

Aligning the American College of Research Libraries Framework with the Information Literacy Knowledge and Skills of Undergraduate Students at the University of Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Information literacy (IL) is central to student success, it provides lifelong skills that can support their academic career. This study aimed to assess the IL skills of undergraduate students at the University of Zambia (UNZA) by applying the American College of Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework. Specific objectives of the paper were to examine how students' IL skills align with the Framework's six Frames and their accompanying knowledge practices and dispositions and to explore the feasibility of adopting the Framework for Information Literacy (IL) instruction at UNZA. An exploratory qualitative methodology was used, with 22 purposively selected participants placed in four focus groups. Discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using NVivo 12. Participants demonstrated some, but not all, knowledge practices and dispositions across the Framework's six concepts. They understood key IL attributes such as assessing source credibility using authority measures, citing sources of information, and interacting frequently with peers. Furthermore, it was clear that participants used the Internet to complete their assignments. Despite being aware of the wealth of information and credible resources in databases, they lacked guidance on how to search and access them. Additionally, they indicated that they had received no IL training and had limited awareness of the librarian's role. Knowing that UNZA students already possess some information literacy skills, it is feasible to build on their existing prior IL knowledge to integrate the Framework concepts into any library instruction.

Keywords: ACRL Framework, information literacy, threshold concepts, focus groups, students, University of Zambia, Africa

1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The College of Research Libraries Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education was developed to address the evolving higher education landscape and align IL instruction to the changing information environment (ACRL, 2016). The Frames in the Framework are designed to determine the information literacy level of the learner and to provide a solid foundation for building information literacy skills by promoting critical thinking and lifelong learning (ACRL, 2016). The Framework is made up of six frames that have accompanying knowledge practices and dispositions. These are: authority is constructed and contextual, information creation as a process, information has value, research as inquiry, scholarship as conversation, and searching as strategic exploration (ACRL, 2016). The Framework has significantly impacted various aspects of learning, assessment, and the teaching of IL skills (Hsieh et al., 2021). It has also served as a guide for developing IL course materials across different subject areas (Fullard, 2017; Hendrigan et al., 2020). Research suggests that students with strong IL skills tend to perform exceptionally well, academically, professionally, and personally (Haffa et al., 2021; Shao & Purpur, 2016; Weber et al., 2019; Yvelson-Shorsher & Bronstein, 2018).

1.1 The Framework and African Academic Institutions

Historically, most African universities have used some form of IL standards, whether home-grown or as an adaptation of existing standards (Dadzie, 2007). The Framework's strength lies in its ability to prompt libraries and campus partners to tailor information literacy concepts to their specific contexts (ACRL, 2016). This makes the Framework well-suited for adoption in African academic institutions. Van't Hof, Sluijs, Asamoah-Hassan, and Ageyen-Gyasi (2010) highlighted that integrating the Framework could also enhance the development of IL courses, however, modifications tailored to African contexts would be necessary. Similarly, Moyo & Mavodza (2016) stated that using the Framework would significantly impact IL instruction in African academic libraries. Successful implementation of the framework can also be achieved by having strong faculty-librarian collaboration (Fullard, 2017).

1.2 Information Literacy in Zambia

In their recent study, Chisanga et al. (2024) discovered that information literacy practices within Zambian university libraries are generally lacking. Consequently,

the students lacked most of the knowledge, practices, and dispositions associated with the Framework. Further, budget constraints to purchase or subscribe to library materials have resulted in inadequate resources. This has therefore left students relying on freely available open-access materials from the Internet (Makando et al. 2017). Studies have shown that students would prefer to search the Internet first regardless of the type of assignment (Saunders et al., 2015). Similarly, another study found that 41.7% of UNZA students who searched for information to write assignments used the Internet. (Makondo et al., 2018). However, the library provides access to electronic resources. Chewe & Chitambo (2018) listed e-books, e-journals, databases, and the institutional repository. Despite their availability, these resources are not often used due to a lack of knowledge and guidance on how to navigate them. Additionally, Agboola and Bamiabove (2011) found that students are often unaware of their existence.

1.3 Study Objectives

The objectives of the study were to find out whether UNZA undergraduate students possess the information literacy knowledge, practices, and dispositions outlined in the Framework and to determine its potential adoption in an African academic institution.

These objectives were based on the following assumptions:

- i) Resources are available to support students in their research.
- ii) Students utilize a variety of information sources to complete their assignments.
- iii) Students possess the skills to select, evaluate, and cite information sources effectively.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted at the University of Zambia, which, according to its 2018-2022 strategic plan, had approximately 13,500 full-time students (University of Zambia, 2017). The investigator conducted this project while on sabbatical and hosted by the Department of Library and Information Studies within the School of Education. The project followed an exploratory qualitative approach using focus groups. According to Krueger and Casey (2015), focus groups are the best method to bring together diverse groups of people in a setting that encourages the sharing of different opinions and ideas. This research method was used to gain preliminary insights into the students' IL knowledge. A purposive sample of participants from the Department of Library and Information Studies was drawn from a computer-generated list and those recruited through the snowball effect from other departments. Eligibility was limited to

full-time undergraduate students, as they were the target group of interest. Participants were placed in focus groups and were organized following Krueger and Casey's recommendation that effective focus group research involves 3 to 4 groups with 7 to 8 participants. This approach fosters an environment conducive to meaningful discussions while also minimizing the risk of data saturation (Krueger and Casey, 2015).

For this study 4 groups were formed with 5 participants in Groups 1, 2, and 3, and 7 participants in Group 4, totaling 22 participants. Group discussions lasted between 45 and 50 minutes, depending on the number of participants and their level of engagement. The discussion questions were prepared in advance and refined with minor adjustments based on feedback from a pilot focus group held on-site to assess their relevance. During discussions, probing and follow-up questions were further added as needed.

A student research assistant was hired to assist with the research by transcribing the recorded discussions verbatim. To aid in understanding, responses were edited for language and grammar while preserving the original meaning. For analysis, the responses were categorized thematically in Nvivo 12.

3. FINDINGS

A total of 22 students (N=22) participated in the study. Their academic year of the study included 1 first-year, 2 second-year, and 2 third-year students, and 17 were in the fourth year of their studies. Student majors varied, with the most prevalent majors being Education and Library Studies. Other majors represented were Economics, Law, and Chemistry. Participants were initially asked to describe their understanding of information literacy (IL). Despite unfamiliarity with the term IL, they identified key IL components like recognising when they needed information, finding it, and using it effectively as reflected in the responses below.

“In my understanding, information literacy is the ability to recognize the right kind of information that is needed in a particular situation.”

“Being able to acquire the information available and able to use it effectively and efficiently.”

“The ability of one knowing how to retrieve, how to organize, and how to use the particular information.”

“IL is all about knowing the information that you have and how to use it and how to apply it. Because you can find that sometimes you have information, but you

do not know how to get it, and you do not know how to use it.”

“The lectures will tell you the specific sites which they think are authoritative for you.”

3.1 Authority is Constructed and Contextual

This concept focuses on the expertise and credibility of information sources (ACRL, 2016). Participants’ strategies for determining the authority of resources fell into three categories: author credentials, type of publication, and faculty guidance.

3.1.1 Author credentials

Participants acknowledged the importance of being familiar with scholars in their field. They understood that information from a well-published author or a reputable journal is more likely to be credible as gleaned from the following participants’ statements:

“Maybe looking at the writers, of the article or the books they have written because if you are researching on a specific topic, you know scholars or people that have written on the same topics.”

“If you want to see how credible an article is you try to use the same scholars and then search them via Google Scholar so that you try to see if they have published other articles on the topic.”

3.1.2 Type of publication

Respondents knew that credible information is found in databases, sample responses included:

“We have got some specific databases which the University of Zambia subscribes to. We can access the information for example in the database Agricola”.

“Databases have very reliable information that is authoritative in nature.”

“I am encouraged to use journals because they are expert researchers, and they have been peer-reviewed so mostly I use journals although sometimes I use books as secondary sources.”

3.1.3 Direction from Instructors

Students relied on their lecturers to direct them to credible sources. However, this unquestioning trust could result in unreliable recommendations if the faculty members have not critically assessed the sources themselves. This was evident from the participant who stated:

3.2 Information Has Value

In this concept, the value of information is defined “as a commodity, as a means of education, as a means to influence, and as a means of negotiating and understanding the world” (ACRL, 2016 p.16). It further states that “the novice learner may struggle to understand the diverse values of information in an environment where “free” information and services are plentiful” (ACRL, 2016 p.16)

All the Participants owned cell phones, and they acknowledged that they accessed the Internet for most of their information. However, there was an illusion that access meant free to copy without acknowledging the source, as illustrated by this statement:

“When writing an assignment using the information on the Internet you sometimes copy and paste exactly without understanding the information”

Students should be able to recognize that the written ideas and efforts put into producing the information they are accessing should be cited and acknowledged (Fullard, 2017). When participants were asked if they thought citing was important, they responded in the affirmative as in the following testimonials:

“I think it is important to cite in that when researching other people’s work, it is important to appreciate the work they have done because basically without them that information is not available.”

“We show our appreciation to them by not only using their work but also by referencing their work and citing them.”

“...you are giving value to use somebody’s knowledge because knowledge is not cheap. Knowledge is expensive so for you to cite someone you are recognising the work that they have done.”

The Internet has also led to a rise in student plagiarism. Most plagiarism cases involve a student presenting someone else’s work and claiming it as their own (Kasler et al., 2020). A study by Mahmoud (2020) found that faculty members attributed plagiarism to students’ lack of knowledge. However, participants in this study

demonstrated an understanding of the penalties of plagiarism as in the following statement:

“...citing is very important of course because if you cannot recognize or acknowledge the author for the information you are cheating. At UNZA plagiarism is considered a “red case” meaning you can be expelled. So, it is important to acknowledge all authors used in your paper.”

Among the common ways of committing plagiarism is not citing or referencing correctly. When asked how they give credit participants, displayed a knowledge of citation styles. One participant indicated that:

“When citing or referencing you can use APA style, or MLA style or Harvard.”

One participant knew about in-text citations as a way of acknowledging authors’ ideas.

“In text citation, you can write according to Banda (2019), she talked about this and that about adult literacy. Sometimes you include the page number.”

Ultimately, every student's goal is to achieve a good grade. Participants recognized that proper citation is crucial for attaining this goal. This is illustrated in the following response by one of the participants:

“By giving credit and using the author’s ideas added with your ideas you are showing the lecturer that you know what you are doing and deserve a good mark.”

3.3 Information Creation as a Process

This concept states that “Information in any format is produced to convey a message and is shared via a selected delivery method” (ACRL, 2016, p.5). As students progress in their academic journey, they encounter various information formats. In their search, they discover that not all formats are equal. Occasionally, faculty may assign specific sources, but more often, students are encouraged to explore unfamiliar or previously unknown sources (Mays, 2016). Although the UNZA library has printed books and journals, students find it frustrating to search for them due to their age or unavailability. Consequently, they turn to free e-books on the Internet, such as those available on Bookboon, a website offering free e-books to students. Students reported never using printed journals from the library because they were

outdated, restricted to a specific area, and could only be accessed on campus. As one participant pointed out:

“When you are given an assignment, you are expected to read a lot of books and have up-to-date information but when you look at the books which are found in the library most of them are outdated.”

3.4 Research as Inquiry

This threshold concept indicates that “Research is iterative and depends upon asking increasingly complex or new questions whose answers, in turn, develop additional questions or lines of inquiry in any field” (ACRL, 2016, p.18). Understanding the question is crucial for finding the right information for an assignment; otherwise, the literature search may yield irrelevant results. Johnson et. al. (2016) states that student searches should spark enough curiosity to encourage them to pursue the correct answer. As one participant noted:

“ In Zambia when you are researching public interest motivation it is a huge problem because not many people have written about it or researched about so you find that it becomes a little bit challenging in the Zambian context so sometimes you may not know who to see or where to go sometimes you do not even know where to start from.”

3.5 Scholarship as Conversation

This concept highlights that no scholar works in isolation; new ideas emerge through interactions and conversations (ACRL, 2016).

It was evident that conversations among students happened frequently. They mentioned that when they receive an assignment, the initial step is to discuss it with their peers. Studies have shown that students who discussed questions with peers increased the likelihood of arriving at a good answer (Tullis & Goldstone, 2020). This is illustrated by the participant who said:

“I think one of the first things we normally do when we are given an assignment is to discuss it with friends. So, you consult how each of us understands the assignment. If we see that we are understanding it the same way then we know we are on the right track.”

One participant described scholarly conversation perfectly when they said that no man was an island, so usually they need to interact together.”

Although conversations happen among students, it appears such conversations did not include librarians. Some participants did not understand the roles of the librarian and rarely contacted them as stated in these responses.

“I think maybe we just do not know the duties the librarians are supposed to be performing, because we just know that they are just there like when we want to borrow a book from the library you just go there, and they get the details.”

“We were advised that you can go to the librarians if we have challenges. I do not know about my friends, but I have never gone to the librarians to ask for help.”

3.6 Searching as Strategic Exploration

According to this concept, “the act of searching often begins with a question that directs the act of finding needed information” (ACRL, 2016 p. 22). Research questions or assignments sometimes determine where to find information. While lecturers expect students to conduct independent searching, they often do not provide guidance on how to find information sources. One participant likened information searching to “panning for gold”, demonstrating that the lack of proper search skills can lead to missing valuable nuggets.

Some participants indicated that they had not received any library instruction or literature search training. Those who attended sessions felt the instruction was too brief to be effective. One participant mentioned they only received a physical tour of the library, with no search training included. Library orientation as described above is insufficient to provide skill sets for conducting effective literature searching.

This is illustrated in one respondent's response:

“I did not get the skill or understand how to go about looking for information. So that kind of orientation was not effective and was not efficient for my learning.”

4. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The knowledge practices and dispositions outlined in the Framework are numerous so not all of them can be present in all learners nor are they necessarily given equal weight. As undergraduate students, the participants are still developing these skills and are considered novice learners (ACRL, 2016). Based on the findings, this study found some elements of the Framework were present in the study group and some cases completely absent.

Participants excelled in understanding the concept that "information has value," demonstrating knowledge of giving credit and proper citation. While one participant admitted to copying from the Internet, most recognized this act as plagiarism. When looking for resources to write their assignments some participants were inclined to look beyond the library to search for information, although most used the internet one participant went into the community to find information. This inquisitive mind is the foundation of “research as inquiry”. Although participants used some form of literature searching when looking for information, their approach was neither systematic nor comprehensive, as they typically relied on a single source, the Internet, and gathered just enough information to complete their assignments. Collaborating and sharing ideas, and resources while writing assignments can be considered a form of scholarly conversation. However, the depth of the conversation at this stage as undergraduates may not always extend fully into rigorous scholarly discussion or the creation of new academic knowledge but by this action, they are unknowingly contributing to their subject knowledge. The element of the framework which appeared to be least implied from participants' responses was “information creation as a process”. While participants recognized formats such as books and journals, they overlooked other valuable formats like newspapers, grey literature, and videos.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The adaptability of the Framework's concepts to the Zambian situation is feasible as students already exhibited some IL skills. Successful implementation would require addressing the many challenges faced by the students and cooperation between the different stakeholders, librarians, library administration, faculty, and UNZA administration. From the study, it is evident that UNZA students are eager to develop their IL skills if given the opportunity and the right environment. Implementing the following recommendations could significantly improve IL at UNZA.

- i) Incorporate the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy into student library instruction, creating specific learning outcomes for each ACRL concept that emphasize the knowledge practices and dispositions.
- ii) Instruct students to use electronic resources effectively through demonstrations and hands-on practice.
- iii) Ensure IL instructions cover UNZA resources (e.g. books and journals) with a strong emphasis on open-access materials.
- iv) Given that students already rely on the Internet for research and information, it would be

beneficial to teach them how to assess the credibility of websites.

- v) Proactively engage with students to clarify librarian roles and functions.

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