



Implementing Information Literacy through the Personal Librarian Model: Prospects and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the concept of Personal Librarianship which is fairly a novel concept in the library and information science context in Africa. The Personal Librarian Programme encourages students to build relationships with their personal librarians who provide learning support, and introduce the library as an enabling environment that supports students' learning needs. The ultimate goal of this concept is to make First Year Students Information Literate. The idea behind the programme is that the personal librarian becomes the student's primary contact throughout his/her studies. The study reviews the two most widely used models of teaching and imparting Information Literacy by pointing out their strengths and weaknesses. In the end, the research highlights the importance of complementing these existing efforts with the Personal Librarian concept. The research also demonstrates the feasibility of implementing the Personal Librarian Programme in a higher education context in Africa. Finally, the study elicits some challenges in using the Personal Librarian Programme to implement Information Literacy. Overall, the study contributes to efforts aimed at proactively engaging students to enhance their competencies in information usage.

Keywords: Information literacy, Personal librarianship, Prospects, Challenges.

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I. Introduction

Recent advances in marketing and emerging technologies have significantly impacted traditional practices in library and information services (Henry, Vardeman, & Syma, 2012). These trends have permeated virtually every kind of library service leading to re-alignment of traditional roles for library staff. For instance, reference librarians are now expected to increase their involvement not just in user- instruction and customer services, but also at forming new alliances with faculty and students on personal terms (Aguilar et al., 2011). This approach to ensuring personalization in information services delivery has given birth to the concept of personal librarianship (PL). PL is a response to the need for personalised, one-on-one, comprehensive high quality information in an era of new technologies and one-stop shopping.

First Year Students in colleges and universities are often confronted with deficiencies in their Information Literacy (IL) skills irrespective of their previous school experiences of technology resources. The relative value of

IL is outlined by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (2000) as the capacity of an individual to resolve when to find information, and with what kind of skill to evaluate and effectively make use of the required information. Acquiring IL skills is even more important in an era of rapid technological change and dynamic information resources and services. Even though First Year Students are often thought to be familiar with the use of technology, they may not have developed their IL skills sufficiently to fully support their academic development. This is because in many African countries, most students have little to show for their experiences of the library and its resources for lifelong learning (Baro & Keboh, 2012). This situation has been blamed on the poor state of learning materials and a negative perception towards library services and its role in the educational process (Baro & Keboh, 2012). According to Gontshi (2011), in spite of the massive exposure to the mass media and the use of web 2.0 tools with the "right" information, the question that remains to be answered is if First Year Students have the competencies to sift through the mass of information that emerges when they perform their searches; and if this exposure to technology has made

them better researchers. In addition, are these students capable of evaluating scholarly sources correctly? Can they differentiate between an academic journal and a popular press magazine? As a result of questions such as these, many universities and other higher educational institutions have introduced interventions aimed at developing students' IL skills (Gontshi, 2011).

Ensuring lifelong learners is an indispensable role of higher education institutions. Colleges and universities have a primary responsibility to impart into their students the skills to make reasonable decisions and develop good personal models for successful learning which will serve as a strong basis for an independent professional life and as active members in decision-making and community building (ACRL, 2000). In this regard, IL is thought of as a critical success factor for lifelong learning (ALA, 2011). In many academic contexts, IL has been implemented to equip information users with these abilities and skills. These abilities have been traditionally transmitted by librarians in a teaching role through various methods of which the most two widely practised models are the 'course-integrated model' and the 'for-credit model'. These are also referred to by Bell (2008) as the "compartmentalized" and "distributed" models respectively. Bell describes the distributed model as the type in which the IL course is incorporated into several courses in academic programmes and extended throughout a student's entire programme as against the compartmentalized model in which IL is delivered in standalone courses. There is a need for consensus on the kind of strategies to teach IL, in spite of the generally accepted importance of the course (Davis, Lundstrom & Martin, 2011). IL must be evaluated differently from other academic programmes due to the "fit-for-purpose" nature of IL as a course, which unfortunately, often leads to its under-appreciation and attraction of negative perception. For instance, in a large study the Primary Research Group (2008) found that for most US and Canadian universities, IL instruction usually occurred in single sessions, and often lasted an hour or less. In addition, less than 6% of these universities delivered one or two-credit full courses in IL as a pre-requisite for graduation. However, a quarter of these institutions had an integrated IL course for basic writing and composition classes (Primary Research Group, 2008).

In the age of the Internet and new technologies, information users have a constant need for critical thinking skills to help them determine their information need (Breivik, 2005). In other words, to participate effectively in the new information market, a personalized approach- like in other service-oriented professions- is among the best placed solutions for a library to impart IL skills throughout the student's "lifetime" at university. The potential benefits of the ensuing relationship between the personal librarian and the students could serve as a building block for a lifetime relationship culminating in library loyalty.

II. Purpose and Goals of the Study

The purpose of this paper was to explore the potential of using the Personal Librarian programme in guiding students to find effective ways of achieving IL, as well as

point out pertinent challenges in implementation. To achieve the goals of this study, the following specific objectives were envisaged:

1. Identify current models of IL instruction in higher education.
2. Describe the features and purpose of the Personal Librarian concept.
3. Propose strategies for implementing Information Literacy with the Personal Librarian Concept.

III. Contemporary models of Information Literacy instruction

a. The 'Course-Integrated Model' of IL Instruction

This model of instruction is based on the premise that a comprehensive incorporation of IL into the academic curriculum can prove very useful (Parker, 2003). According to Parker, the use of this model implies a contextual IL course designed for the purposes of awarding marks, and with the involvement of both academics and academic librarians. The result of potential faculty-librarian collaboration in imparting IL skills is in part the appreciation of each other's strengths and weaknesses in course material development. This view is shared by Bell (2008) who claims that IL "...integrated into courses across many disciplines and spread throughout the student's academic career – starting with freshman reading/writing courses and ending in the capstone – has proven effectiveness".

On the other hand, the "course integrated model" has fuelled the development of the concept of embedded librarianship. The development of this concept is a response by librarians to the charge of providing a mere "one-off instruction" in IL (Mery et al., 2012). Embedded librarians are actively involved in both faculty and library activities and this potentially has much significant implications for IL skills development (Hearn, 2005). In the embedded classroom situation, the librarian's role is that of a co-instructor, with teaching responsibilities for a considerable part of the research material, as well as grading of students' assignments.

In spite of the advantages of the "course-integrated" model, researchers and practitioners alike have identified some weaknesses. Firstly, the role of librarians in course development is not a widely accepted practice, as librarians are still considered marginal rather than mainstream players in the academic enterprise (Winner, 1998). Secondly, in spite of its obvious effectiveness, Badke (2010) is of the opinion that this approach is a short term intervention by librarians to address the IL deficiencies of students with a view to helping them achieve important learning outcomes.

b. "Credit-bearing" Model of IL Instruction

The origin of standalone credit-bearing IL courses has its roots at the Interdisciplinary Studies Department of the Salem State College in 1989 where a three-credit hour IL course was offered to students (Dennis, 1990). This model of IL instruction has since gained wider acceptance among academic librarians desirous of providing the

relevant skills required by library patrons to effectively access and use specific information tools and databases. Researchers have highlighted the myriad of possibilities in developing and delivering standalone IL courses, including the forging of mutually beneficial partnerships, on the one hand between librarians and academic staff and on the other between librarians and students. Furthermore, the use of this model offers the chance of building long term relationships with students due to its potential in creating a much more comprehensive insight into students' research and information needs (Kemp, 2006; Partello, 2005; cited in Davis, Lundstom & Martin, 2011). As such, one of the ardent proponents of the "for-credit" model of IL, Badke (2010) claims that the standalone IL courses "lead to consistent and relatively permanent attainment of both knowledge and skills that match the ACRL standards for information literacy."

However, there is a high possibility of disconnect with skills learnt in IL classes with actual problem-based contexts, in cases when the instructor-librarian fails to create this connection between the student's subject context and the IL skills. This is confirmed in a study which concluded that "one library research concept should be taught at each session and then, reinforced individually in an assignment" (Barnhart, Stanfield, Lei Hsieh, McManimon, & Yang, 2013). The attitude of faculty colleagues also poses a challenge to the success of IL efforts implemented as a credit-course as they often consider IL as a subject they are not required to do much about (Bell, 2008). This problem is further compounded by the inability of librarians and academics to collaborate and find a common ground in working with one another (Farber, 1999).

IV. Introducing the Personal Librarian Model

The concept of Personal Librarianship first appeared in the literature in the early 1930's (Smith, 1933). In his article "Personal Librarianship", Smith makes reference to the fact that "the reader is generally left to his own devices amidst the confusing mass of books". He concludes by suggesting that there is a need for an expert who has the art of answering direct and revealing questions, as well as a skilful listener, who is "quick to perceive the nascent interests of his readers and to take advantage of what he has learnt".

In practice, it was however first experimented at the Newton Gresham Library (NGL) at Sam Houston State University in 1996 as an outreach initiative (Nann, 2010). The next experiment of this concept at Yale University occurred in 2008, when the reference librarians at Cushing/Whitney Medical Library at Yale University School of Medicine started a Personal Librarian Programme (Nann, 2010). The processes involved in the Yale programme were as follows:

1. Grouping: assigning fresh medical students equally among five reference librarians;
2. Communicating: sending three to four messages in a year; and
3. Reporting: prepare a post-implementation report at the end of the year.

Nann (2010) throws more light on the PL programme at Yale by describing its purpose as connecting students

with identifiable library staff who provide ready assistance at the beckon of the student. More particularly, individual students are assigned to individual librarians who then send an initial welcome email message about the library; aids students to find answers to their questions and important library resources; and finally, helps them in refining their research questions. According to the author, the PL programme need not be seen as an entirely new programme but rather as a complementary one to existing efforts to reach students. The programme is usually open to all librarians even though it is not compulsory. In his article, Nann (2010) argues that the Personal Librarian programme can have the following benefits to users:

1. Effectiveness in creating an individual relationship which is more direct than other programmes while ensuring a more definitive relationship between the parties.
2. Ability to directly resolve issues relating to students' library skills and lack of experience.
3. Ensuring an environment of unmediated personal relationship between librarians and patrons.

According to Nann (2010), one potential significant challenge that the personal librarian programme was confronted with at the point of implementation is captured in this question: "Will this program be overwhelming?" According to the author, reports from Yale libraries rather show a bright spot. The programme was far from overwhelming; increase in contact: the university librarians report that they see between 10-15 percent of their students, while the medical librarians see more. One librarian at Yale has more than 700 students assigned to her, yet she does not feel that it was overwhelming. However, the author admits to one potential drawback. There is little or no effort at all to distribute students to personal librarians on the strength of the student or librarian's areas of interest. Notwithstanding the strength of the personal librarian programmes lies in the fact that a personal librarian is only the first port of call to students, and these librarians are expected to act as portals to the rich mine of information in and outside the library, in their effort to provide a "one-stop shopping experience".

Drexel University also commenced its Personal Librarian Programme in 2010. The aim of this programme was to, aside creating a marketing platform for the library, "increase individualized support to new undergraduates". With this programme, First Year Students are assigned to a Personal Librarian, usually a member of the library staff. The role of the Personal Librarian was to serve as a personal intermediary to library resources and services. Generally, the aim of the programme was to offer assistance to students in terms of:

- Navigating the library environment;
- Providing assistance in using research tools;
- Creating opportunities for personal matching for help; and
- Providing information on innovative library resources and services.

a. Research Support

The Personal librarians are required to provide responses to frequently asked questions about research tools available in the academic environment. The library also offers other avenues to assist students with research until they eventually become accomplished researchers. Among these are:

- Liaison Librarians: These are usually subject experts allocated to different subject areas, and who provide research advice personally, by phone, through email or via IM/chat etc;
- Research/Library Guides: These consist of online resources that supply important and useful information on the tools required for effective searching; and
- Online Tutorials: Learning materials covering several research areas and approaches to research.

b. Student Support Services

The Personal librarian programme at Drexel University also recognises that the personal librarians are not competent to attend to all the possible student issues and as such make every effort possible to connect students with staff with the requisite skills for solution to their challenges.

V. Experience in South Africa

Rhodes University Library is the first adopter of the Personal librarian concept in Africa. The Rhodes University PL programme was observed and modelled to Yale University Library's Personal Librarian programme in the United States. In addition to receiving an email from the Personal Librarians inviting the students to join the programme, First Year Students can send a simple email to any of the participating librarians and request a personal librarian of their own. A librarian will then contact the student to arrange when to meet and discuss how he/she can assist the student. It is important to note that under this programme at Rhodes, the personal librarians do not complete assignments for students. They however discuss with the student effective ways to research, reference and everything else that is significant in achieving their academic goals (Ndima, 2013).

**a. Introducing the Personal Librarian Programme:
A real life story of an author's experience**

As a very busy mom with two daughters, my children have become the centre of my universe. My reasoning for this is that I do most of the things in life in order to better my life and in so doing their lives will benefit as well. When they were little, I constantly found myself needing to replace their school sports clothes. Birch's, the only local supplier of our school uniform in Grahamstown, the rural town where we live, became my second home. The store is not cheap and some of the items sold there can be found elsewhere, but the quality of the service that was provided at the store kept me going back for everything I needed even when I could have found the item in another shop.

The Secret

I had my own personal contact in the store. I could walk in anytime, and even if this shop assistant was busy with another client, she would make eye contact and ensure that she greeted me by name and told me that she would be with me in a moment. What struck me about her was her knowledge of the uniform and the type of shoes that would suit my children's situation. She would also take the time to tell me about the discounts or sale items that the store would be planning to make available in the near future. One of the benefits I enjoyed was the advice of paying cash for my items – as this ensured that I got my 10% cash-back reward if I bought items for over R500. Another benefit for me was that my go to person knew what my children needed at which seasons, she was knowledgeable about the school's activities and exactly which items my children would need and she took the opportunity to make this information available to me even before I asked for it. She even knew my children's sizes and could estimate how long their shoes would last because she also knew how much sport they were required to play during each season. For me, it was the personal component of the service that kept me coming back to the store even for the items that I could easily get elsewhere at lower rates.

**b. Personal Librarian Programme: A case study of
Rhodes University Library - The Personal
Librarian = Personal Contact**

After analysing the personal experience detailed above and relating the experience to the library, it is safe to say that people appreciate personal service. Rhodes University's description of the Personal Librarian is Personal Contact. A survey conducted amongst First Year Students and analyzed at Rhodes University in 2013 produced surprising results. The students were given a form during a Cake Day event and were asked one question "What do you expect from your Personal Librarian?" The form was purposefully left blank to give the students the opportunity to express their opinions. The student responses are listed below in order of priority:

1. Friendliness and willingness to help.
2. Research & Study guidance.
3. Assistance in finding information – OPAC; Online resources.
4. Practical assistance: photocopying, printing, loan procedures.

The Personal Librarian Programme at Rhodes University is primarily directed at First Year Undergraduate students at Rhodes University (Gontshi, 2013). The idea behind this programme is that each incoming first year student is assigned a Personal Librarian who will remain that individual's contact in the library throughout his/her academic career in an attempt to bridge the information literacy skills gap that exists between Senior School and University in South Africa. The project came about as a result of a research conducted in 2011 exploring the perceptions of both students and lecturers in the Commerce Faculty at Rhodes University with regard to Information Literacy practices and needs

(Gontshi, 2011). The study revealed and recorded a shortcoming in the Information Literacy ability of students between Senior School Level and University Level. It became clear that new University students were not aware of the important link between their academic studies and the Library which in turn suggested the need to make Rhodes University librarians and the role that they play in the academic world more obvious to these new students (Gontshi, 2011). The Personal Librarian Programme was devised to fill this need.

c. Process of Engagement

The PL programme involved 1,300 1st year students who were divided amongst the 13 selected PLs.

This implies that each librarian serving on the programme had an average of 100 students. The subsequent activities of the personal librarians were as follows:

- Introduction emails sent to individual students at the end of 1st term/semester.
- Some PLs got responses immediately, some never did.
- Active students in the programme = 755
- Follow-up launch invitation emails.

d. Challenges of the Personal Librarian Programme

After the programme was observed at Yale University in the United States, the single major challenge was to convince the Rhodes University Library (RUL) about the feasibility of the Programme being replicated. Presentations on the “Theory behind the programme” were held with different levels of staff and one presentation with the entire library staff was held. It was important to spend time presenting and brainstorming challenges that could come with a programme from outside South Africa to a South African student.

Another challenging question that was faced by Rhodes University Library was the fact that the University of South Africa (UNISA) has Personal Librarians who are generally reference librarians with responsibilities ranging from the provision of research assistance; offering database support; planning alert services; designing subject bibliographies; collaboration in course material development; and initiating user-driven collection development. To address the question on “how different is our programme to the UNISA Personal Librarians, Rhodes University Library implemented a Personal Librarian programme which only caters for the Undergraduate students. It is important to note that one of the programme’s primary aims is to bridge the Information Literacy gap that is assumed to exist between High School and university; hence it is basically directed to 1st year students. The fact that Rhodes is the first university in Africa to introduce the Personal Librarian concept as a programme poses more challenges, and amongst them are the following:

- There is no one in South Africa to share common challenges with. This has challenged the Rhodes Personal Librarians to be more innovative in terms of marketing the programme and to share the

experiences with other African Universities in an attempt to contribute to the Higher Education’s larger goal of retaining students.

- By replicating an American programme in a South African context, Rhodes has had to do the groundwork of adapting the programme to suit a South African university student. This benefits Rhodes University Library Personal Librarians as they are challenged to innovate in creating a Personal Librarian model that suits the lifestyle of most undergraduate students.
- Rhodes University Personal Librarians learnt very quickly in 2013 that students generally do not respond to emails, a situation that left the Librarians with the decision of investigating attractive ways of communicating with the students. “The Cake Day” idea was birthed through this experience. Pick n’ Pay, a local family supermarket is the sponsor of the cake. Three “Cake Days” have been held at Rhodes. This has been a great way of collecting the surveys in order to get an idea of the students’ expectations of their personal librarians.
- One of the major challenges is that because of the introduction of the “Cake Day” and the vibe around it, it became very difficult to limit the survey only to Undergraduate students; hence, the survey had to be opened to the entire student body at Rhodes University including the Postgraduates. Even though this meant more work for the programme in terms of analysing a bigger scope than predicted, it did provide the personal librarians with deeper insights and a good understanding of the expectations of the entire student population.
- Finally, Rhodes personal librarians are investigating creative ways of measuring the impact of the PL programme. Whilst the “Cake Day” is a great way to attract a large number of students who are required to fill in a survey for a slice of cake and a chat to their personal librarians, it cannot be used to measure the impact or the success of the programme.

Fig. 1 shows the trend across the entire student population surveyed after writing exams. What is evident across the scope of the student body is how much students value friendships with librarians; this is mainly followed by the need for assistance in finding information.

VI. Discussions

The Personal Librarian Programme has endured some challenges in spite of its obvious successes (Gontshi, 2013). One of the most common challenges relates to poor response rates to the initial email inviting students to contact the Personal Librarian allocated to them. While poor initial response rates have also been recorded at other universities, it has been observed that a failure to respond initially was not indicative of a complete disinterest as some students chose to respond only when they actually needed help.

Rhodes University Library has listed the Personal Librarian Programme as one of its services which is aimed at undergraduate students. 2014 saw the personal librarians taking on board the new intake of 1st year students and the 2nd year students who were 1st years in 2013.

Even though the PL programme was initially introduced for the 1st year students during the pilot project in 2013 when the programme was launched, it is envisaged that in 2015 the full complement of the Undergraduate students will be fully incorporated into the programme.

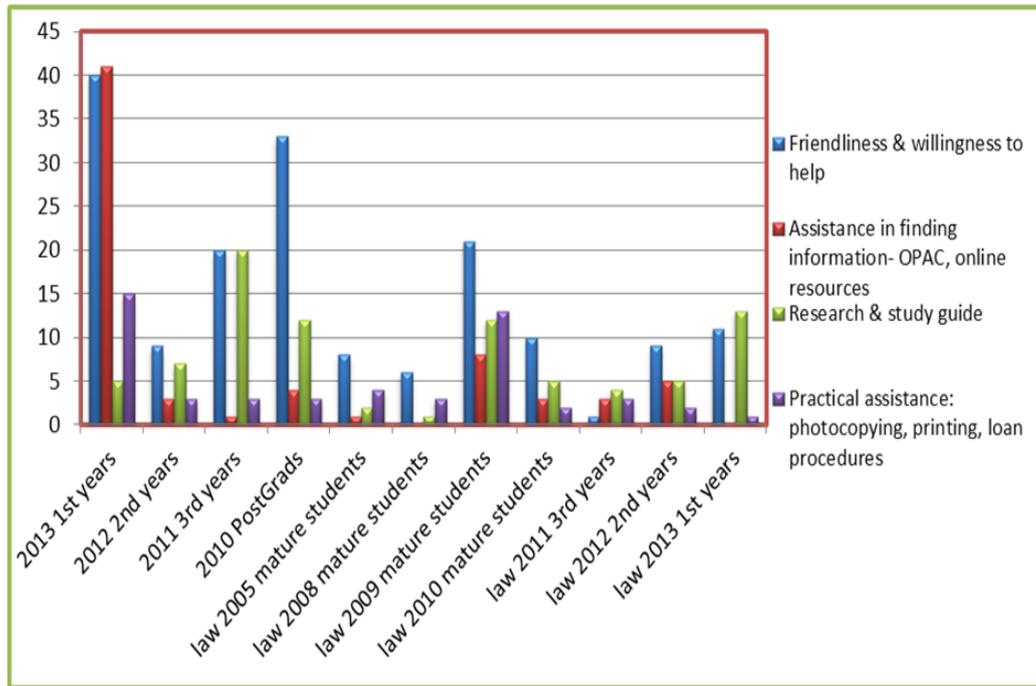


Fig. 1. Expectations of students towards librarians.

VII. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study explored the potential of using the Personal Librarian programme in guiding students to find effective ways of achieving IL, and highlighted pertinent challenges in implementation. The findings demonstrate that in spite of the challenges identified by researchers and practitioners, current models of ‘course integrated’ and ‘credit-bearing’ IL instruction have both made modest gains in ensuring IL among students. The study again demonstrates that the PL model will not replace both existing models of IL instruction but can effectively complement either approach. However, unlike both existing models, students appreciate the ‘personal touch’ of the PL model.

Based on the findings of the study, the following strategies are proposed to guide the implementation of the Personal Librarian Programme in other institutions, especially in African academic libraries:

1. African Librarians who are interested in introducing this model may visit institutions that have experience in using this model in order to acquire a first-hand experience of the programme. Currently, Rhodes University Library in South Africa has introduced the programme for its First Year Students.
2. There is also a need to create awareness about the programme by making a case to the library and institution’s administration about the potential benefits of the programme to the overall goal of

imparting Information Literacy to their students.

3. There is also a need for all library staff to be invited and encouraged to join the programme on a voluntary basis in order to form a Personal Librarian team. This is to ensure that every member of staff could contribute fresh ideas and also lessen the number of contact hours required for each Personal Librarian to spend with a First Year Student.
4. Volunteering Personal Librarians must be trained on an ongoing basis to ensure uniformity in how the programme is administered to students. Also, there must be ample opportunities for all Personal Librarians to share their experiences and learn from each other.
5. Again, working closely with university administration, programme administrators must decide how to best assign students among the Personal Librarians. Following this, the Personal Librarians should then initiate the first contact through the use of effective communication tools like electronic mail to their list of First Year Students.
6. The use of social media in marketing the programme and communicating with students is also advised as most students have access to mobile devices with a social media account. They can access it in their own space and own time and therefore make communicating with them less intimidating. Both e-mail and social media affords opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous communication.

7. Finally, irrespective of the communication methods used, each Personal Librarian must be consistent and open to their students about the purpose and specific goals of the programme to forestall abuse.

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