Library Literacy: the Step before Information Literacy

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Abstract

Acquiring library skills is the first step that a person must take to become information literate. The article pleads for the university library's role in training students to become aware of today's possibilities of accessing information and acquiring knowledge. There are a few examples of activities developed by "Carol I" Central University Library of Bucharest, regarding training in library skills and not only.

Information literacy/library literacy: similarities and differences

Starting the 70's and continuing with the next decade, concerns regarding library's provision of user education programmes have grown in intensity, leading to the publication of numerous articles regarding this subject [1].

Over time, more terms were used to define a set of activities which had the purpose of "helping people to derive the most benefit from using a library" [2]: some were focused on the training institution – the library („library education", „library instruction", "instruction in library use", "library orientation"), other were focused on the training objective – the library user ("client education", "reader education", "reader instruction", "user education", „user assistance"), and other were focused on a librarian specific type of training (,,bibliographic instruction").

Bibliographic instruction has been used on a large scale before the Internet age. This term refers strictly to user training for locating information in a library: bibliographic instruction consists in „instructional programs designed to teach library users how to locate the information they need quickly and effectively" [3].

A broader term than bibliographic instruction is *user education*, defined as „all the activities involved in teaching users how to make the best possible use of library resources, services and facilities, including formal and informal instruction delivered by a librarian or other staff member one-on-one or in a group" [4]. As Feather & Surges notes [5], user education intents to help the user to be "self-reliant in locating, sorting and repacking information", it prepares him for „self-evaluation of information" and it is considered to be "essential for a new user and desirable for an experienced one".

In parallel (but on a smaller scale) it was also used the term of *library literacy*, somehow integrating. Bell [6] defines library literacy as following: „In the academic setting, library literacy refers to the acquisition of a range of skills relating to identification of and familiarity with sources and information seeking processes, usually through formal bibliographic instruction and informal user education".

So, *bibliographic instruction*, *user education* and *library literacy* are terms referring to the use of information resources available from library. In the last decades, especially after the Internet prevalence on a global scale, they were replaced by the integrating concept of *information*

literacy. Unlike *library literacy*, *information literacy* implies attaining a set of information abilities, which are independent of the type of information resources or by the place they can be found. According to the well-known definition offered by the American Library Association (ALA) Presidential Committee on Information Literacy, "To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information" [7]. In a world in which quantity of information and the multitude of the channels on which this information is transmitted have become overwhelming, the accent is placed on developing critical thinking skills.

Which is the librarian's role in attaining information literacy skills? It was written a lot on this subject. The general conclusion is that: as in the print age, in the Internet age library must play an important role in this process. But now, unlike Internet age, library is not the only player on the field, but it is only one of many. From the entire area of abilities a person must have in order to be considered information literate, there are a few abilities for which library expertise is, if not exclusive, at least the most adequate.

Library skills and the identity of the library

The students start the university life with a baggage of knowledge acquired along his previous experiences, either in their scholar or personal experience. Their information behavior was formed by the contact with different information resources, among who it is supposed to be the library – usually a school/high school library and/or a public library. Their previous experiences about library use determine how they relate and how quickly they learn to orient themselves in the new library type, in which they will have to step once they'll be in university: the academic library.

The empiric observation of freshmen students entering an academic library – in our case „Carol I" Central University Library of Bucharest – shows that their information behavior is oriented on the use of Internet resources. This can't represent a surprise because it is specific to the "Google generation" all over the world. Another empiric observation, however, can make us think: the level of library literacy skills of our freshmen students is, usually, very low. The relationship between preferences for electronic resources and low level of library literacy skills it is not necessary a causal one. Here comes, as a determinant factor, the specific of the education system: if students were more stimulated or constrained to go to the library in school and high school, in the moment they enter in university they would already had at least basic library skills.

So, generalizing a little, the Romanian freshmen student comes from the unstructured Internet universe and enters in the library universe, in which knowledge is systematically organized. On the one side, there is an ocean of information governed by a few rules, on the other side – an institution with her rules, in which access to information is subjected to this rules. The typology of freshmen student information needs itself is different from the typology of a high school student: his information needs becomes more complex and satisfying them is a more important purpose for his becoming.

Our freshmen student comes into the library with expectations formed by the intensive use of the Internet: a simple search, Google-like, will return a set of results in which he will find what he is interested of. The reality they face is different: in the online catalogue of a library, the search is different from Google search – a word is not searched in the library collection's full text, but will be made using significant words from the bibliographic point of view. This leads to the situation in which, to search for a specific subject it is necessary more than simply typing some words in a search box…

In library science literature there are a lot of discussions about the necessity of library adaptation to the specific of the contemporary user of information. The library of today has really made some important steps in this direction, being a more adaptable institution than the traditional library. In the same time, a fundamental question arises: how far can library adaptation go, so as to keep its identity? If for the medium user, the search model is given by Google search engine, will ever library be able to give up the content description (by indexing and/or classification)? If the "organizing" model of information for some is Word Wide Web, will library be forced to give up the idea of organizing her collections? If someday the answer to these questions will be affirmative, this will mean that either library as institution died, or was replaced by another institution, which can't longer be called library.

Learning how to use a library, the freshmen student will learn that the access to valuable information is not so easy and it requires some specific skills. The library is maybe the first institution that teaches him that there is life – i.e. information – beyond Internet and that this information is structured and organized for his own benefice. He has to learn the ABC of the library, in order to gain access to this organized knowledge.

Library and information literacy related activities in "Carol I" Central University Library of Bucharest

Library skills can be divided in two categories: *transferable* and *specific*. The transferable library skills are those skills that can be used in any library: strategies of searching information in an online catalogue, how to use a reference work etc. The specific library skills refers to the way the library is organized (i.e. what type of publications are available on open shelves, what type of organizing criteria is used in that library, the way that knowledge domains are displaced in study rooms, which is the destination of the study rooms – for books/serials/audiovisual documents etc.), classification system used, available services, eventual costs involved in offering those services a.s.o.

In „Carol I" Central University Library of Bucharest there are many specific organizational and structural elements, which distinguish it from other libraries. That is the reason we pay a lot of attention to training those users who steps for the first time in our library, to help them acquire some specific library skills. All new users, before getting a library card, are obliged to make an orientation tour in the library, made by a librarian. During this tour which takes about 15 minutes, users are briefly presented: library spaces, main library services, online catalogue, the way they are able to make a difference, depending on the shelf marks, from publications available on open shelves to the publications that are in closed stacks, the way they can get a place in the study room, assisted by the *Reader's Management System* (our library is the only library in the country that uses this software) etc. While they are waiting for the orientation tour, users can watch an instructional movie made by the library, in which all this information are widely presented (the movie is also available on library website, at http://www.bcub.ro/continut/prezentare/filmBCU_flash/Untitled-1.html).

User's education doesn't stop at this basic level. We also put an emphasis on training users and librarians for use of scientific databases provided by the library. The number of participating students at those training courses, taught by our librarians or by vendor's representatives, grew constantly in 2005-2008 period (in 2009 the training sessions were dedicated especially to librarians – see fig. 1).
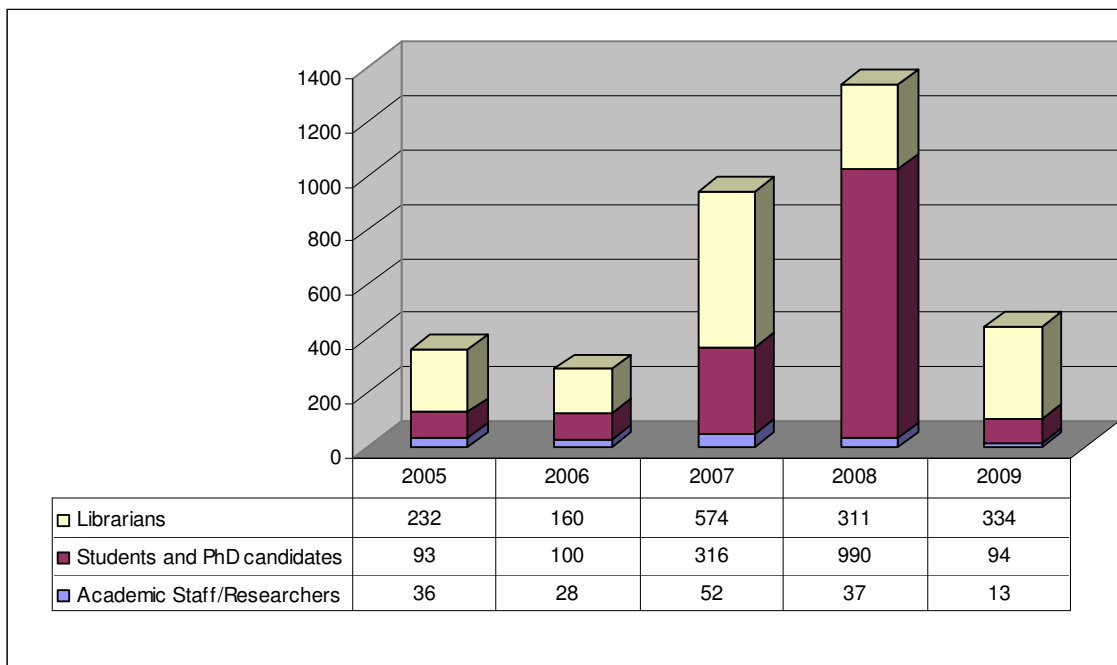
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
☐ Librarians	232	160	574	311	334
■ Students and PhD candidates	93	100	316	990	94
☐ Academic Staff/Researchers	36	28	52	37	13

Fig. 1 The attendance of the training courses for the use of scientific databases

Conclusion

Acquiring library skills is, in our opinion, the first step a person must take in order to become information literate. Knowledge must precede the process of evaluation. In order to adopt an efficient search strategy, you must know very well the entire typology of information resources. It is what a university library offers to its students: the possibility of getting in touch with the entire range of information resources, on all media. Knowing these resources and the methods developed along the millenniums by the library for organizing information, the student will be more prepared to manage the Internet virtual space.

References

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