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## **Self-directed learning in an Internet age: the role of academic libraries in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Advancement in technology has given rise to the explosion of information resources on the Internet which has invariably drawn many self-directed learners to seek learning online. While this is a welcome development, the use of the Internet for learning, however, is not without challenges. Learners may be overwhelmed by the volume of resources online; they have to ascertain the reliability of information resources and at the same time make ethical use of them. It, therefore, behooves on librarians as information professionals to take a leading role in impacting information literacy skills. This paper, explores the use of internet for learning, identifies the challenges associated with it and the roles academic libraries could play in supporting learning in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Academic libraries, Information literacy, Internet age, Self-directed learning.

### **Introduction**

Learning is central to the concept of education which can be seen as a process of acquiring knowledge. The Federal Government of Nigeria has since identified education as a major vehicle for change in the country by basing its philosophy of education on the development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen through the provision of educational opportunities at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. However, while education is mostly acquired from traditional classroom settings, the Internet has given impetus to the proliferation of information resources. Students are now exposed to information in online databases, email, films, social media such as Facebook, YouTube and so on, in addition to print resources and as such find it easier to engage in self-directed learning. Self-directed learning, while depending much on an individual's ability to engage in learning activities, does not entirely exclude the support of others. Considering the complexities associated with the use of some Internet resources and the difficulties faced by learners who grapple with understanding various sources of information, techniques for locating, accessing and evaluating information as well as issues of ethics associated with information use, it, therefore, becomes necessary for librarians to support the self-directed learner.

### **The concept of self-directed learning**



Self-directed learning is rooted in the need to better oneself. It is a learning situation where the learner takes responsibility for the actions involved in learning. Self-directed learning is of particular importance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century considering the rate at which technology changes. Indeed, Illich (1971) argues that specialized knowledge is often acquired well past the age of formal schooling, and in many situations through educational processes that do not center on traditional schooling. It, therefore, becomes obvious that not everything can be learnt in the formal school environment and as such individuals must take the leading roles in identifying their areas of need and consciously work towards improving themselves. Pink (2009) corroborates this by arguing that the secret to high performance is rooted in the personal desire to learn and create new things.

Self-directed learning, according to Knowles (1975), is a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, to diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources for learning, select and implement learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes. This definition makes it clear that the learner can take the learning initiative with or without the help of others. In other words, learning motivation could also be internally or externally generated. It is synonymous with self-study (Candy, 1991), adult education (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) and student-centered education (Ainoda, Onishi, & Yasuda, 2005). Self-directed learning has three dimensions attached to it (Garrison, 1997) which are: self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation. The drive for learning is expected to emanate mostly from the learner who takes control of managing and monitoring the learning process in order to achieve the learning objective.

Summing up the concept of self-directed learning, Hiemstra (1994) affirms the following: (a) individual learners can become empowered to take increasingly more responsibility for various decisions associated with the learning endeavor; (b) self-direction is best viewed as a continuum or characteristic that exists to some degree in every person and learning situation; (c) self-direction does not necessarily mean all learning will take place in isolation from others; (d) self-directed learners appear able to transfer learning, in terms of both knowledge and study skill, from one situation to another; (e) self-directed learning can involve various activities and resources, such as self-guided reading, participation in study groups, internships, electronic dialogues, and reflective writing activities; (f) effective roles for others in self-directed learning is possible, such as dialogue with learners, securing resources, evaluating outcomes, and promoting critical thinking; (g) some educational institutions are finding ways to support self-directed study through open-learning programs, individualized study options, non-traditional course offerings, and other innovative programs.

### **The Internet and self-directed learning**

The use of the Internet is a global phenomenon. WorldStats (2012) noted that there are 2,405,518,376 internet users in the world. For Africa the figure was given as 167,335,676 while Nigeria has the share of 48,366,179. Considering the avalanche of information on the Internet which is made accessible without the boundaries of time and space, hardly can anyone carry out a successful research in business, education or take meaningful life decisions without referring to an internet resource. Draves (2002) suggests that the Internet offers several advantages to learning such as learning at personal speed, access to vast quantity of information, ability to track and test personal learning effort. The use of the Internet in higher education is affirmed by Kerins, Madden



and Fulton (2004) whose study of graduate engineering students in Ireland reported that the majority of the students use the Internet as the first source of information when carrying out a research project. This was corroborated by OCLC (2006) report that 89 percent of college student information searches begin with a search engine.

Several tools according to Saxena (2013) exist on the Internet to support learning amongst which are:

- **Free educational resources:** quality resources provided freely for learning. Through these resources students are able to learn any subject they want on their own, and the constant need for a teacher is eliminated.
- **Personal Learning Networks:** can be created through blogs, social networks such as, Twitter and Facebook, to facilitate collaboration.
- **Video-conferencing tools:** Using tools such as Skype individuals can connect to discuss topics of interest.
- **YouTube/iTunes:** YouTube adds the visual element to make learning more powerful. They empower students and teachers to design their own learning.
- **ePortfolios:** These help students keep track of their own achievements and share them with others. They are free and easy to create; students create a container like, a blog, wiki or website, organize it and post their work.
- **Self-assessment:** Instead of relying on teachers to get evaluated, students could assess themselves by sharing their work with others to get feedback for improvement, practice tests on test prep and review sites, create videos and look for views and comments on them.

#### **Academic libraries and the self-directed learner**

The Nigerian National Policy on Education (2004) identifies the library as one of the most important aspects of educational support service used as media for disseminating information and enhancing literature search. Islam (2004) as cited in Adio & Olasina (n.d.) defines the library as an instrument of self-education, a means of knowledge and factual information, a centre of intellectual recreation, and a beacon of enlightenment that provides accumulated preserved knowledge of civilization which consequently enriches one's mental vision, and dignifies his habit behaviour, character, taste, attitude, conduct, and outlook on life. The importance of the library can be seen in the way it is described by several authors. Odiase, Unegbu & Haliso (2001) described the public library as the peoples' university. The academic library on the other hand, is unarguably the centre point of all academic activities within tertiary institutions as Olanlokun and Salisu (1995) describe it as the nerve centre of educational institutions. The primary goal of libraries irrespective of type is to aid the pursuit of information through the provision and access to information resources within an environment that fosters intellectual development. To reach this goal, libraries make efforts to provide adequate information materials, modern facilities, and employ qualified staff who will work to meet users' information needs.

The self-directed learner in an Internet age, no doubt, faces challenges when seeking for information as noted by a number of researchers. Hasegawa & Kashihara (2006) point out that the web makes it difficult to locate suitable resources on particular topics of interest. This is especially



so, when the learner is faced with information in a variety of formats, some of which may be too complex to understand or lack adequate search skills necessary for navigating the quantum of information available on the Internet. The knowledge of databases relevant to one's inquiry can also be a challenge as awareness of databases facilitates the self-learning process. When the self-directed learner has little or no knowledge of relevant databases, it could hinder the learning process. Hil & Hannafin (2001) emphasize the need to understand the relationships between types of information resources evaluate the validity and reliability of the resources and make intelligent choices among them. In view of these challenges, Fowell & Levy (1995) assert that librarians as information professionals must take a leading role in developing and delivering the learning support strategies which will be appropriate to the new learning environment.

Information literacy as noted by Dangani (2009) is one of the methods through which librarians' support learning strategies in the online environment. Information literacy is defined by the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) (2014) as a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information. Information literacy according to the association is related to information technology skills, but has broader implications for the individual enabling him or her to use computers, software applications, databases, and other technologies to achieve a wide variety of academic, work-related, and personal goals thereby enabling them to master content and extend their investigations, become more self-directed, and assume greater control over their own learning. The importance of information literacy skills in self-directed learning is acknowledged by Rowntree (1995) who states that computer skills, time management skills, interactive skills, and literacy skills are essential for successful online learning.

ACRL (2014) describes an information literate person as an individual who is able to:

- Determine the extent of information needed
- Access the needed information effectively and efficiently
- Evaluate information and its sources critically
- Incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base
- Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose
- Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally

While noting the importance of information literacy, Dutton (1990) argues that the skills required to maximize the potential of electronic resources are much greater than those required for searching printed sources. These skills in the author's view include a knowledge of the structure of the database and the instructions which must be input into the computer by the searcher, as well as an understanding of the ways in which the instructions are linked with one another. In an effort to teach information literacy skills to meet the technological demands of the information age, libraries in the developed world develop self-directed learning modules which are easily accessed through their websites as in the case of James Hardiman Library, National University of Ireland (n.d). In addition, Hoffman et al (2011) reports the result of a study by the American Library Association which showed that 87% of libraries provide some type of technology instruction. The same, however, may not be said of libraries in Nigeria.

### **The Nigerian challenge**



Nigeria as a country has its own myriad of challenges which also rubs off on the self-directed learner. Even in situations where an individual desires to work towards the achievement of academic goals, there are issues which are general to the country that adversely affects the learner. Nigeria as a country is yet to boast of twenty four hours a day/seven days a week power supply, hence the self-directed learner is constrained as the likely hood of 24/7 access to the internet is not guaranteed. This is also noted by Adomi (2005) who points out that the electricity situation in Nigeria is an impediment to the development of the internet in Nigeria. As if the issue of power failure is not enough, the Daily Independence (2014) also affirms that Nigeria's broadband access remains very low compared to countries like South Africa, Kenya and Ghana. In addition, Bac (1998) as cited by Quadri (2012) observed that where internet exists in an institution very little time allocation is made for students' use of the internet.

Akande (2011) in a study which examined the use of computer and Internet facilities for distance education by sandwich students in University of Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria, reports that even though distance learning education programme is expected to be carried out in an ICT environment through electronic communication by the use of computer and Internet resources, half of the respondents surveyed could not use the ICT facilities because they lacked the skills for using them. This was further confirmed by Ilogho & Nkiko (2014) in their study of information literacy and search skills of students in five private universities in Ogun State, Nigeria where findings revealed that most students showed high deficiency in identifying diverse information sources. Funding was also identified as a challenge for the self-directed learner in Nigeria as studies by Salaam & Adegboire (2010); Adeoye & Udeani (2008) affirm that the Nigerian student is financially constrained when it comes to owning a computer or even accessing the internet. This is due to the fact that Internet access in most Nigerian universities is provided at a huge cost.

### **Contextual discussion**

The need for academic libraries to support self-directed learning in an Internet age is crucial especially as Knowles (1975) and Hiemstra (1994) makes it clear that self-directed learning does not necessarily mean all learning will take place in isolation from others. In other words, the self-directed learner must not necessarily work alone but could receive support from others such as faculty and librarians. The findings of Akande (2011); Ilogho & Nkiko (2014) which revealed high deficiency in identifying diverse information sources and lack of ICT skills also makes it necessary for academic libraries in Nigeria to embark on user education as Rowntree (1995) affirms that computer skills, time management skills, interactive skills, and literacy skills are essential for successful online learning. Although the provision of electricity and Internet connection are mandatory for utilising the Internet, Adomi (2005) and Bac (1998) as cited by Quadri (2012) observed that this is not always the case for academic libraries in Nigeria as the country faces the challenge of electricity and even where internet exists in an institution very little time allocation is made for students' use of the internet.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

There is no doubt that a major objective of academic libraries is to aid learning and development in the society. Although individuals may take the initiative for self-directed learning, this does not

absolve academic libraries from performing their primary duties to library users hence the following recommendations are made:

Based on the above, the following recommendations are made:

1. Academic libraries in Nigeria should intensify efforts in teaching information literacy skills. It is no longer enough to limit user education to basic understanding of information resources in the library. Users should also be equipped for independent learning in the online environment by covering areas such as electronic search skills, website evaluation and ethical use of information resources.
2. User education in academic libraries should not be limited to classroom experience or new intakes orientation; rather, libraries should go a step further by developing information literacy tutorials which should be made available on their websites for easy accessibility.
3. Libraries working with their parent organizations can provide access to the Internet for free or at a very minimal cost. By so doing, it would not only reduce the financial burden that self-directed learners face in accessing the Internet, but also boost library visits, as well as the image of the library.
4. While some individuals may have personal computers to work with, there are still those who depend on the library for such provision. Academic libraries should, therefore, endeavour to provide adequate computers with Internet connection to meet the needs of such users.
5. The use of Information Communication Tools should not be taken for granted and as such academic libraries in Nigeria should endeavour to have skilled personnel to assist students in the face of technical difficulties.

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