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**REFLEXIONS ON THE LIBRARY USER EDUCATION  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST**

**BY**

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**ABSTRACT**

The library's role in the academic life of the University is evident in the long association of scholarship with the use of the books and other library materials. The library plays another role by encouraging students to take the initiative and do independent work. The acquisition of knowledge of how to find information or locate any desired document for one's self is an educational experience whose value extends beyond the walls of the University. As a result of this need, the University of Cape Coast Library organises user education programmes as part of the general orientation activities organised to introduce students to the new life in the universities. This paper discusses the library user education programme at the University of Cape Coast, with the major problems highlighted and some suggestions may for improving the programme put forward.

**INTRODUCTION**

The University of Cape Coast was established by the Ghana government in October 1992 as a university college and was formally inaugurated in December of the same year. It was placed in a "special relationship" with the University of Ghana, Legon. Courses taught by the University College of Cape Coast had to be approved by the University of Ghana, which also awarded its degrees, certificates and diplomas to the students of the University College.

The government recognition of the role of science in national development led to a change of the name of the institution to the University College of Science Education. In 1964, the University College of Cape Coast was thus assigned the unique role of training graduate teachers in Arts and Sciences for the country's Secondary Schools, Teacher Training Colleges, Technical Institutions and Polytechnics

### THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST LIBRARY

The College Library started in the present Geography Departmental Library with 650 books inherited from the erstwhile Kumasi College of Arts and Education. These formed the nucleus of the library collection and were mainly books in Arts and the humanities since the science books were found unsuitable for undergraduate work

During the formative years the College enjoyed special financial support from the Government's consolidated fund so it was able to develop the library collection at an accelerated pace. Consequently, between 1965 and 1970 over 1,000 titles covering all disciplines in the University were accessioned every month.

Special collections included International and National Bibliographies and Index. To cater for the needs of African Studies, a singular requirement for a degree award in all Ghanaian Universities, the University Library developed a special collection in that field. This was in addition to the African Section, which was housed in an annexe built on top of University Press.

To complement the inadequate space in the Library the Science collections of over 60,000 volumes had to be moved away in 1967 to occupy a wing of the Faculty of Science building. Another room was improvised as a Science Library for the Faculty of Education. Apart from published material, the Education Library houses a collection of undergraduate and post-graduate student Long Essays in Education which serve as a major primary source of materials in the field of Education. Similarly, the Faculty of Social Sciences and indeed all departments had to establish small libraries /reading rooms in the limited space available to them; and all the halls have libraries.

The library is considered one of the most important sections of the University. It serves as the heart of the institution; without it the University cannot function properly. Apart from the general function of conservation of materials or library resources, the library contributes to the university education in many other ways. Besides its role in the academic life of the institution, which is evident in the long association of scholarship with the use of books and other library materials, the library plays another role by encouraging students to take the initiative and do independent work. This is done through its user education programme.

A sizeable number of students enter universities without proper knowledge of the use of libraries. Students come to the university with different backgrounds,

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abilities and motivation. Not only are they bewildered by the sheer size of the university library collection, but also they are usually at a loss as to how to locate materials in the library. The acquisition of knowledge of how to find information or to locate any desired document for one's self is an educational experience whose value extends beyond the walls of the university. As a result of this need, the University of Cape Coast Library organizes a user education programme as part of the general orientation activities organized to introduce students to the new life the university.

The main aim of a university library according to Fjallebrøft & Malley (1983), is "to contribute to the realization of the aims of the university with regard to teaching, learning and research by acquisition of print and non-print materials necessary to cover the present day and future information needs"

Students should be able to use the library effectively, comfortably and perhaps even pleasurably. It has however been observed that most of them fumble when in the library seeking information, and thus they spend a lot of time looking for needed information. They sometimes find little or no information at all. This discourages some students from using the library and some even have negative ideas about the library. For example, they do not see the library as a place for them. This therefore affects their academic performance.

### **WHAT IS USER EDUCATION**

User Education has been defined "as various programmes of instruction, education and exploration provided by libraries to users to enable them to make more effective, efficient and independent use of the information sources, resources and services to which these libraries provide access. (Fleming, 1990).

Although they may vary in extent of coverage and methods of implementation, user education programmes generally have two main components: library orientation and library instruction.

Library orientation creates and awareness of the library and its services indicating, what is available, where things can be found and explaining conditions relating to use such as hours of opening, membership and loan periods.

Library instruction is concerned with enabling users to obtain information required for a specific purpose by making full use of the resources and materials available in the library (Fjallabrant, 1984). This is often referred to as Bibliographic Instruction (BI).

Throughout Ghana, user education services have been developed in libraries serving institutions of higher, or tertiary education. These readers of user education programme have been based on the belief that "society consciously or unconsciously considers the graduate either as the possessor of knowledge or as the one who knows where to find it" (Fjallabrant 1984) and knows that competence in locating and handling information involves the efficient use of libraries.

#### **USER EDUCATION AT UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST**

The University of Cape Coast Library organizes user education programmes as part of the general orientation activities put in place to introduce students to the new life in the university.

The aim of such programme organized by the librarian and his senior staff is to introduce students to the university library or to improve the students' competence in the use of library facilities like catalogues, periodical guides, subject indexes and other basic reference and bibliographical guides.

Most students who come to the university do not know that they should find information for themselves, study independently and need not learn just by using one textbook or the lecture notes. In addition to that, most students study and prepare assignments together, in other words, learning is like a collective process. Those are deterrents preventing the students from using the library as a source of information. Most students come to the library either to use the reading room for books in the reserve collection, or to read their notes. In fact, many end up being in the final years without gaining any training in the acquisition of study skills in the use of the library: thus the need for user education.

Since user education is a necessity in the life of the university community as a whole and students in particular, all students are expected to participate in the programme to ensure the necessary level of knowledge and ability in independent search for information, using the resources available in the library.

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### **USER EDUCATION FOR FRESH STUDENTS**

At the University of Cape Coast, user education for fresh students usually takes place at the beginning of the academic year when all categories of fresh students have accepted their admission and registered. A general programme of orientation is drawn for the university usually by the Deputy-Registrar (Academic) in which provision is made for the library user education programme.

Library orientation is defined here as the introduction of students and faculty to the library, to locate essential areas and resources, basic elements of using of library, and the services provided by librarians. (Alemna 1998).

Orientation at University of Cape Coast is done on faculty basis. This is organized in the form of lectures. At the University of Ghana, all first year students are grouped together for this lecture at the auditorium. At the University of Science and Technology, the students are grouped by faculties for this lecture. The lectures are given by the librarian of the university or any senior member delegated by him. The lectures spell out the history of the libraries as well as the introduction of a few titles of reference sources and indexes for the purpose of awakening students to the wealth of resources beyond what they know in secondary schools; he finally announces the future opportunities to learn more about the library's mode of operation.

The lectures take about two hours followed by a guided tour of the library and also registration at the issue desk. All students have their orientation in the main library. Included in the orientation is a brief explanation of the use of the Library of Congress Classification for arranging materials on the shelves, as well as the arrangement of the catalogues and their purpose as keys to locating materials. They are also made aware of whom to contact and for what. All these are compiled and printed in a library guide, which is given to each student during the orientation.

From previous years' observation, the unfortunate thing about user education in the University of Cape Coast is that only students who register for the first batch of admissions undergo the orientation programme. All those who are admitted later have to find their own way of knowing how to use the library and its resources.

Unfortunately, delays in the university registration process cause students to arrive erratically, which affects monitoring the sizes of groups. Students in the various groups (on hall basis) are taken around the library at the same time by the senior members in the library. As a result, one group does not start logically at the entrance, which can be confusing especially for students who have only experienced a single room school library with a few hundred volumes. Also, as the library is the last stage of registration, students often arrive rather tired. Students' later seeking assistance in areas which were covered during orientation usually say they found the orientation confusing or they were tired or there was too much to remember.

It is always assumed that post-graduate students have used university libraries before although university libraries vary in so many ways. Thus they are not given much attention as compared to undergraduates.

A category of users who are often forgotten in the user education exercise are senior members, in particular newly appointed one. As (Adjei, 1984) rightly pointed out, some of these usually voluntarily make themselves available for the education.

#### **THE INFORMATION RETRIEVAL COUSE AT UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST**

User Education organized for fresh students is usually not well-organised considering the large number of students involved, duration (just an hour or two) and timing of the programme. This does not help the students much especially when they are ready to write their long essays and projects. That is why the information retrieval course was introduced.

The course is now a three-credit course done in the 300 level. It is a compulsory course. The idea is that it is only in this year that the students become serious about information searching; and since they would need the information for their work, the method of information searching should be fresh in their minds as they get ready to write their projects. According to one of the lectures handling the course, it is only in the third year that the students become academically mature and also familiar with the university system.

The one-hour lecture room presentation is a relatively simple instructional programme designed to help students get started on the bibliography for a short

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paper. This course has now been introduced in the University of Department Studies at Tamale.

The course treats three major topics. They are:

1. The library and society
2. Information searching and handling
3. Information retrieval systems

With this course, students are introduced to computers and their application in libraries. The main aim for the students to understand computerized information system and their services and to be able to use such services, under the library's guidance to gain information.

#### **SUGGESTION FOR IMPROVEMENT**

In view of the fact that most students do not know that some facilities like interlibrary loans and microforms even exist in the library, and since the students constitute the greater percentage of the library's patrons, it is recommended that the Readers' Service Section of the library mount periodic user-education services. Students, especially those in their first and second years, can be invited to benefit from such facilities.

Until the course is started in the first year, the first and second year students should be encouraged to use the library extensively. This can be achieved through organized talks by the University Librarian on the rich experience that can be gained by using library materials. An awareness of what is available in the library should be created by the librarian and his staff. There should be book displays of new arrivals at the entrance of the library. This method would attract the attention of the students and sometimes lecturers and enable them become aware of new materials that have been added to the stock.

One must not forget that the time when only the grades a student gets in just the third and final years are what determine his final grade are over. Now the whole institution is being run on semester basis; it is therefore right for the Information Retrieval Course to be started in the first year so that right from the time a student accepts his admission at the university he /she is introduced to the library, what it entails and what he is expected to do.

It is further suggested that short hand-on practical tests can be conducted as often as possible. This is the only way for a student to know how to effectively use the numerous information tools available.

On the other hand, short questionnaires on the programme in general can be given to the students as a form of evaluation. This will give the organizers an idea about what the students are learning and can also help in improving the user education programme by way of adding some other areas or deleting some.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, if efficient and effective use of the University of Cape Coast Library is to be achieved, there will have to be more liaison with lecturers (to overcome the deficiencies in the existing user education programme) and careful planning to integrate them into a continuing process for developing information competence that will enable a life-long learning and effective academic research.

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