of six females aged between 50-70 years old saw in the local paper that their community library is offering a free Introduction to Computer for beginners. It a hands-on training session and there were two trainers (Lisa and Anna) for the three-week course. The first lesson covers basic mouse and keyboarding skills and naming different parts of the computer. The second lesson covers website navigation using the library website as a reference and the third lesson touches on library databases.

(i) What happens in the session?

The group recognised that there is information gap as the world moves toward e-learning and they addressed the gap by wanting to learn new things such as the computer. There are millions of reliable information on topics (such as health) that are of interest to them. Therefore the beginner courses introduce students to basic computer knowledge and search tips such as keyword and subject searching on the library catalogue. More advanced searches such as using truncation and Boolean searching are also introduced. Step by step instructions on how to locate and access information such as a special “seniors page” that is linked to the website are provided as an additional resource. At this level, the last three points are not addressed due to the limited computer knowledge they have. The disadvantage of this is the time that is involved by providing classes to the community. All students are different therefore their learning style varies too.

(ii) Questions

1. How aware are you of the needs of your learners?
2. What kinds of things can be done differently?

(iii) Discussion

As this is a beginner’s course, Lisa and Anna started off with basics. Covering mouse and keyboard skills are essential. The tutors help learners to make the most of the library website and the resources that are linked to the website. This includes ways to search the library catalogue using title, author, keyword and subject. The course also covers setting up a reading history function that only customers can access it with library barcode and pin. The course also covers introduction to databases such as searching for Time full text articles.

Step by step instructions are ideal as it gives opportunity for students to review what they have learnt in the session. The handouts consist of large print fonts and lots of screen shot of the screen provide students to refer to the notes easily. This is supported by Webb and Powis (2004) who argues that handouts should include a diagram or visual representation of what you are covering. Most importantly, allow plenty of time for practice!

(b) Case Study Two

Maryanne is 35 years old. Recently, she decided to enter the work force after being a home-maker for several years. She registered to join the Internet computer class that her local library offered. The course runs for an hour for three weeks and cover basic Internet searching and setting up an email address. This will be essential as she has decided to

apply for jobs. There are eight people in the class of two tutors. The students vary from mid 20s to early 50s and there are from 4 different nationalities.

(i) What happens in the session?

Maryanne recognised that there is an information gap as she was out of the working force for several years. Her computer knowledge is limited and she is not confident with using e-mails. She addressed the gap by attending the free computer class that the library offered and checked out a number of computer books. After the class, she learnt the different ways of finding advertised vacancies. She was given a number of websites as resources and was informed on how person to person networking is also important. She located the websites and patiently searched for vacancies. She was told that there are many websites that have information on how to write CVs and cover letters. She searched for the sites and compared the information before evaluating the sites to see the suitability of it. During a class comprehensive handouts were given. The handouts list some of the websites that are relevant. The limitation of this is that job searching can take some time and the availability to apply for jobs on the website can be challenging. Applicants who have limited computer skills will have to know how to attach documents and need to have an e-mail address.

(iii) Questions

1. How would you approach teaching information skills to this group?
2. What do you feel about the content of the course?

(iii) Discussion

There is too much to cover in the course and thus make it seem a lot for students to learn. Doing a CV is not an easy task therefore requiring a longer period of training sessions. Ideally there should be another session for e-mail and a practice session in between, to give students time to practice sending and receiving e-mails before another teaching session. However this does not mean that the session has to be perfect and to suit all students. The teacher-student ratio is good as it gives enough attention to students. Good strategies dealing with the diverse group including giving out handouts and dividing the course into three weeks to spread out the learning. Given the constraints of staff and the resources that the library can provide, this seems a reasonable approach which would meet the desired learning outcomes.

5. Challenges

(a) Disability

In New Zealand, The New Zealand Disability Strategy is vital to the well-being of the one-in-five New Zealanders who identify that they have a long-term impairment. "The Strategy has the vision of a society that highly values the lives and continually enhances full participation of disabled people. It provides an enduring framework to ensure that government departments and agencies consider disabled people before making decisions. In taking the lead, the Government will do everything possible to influence the attitudes and behaviour of society as a whole. By all New Zealanders considering issues facing people with disabilities and their aspirations, New Zealand can become a fully inclusive society (Office of Disability Issues, n.d.)".

The main challenges that librarians and information professionals have is making the teaching sessions accessible to all students. There are students that are visually impaired and required large print notes on the other hand there are students that have hearing problems and required tutors to speak louder. Forrest and Simpson (2007) research

focused on making teaching sessions accessible to participate with disabilities. The paper argues that when preparing it is essential to ensure that there are no unnecessary barriers to accessibility. Practical tips such as making font size to 30 either Arial or Verdana. Layout of the furniture and height adjustable tables and chairs are essential.

(b) Creativity

Creating an interactive and fulfilling sessions will enhance the learning ability. Doshu (2006) argues that by presenting students with real-world situations and allowing them to play a game by applying newly learned library skills, the concept of information literacy loses its abstract, theoretical quality and becomes a relevant part of their lives. It can be done easily and without any cost. For example, asking students to provide information about the history of a town using the library local history websites and family history database through means of a role-play. By presenting students with real-world situations and allowing them to play a game by applying newly learned library skills, the concept of information literacy loses its abstract, theoretical quality and becomes a relevant part of their lives.

(c) Interactive Online Modules

Learning programs such as an interactive Internet based modules to teach information competence are popular as distance learning is becoming more common as students can access the modules remotely. For example, TAFE a polytechnic in South Australia website (<http://www2.tafe.sa.edu.au/lili/>) has a link to an interactive information literacy page. The site was voted for the Inaugural 2002 Training Initiative Award in South Australia. However such modules have their limitations. Students must have basic keyboarding skills in order to navigate the website. Setting up online resources can also be time consuming and expensive to produce. Nevertheless, research conducted by Lawson (2005) argues that using eclectic digital resources to enhance instrumental methods rather than through learning skills in isolation is more effective.

(d) Learning environment

The learning environment contributes to students' learning ability. Webb and Powis (2004) list practical factors as venue, time of day, heat, lighting, furniture, room layout and computers. When the learning environment becomes uncomfortable it is better to reschedule the sessions. Language and cultural barriers will also affect the learning styles of students. In a group situation if there is one person who finds it hard to follow the lessons due to language barriers, this will affect the flow of the session. Cultural barriers need to be addressed too. In some cultures, is not appropriate to have eye contact with another person especially from a different gender.

(e) Staff training

Staff need to be trained and confident in teaching. This can be costly to the libraries and time is always a factor. Staff also need to be confident and aware of the different theories of learning and the different learning strategies. Because of the vast diversity of students, the sessions need to be quickly adaptable to different age groups and must be able to be conducted at various speeds. Technology is advancing rapidly and this requires librarians to also keep up-to-date. For example: how confident are librarians in blogging or downloading music to IPOD?

6. Conclusion

The paper has examined the importance of teaching information skills in public libraries and has evaluated and discussed current teaching methodology. It concludes with

challenges that information professionals and librarians face when running information skills sessions as based on case studies and personal observation using the seven pillars model for information literacy as a model. Although the study has limitations, as it generalizes the understanding patterns of information seekers in New Zealand, it is a good starting point for more pilot studies and research to be done. Ideally a mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) approach with a training needs analysis (TNA) should be carried out nationwide in order to observe the overall implications

References

- Auckland City. 2006. Financial boost for community facilities. *City Scene*, 26 November 2006
- Clarke, Alan. 2007. The future of e-learning. *Adults Learning*, Vol. 18, 7:14-15
- Clarke, Alan. 2005. Towards an e-inclusive society. *Adults Learning*, Vol. 17, 4: 24-25
- Doshu, Ameet. 2006. How gaming could improve information literacy. *Computers in libraries*, Vol. 26, 5:14-17
- Forrest, Margaret and Simpson, Anne. 2007. Teachability: creating accessible learning and teaching in information skills. *Health Information and Libraries*, Vol. 24:69-71.
- Government of South Australia. *Learn information literacy initiative* (Lili). Available at: <http://www2.tafe.sa.edu.au/lili/> (accessed 24 April 2007).
- Lawson, K. 2005. Using eclectic digital resources to enhance instructional methods for adult learners. *OCLS Systems and Services*, Vol. 21, 1: 49-60
- Liu, Yan Quan, Martin, Craig, Roehl, Eileen, Yi, Zhixian and Ward, Sheila. 2006. Digital information access in urban/suburban communities: a survey report of public digital library use by the residents in Connecticut. *OCLC System & Services*, Vol. 22, 2:132-144
- McClennen, Michael and Memmott, Patricia. 2001. Roles in digital reference. *Information Technology and Libraries*, Vol. 20, 3:143-148
- Office of Disability Issues. (n.d.) *NZ disability strategy*. Available at: <http://www.odi.govt.nz/nzds/> (accessed 25 April 2007).
- Roselle, Ann. 1996. The case study method: a learning tool for practising librarians and information specialists. *Library Review*, Vol.45, 4: 30
- South, Gill. 2007. Reaching out to the over 50s. *New Zealand Herald*. Sunday 22 April 2007
- Statistics New Zealand. 2007. *Two-thirds of New Zealand homes online*. Available at: <http://www.stats.govt.nz/products-and-services/media-releases/household-use-of-information-and-communication-technologies-survey-2006/household-use-ict-06-mr.htm> (accessed 27 April 2007).
- Thompson, Ainsley. 2006. Telecom's grip severed. *New Zealand Herald*. Thursday 4 May 2006.
- Webb, Jo and Powis, Chris. 2004. *Teaching information skills: theory and practice*. Facet Publishing: London