Impact of user education programs in the Library, University of Jaffna: An appraisal

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Abstract

This research paper provides a basic understanding of the impact of the user education programs of the Library, University of Jaffna. The objective of the study is to assess the impact of user education programs in the Library, University of Jaffna, based on the quantitative and descriptive analysis of the readers' visits, opinions, feedback, and the developments encountered after the programs. The findings of the study show that the remarkable (20%) increase in number of visits of readers, enrichment of their information literacy level, appreciation and collaboration of departments, development of library awareness and of documentation culture are the major impacts of the user education programs of the Library, University of Jaffna.

Keywords: User Education, Academic Libraries, Library Orientation, Information Literacy Level

Gateway to User Education

Proliferation in book production, coupled with dramatic changes in technology has paved the way to find the best ways and means to educate patrons for the maximum utilization of library resources. In keeping with this development, the concept of user education is regarded as a step forward of the highest importance to the profession of library and information science.

User education is not a new concept. It is a widely used term in Western literature. It is more than 170 years old. The earliest evidence of instruction: a librarian lecturing undergraduates is found at Harvard College in the 1820s, (Tiefel, 1995). But for some, it is one of the less sensible terms invented by the librarians (Line, 1983). For the researchers of the West, it is purely bibliographic instruction. To us, in Sri Lanka, it is 'Library Orientation.' In actual sense, user education is the composition of four elements: User awareness, Library Orientation, Bibliographic Instruction and Interest Profiling.

In simple terms, user education could be defined as educating the user on how to use the library resources, services and facilities effectively and efficiently. Democracy (ideology), education (methodology) and library (service) are three components that constitute the essence of user education.

It is library orientation to those who are using the library for the first time, subject oriented instruction for undergraduates at a stage when they are admitted to a special branch or subject of their choice or at the time of project work. User education is also part of literature search training in the beginning of their research work as summarized by Rathore (1992).

Carlson and Miller (1984) give a working definition of what constitutes integrated user education. It has three essential elements. First, User Education should take place as part of subject specific classes. Secondly, because it is part of subject classes, librarians and teaching staff must work very closely together to ensure the quality and focus of the class. Thirdly, the main dose of instruction should be given in lectures although this does not preclude the student from seeking further help in the library.

Objective of the study

The broad objective of this study is to assess the effect of user education programs of the University of Jaffna Library (UOJL). Specific objectives include investigation of the relevance of the user education programs of UOJL, determination of the extent of utilization of the resources, assessing the level of user interaction with the staff of UOJL, and finding out student assessment of user education.

Related studies

A vast number of research studies in the 1970s focus on 'library orientation', in the 1980s, on bibliographic instruction, and in the 21st century, on 'Information Literacy'. Integrating user education in the undergraduate curriculum has been the main concern in American studies for more than two decades, and the contributions of University of Illinois to include a number of research articles in its journal 'Library trends' could be noted in this regard (1980;1991;1995;2002). The 'Gateway to Information' developed by the Ohio State University Library is one response to the current and future issues and problems facing libraries. The 'Gateway' was designed to help undergraduate and graduate students identify, find, evaluate, and select the most useful information for their needs without the help of library staff (Tiefel, 1995).

Studies in Britain too, show the integration of user education with the undergraduate curriculum since the best way of assessing user education is to integrate it into the curriculum whether it is as part of current courses or as an extra credit course, (Wilson. 1997). On the other hand, the Iranian experience suggests that libraries should employ expert and skillful librarians who should offer user education to the faculty, and provide them with instructional material (Mohammadi, 2008). Meanwhile, South African studies indicate that enabling students to make maximum use of the library resources and services, requires training on how to use them, (Babasiki, 1998). It must be borne in mind that user education can only be successfully carried out if there is cooperation between the library and other key stakeholders, (Agyen-Gyasi, 2008). In China, the Ministry of Education recommended three levels of user education based on the user's educational background. The first level is library orientation for freshmen; the second, courses of bibliographic instruction for juniors and seniors; and the third, a more sophisticated user education program involving the sorting and summarizing of documentation and the studying and analyzing of information for all graduate students, (Fang and Daniel, 1990). The Sri Lankan experience on the other hand, focuses on situational analysis (Ratnayake, 2004).

User Education at UOJL

Like other university libraries in Sri Lanka, UOJL too, covers only one aspect of user education, and it was the common practice of this library to start the orientation with a short introduction followed by a two hour library guided tour during the inauguration session of the first year students. Considering the fact that there is no single method or media, which could serve as panacea for all the categories of user education programs, the development in the field invites new methods of instruction. UOJL, while adapting the existing methods, has also made some new methods of educating its users.

Improvements to the existing system

The existing system included a brief introduction to the Library during orientation. Since it was realised that the theoretical introduction of the Library in 15 minutes, during the inauguration session of the newly admitted students and the mere visits of the students to see the different sections of the Library would do nothing to improve the use of the Library, requests were made to the Dean of each faculty to extend the lecture period to one hour and the Library visit to 3 hours. Each faculty responded to the request by extending the hours requested and incorporated this in their inauguration program each year. During the library visit, students are grouped and given an explanation of the basic facilities of the Library.

Orientation programs

The orientation program was conducted for the first time in UOJL history as a three week session, covering 20 hours with support from the Faculty of Management for the students of the Faculty of Management. The objective of this program is to provide a thorough knowledge of the Library and its resources to get the maximum benefit. Through five major topics: introductory aspects of Library/Information Resources/ Information literacy/Evaluation & presentation of Findings/Library Ethics/and several sub topics, a wide range of skills which are essential for successful utilization of information resources available within the Library was introduced to the first year undergraduates. To guide the students during the process, a variety of checklists, activity sheets, handouts and guidelines were provided. The duration of each topic was one hour for theory and three hours for practical training. Lectures, presentations, demonstrations and hands-on sessions were used to deliver the contents. At the end of the program, structured questionnaires were distributed to the participants to identify the needs of the program.

Exhibitions

The best way of making the libraries and the librarians more valued is to make the library experience more pleasant by making the library accessible and easy to use on one hand, and more rewarding by showing the value of collections and services on the other, (Gorman, 1991). Considering the above fact, a new method was introduced in the form of exhibitions which could be suitable for both group instruction as well as individual instruction. The idea was to provide user awareness, considering the reality that learning activities combined with a practicum of about ten minutes can prove to be more successful than a Power Point presentation of an hour or so. With the celebration of the reading month of the year 2009 in October, this exhibition named 'Path to Knowledge' was organized at the central part of the Library in a space of 54'x 54'. This exhibition was on for one month and extended for another month at the request of readers, under the following headings.

Face 1: 3D Library – A Model. Three dimensional (3D) library is the new concept consisting of three important elements arranged in a meaningful manner to explore information for self-learning. The three basic elements of the 3D Library are objects and their meaning as primary resources; documents and related materials as secondary resources, bits of information in the form of abstracts, extracts, charts, diagrams, translation etc., as tertiary resources arranged in a pyramid structure.

Face 2: The world of objects – A Tour. Objects include artifacts and models. They can provide the user with a direct, purposeful, and concrete experience. The purpose of setting this up is to raise awareness that the library is not a place to preserve only written materials. Realia and artifacts are regarded as important information resources and at the same time, it encourages or improves preservation and documentation culture among readers.

Face 3: World's best images – A Listing. The purpose of setting up this corner was to make the readers improve reading through picture oriented materials and to show the reader the world's best things such as places, buildings, nature, etc. and above all, to impress on them the importance of the library and its current trends. World famous photographs published in magazines, newspapers, best paintings, cultural heritage of Tamils, were treated as special features of this corner.

Face 4: Here we are – A Sample. This was divided into nine major types as resources by their origin, body, format, content, concept, nature, standard, help and arrangement. The purpose of setting up this section was to introduce the user to the various dimensions of information, resources available in a human society, to improve resource literacy, or the ability to understand the form, format, location and access methods of information resources.

Face 5: Where you are – A Test. This corner was designed as the readers' corner. The main mode of display was the hanging descriptions and instructions. Readers were requested to answer the questions, such as 'How can I search in OPAC?' 'I lost the borrowed book or document: what are the steps to be taken if the borrower has lost the books?' etc. The main purpose of this corner was to introduce the different facets of a modern library.

Face 6: Take care of us – A Practical. The main purpose of this corner was to educate the user to understand the hazards of library resources and to make them realize how good handling practices would safeguard the resources. Display of this section had the 3 D library set up in which one sample of materials was affected by the hazards discussed. This corner was divided into three areas such as Enemies of information resources, Physical preservation and conservation methods of the resources, Content preservation and conservation methods of the resources.

Face 7: Let's go and find – A Guide. The purpose of this section was to guide the user to search and find the information from reference resources in a meaningful manner, improve literacy, inculcate research literacy, and identify sources of information.

Face 8: Our best corner – A Face: This corner was arranged to highlight the fact that the best methods of educating the user is to show the best collection of the library in their subject or field of interest.

Face 9: Important events of the day – A View. Selection of the topic was based on the current event, the importance of the particular day for the exhibition and the important personalities at national level and the available resources in print and non print form.

Face 10: Know your role model – A Search. Purpose of this section was to bring awareness about a person and his or her contributions to society and to show the readers about the strength of the collections of great personalities worldwide.

Face 11: World of serials – A Collection. The purpose of this section was to introduce the importance of serial publications which cover a wide spectrum of knowledge and to show the variety of serials from newspapers to magazines, to newsletters, as well as periodicals.

Methodology

The study was based on the descriptive analysis of the quantitative data. The study population consisted of entire batches of students totalling 6,800 students (both undergraduates and postgraduates), faculty staff, school students, teachers and librarians. Readers' attendance records, opinion book of the viewers of the exhibition, feedback forms from the students were the major data instruments for this study. Six month statistics of readers' attendance, about 190 opinions of viewers of the exhibitions, 130 feedback forms of first year students from the Faculty of Management in 2009 were

collected for the analysis of data. Statistics of readers' attendance for the months of July 2009 – Feb 2010 were taken as a sample for this study. A total of 190 opinions of the viewers were recorded in the opinion book of the exhibition, of which 4 opinions were identified as irrelevant and not considered for this study since they were from non educational sectors. Out of 186 opinions, 142 viewers stated their names while 38 gave either their department or the faculty with the academic year. 6 viewers didn't mention their names or the place. Simple majority of the opinions recorded was by students of all categories (165). This includes student category in school level, undergraduate level and post graduate level. A few students from the same discipline formed a small group and recorded their opinion. 15 staff from the faculty recorded their opinion.

Result and discussions

Based on the developments encountered after the programs, an increase of 20% in number of visits of readers, with enrichment of their information literacy level, appreciation and collaboration of departments, development of library awareness and documentation culture were identified as major impacts of the user education programs of UOJL.

Library Visits

Fig. 1: *Increase in number of visits made by readers in July-Dec 2009*
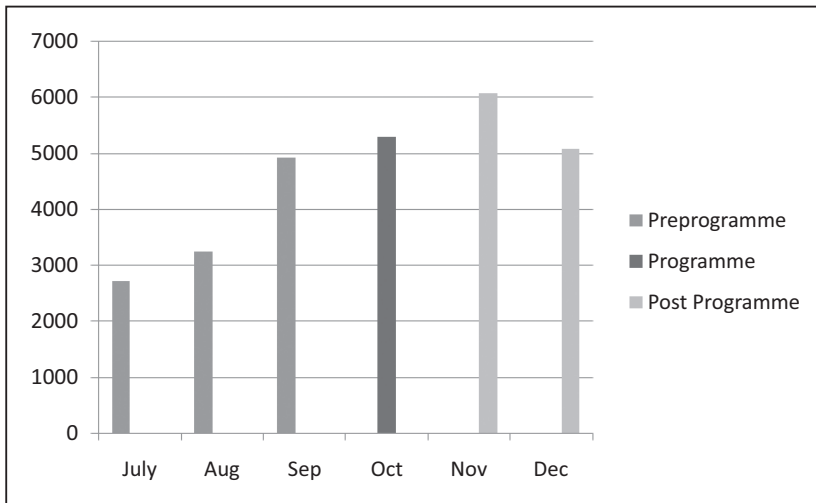
A remarkable (20%) increase in number of visits of readers was the notable finding of this study. (see Fig.1). This Figure shows the gradual increase in the number of visits during the pre-program period (July-Sept), program period (Oct) and the post-program period (Nov-Dec). It shows the user education programs as encouraging students to visit the Library and using it for their needs.

Appreciation of the viewers

98% of viewers of the exhibition fully appreciated the overall aspects of the exhibition. The degree of approbation from the views could be summarized as follows. They viewed the exhibition as

- A driving force for the search for knowledge and promotion of reading culture

- An introductory phase to the broad field of information, a guide to demarcate the limits of Information Search and an intellectual motivation in the pursuit of Information Searching Techniques

- Thoughts into reality; Highly praiseworthy and knowledgeable

- Good effort, useful work, excellent arrangement

- A touchstone for information handling and evaluation

- A stepping stone for sharing of information in an ethical manner

- Creative, innovative, informative, constructive, comprehensive as well as impressive initiatives

There is still room for improvement as suggested by a few (6 comments) of the viewers of the exhibition, while appreciating the exhibition as a whole.

Library Awareness

Library awareness gained highest rate of attention (95%) next to the appreciation of the exhibition. 50% of viewers found that the overall arrangement of the exhibition stimulated their interest to use the Library. 30% of the viewers felt that the 3-D Library is the best way to stimulate their reading and searching, whereas 20% said this exhibition made them realize how important a library could be, to help them in their educational achievements.

*Enrichment of Information Literacy through Exhibition*

26.9% (50) of viewers felt that this exhibition has enriched their information literacy level. Eight of them expressed that this exhibition stimulated their ability to think, the interest in search habits and to maximize the use of the library materials, whereas five of them were satisfied with online information retrieval.

Enrichment of Information literacy through Library Orientation Program

The following statistics show the impact of the program based on the level of satisfaction on the specified aspects given to them during library orientation(Fig2). Out of 130 students, 53.8% stated that the basic introduction given was very helpful. 59.2% were highly satisfied with the introduction given with regard to information resources. Besides, the study revealed the fact that students need additional instruction during consecutive years.

Fig. 2: *Satisfactory level of students in library orientation*
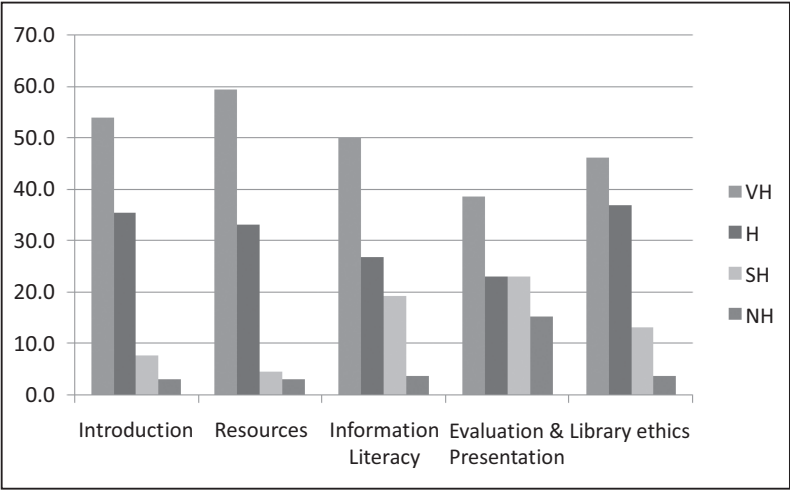
Collaboration of departments

Based on the appreciation recorded in the opinion book by the faculty members, further arrangements were made to obtain the support of departments to develop such service. Discussions were held with the Heads of Sociology, Agricultural Biology, Fisheries, Chemistry, Economics, History, Fine Arts and Tamil in the form of personal interviews to continue the service to improve the Information Literacy of their students by providing related images and objects of their subjects. This could be noted as a positive and collaborative impact of this study.

Documentation Culture

The study revealed the fact that the object oriented display gained the highest rate of attention (78 positives). Opinions from the viewers could be summarized as follows: 50% of the viewers felt that they were able to see the lifestyle of people through the objects displayed in the exhibition. 10% of the viewers felt that the object oriented display highlights world culture in general, and Tamil culture in particular. 20% of viewers stated that most of the antiques are unknown to them and documentation should be done to preserve them for future generations. 5% were amazed that reading promotion through evidence based displays is an ideal concept to enhance reading culture towards the development of a knowledge based society.

Suggestions and conclusion

A balance between print and electronic documents is a basic norm in the current era. Through the impact pointed out in this study there is a need for strategic planning in order to develop a comprehensive user education and training program at the national level. In this context, training and retraining the readers in the use of library and library materials will ensure the quality of research outcomes of the higher education sector in Sri Lanka. The University Grants Commission (UGC) of Sri Lanka, the National Institute for Library and Information Science (NILIS), National Library Services and Documentation Centre, University Libraries, Library Associations, Library and Information Science departments can play a pivotal role in this direction. Such national programs can be customized at the local level to suit institutional needs as demonstrated in the case of UOJL.

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