Information literacy skills training of staff and students in the Unisa Library: challenges and opportunities

Leanne Brown
University of South Africa Library
PO Box 392, Pretoria, South Africa, 0003.
 E-mail address: brownlt@unisa.ac.za

Mercy Mokgele
University of South Africa
PO Box 392, Pretoria, South Africa, 0003. (Polokwane Branch Library)
E-mail address: mokgemm@unisa.ac.za

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 ABSTRACT

Information literacy skills training has, especially over the last decade, become a core function of academic libraries and librarians throughout the world. The growing number of expensive electronic information sources that libraries subscribe to makes it essential for them to justify this expense by ensuring that their users are effectively trained in how to use the databases. The University of South Africa, as a large distance education institution, has a significant amount of remotely situated students, which makes proper information literacy skills training even more important, since this then empowers them to use the library's resources wherever they are.

The University of South Africa (Unisa) Library has its main campus in Muckleneuk, Pretoria. Over the past decade or more, information literacy skills training has been a core function of this library, and has proved to be very successful. The aim of this paper is to give an overview of the different types of training conducted by the Unisa Library, both for staff and students, looking specifically at how (training methods, format of material etc), for whom (target groups) and by whom (trainers/presenters) the various types of training are conducted, and the frequency of the different types of training.

Training of this kind, particularly since it usually involves large groups of staff and/or students, obviously presents Unisa's librarians with many challenges as well as opportunities. Among the challenges are the following:

- *Staff perceptions and attitudes ie in terms of library staff*
- *Inadequate resources for training large groups*
- *Large numbers of remote students- online training material is not yet fully formulated and implemented*
- *The more disadvantaged clients usually do not have access to computers at home or work- this detracts from the long-term success of training*
- *Cultural diversity*
- *Differing levels of computer and information literacy*
- *Branch libraries have been traditionally disadvantaged in terms of resources, staff and training opportunities*

On the positive side, some of the opportunities for information literacy skills training at the Unisa Library are as follows:

- *Training leads to more self-sufficient and empowered clients*
- *The library's training venue at its main campus in Pretoria, the Electronic Learning Centre, was revamped in 2006, which means that it now has better resources and equipment with which to conduct training*
- *There is a great opportunity to develop and motivate staff to become active participants in information literacy skills training*
- *More involvement of the branches in the training of library users will empower them and enable them to market themselves better to their clients.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Information literacy: what is it?

As a concept, information literacy has, according to Albitz (2007: 97), been around for the last 25 years or so, and is "…a way to describe how one manages the exponential increase in information…..in this age of computerized access". It is important for users to know how to handle the wealth of information available to them, so as to be able to find and use the most relevant information in the best way.

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) defines information literacy in the following way: "Information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" (Albitz, 2007: 98-99).

Information literacy can be viewed as "…the basis for lifelong learning…" (Albitz, 2007: 99). The ultimate goal of information literacy skills training is that of lifelong learning, and to equip students and staff with the skills to enable them to be active participants in society.

According to Bruce (2003:4), information literacy is:

- The ability to access, evaluate, organize and use information in order to learn, problem solve, make decisions – in formal and informal learning contexts, at work, at home and in educational settings.
- A key characteristic of the lifelong learner – strongly connected with critical and reflective thinking.

Another author, Breivik (2000), in Bruce (2003: 41) asserts that information literacy (is not) "… teaching a set of skills but rather a process that should transform both learning and the culture of communities for the better". Thus, it is synonymous with lifelong learning.

According to de Jager and Nassimbeni (2003: 108), the ACRL, through their information literacy standards, defines an information literate person as one who" recognizes a need for information; accesses needed information effectively and efficiently; evaluates information and its sources critically; incorporates selected information into his/her knowledge base; uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose; understands economic, legal and social issues; uses information ethically and legally; and recognizes that lifelong learning and participative citizenship require information literacy". This supports the notion that information literacy is a key issue to students who are serious with their studies and want to access useful information using diverse information sources in the library.

The abovementioned authors add that "…the desired outcome of all bibliographic instruction and user training is the information literate user and lifelong learner" (de Jager and Nassimbeni, 2003: 109). They add that the concept of information literacy "…encompasses both lower and higher order skills…" (de Jager and Nassimbeni, 2003: 110). There are 3 basic steps in terms of the acquisition of information literacy skills: orientation, interaction and internalisation. (de Jager and Nassimbeni, 2003: 110). Orientation involves users familiarising themselves with the information sources available to them, and defining their specific information needs, while interaction suggests that information-seekers make active use of the various information sources and refine their information needs as they go along, retrieving the most relevant material and analysing the information contained in it. The last stage, internalisation, indicates that they finally absorb the information obtained, and apply it usefully to a given situation. At the end of these three stages, true information literacy should have been achieved.

2. Characteristics of the distance education environment

The Unisa Library is a distance education academic library, and as such is quite different to a residential or contact university. Students are situated all over the country and also abroad- study by correspondence makes this possible. The fact that many of our students are not able to personally visit the university and its library, because they are too far away, means that our websites and electronic resources are

even more important- they are to a large extent the only real contact that a student has with the library.

The challenge for information literacy instruction or training in a distance education environment lies in the fact that an information literacy programme must essentially be a result of collaboration between academics (faculty) and librarians. According to Buck et al (2006: 65), "…it can be especially difficult to form collaborative relationships in the absence of a physical campus". Unisa has 2 main campuses (Muckleneuk and Florida) and several branches or regional centres throughout the country. This makes it a challenging task to establish and maintain a successful information literacy programme.

Buck et al (2006: 65) add that the disadvantage with a distance education environment is that "…distance education faculty and students are often difficult to reach and subsequently not aware of available library services". This makes it even more important for librarians to market themselves and their services, especially by means of the Web. The difficulties experienced by librarians in a distance education environment are in terms of "…reaching members of the distance learning faculty, combined with the unresponsiveness of many of these individuals…." (Buck et al, 2006: 69). A distance education environment is a unique one, and as such, presents librarians and other information literacy trainers with unique challenges.

3. Academic libraries in South Africa

A common feature of all academic libraries in distance education institutions is their responsibility "..to support the information needs of distance learners" (Buck et al, 2006: 65). This gives information literacy skills training a vital role to play in achieving this objective.

Information literacy or instructional librarians in academic libraries in South Africa are faced with a unique situation. The South African social, economic and political situation, both past and present, means that "…all students have not had equal prior access and exposure to educational resources…" (de Jager and Nassimbeni, 2003: 108). Therefore, any information literacy programme in a South African academic library, such as that of Unisa, must take into account the information/educational background of the students being trained, and must adapt it accordingly. It is important for information literacy teachers in South Africa to remember that "students bring to higher education a set of previous experiences, beliefs and disciplinary traditions that may either hinder or enhance their learning…" (de Jager and Nassimbeni, 2003: 108). This is one of the main challenges for information literacy training in South African universities and related academic institutions.

4. Information literacy skills training in the Unisa Library

4.1 Student training

The Unisa Library staff train students to become more self-sufficient, in order that they can retrieve relevant information on their own, using the resources in the library.
Information literacy training is chiefly intended to develop library clients, be they students or staff, so that they can become confident and knowledgeable information resource users.

Through the process of constructive alignment, according to Biggs (1999) in Bruce (2003: 42), learning activities should require students to engage in a process that leads to them achieving the desired learning objectives.
The main objective of students coming to the Unisa Library is to be able to access online and print-based information. This objective can therefore be achieved through information literacy training because in this, among other things, students are involved in the practical activity of physically retrieving information sources from the shelves. They are also sometimes rewarded by being employed in the library when they have fully understood the library's processes.

As students progress in their studies, they need more than a book on the shelf, and can therefore apply the knowledge acquired through information literacy training to do advanced online searches in order to acquire articles or books. They should then be able to conduct advanced searches using phrases or keywords from their research topic. Without information literacy, however, one cannot engage oneself in such activities.

The databases which the Unisa Library subscribes to are upgraded and changed on a regular basis, and therefore the user needs to have sufficient knowledge in using such sources, in order to be able to retrieve useful and relevant information.

The Client Services division of the Unisa Library is responsible for training students and staff in how to use the library's information resources. Information literacy training is the core business of the library. The Client Development subdivision works as a team, together with other trainers and volunteers in the library. The co-ordinators of training courses form part of the Steering Committee for Client Education, which meets on a monthly basis to discuss important training issues. The head of the Client Development subdivision chairs these meetings and co-ordinates the activities decided on by this committee. This committee also designs and upgrades courses to suit the changing needs of clients.

Training of students and staff is conducted in the Electronic Learning Centre of the library, which is a training venue equipped with thirty computers which were funded by a generous donation from the Goldfields Foundation in 1997, and then upgraded in 2006, following a second donation from the same corporation .

As previously mentioned, Unisa is a distance education institution, but these days it has many young students who use the library on a daily basis. These students need to obtain skills in how to use information resources and databases in order to access

relevant information. Most of these students come from rural areas, and even those who are from urban areas do not have the necessary knowledge to use computers. The average age group of these students is 17-24 years for undergraduates and 24 years and above for postgraduates.

4.1.1 Training programmes offered to students

Students are initially taken through the library for orientation, in order for them to be shown the most important areas in the library, and so that they will remember where to go once the training programme starts. Most of our students are seeing a library and touching a computer for the first time in their lives. They struggle with the distance education system of Unisa and with finding information - therefore the training assists them in adjusting smoothly to the university's system and usage of the library in general. English language is also a problem for most of them, because they come from rural schools where English was just one of their subjects, and therefore they are not as eloquent as students from urban schools.

It is often quite an effort to conduct these training sessions because the trainer has to (figuratively) hold students by the hand in order to show them how to use a mouse and keyboard.

Librarians have a difficult time training first-year students in particular, because these students cannot use a computer at all. Therefore, the allocated training time is often inadequate due to the delays caused by showing them how to use a mouse and keyboard.
In view of this, therefore, the library presents library skills training, which consists of two separate units that in the end form a single unit, namely: Basic Library Skills and Advanced Library Skills. These units can be attended separately, although they directly follow one another. Students have to first book for the Basic Skills course and can then attend the Advanced Library Skills course.

The **Basic Library Skills** course teaches students how to find their way around the Unisa Library. This course is aimed at new undergraduates and postgraduates, and equips them with the knowledge of how to effectively use the library and its resources. The **Advanced Library Skills** course then teaches students how to become knowledgeable in the use of relevant additional information and reference sources in the library.

After these two courses, students then have to attend hands-on training in the use of electronic resources. This training is conducted in the Gold Fields Electronic Learning Centre which was previously mentioned. This Electronic Learning Centre has new, upmarket equipment, including thirty-one new computers, two printers, an overhead projector and a large screen.

Following this, students are taken through a basic computer skills course, namely **Computer Mouse and Keyboard Skills**. This training course is aimed at students who wish to acquire basic mouse and keyboard skills. It prepares them for other, more advanced training courses such as the **OASIS Library Catalogue** and **Internet** training. These courses last for approximately 2 hours each.

Using the Internet is the first unit of the Internet training package for students - there are two separate units. This training is aimed at new users of the Internet, and covers basic Internet concepts and terminology such as the World Wide Web, protocols, browsers and URLs. The pre-requisite for this course is prior attendance of basic computer skills training and the Computer Mouse and Keyboard Skills. This course lasts for approximately 1hour and 30 minutes.

Searching the Web is aimed at the more advanced user of the Internet, and covers the planning and conducting of a search, using of search tools, and the evaluation, saving and downloading of search results. Prior attendance of Using the Internet is a pre-requisite for this course.

In addition, postgraduate students from Honours to Masters and Doctoral level receive training each year in the use of generic and subject-specific databases that the library subscribes to. For example, Psychology Honours students are given training in the use of the Oasis Library Catalogue, Psychology-related databases, and the Internet in general- this is done twice a year and the subject librarian concerned is responsible for this training. Students in other subject fields such as Information Science, Nursing (Health Studies), Environmental Education and Business Leadership, to mention a few, are also trained by subject librarians and other library staff at different times during the academic year.

4.1.2 Outcomes of student training courses

The objectives of each course differ, but the underlying purpose of all of them is to equip clients with vital information literacy skills. They are expected to be able to use the information resources and the library effectively, after completion of the abovementioned courses.

4.2 Staff training

The Client Services Division of the Unisa Library is also responsible for the provision of information literacy skills training to Unisa staff in both academic and administrative departments throughout the university. As with the student training, the Client Development subdivision within Client Services co-ordinates training courses for this target group.

The main objective of staff training in the Unisa Library is to equip employees of the university with the necessary skills and knowledge to enable them to use the library's information resources effectively, but also, and more importantly, to become information literate and to engage in lifelong learning. As staff members of the institution, this information literacy training also offers employees the opportunity to develop themselves personally and professional, by gaining new and valuable skills. The training courses provided to Unisa staff, as with those of students, assists them to become self-sufficient information seekers, something which is extremely important in a distance education environment such as that of Unisa.

Staff members are a unique group in that, unlike students (especially new undergraduates and postgraduates), most staff are already computer literate when they

come to attend the library's training courses, and often have a basic knowledge of how a library works. This means that this group of people do not need to go through the library orientation, basic and advanced library skills, and computer mouse and keyboard training courses which are offered to students. Obviously this makes the trainer's role a slightly easier one when training staff members, as opposed to students.

Training courses presented to Unisa staff are conducted in the Electronic Learning Centre in the library, and all these courses are advertised in advance via the university's e-mail system and intranet. The name of the training course, plus a brief description of the course's content and outcomes, is provided in these advertisements. Interested staff members can then book for these courses by means of the online booking system which is available on the library's website- this booking system is also used by students to book for training courses. With all these courses, a maximum of 30 trainees can be accommodated, since the Electronic Learning Centre has 30 workstations, excluding that belonging to the trainer. Staff training is presented by subject librarians and other library staff members who are involved in training, and for each training course, there are a number of volunteers who assist the trainer for the duration of the course.

4.2.1 Training courses offered to staff members

The following courses are presented to Unisa staff on a regular basis:

- ➢ **Oasis Library Catalogue**: This course has the objective of teaching staff how to effectively use the library's in-house catalogue to retrieve relevant information sources (books, theses or dissertations, audiovisual material and periodicals) that the library has in stock. The training session is a computer-based and hands-on course which covers the different types of searches eg. title, author, keyword etc., as well as teaching trainees how to save their search results and print, email or download them. Users are also shown added features such as viewing their loan records and requesting books and articles via the catalogue, among other things. The course lasts for approximately 2 hours, and is currently co-ordinated and presented by a subject librarian, with the assistance of one or two helpers. It takes place on a twice-monthly basis for most of the academic year.

- ➢ **Sabinet Online Reference databases**: This training course teaches staff members how to effectively use various databases through a common user interface. These databases are unique, in that their origin and content is mostly South African, which makes these information resources very relevant and valuable to researchers working in a South African environment. The databases are both bibliographic and full-text, and cover a wide range of subject areas and a variety of formats. The training session is a computer-based, hands-on course in which trainees are given practical examples to do using various databases available via the Sabinet Online Reference system. This course lasts for

approximately 2 hours, and is presented on a monthly basis by a subject librarian and two helpers.

➢ **Subject databases**: The Unisa Library subscribes to many different databases, and, in order to ensure that these databases are optimally used by staff members, awareness of these information resources is created and enhanced by means of subject database training. The objective of these training courses is obviously to equip trainees with the skills to effectively use various databases in their chosen field of research or study, and to become self-sufficient information seekers. Subject librarians from the Client Services Division are responsible for co-ordinating and presenting subject database training in their specific subject areas, and several such training sessions are scheduled throughout the year, with the idea being to cover all possible subject areas applicable to research and teaching at Unisa.

➢ **Internet**: Training is also offered to staff members in the effective use of the Internet for research purposes. There is obviously a wealth of information available to users on the Internet, and the objective behind Internet training courses for staff is to equip them with the skills to retrieve relevant information from this vast source – information overload is otherwise the logical result, and this causes confusion and leads to either too much information being retrieved, or to that information not being relevant. Currently, Internet training for staff is presented by a library staff member (not a subject librarian), who is assisted by volunteers. Subject librarians sometimes also present Internet training to staff or students in their particular areas of responsibility. The training course lasts for approximately 2 hours, and is also presented on a monthly basis or as required.

➢ **Ad hoc training for library staff**: As new databases or other products are introduced or subscribed to by the library, training sessions for library staff members are scheduled, in order to train them in their effective use. The affected staff members will then be responsible for training their users in how to use the database or other information resource.

4.2.2   Outcomes of staff training courses

The objectives of all the abovementioned training courses which are presented to Unisa staff are similar to those mentioned with regard to student training. In other words, the aim of these courses is to equip users with information literacy skills and enable them to make optimal use of the library's various information resources.

5.   CHALLENGES

The challenges that information literacy skills trainers in the Unisa Library face today can be summed up as follows:

- *Staff perceptions and attitudes*: Many librarians, especially in the Client Services Division, where training is one of subject librarians' key performance areas, are unwilling to, or lack the necessary skills to train students and staff. Librarians are not trained as teachers or trainers, and although many are happy to do one-on-one training of clients, standing before an audience is a problem for them. This ultimately means that there is a small pool of willing and able trainers and helpers in the library, and with the increasing number of students and staff visiting the library and wanting to be trained, a lot of pressure is placed on the existing trainers.
- *Inadequate resources for training large groups*: As previously mentioned, the Unisa Library, especially the main one which is located on the Muckleneuk Campus in Pretoria, has over the past few years witnessed an ever-increasing number of students, particularly undergraduates, coming into the library to study and use its resources. This has also created an increased demand for training of these large groups of library users. Resources in terms of staff who are available and willing to train these groups, as already mentioned, is limited, and other resources such as physical equipment (computers, seating etc) are also not sufficient to cater for groups larger than 30 at a time. Ultimately, this means that some students will lose out in terms of much-needed information literacy skills training, which is a very unfortunate situation.
- *Remote students and inadequate online training material*: Being a distance education institution, Unisa has many students (and sometimes staff) who are living far away from the main campus and its library in Pretoria, and are therefore unable to personally visit the library and to participate in the training courses offered during the year. This makes the availability of comprehensive and user-friendly online training material very important, as this is the only way in which these remotely situated users can benefit from any form of training. At present, although there are some online training tutorials or manuals available to Unisa staff and students, they are by no means adequate to cover all databases and subject areas- a lot of work still needs to be done in this regard.
- *Disadvantaged clients with no access to computers*: Many of our students at Unisa come from disadvantaged backgrounds and do not have access to computers at home- the only time they can use a computer is therefore when they come to the library. The long-term success of training depends to a large extent on the trainees' ability to practice what they have learnt in the training course, and if this is not possible, the skills they have gained will be lost after a short period of time.
- *Cultural diversity of users*: Unisa students and staff come from a wide variety of cultures and backgrounds. The majority of students visiting the library have English as a second (or even third) language, and because training courses are currently only presented in English, many trainees find it difficult to fully understand what the trainer is trying to teach them. This makes it essential for

trainers to adjust the pace of their training courses in line with the cultural profile of the training group in each case.

- *Differing levels of computer and information literacy*: Although prerequisites are usually set for most training courses offered in the library, trainers are often faced with a situation in which not all of the trainees are on the same level in terms of computer skills and information literacy. This means that the trainer must allow the less advanced users to catch up with the others before proceeding with the next step, and this can sometimes be frustrating for the trainer and the more advanced trainees in the group.
- *Branch libraries' disadvantaged situation*: As previously mentioned, Unisa has various branches or regional centres throughout the country. These branches and their libraries have traditionally been disadvantaged in terms of limited resources and a lack of training opportunities. Their remoteness means that they are often cut off from the main campus library and the training which takes place there.

6. OPPORTUNITIES

On the positive side, however, there are several opportunities available to information literacy skills instructors in the Unisa Library, and these can be summed up as follows:

- *Self-sufficient and empowered library users:* The long-term objective and outcome of any information literacy training is the creation of users who are self-sufficient and empowered, thus being able to retrieve relevant information from the library's information resources, and to successfully apply it to a given situation. Trainers have the opportunity, therefore, through their training courses, to facilitate and encourage trainees to become self-sufficient.
- *Availability of a high quality training centre:* As previously mentioned, the Unisa Library has the Electronic Learning Centre as its training venue, and this centre was upgraded in 2006. Due to this upgrading, the ELC now has better resources and equipment with which to conduct training courses, and this presents trainers with a valuable opportunity to train clients on a regular basis in a conducive environment.
- *Motivating staff to participate in training:* Having a state-of-the-art training venue such as the Electronic Learning Centre means that there is no time like the present to encourage staff members in the library to become involved in one way or another with the core business of information literacy training. The more trainers and volunteers we have at our disposal for conducting training courses, the better and more frequent training can be.
- *Branch library involvement:* The Client Development subdivision in the Unisa Library is currently busy drafting an information literacy programme plan, and this will include the roll-out of training to the branches throughout the country. By ensuring that staff who work at the various branches are effectively trained, they can in turn train their clients and provide a better service to them. The adequate provision of online

training material will also enable the branches to benefit from training courses.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has given a detailed account of information literacy training in the Unisa Library, and should therefore provide the reader with a good understanding of what is being done at present in this regard. Despite the obvious challenges faced by our information literacy trainers, there are also important opportunities for improving on what we currently offer our clients. There can also be no doubt that some measure of success has so far been achieved in terms of what the Unisa Library offers its students and staff in terms of training, and we are slowly but surely creating self-sufficient and information literate users who can make meaningful contributions to society.

The following recommendations can be made to improve information literacy training in the Unisa Library:

- More library staff need to become involved in training courses, so that ultimately more users can be trained.
- A clear-cut information literacy programme plan needs to be put in place, so that all stakeholders are aware of the importance of information literacy training, and are guided by this plan.
- Librarians involved in training must collaborate with academic staff on a regular basis, in order not only to effectively market information literacy training, but also to ensure that information literacy is ultimately integrated into the curricula of all academic programmes at Unisa- this is the only way to achieve the objective of creating as many information literate individuals as possible.
- The availability of online training material across all subject areas and disciplines should be ensured as soon as possible, especially when considering the distance education environment in which Unisa operates.

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