



**Promoting Information Equity to Bridge the Information and Digital Divide: the ethical obligation of South African librarians at the University of KwaZulu-Natal Library**

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**Abstract**

*While South African universities remain committed to providing fair and equal information access to diverse populations, information equity and the information rich and poor and digital divide raised ethical concerns for librarians at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Librarians realized that while the democratization of information addressed the inequalities of information access, it did not address equitable access because the information poor did not have the skills to share equitably in the equality of information. To promote information equity, librarians designed innovative programs to ensure fairness in information justice by affecting a service delivery paradigm shift from a one “size fits all” to a “customized services” approach.*

**Introduction**

“It is equally clear that if people lack the skills and background to understand or use the information resources that are available, even the most strictly apportioned distribution of resources is meaningless” (Lievrouw and Farb 2005, p. 528). Unequal and inequitable information distribution, access and use has plagued the African continents for decades and rooted South Africans into two unequal information cultures resulting in an information rich and poor divide. On the one hand South Africa is an information rich country with a developed information service industry providing equal access to information, but on the other hand there exists a third world information poor subculture lacking various literacy skills to share in the equal distribution of information resources. This information inequity created ethical dilemmas for librarians. Mergers with previously “Black” and “White” universities changed the population dynamics at South African universities, extending services to the previously marginalized people.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal ([www.library.ukzn.ac.za](http://www.library.ukzn.ac.za)) library remains committed to providing fair information access to a diverse population but ethically the question of information equity raised moral and ethical conundrums because we realized that equality did not mean equity in access and use. The librarians knew that the “one size fits all service delivery paradigm” was not equitable enough to meet the needs of the information poor because the students lacked the skills to keep abreast with their information rich peers. To fulfill our ethical obligation of information equity, we continued to question the status of our service delivery and correct the injustices of information inequity by affecting innovative service delivery practices to promote information equity.

### **History and Context**

South Africa presents a unique multicultural identity and will always appear to be an enigma to the world because it is a country of extreme disparity. First and third world components co-exist giving it a unique blend of first and third world characteristics. The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) is the largest contact teaching, higher education institution in South Africa. It was constituted on 1 January 2004 as a result of the merger between the University of Natal, a historically white university and the University of Durban-Westville a historically Indian university. The University emerges as the “Premier University of African Scholarship”, marking the end of the apartheid style institution. The Library includes five campus libraries and several branch libraries distributed across two cities and plays an integral part in supporting equal and equitable access to information through its print and electronic resource network.

### **Identifying the Ethical Dilemma**

During daily interaction with our users we realized that although equity and equality were two variables of the information service delivery equation these two concepts did not mean the same thing, simply because the “one size fits all service delivery approach” was not suitable for the previously marginalized populations. We also realized that for many years’ people in power have assumed that all members of a university community are alike and designed core services to meet the needs of people like themselves. When it came down to grassroots level, librarians at UKZN began to feel the tension and knew that something was wrong.

Participant observations enabled us to gather data about the information seeking behavioral patterns of the information and digitally poor students. We felt that even though all services resembled equality and fairness in distribution, the situation did not employ fairness in justice because of the unfair skills distribution. In order to reach consensus and decide on a course of action, we felt morally obligated to correct the imbalances and think of innovative ways to re-invent the service wheel. Information technologies exacerbated the inequity difference, making the information rich richer and the information poor poorer.

### **Taking the Moral and Ethical High Ground**

The morally acceptable thing would be to prepare all users with the skills proportionate to their needs without privileging one user group over the other and without stifling the intellectual development of the information rich. We knew that we were the key stakeholders and had to assume the role of change agents in the ethical decision making process.

Normally code of ethics serve as professional guidelines for ethical decision making in the resolution of ethical dilemmas, but the South African Library profession did not have a professional code. This caused challenges for us because we had no terms of reference to use

to resolve our dilemma. Therefore personal ethics played an integral part and it began to raise ethical concerns about our personal morality. We had to become moral beings and do what was morally right and socially just. Affecting a paradigm shift from “a one size fits all approach” to “a customized services delivery approach” was the morally permissible thing to do.

### **Course of Action: developing literacy skills.**

#### **User Needs Analysis**

Participant observation, pre-and-post test and LIBQUAL surveys gave us excellent response patterns for demographics and information seeking behavioral patterns of the information poor. We began to appreciate the findings of these survey instruments and began using it more in the diversity environment because it gave us an idea of how we could serve the information and digitally poor students better.

#### **Literacy Programs**

We knew that library users required to be literate in various aspects of library and information use, therefore literacy skills and knowledge of the other literacies were important. Whilst literacy refers to the integration of listening, speaking, writing and critical thinking, the other literacies are vitally important in promoting information equity. Based on our findings, we developed a strategy to nurture the various literacy skills so that over time we would normalize the playing fields. Literacy programs served as stepping stones to ensure that the information poor developed the appropriate literacy skills. While some of the literacy programs were standalone programs, others were integrated in the user education sessions.

#### **Academic English Literacy**

Academic English literacy skills are an integral component of the student’s academic performance. We highly recommend that information poor students and students who have used English as a 2<sup>nd</sup> language attend the Writing Place. The Writing Place is a student driven initiative, but is housed in the library. The reason behind its establishment is that when some students arrive at university, they find that the research papers they are asked to write are different from those they are used to at high school and the writing place serves as an effective writing supportive network that helps the students develop the academic English literacy skills.

#### **Library Literacy**

A large proportion of the information and digitally poor users came from black impoverished schools, where in most instances libraries were non-existent. Many black schools did not have classrooms, let alone libraries, and for some this was their first encounter with the collections of an academic library. Literacy programs were customized according to user needs and for some a basic library tour and library exhibition was an excellent starting point to familiarize the users with the library collections, services and facilities.

#### **Computer Literacy**

A large percentage of the information poor lacked basic computer skills and were digitally disadvantaged. We realized this in our online information sessions because we lost some of our digitally challenged users at the first mouse click, putting them into a computer dilemma. This concerned the librarians because information technologies continued to exacerbate the inequity difference. Our aim was to ensure that the students acquired a general understanding of the use of the computer so that they would be able to confidently apply these skills to the

other literacies. We recommended that our novice users take basic computer courses and our slightly advanced users take the International Computer Driving License (ICDL) through the Information Technology Department. The ICDL is an international computer user skill certification program.

### **Information Literacy**

If the student can be taught how to identify an anomaly and use the appropriate skills to share in information equity by searching for information to satisfy this need then we believed that we would have done justice to our users. We viewed information literacy as a key component to prepare students for a life long engagement in the information society. The aim of our information literacy program was to create and foster an interactive and continuous learning environment, so that all users will become self-reliant, and empowered with critical thinking and information literacy skills and use information equitably and appropriately to solve problems and become life long learners. Critical and analytical thinking, search strategy formulation and an awareness of the use of information networks made up the content of this program.

### **Media Literacy**

Media literacy should ideally be taught at schools but given South Africa's apartheid past and the disparity of information resources, a large percentage of the black majority did not have an opportunity to become media literate. Whilst the information rich students enter university with vast media knowledge and use a variety of media formats, many of the information poor students have until recently only used a book and a printed journal article as their main information resource. The aim of the media literacy program was to create a media literate user who is well informed on all types of media, familiar with its characteristics and uses and develops the necessary skills to retrieve information from the different media formats. Media exhibitions and library tours were found to be most effective tools.

### **Online Searching Literacy**

We concluded that knowledge of the other literacy programs helped when students were introduced to the online searching. We were aware of the role that the internet played in the new economies of information thereby introducing a new way of learning. This technological infrastructure demanded the creation of a new "end user". Until very recently in South Africa online searches were predominantly undertaken by librarians. We have however moved from a passive to a proactive approach and encouraged the student led approach. The Research Commons is a new venture funded by the Carnegie Corporation and serves the research needs of the students. It has made it easier for librarians to actively practice the student led approach. Returning postgraduate students were not taught how to search online resources and often showed much anxiety and reluctance. More than reluctance, our observation told us that it is a fear of venturing into the unknown. Our aim was to create proactive and multi skilled "end users", empowered with the necessary online searching skills, to share equitably in the equality of resources. A demonstration of our liaison librarian website was extremely useful for the information poor students because the site was customized and linked to specific subject resource alleviating confusion and frustration.

## **Conclusion**

UKZN librarians remain ethically committed to promoting information equity by constantly assessing the environment for changes and affecting new equity practices. As they ensure that the library continues to be a benchmark for information equity practices in the “African Renaissance”, the librarians are also committed to the words of Pan Africanist leader Kwame Nkurumah (1956) who said in his *Opening Address* at the University of Accra, “we must in the development of our universities bear in mind that once it has been planted in the African soil it must take root amidst African traditions and cultures.”

## **References**

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