

Utilization of Reference Books by Students: A Case Study of Covenant University, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: This study assessed the utilization of reference books by final-year students of Covenant University, Nigeria with a view to providing valuable data to help students to get a better orientation on the use and importance of reference sources for their research work, to guide instructors and teachers on the use of library, information retrieval processes and information literacy, and to help University management, policy-makers and other stakeholders to make appropriate policies concerning the acquisitions of library materials. The survey method of research was adopted for the study. The simple random sampling technique was used in choosing the study population. The respondents for the questionnaire, interview and focus group discussion were chosen from the 400- and 500-level undergraduate students at the Covenant University. 300 copies of the questionnaires were administered to respondents. A focus group discussion was conducted with 30 participants. And 18 students were interviewed. It was revealed that students prefer online resources, which accounts for the poor usage of the hardcopy reference materials. It is, therefore, recommended that the library should intensify its information literacy skills program in order to help users maximize online reference resources. At the same time, the library should acquire more online reference sources rather than buying hard copies for a few users.

I. Introduction

The age in which we live is characterized by a great influx of information. Much more than ever before, knowledge has gained such importance that students who want to succeed in their fields of endeavor must seek appropriate information. It is on this backdrop that students in institutions of higher learning must be conversant with the variety of resources and tools that can help them get the information they need to complete an assignment and more importantly, their research work, quickly and efficiently. Students should be highly literate in seeking and using various information resources. In essence, they need to know the appropriate resource for specific

information in libraries or other information centers. In today's complex societies, access to information has become central to making decisions about the daily conduct of private and public life. As a result, contemporary library entails not only the traditional function of preserving and providing access to vast amount of printed materials but the creation of more sophisticated information environment (Sineath 2000).

Reference materials are one of the essential information resources of modern libraries. Their value is inestimable in the hands of a user, who requires quality information to meet a need. Nwogu and Obiagwu (1991) stated that "reference materials are the gold mines of knowledge". There are different types of reference materials and each of them contain diverse information ranging from simple definition of words and concepts to detailed explanation of ideas and events.

Reference materials are generally classified into two categories, the source and the access types. The source type of reference materials (books) are those that contain the information needed by the users (e.g., encyclopedias, dictionaries, and handbooks) while the access type of reference books are those that refer the user to the source of information required (e.g., indexes, abstracts, and bibliographies). Also, reference books are either general or specific in scope of their subject. What is important about reference books is that the subjects they contain have been well researched and proven to be of high intellectual standard by subject experts. Thus a scholarly work without consultation of good reference books is deemed to be shallow. Igwe (2004) rightly observed this by asserting that "A search for literature in research work will not be complete without examining some relevant reference materials necessary for exploring the topic". Some reference works, such as almanacs and encyclopedias, provide information directly. Other works, such as indexes and bibliographies, lead users to where information is.

II. Statement of the Problem

The reference section of a library houses reference materials that have been carefully selected and acquired to aid users in their quest for information in their chosen fields. These books are resources in the library that are designed in a way that users can refer to them in the course of research for specific information. Reference materials contain the origin of events, phenomenon, ideas and sometimes their history while other texts may not necessarily contain such. According to Nwaigwe and Onwuama (2004), reference materials provide significant information regarding the definition of the topic sought and its background. They opined that the information in reference materials are usually authentic, accurate and more reliable than non-reference sources. When users get really familiar with reference materials, they will find out how quickly and efficient it will be to complete their assignment and do their researches.

However, the reference section is almost always desolate, implying that the majority of students do not know when and how to use them or they do not find them to be valuable resources. It is unarguable that the Internet provides a barrage of reference information but not everything is available on the Internet. Sherman (2011) observed that "The amazing amount of useful information on the web has, for some, engendered the false assumption everything can be found online. It's simply not true". He added that Wikipedia, which ranks well for a wide variety of specialized subject areas, is improving web concision. But Wikipedia is just one site. It can be edited by anyone. Therefore, its veracity is not guaranteed. Libraries retain a much more

comprehensive and concisely indexed collection of research materials. The Internet is a great resource but many times, information can be found more easily by using a reference book.

This is not intended to undermine the value of the Internet but to posit that a researcher must harness the use of every available resource at his or her disposal to explore a topic. No students can possibly claim that access to free Internet resources alone will satisfy their information needs. Then, why do students shy away from using the physical reference materials? Why do they not access the electronic resources the library has subscribed to?

The current study is aimed at assessing information seeking behavior and utilization of reference materials by final-year students (research students at undergraduate level) of Covenant University.

III. Research Questions

- To what extent are students acquainted with the reference materials?
- Do they know the importance and use of reference materials?
- From where else do they get their needs met?
- Does information from other sources really satisfy and meet their needs?
- How do they maximize the use of reference materials to meet their information needs? Are there any possible challenges?

IV. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To determine the extent to which research students are acquainted with reference materials
- To determine their knowledge of the importance and use of reference materials
- To discover other sources from which they get their needs met
- To determine whether their information needs are actually being met from such sources
- To determine possible challenges to their effective use of reference materials in the library

V. Relevance of the Study

Findings from a study, such as this, may help students to get a better orientation on the importance and use of reference sources for their research work.

The findings of this study may be relevant to instructors or teachers regarding the use of library, information retrieval processes, and information literacy.

The university management and policy-makers may be benefited from the findings of this study when making policies that concern the acquisition of library materials.

Lastly, the acquisition unit of the library may use the findings of this study to determine what resources to acquire.

VI. Importance and Use of Reference Materials

The importance of reference materials cannot be overemphasized in an academic environment. The use of reference sources is highly beneficial or even indispensable for students to achieve their educational outcomes. Using reference is one of the most important parts of the process in an academic exercise. It avails the researcher of an opportunity to get informed about a topic.

Corijn and Dukes (2011) affirmed that reference sources

help make your choice easier, look up textual information about your subject. Finding out information on your chosen subject, learn about it. How it works, what it's made of, what it's used for, why it exists, who uses it, what different types there are, anything you can find out is good. This might help to spark your interest and motivate you.

However, the majority of students and researchers ignore this salient part. Corijn and Dukes (2011) gave an analogy of the processes involved in building a house:

Just imagine you're building a house. You wouldn't start building without a plan or any sort of idea where you are going. The building process itself may be more fun than planning, but in the end the house will not fit together well, it will look bad, or just collapse if you worked without a plan. Since the creation of any art asset starts with building reference, you can go as far as saying that the final quality of the finished product is largely defined by the effort you put into reference in the beginning.

VII. Books in the 21st Century Library

The proliferation of information on the Internet makes it all the more imperative to have a reference service. With just a click of the mouse comes a deluge of information, posing a challenge for the user to make an appropriate selection. The web is indeed a platform for quick access to information, including that from traditional reference books. Thus it is believed that sooner than imagined physical books will disappear in libraries.

Brewster Kahle, while talking about the future of libraries, predicted that "Libraries as a physical place to go, I think will continue." "But if this trend continues, if we let Google make a monopoly here, then what libraries are in terms of repositories of books, places that buy books, own them, be a guardian of them, will cease to exist. Libraries, going forward, may just be subscribers to a few monopoly corporations' databases." (Goodman, 2009)

Sarijj (2010) expressed the fear that books with so much information (such as in a large reference collection) would disappear and that everyone would be forced to find scholarly information online.

As efficient as the Internet may seem, all information is not available there. Even if Google has successfully digitized the sum of human knowledge, it is unlikely that contemporary authors and publishers will allow their works to be freely accessible over the Internet due to copyright laws. Copious academic research papers, journals and other important materials are virtually inaccessible to someone seeking to pull them off the web for free. Rather, access is restricted to expensive subscription accounts, which are typically paid for by libraries. Visiting the library in person or logging into the library through a personal account is therefore the only way to access necessary archived resources. Moreover, not everyone has access to the Internet.

Sherman (2006) opined that in less developed nations or even poorer parts of the United States, library access is often the only clear-cut way for an individual to conduct serious research. Even if Internet access is obtained, the lack of technological education in poorer areas of the world will render the technology much less useful than it would be for the person who has more experience navigating the web. Even if there will come a time when books are out of libraries, it is not going to be any time soon. Downloading and reading books on the Internet may be a matter of convenience, but it is the social nature of books and the bookstore that will keep them relevant for years to come.

VIII. Research Methodology

The survey method of research was adopted for the study. The instrument for collecting data was a questionnaire, interviews and focus group discussions. The simple random sampling technique was used in choosing the study population. The respondents for the questionnaire, interviews and focus group discussions were chosen from the 400 and 500 level (research students) of the Covenant University at the undergraduate level. Respondents were chosen from the six schools of the University, 50 from each. 30 other students were chosen for the interviews, with 5 from each. 18 participants were chosen for the focus group discussions, 3 from each school. This brought the study population to a total of 348 participants.

The descriptive statistical method of analysis was used for data analysis. Data were coded in simple percentages and presented in tables. Data obtained through the questionnaires, focus group discussions and interviews were discussed in relation to the research questions.

Distribution of the Study Population by School

| Name of School | # of Respondents | Percentage |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Business Studies | 50 | 16.7% |
| Environmental Studies | 50 | 16.7% |
| Engineering | 50 | 16.7% |
| Human Resource Development Studies | 50 | 16.7% |
| Natural and Applied Sciences | 50 | 16.7% |
| Social Sciences | 50 | 16.7% |
| Total | 300 | 100% |

IX. Findings

Table 2: Awareness of the Reference Section in the Library

| Awareness | # of Respondents | Percentage |
|------------|------------------|------------|
| Aware | 275 | 91.6% |
| Not Aware | 25 | 8.3% |
| No comment | Nil | Nil |
| Total | 300 | 100% |

Table 2 shows that the majority of the respondents 275 (91.6%) were aware of the reference section in the library while only 25 (8.3%) claimed that they were not.

Table 3: Respondents Knowledge of Reference Materials

| Statement | Agree | Strongly Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | No Comment |
|--|-------------|----------------|----------|-------------------|------------|
| I know what constitute reference materials in the library | 160 (53.3%) | 120 (40%) | 8 (2.6%) | — | 2 (0.6%) |
| I have the knowledge and skill to search reference materials in the library. | 135 (45%) | 141(47%) | 15 (5%) | 2 (0.6%) | 7 (2.3%) |
| I am aware that the use of reference materials is indispensable in my research work. | 86 (28.6%) | 207 (69%) | 1(0.3%) | 3(1%) | 3 (1%) |
| I am aware that reference materials will avail me good background knowledge of my research Topic | 83 (27.6%) | 211 ((70.3%) | 3 (1%) | — | 1 (0.3%) |
| I am familiar with a variety of reference materials and I know they contain a wealth of information. | 120 (40%) | 172 (57.3%) | 6 (2%) | — | 2 (0.6%) |

Table 3 shows that the majority of the respondents (280, 93.3%) had knowledge of what constitute reference materials in the library while only 8 (2.6%) of the total respondents did not. Also, the majority of the respondents (276, 92%) claimed to have knowledge and skill on how to search reference materials while 17 (5.6%) said they did not. An overwhelming majority (293, 97.6%) of the respondents were aware that the use of reference materials is indispensable in their research work while 4 (1.3%) were not. Moreover, 294 (98.9%) of the respondents were aware that reference materials will avail them of good background knowledge of their research topic while 3 (1%) of the respondents were not. A larger number of the respondents (292, 97.3%) were familiar with a variety of reference materials and knew that they contain a wealth of information while 6 (2%) of the respondents were not.

Table 4: Level of Utilization of Reference Materials

| Statement | Agree | Strongly Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | No Comment |
|---|-------------|----------------|-------------|-------------------|------------|
| I use reference materials frequently. | 67 (22.3%) | 92 (30.6%) | 73 (24.3%) | 62 (20.6%) | 6 (2%) |
| I only consult online reference sources because they are easier to use. | 52 (17.3%) | 80 (26.6%) | 125 (41.6%) | 73 (24.3%) | — |
| I have never used a physical reference material before. | — | — | 53 (17.6%) | 244 (81.3%) | 4 (1.3%) |
| I only use the dictionary, not any other reference material. | 32 (10.6%) | 19 (6.3%) | 103 (34.3%) | 139 (46.3%) | 7 (2.3%) |
| I do not know how to use reference materials other than the dictionary. | 12 (4%) | 9 (3%) | 92 (30.6%) | 186 (62%) | 1 (0.3%) |
| I cannot do without the use of reference materials in my research work. | 106 (35.3%) | 181 (60.3%) | 2 (0.6%) | 3 (1%) | 7 (2.3%) |

Table 4 shows that 152 (52.9%) of the respondents used reference materials frequently while 135 (44.9%) did not. Also, 132 (43.9%) agreed that they consult only online reference sources because they are easier to use while 198 (65.9%) of respondents disagreed. Almost all respondents (296, 98.6%) disagreed to the statement that they have never used a physical reference material before. In response to the statement “I only use the dictionary, not any other reference material”, 242 (80.9%) respondents disagreed while 51 (16%) agreed and 7 (2.3%) did not respond. Moreover, 278 (92%) of the respondents agreed that they know how to use reference materials other than the dictionary while 21 (7%) disagreed. Furthermore, a clear majority of the respondents confirmed that they could not do without the use of reference materials in their research work. Only 5 (1.6%) responded to the contrary while 7 (2.3%) did not respond.

Table 5: Training Received by Respondents on Effective Use of the Library

| Statements | Agree | Strongly Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | No Response |
|---|-------------|----------------|------------|-------------------|-------------|
| I had library orientation and training on the use of library. | 110 (36.6%) | 164 (54.6) | 8 (2.6%) | 13 (4.3%) | 5 (1.6%) |
| I was taught what reference materials are and how to use them. | 157 (52.3%) | 124 (41.3%) | 4 (1.3%) | 11 (3.6%) | 4 (1.3%) |
| I am a beneficiary of the library's information literacy skill program. | 104 (34.6%) | 145 (48.3%) | 32 (10.6%) | 18 (6%) | 1 (0.3%) |

Table 5 shows that 274 (91%) of the respondents agreed that they had library orientation and training on the use of library while 21 (7%) disagreed and 5 (1.6%) did not respond. Also, 281

(93.6%) of the respondents agreed that they were taught what reference materials are and how to use them while 15 (4.9%) disagreed and 4 (1.3%) did not respond. Finally, 249 (82.9%) of the respondents affirmed that they were beneficiaries of the library's information literacy skills program while 50 (16.6%) disagreed.

X. Discussion of the Findings

The findings of the study show that the majority of the respondents had good awareness of the reference section in the library. This can be contributed to the orientation, induction and information literacy skill programs organized for the students. These afforded them a sound knowledge of what constitute reference materials in the library. Moreover, the majority of the respondents had knowledge and skill of how to search the reference materials, were aware of the value of them, and were familiar with a variety of reference sources. However, only about a half of the respondents used these materials frequently. A sizeable number of the respondents claimed that they consulted only online sources because they are easier to use. Nevertheless, there are still a handful of the respondents that consulted both hard copies and online sources. Consequently, libraries and librarians need not despair over the use of huge resources in their holdings. Furthermore, almost all respondents had, at one time or another, used a physical reference material, which was not limited to the dictionary, a most commonly used and known reference source. Thus a clear majority of the respondents confirmed that they could not do without the use of reference materials in their research work. This corroborates the assertion of Igwe (2004) that "Your search for literature for your research work will not be complete without examining some useful reference materials necessary for exploring your topic".

XI. Conclusion

Despite the fact that reference materials are highly important for research work and available in the Covenant University Library, students prefer online resources, which resulted in the poor usage of the hard copy reference materials. Therefore, the library should intensify its information literacy skills program in order to help students maximize the use of online reference resources. On the other hand, the acquisition unit in the library should purchase good online reference sources that are not available for open access, rather than buying the huge hard copies that will be used by only a few students. Finally, librarians should go an extra mile to encourage students to consult the available hard copies due to the fact that the information they need may not be available online.

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