A critical review of the association of college and research libraries (ACRL) information literacy framework for higher education in addressing information ethics

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Blessing Chiparausha¹ and Josiline Chigwada²

Library Department, Bindura University of Science Education
Email: bchiparausha@gmail.com¹ and josyphiri@gmail.com²

Abstract

Information literacy skills competencies play an important role in ethical behaviour in the production, access, use and sharing of information. Authors employed qualitative research through the document analysis method whereby they interpreted the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education to derive what information literacy is and the skills and competencies expected to be displayed by an information literate citizen. Six frames outlined by the Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education are analysed vis-à-vis their contribution to the development of individuals’ ethical behaviour in the production, access, use and sharing of information. Authors recommend that the Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education be incorporated in the tertiary education curriculum as the frames address the information ethics dilemma.

Keywords: information ethics, information literacy, Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education

Introduction

The world today is often referred to as an information society because information is playing an important role in human interaction and decision making (Johnston & Webber 2003:335). Considering that information has become that important, a lot of
dilemmas are encountered during its usage, sharing and storage. This calls for the need to pay attention to ethical issues arising as result of the usage, sharing and storage of information. Pieces of legislation, conventions and policies have been put in place as measures attempting to address ethical dilemmas relating to information use. This paper reviews the role played by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) *Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education* in addressing information ethics issues.

**Information Literacy**

Various definitions of information literacy have been coined and this paper presents a few of these definitions. Johnston & Webber (2003:336) define information literacy as:

“The adoption of appropriate information behaviour to obtain, through whatever channel or medium, information well fitted to information needs, together with critical awareness of the importance of wise and ethical use of information in society”.

The American Library Association (ALA) Presidential Committee on Information Literacy (1989:1) is often cited when information literacy is discussed when they said:

“To be information literate, a person must be able to recognise when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information”.

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 2000) went on to define what an information literate student is:

1. Determines the nature and extent of the information needed;
2. Accesses needed information effectively and efficiently;
3. Evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system;
4. Uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose;
5. Understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally.
The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (2013) defined information literacy as “knowing when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner”.

The Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) came up with Australian information literacy standards that focus on an information literate person instead of a student. The standards are similar to what the ACRL provides save to say that they add the following:

1. …recognises that lifelong learning and participative citizenship requires information literacy;
2. …expands, reframes or creates new knowledge by integrating prior knowledge and new understandings individually or as a member of a group (CAUL, 2001).

United Kingdom’s Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL), who developed a model for information literacy and their information literacy framework known as the Seven pillars of information literacy, defined information literacy as ‘ability to synthesise and build upon existing information, contributing to the creation of new knowledge’ (Advisory Committee on Information Literacy, 1999).

Chakravarty (2008:1) defined information Literacy (IL) as “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”.

Belshaw (2009) expressed that information literacy should be considered as a way of thinking rather than a set of skills which, if sustained over time, can become a dispositional habit whereby one seeks on-going improvement and self-discipline in inquiry, research and integration of knowledge from varied sources.

ACRL (2015:3) provided a new definition for information literacy. It states that “Information literacy is the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning.”
Tuominen, Savolainen and Talja (2005) note that the history of information literacy traces back to the 1960s when the issue became topical. The term information literacy was coined by Zurkowski in the 1970s (Johnston & Webber 2003:336). Zurkowski defined information literacy as "an individual’s capacity to use information tools and primary sources to address problems" (Tuominen, Savolainen and Talja, 2005:331)

Information literacy gained prominence in the 1990s following the American Libraries Association’s information literacy model of 1989 (Belshaw 2009; Tuominen, Savolainen and Talja, 2005:331). The model suggested that an information literate individual should be able to:

1. Recognizing a need for information
2. Identifying what information is needed
3. Finding the information
4. Evaluating the information
5. Organizing the information
6. Using the information

Michael Eisenberg and Robert Berkowitz went on to propose the “Big Six Skills” model in 1990; the model describes the information seeking and use stages for the purposes of problem solving (Tuominen, Savolainen and Talja, 2005:331). The Big6 model comprises of six ‘big’ steps that are involved, namely task definition, information seeking strategies, location and access, use of information, synthesis, and evaluation (Chakravarty, 2008).

Several other models have been developed and a few of these are discussed below. In the United Kingdom, the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL), developed an information literacy framework known as the Seven pillars of information literacy as a model for information literacy (Johnston & Webber 2003:340).

A lot of information is available for people to use. In fact, the information is said to have overwhelmed the users resulting in what David Shenk termed the ‘Data Smog’. Information literacy comes in as a solution to Data Smog as it enables people to cope
through knowing when information is needed and where to locate it effectively and efficiently (Chakravarty, 2008).

James Herring proposed the PLUS Information Skills Model whereby PLUS is an acronym for the four main parts of the model as shown below (Chakravarty, 2008):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full name</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Identifying the purpose of an information need or assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Finding information sources addressing the purpose for which the information is required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U</td>
<td>Use</td>
<td>Selecting required information and presenting it to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>Self-evaluation</td>
<td>Self-evaluation when applying information on a given assignment and referring to that in future</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) launched the *Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education* in January 2015 to supersede the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* of 2000 (ACRL 2015). Further details about the *Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education* will be presented in subsequent sections of this paper.

A lot has taken place with regards to information literacy; Tuominen, Savolainen and Talja (2005:332) suggest that library professional put a lot of effort in the development of information literacy as a way of strengthening their professional role in society but at the same time taking responsibility over an area that education has overlooked.

**Information Ethics**

It is important to define ethics before attempting to define information ethics. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2015) defined ethics as “the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group”. Ethics belongs to that branch of philosophy concerned with human conduct specifically the behaviour of individuals in society; they define how a moral person should behave (Kaddu 2007).

Ess (2007:97) described information ethics as all of the ethical issues related to the production, storage, access, and dissemination of information. This implies that
whether one is writing a book or an assignment, keeping as information source (e.g. a disk, book, etc.) for personal or public access, information ethics come to play. As Kaddu (2007) explains, information ethics provide a critical framework for considering moral issues relating to information creation, collection, recording, distribution, processing, etc. with greater attention being paid to ownership and copyright in a digital environment. For librarians, information ethics is concerned about censorship, privacy, access to information, balance in collection development, copyright, fair use, codes of ethics, and problem patrons.

The Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education

The precursor to the Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education were ACRL Standards, and like any other set of standards set out by the American Library Association (ALA), the standards would undergo review (ACRL 2015). Instead being reviewed after five years, ACRL (2015) report that it was after ten years that a task force was set up in 2012 to review the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education of 2000. Between 2012 and 2014 the task force did some work to review the Standards leading to the Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education that was formally adopted by ACRL in January 2015.

As the ACRL reports (2015), the Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education differs from the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education in that it allows for flexibility in implementation. The Framework also took a step further to consider the learner as a producer of information unlike the Standards which primarily considered learners as consumers of information.

Whereas Standards tended to be more isolated from one another and could be taught and applied independently, Frames are intertwined (ACRL 2000; 2015). Furthermore, it was recommended that librarians train learner on the Standards one at a time in a rather sequential fashion, Frames are different in that they are not arranged in order of sequence or importance but in alphabetical; the Frames are also closely related.

The rapidly changing higher education environment showed that students play a pivotal role in the creation of new knowledge, in understanding the contours and the changing dynamics of the world, and in using information, data, and scholarship ethically (ACRL, 2015). This makes the ethical use of information by students,
teaching staff and librarians even more important. The teaching faculty have a greater responsibility in designing the curriculum and assignments that foster enhanced engagement with the core ideas about information and scholarship within their disciplines. Librarians have a greater responsibility “in identifying the core ideas within their own knowledge domain that can extend learning for students, in creating a new cohesive curriculum for information literacy, and in collaborating more extensively with faculty” (ACRL, 2015:2).

The *Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education* comprises of six frames which are organised as follows:

1. Authority is constructed and contextual
2. Information creation as a process
3. Information has value
4. Research as inquiry
5. Scholarship as conversation
6. Searching as strategic exploration

**Aim of the study**

The objective of the research was to answer the following questions:

1. What are the six frames of the *ACRL Framework*?
2. How does the *ACRL Framework* address information ethics?

**Methods and Procedures**

Document analysis was done whereby the *ACRL Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education* was reviewed. Literature about information literacy and information ethics was considered in the formulation of the background to the study and for purposes of content analysis. Mogalakwe (2006) described documentary methods as the analysis of documents that contain information about the phenomenon one wishes to study. Mogalakwe (2006) went further to define a document as a written text and documents are produced by individuals or groups in the course of their everyday practices for their own immediate practical needs. Ahmed (2010), McCulloch (2004)
and Mogalakwe (2006) are in favour of this research method because it is good and more cost effective than social surveys, in-depth interview or participant observation.

**Results and Discussion**

**Frame 1: Authority Is Constructed and Contextual (ACRL 2015:5)**

The frame calls for the acknowledgement of the fact that information reflects on authorship, expertise and credibility; therefore, information should be evaluated accordingly. Paying attention to the credibility of an information source was also emphasised by ACRL in the Standards (ACRL 2000), and Mason (1986). It is therefore important that when someone is using information, they check on the credibility of the author and the information itself; some information lacks credibility and this calls for the user to be cautious when using information.

Similarly, when an individual is producing information, they must know that their credibility is at stake; they must ensure that they generate information that would help build their credibility. This is particularly important because various communities tend to recognize authority differently. The frame is important in information ethics in that it calls for principled production of information, which if adhered to, helps in building the reputation of scholars. In addition, consumers of information would benefit by getting access to reputable sources of information but at the same time taking cognisance of the expertise applied.

**Frame 3: Information Has Value (ACRL 2015:8)**

The keyword here is value; information can be viewed a commodity implying that there are times when one must pay to get it. This is why some libraries charge a membership fee, television channels require a subscription fee and books and newspapers are sold. The bottom line here is that we must value those who created information that we use because they spent some time and resources to make the information available to us.

Besides the monetary value that information carries, using information that someone else produced calls for proper referencing and citation. Referencing and citing sources
used in coming up with one’s own piece of information has become an academic practice which, if practiced, is a sign of moral or ethical conduct. To reinforce the importance of valuing information generated by other, in many disciplines of research, their codes of conduct stipulate that proper referencing and citation be done as part of ethical conduct; a good example is the American Psychological Association (APA) who have the APA referencing style for that purpose (2001:3).

Considering the high value placed on information, there is need to balance privacy and the commodification of personal information (ACRL 2015). Individuals can benefit through the production and selling of information but some of the information could not be good for public consumption as it would harm other people’s character for instance. A typical example that comes to mind is Julian Assange’s WikiLeaks who published classified information from government computers (Karhula 2011).

Even though information is a valuable commodity, the ACRL Framework stresses the importance of ethical conduct when one has a competitive advantage over other when accessing information. Frame 3 points out that better access to information compared to others should not be an opportunity to marginalise others or take advantage of them.

**Frame 4: Research as Inquiry** (ACRL 2015:9)

Frame 4 underscores the importance of ethical behaviour when carrying out research. The frame reiterates that research must be carried out with an open but critical mind. Ethical and legal guidelines governing the gathering and usage of information for research purposes are encouraged (ACRL 2000; Mason 1986).

**Frame 5: Scholarship as Conversation** (ACRL 2015:10)

Considering that scholarship is conversation, there is need for respecting old and new ideas, existing and emerging scholars. Similar sentiments were echoed by Garcia and Labatte (2015). Since scholarship is viewed as conversation, etiquette becomes important so that the conversation is productive. This implies that when teaching and learning, participants ought to engage in respectful debate.

Individuals must also be wary of unfounded influence from some scholars who may push forward unfounded theories and arguments. As such, individuals must be able
to effectively evaluate information they come across. Similarly, individuals must also avoid pushing forward unproven theories and arguments as they produce information.

As part of ethical practice, retracting from wrong theories and/or positions of the past is encouraged as individual participate in scholarly conversation. This important because some theories would have gained followers some of whom would be engaged in further research building upon the theory.

**Frame 6: Searching as Strategic Exploration** (ACRL 2015:10)

This frame highlights the importance of selecting best information source and understanding that different sources of information have varying content as suggested by Chakravarty (2008). It is therefore important for an information literate individual to “understand that first attempts at searching do not always produce adequate results” and must therefore “realize that sources of information vary greatly in content and format, and have varying relevance and value” (ACRL 2015:12). The individual must therefore display their skill by completing the task at hand by finding the right information tactfully.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

Findings from this study show that the *Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education* plays a key role in addressing the information ethics challenges. Its implementation in the higher education sector would greatly help in addressing issues relating to information ethics in research, teaching and learning.

Authors would like to recommend the inclusion of *Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education* in the curriculum by tertiary education institutions as the frames address the information ethics dilemmas which are often faced by these institutions.

Furthermore, authors strongly recommend that the Framework be applied across all sections of society not necessarily higher education alone. This is important because society has now become heavily dependent on information leading to the term ‘information society’; however the same information society continues to grapple with challenges relating to ethical use of information.
References


