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Information Literacy Activities that meet changes in Iranian Society

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Abstract:

This paper will discuss how information literacy skills can be increased among neo & semi-literates sections of Iranian population.

Initially practical suggestions for promoting IL skills are made, based on a national survey carried out in 2003 by the Iranian Literacy Movement Organization (LMO), affiliated to the Ministry of Education. These suggestions will include:

- *Producing activity oriented materials.*
- *Organising reading circles in the libraries of community learning centres (CLCs) for analysing and evaluating information. CLCs in Iran are supervised by LMO.*
- *Applying new participatory methods in educational programmes, such as brain storming and group discussions.*

The above experiences have achieved much of the LMO's aims. It is hoped that through this paper our experiences gained in this field in Iran will be introduced and shared with our international colleagues.

Introduction:

Considering the declaration made by the UN that this decade has been designated as the "Decade

of Literacy" (2003-2012), public libraries have been offered with another opportunity to improve and disseminate their literacy and post-literacy programmes.

Unfortunately there are still 880'000'000 illiterate adults around the world. The majority of them are women (1). In the countries that their population still suffers from illiteracy, neo-literacy, and semi-literacy, encouraging their public libraries to have a more educational approach, will help to reduce substantially the number of illiterate adults.

The programme of "Education For All" (EFA) declared that it is their aim to achieve:

A 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy till 2015 especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults (2).

Since 1995, according to a mutual agreement between Board of Trustees of Iranian Public Libraries (BTIPL) and Literacy Movement Organization (LMO), a close cooperation has started. This cooperation has led to the promotion of literacy level of the neo-literates, the majority being Iranian women. Since this agreement, all the libraries have organised tours for the target groups. Easy-to read materials (most of which are joint production of LMO and the other organizations) are being made available in public libraries in Iran. The main theme of these materials, are basic life skills.

In this paper, it will be argued that it is still necessary to further encourage educational programmes in which their main thrusts are teaching Information Literacy skills to librarians, facilitators, and learners. These educational programme should make efforts to reach where there are information gaps, such as among women in rural areas, prisoners, street children, neo & semi literates whom are often among low-income section of the population.

UNESCO Public library manifesto supports self-learning education, and formal education in all levels. It insists that the role and mission of public library is to help the promotion of computer literacy skills as well as literacy skills and programmes (3). Following this manifesto, LMO and BTIPL have increased their educational programmes in this direction.

The first part of this paper will discuss Information Literacy Skills that are currently adopted in Iran.

Second, the educational role of public libraries to meet the educational needs of neo and semi-literates is discussed. Third, the implementation of educational programmes are introduced, with emphasis on LMO and BTIPL educational programmes. Fourth, the results of a national survey about educational needs of neo-literates are presented.

Finally, I would like to inform the reader that this paper was originally written in Persian and was subsequently translated by myself into English. I apologies for any inaccuracies occurred in the translation, especially in the sections containing quotes from various sources.

Information Literacy Skills:

The combination of the "Information" and "Literacy" has created a new concept. Some definitions are as follows:

The ability of accessing, retrieving & evaluating information are considered as important elements of information literacy skills (4).

Clever defines it as:

A collection of skills & attitudes those are necessary for continuous learning (5)

Paulo Friere believes that:

Literacy skills should lead to critical thinking (6)

Webber and Johnson argue that:

Information literacy skill is selecting proper information behaviour through compatible channel/intermediate for recognition of information. This information should be according to information need, and lead to a wise and moral usage of information (7).

Therefore, we can deduce that IL skills are the ability of searching, finding, analysing, evaluating and applying needed information efficiently in our daily life. Now, much of the above mentioned have been implemented in Iran.

The public Libraries Role:

The most accessible kind of learning institutions for general public, undoubtedly, are public libraries. These institutions should adapt to society's needs so as to improve literacy level and general knowledge within the communities in which they serve and move towards a learning society. Therefore, they should plan educational programmes for both users and librarians to develop IL skills.

These programmes can help to distribute knowledge and awareness equally among population regardless of the size of the community involved and prevent information gap. Especially among un-reached population, such as women in rural areas, prisoners, street children, neo & semi literates whom are often among low-income population.

To develop the library services for neo & semi literates, and to change their information gathering behaviour, a new approach by the librarians are necessary.

Librarians should be equipped with IL and net literacy themselves and foster it through public libraries (8).

To change the attitudes of public libraries from that of a book providing service, to that of a learning institution, we should establish a communication bridge between accessible knowledge in the library and the end users. The majority of service providers need to learn how to learn. Therefore, change should begin within staff of libraries in Iran.

Library Education Programmes and achievements:

Libraries have traditionally supported independent learning, and are involved in many national/regional programmes that are being developed to improve life long learning. According to Mally, in an educational programme of a library, the following procedures should be considered:

1. Recognition of potential user.
2. Recognition of the information needs of target groups.
3. Recognition of present target group skills.

4. Recognition of the skills they need.
5. Recognition of general objectives.
6. Recognition of behavioural objectives.
7. Recognition of applied objectives (9).

The above points have now been adopted in Iranian libraries. To support educational programmes, LMO held a national workshop to transfer new participatory methods to its facilitators of community learning centres (CLC) in 2002. There are 1500 CLCs in Iran all of which have small libraries containing a collection of easy-to-read materials. Since then, short term library courses (one week) have arranged for training the librarians of mobile libraries with the cooperation of BTIPL, LMO and UNICEF. These libraries are now working in 20 provinces. Most of them are equipped with computers and video projectors.

The libraries of CLC and mobile libraries holds reading circles consisting of the librarian and the learners. In these circles they use brainstorming and group discussion methods. In these circles, initially, a book is chosen according to the needs of the group. Then, the learners discuss the content of the book. It is hoped that this method will encourage a problem solving approach through reading and discussing.

Asian Cultural Centre for UNESCO (ACCU) recommends that making learning process more interesting and useful. They suggest the usage of various media in CLCs. (10).

In Iranian CLCs, the facilitator use activity oriented materials, including cassettes, video tapes, and plays, educational lectures from radio and television programmes related to their particular curricular units.

After each session, they discuss the content with the learners. It is hoped that this will encourage widening their critical thinking. Some of the reading materials are prepared with the participation of learners. Facilitators make sure that the content of the learning materials are relevant to local needs.

According to ACCU, this approach to material preparation has the following benefits:

1. It stimulates learners to continue their education.
2. Involves them with learning activities.
3. Provide more knowledg, information, and skills in their daily life.
4. Increases and reinforce literacy skills (11)

The involvement of the learners in each stage of their education encourages them to evaluate the information content of their sessions. Additionally, they learn research skills.

Problems for semi-literates when visiting libraries, seems to be common across many countries. For example, according to Johnson's research, semi-literate adults in US confront some barriers before coming to the library. Semi-literates usually don't ask for their requests through author, or title. Instead they ask for a subject or a reference like a dictionary (12).

In Iran similar problems are faced by semi-literates when visiting libraries. Therefore using subject guides according to subject classification are used, and a simple collection of easy to read materials that is accessible for users regardless of classification schemes are used.

In most of Iranian libraries efforts are being made so that the easy-to-read collections are easily seen by those entering the library. Bright colours for the shelves are used. Labels, such as "E", are placed on books in order to show the concept of easy to read. In some libraries, newspaper stations outside the library have been placed to attract semi-literates to enter the library and break down the inhibition factors common amongst semi-literates.

Educational Needs:

Public libraries should recognize present educational needs of their users and consider their expectations. General needs:

The result of LMO national survey based on a sample of 1200 neo-literates in Iran shows that their first concern was health awareness (19.9%). They were particular concern with issues relating to hygiene (34.6%).

The second concern were issues related to social awareness (19.3%). With family affairs being their priority (39.1%).

The third concern were religious awareness (18.7%). Religious regulations and laws were of particular interest (28.5%).

Fourth, was technical/vocational education (10.1%). Weaving industry being their favourite (28.6%).

Table 1: other interests expressed by neo-literates in Iran.

subject	men	women	total/percentage
Social	15.7	20.4	19.3
Business	7.5	5.0	5.5
Health	16.9	20.8	19.9
History	7.5	5.8	6.2
Religion	16.2	19.4	18.7
Culture	7.9	8.6	8.4
Agriculture	12.1	6.8	8.0
Technical	10.5	10.0	10.1
Natural Resources	5.8	3.2	3.8
Total	100	100	100

Considering the results in different provinces, LMO is preparing some easy to read materials and revise the textbooks of neo- literates.

New participatory methods and tools:

The same survey shows that neo-literates believe that the best participatory methods which can be used are answer and question sessions (28.4%), group discussion (27.3%), and scientific visits (17.2%).

Cassettes and video tape are chosen as the most needed educational tools (18.3%)

Libraries are attempting to add to their printed collection audio-visual materials. In addition to their text projection equipment, libraries are planning to acquire software material dedicated to the needs of neo-literates.

Educational courses:

Librarians can be very effective in planning of educational courses for the neo-literates.

According to Malley for a successful educational programme, the following questions needs to be addressed:

- Why the library is teaching information skills?
- Who should be trained?
- What are the aims?
- What subjects should be taught?
- How the skills should be taught? (13)

In programming the activities of Iranian public libraries the above questions have been taken into consideration. The important point in educational programmes for neo-literates is mutual understanding and cooperation between the related organisations. For example to design a simple usage guide for public libraries, cooperation between the experts of adult education and the librarians are necessary.

In the Berlin Conference of Public Libraries Workshop (2003), the cooperation with other organisations was recommended:

"Librarianship would bring an impressive net worth to the development of a culture of literacy. Our facilities, our collections, our geographic distribution and our professional commitment would be important assets. Our principal liabilities would be lack of experience and lack of knowledge about literacy training. That suggests a strategy of partnership that would bring the capabilities of libraries to bear in conjunction with other institutions and organisations."(14)

Keeping in touch with adult education organisations and advertising the services are very important for attracting neo and semi-literates to the public libraries.

Conclusion:

Public libraries can contribute to continuing education programmes by developing courses on information literacy skills. Specially to encourage the usage of public libraries by sections of the population who are in need of further assistance, such as disables, and women in rural areas. To fulfil these programmes the cooperation and collaboration with related organizations, which have the same target groups for dissemination of literacy skills, is a crucial factor.

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