

Librarians' Role in Development and Achievement of Central Library Users' Information Literacy (a Case Study: Iran)

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Due to the development of technologies, communications, databases and information resource varieties in today's information age, our various social, economic, cultural and political needs cannot be fulfilled by relying merely on past knowledge and skills as done previously. Information literacy (IL) as a set of necessary skills for all of us is an effective way of treating new technologies and their effective application in our lives. The study aimed to survey the library users' views in the Central Library of Babol University of Medical Sciences (The Library), Iran, on the role and influences of librarians on their IL development and improvement. **Methods:** This analytical survey used a researcher-made questionnaire for data collection. Research population consisted of all users referring Information Unit of The Library during 22 September - 20 December 2010. Of them, 150 users participating in at least 5 workshops held by The Library were selected as the study sample. **Results:** Based on the findings, 52.7 percent of the subjects rated the influence of the librarians on their IL development much and very much. 44.7 percent claimed that they more acquired IL skills from librarians rather than others. 100 (63.3%) subjects preferred workshops held by the librarian to other workshops. **Conclusion:** The users of Information Unit of The Library perceived the training IL skills by librarians as a main influencing factor in their IL development and achievement. This emphasized the necessity of teaching IL to users and training the librarians in better teaching IL skills to library user **Key words:** Information Literacy, Library Users, Librarians, Babol University of Medical Sciences, Iran.

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of information literacy, broadly defined as the ability to recognise information needs and identify, evaluate and use information effectively, has been of growing concern in the education sectors for a number of years; whilst in the workplace, employers and managers have perhaps attended more to the need for computer and information technology skill (1). Information literacy is a natural extension of the concept of literacy in our information society, and information literacy education is the catalyst required to transform the information society of today into the learning society of tomorrow (2). According to Julien and Genuis (2009), "information literacy skills are basic requirements for successful personal and professional life in the digital age"(3).

There are several reviews of the concept of 'information literacy' -see, for example, the work of Snively and Cooper (4), Mutch (5), Carbo (6), Behrens (7), Olsen and Coons (8), Kulthau (9), and McClure (10).

IL is a key component of LL (11) and a core literacy. However

emerging empirical research indicates that the phenomenon will have different characteristics in different contexts and will be played out in culturally different ways (12). Information literacy (IL) consists of two words: Information and literacy. People conceive the former as news or interpretable data. The latter refers to the ability to read and write, and in some cases, the ability to understand and/or accurately interpret a topic (13). There are different definitions of information literacy provided by various educational institutions, specialists and experts, Most definitions stem from the definition appeared in the end of report by Information Literacy Committee in American Library Association (ALA): one's ability to recognize their needed information, locate and evaluate information and effectively use it for satisfying their needs (14). In era of huge volume of publications and information products, information literacy has become a very important survival tool.

Information literacy is an instrument for individual empowerment that leads one to search for the truth and the desired information for decision making with independence(15).

Information overload and the diversity of information have generated the concept of information anxiety, defined by Bawden and Robinson (2009) as "a condition of stress caused by the inability to access, understand or make sense of, necessary information". The authors speak also of library anxiety: "a sense of powerlessness when beginning an information search in a library, and feelings of being lost, unable to find one's way around, and afraid to approach the library staff"(16).

ICT development has changed the ways of information access, organization, representation and publishes. California Library Association (CLA) described information literate person as one who has the following three abilities:

- a) Reading and writing literacy;
- b) Arithmetic literacy (enumerating skills);
- c) Media literacy (manipulating and gathering information from worldwide published modern and traditional media) (14).

The connection between IL and formal education results in librarians' interests in the notion. They believe that developing library users' IL skills is the continuation of their traditional roles in user instruction. Most librarians regard IL as some form of user instruction, library skill training and even library instruction (13).

Howard L. Simmons spends a good portion of his chapter, "Librarian as Teacher: A Personal View," reminiscing about librarian mentors during his own high school and college years, demonstrating the positive influence those in our profession can have on new scholars. "No matter what librarians are called in the profession or how much more technology is used to access information through the medium of the library and information resources, the most effective librarians in the new millennium will be those who empower learners and who facilitate the teaching and learning process (17, 18).

Although IL skills are determined by basic skills and the abilities citizens have in satisfying their daily life information needs and affairs, increasing domination of educational approaches to library and information science has motivated librarians and information scientists to have a considerable role in developing IL skills in recent years. Nowadays, there is some notable cooperation between librarians, information scientists and faculty members in main worldwide educational centers and academic institutions in order to enhance IL skills of their target groups by teamwork. Today's librarians' role has been changed and it can be said that their educational role is more highlighted than those of information storage, organization and dissemination.

Although related literature on IL shows librarians' positive role in development and enhancement of library users' IL skills, the status of academic society in which the researchers work demonstrates that various persons, groups and institutions involve in IL training courses and different IL workshops and short-time courses are being held in academic and university setting by different specialists. The attractiveness of IL itself from one hand and high demand for IL training from the other hand have resulted in the involvement of various persons with different related and unrelated fields in IL training process. Since the quantity of such workshops and courses and the warm welcome of them are positive, their application and quality must be regarded heavily.

Reviewing literature on IL shows that most studies on the concept have considered the IL skill amount of librarians, stu-

dents, faculty members, users and so on based on IL criteria. Few studies have regarded the librarians' role in the development and enhancement of users' IL skills. In this section, after mentioning some theoretical bases, related literature was reviewed briefly.

Librarians throughout the world have tried in both practical and educational contexts to integrate the concept of IL in their professional activities, especially in public library settings. For this, the National Forum on Information Literacy has been established as a result of a report published by ALA. It aimed at coordinating the activities related to IL development and forming some discussion groups for issues in IL and conceptualizing its importance among academicians. The forum tended to set forth IL as an inseparable component of literacy (19).

In 2003, the first international conference on IL issued The Prague Declaration: Towards an Information Literate Society, according to which "the creation of an Information Society is key to social, cultural and economic development of nations and communities, institutions and individuals in the 21st century and beyond" and which declared IL "a prerequisite for participating effectively in the Information Society, and [...] part of the basic human right of lifelong learning"(20).

The idea of information literacy, emerging with the advent of information technologies in the early 1970s, has grown, taken shape and strengthened to become recognized as the critical literacy for the twenty-first century. Sometimes interpreted as one of a number of literacies, information literacy (IL) is also described as the overarching literacy essential for twenty-first century living. Today, IL is inextricably associated with information practices and critical thinking in the information and communication technology (ICT) environment (2).

In the current age, the reason for changing peoples' views on librarians and librarianship stems from change of higher education. It is expected that libraries and librarians act as educational centers and educators enhancing users' skills in accessing appropriate information. Hashem-zadeh and Yari argued that the role of librarians in teaching IL is undeniable and emphasize that librarians should near users and help them to effectively retrieve information. Librarians should apply all available means and technologies for updating their professional information in order to provide satiable instructional programs for teaching users to prepare them to use library and its resources effectively based on users' different knowledge bases and professional fields and helping them to learn IL skills (21).

Despite theoretical debates on the importance of librarians' role in the development and improvement of IL skills, few applied studies have been conducted for confirming these theoretical considerations. In the case of Iran, some studies regarded the IL related issues, especially in academic settings.

Moghadas-zadeh studied the amount of IL skills of faculty members in Mashhad Islamic Azad University and found that only 4.6% of them gave priority to librarians over the other factors affecting the development of their IL skills and more than 70% gave them lower than 1 and 2 ranks in teaching IL(22).

Recently, Afzali in 2010 studied the placement and role of Iran's Radio and Television Center's (IRIB) libraries in developing users' IL skills and found that librarians (with 18.8%) had the second rank in developing the users' abilities to seek and retrieve information. They also found that only 36.9% of the participants conceived library as a factor that affects their seeking and retrieving information via the Net and other resources

much and very much. This is not satisfactory result in relation to other affecting factors.

Parirokh and Abbasi's study of effectiveness of teaching IL skills to college students found that all students needed to acquire IL skills and there was significant difference between their IL skills before and after holding training courses by librarians (19) (1). This research showed librarians' positive role in users' IL skill development.

Personal experiences and observations by the researchers show that participants prefer some courses to others and highly participate in the courses held by librarians. These experiences and observations were tested scientifically in this paper and the viewpoints of the user referring to Information Unit of the Central Library of Babol University of Medical Science (here, The Library) were considered for testing the presented hypotheses.

The study aimed at studying the users' views in the Central Library of Babol University of Medical Sciences on librarians' role in their information literacy development and achievement.

These two following special objectives were considered: determining the differences among users' viewpoints regarding their demographic information; Sex and recognizing the problems users encounter in information seeking. Then, two hypotheses were tested:

- a) Users' viewpoints on librarians' role in developing their IL skills are positive;
- b) There is a significant difference among users' viewpoints on librarians' role in developing and enhancing their IL skills according to their gender.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is an analytic survey. Research instrument was a researcher-made questionnaire. Research population consisted of all users referring to the information unit of The Library during 22 September - 20 December 2010. Of them, 150 users participating in at last 5 workshops held by the library and other centers located in the university were selected as study sample. Descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used for data analysis by SPSS 17.

3. RESULTS

Of 150 users studied in the survey, 70 (47%) and 80 (53%) were male and female, respectively. Their study fields (majors) were medicine (28%), obstetrics (24%), nursing (22%), dentistry (14%) and other (12%) in descending order.

As Table 1 shows, 79 (52.7%) of the subjects said that librarians' effect on their IL development was much and very much and only 40 (26.5%) considered this effect low and very low.

From total of 106 subjects (70%) conceived the quality of teaching IL skills by librarians as good and very good and only 23 of them (15.3%) considered it as weak and very weak.

As Table 2 shows, 95 subjects (63.3%) preferred the IL workshops and courses held by librarians to those of others.

Figure 1 shows the ways by which the studied users acquire IL skills. 44.6% said that they

Effect rate	frequency	percentage
very low	17	11.3
low	23	15.3
moderate	31	20.7
much	55	36.7
very much	24	16
total	150	100

Table 1. Subjects' viewpoints on librarians' effects on their IL development

prefer librarians to others to acquire IL skills. This demonstrated that librarians have relatively succeeded in achieving their modern roles in instructing library target groups. The weak role of Student Research Committee in this process is worth noting (8.7%) that equals to that of students' friends and families (8.7%).

Holding group	frequency	percentage
librarians	95	63.3
other specialties	12	8
Student Research Committee	27	18
no matter which group	16	10.7
total	150	100

Table 2. Subjects' preferences for participating in IL courses held by various groups

As Figure 2 shows, 45.3% of the subjects gave librarians' role in the development and enhancement of their IL skills at the first rank. Only 3.3% emphasized the role of their instructors and faculty members in teaching IL to them. This demonstrates that despite the vast development of ICT in universities, faculty members cannot even use it in learning and teaching processes and it is needed to hold courses for training them relevant IT and IL skills.

Then, the first hypothesis of the study was confirmed. This states that subjects' views on librarians' role in developing their IL skills is positive.

As to the second hypothesis, there was no significant difference between the subjects' gender and their viewpoints on librarians' role on developing their IL skills ($X^2 = 0.374$; $DF = 5$; $p > 0.05$).

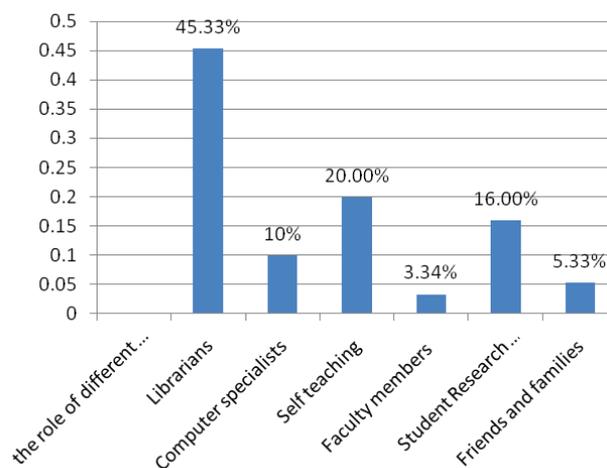


Figure 1. Subjects' ways of acquiring IL skills

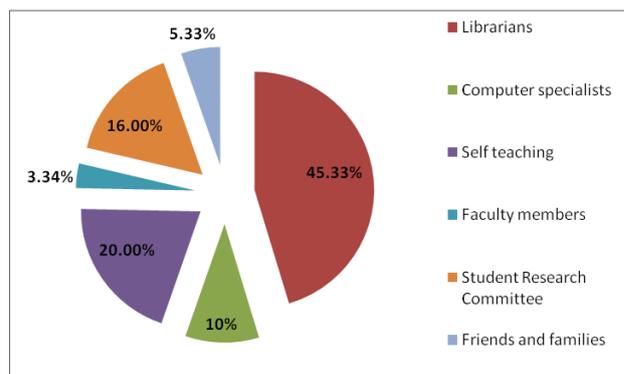


Figure 2. the role of different groups in teaching IL skills to the subjects

4. DISCUSSION

Based on our findings, most studied users confessed that librarians' role in developing their IL skills was much and/or very much. Most of them considered the quality of teaching IL skills by librarians better than that of other groups. This confirms the arguments by Bruce and Breivik who believe that librarians have useful experiences in teaching users and are valuable resources for training IL skills (1, 2, 20).

It was also found that library users mostly rely on librarians' help and guidance in acquiring IL skills rather than relying on other involved groups, especially faculty members. The least role of faculty members in teaching students IL skills found in our study is not in accordance with Moghadas-zadeh and Afzali's findings (22, 23). They found that librarians had the second rank in developing users information seeking and retrieving skills. The weakest role of faculty members in IL teaching is notable. They need to acquire IL skills due to their main educational and research roles and transform these relevant skills to their students. It is necessary to plan some related courses and workshops for teaching appropriate IL skills needed for the Information Age to our university faculty members.

In addition, since one of its goals is to train students in skills needed for internet use and information search, the Student Research Committee does not achieve the goal probably because of its members' need to learn IL skills and how to teach them effectively for students. Librarians can and must have the main teaching role in training the members.

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