

Towards a Functional Infoliteracy Campaign in African States

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1. Introduction

INFORMATION LITERACY, or infoliteracy, in its own right, is of considerable significance in the formulation and implementation of an appropriate African development paradigm. When considered in the context of larger issues, such as the emerging information society or 'Education for All', however, infoliteracy in much of Africa assumes added significance in terms of urgency, and even survival, in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy. Therefore, international initiatives to promote infoliteracy, such as this conference sponsored by an arm of the United Nations Organization and two national agencies, are most welcome.

However, the genuine commitment of the developed world to the cause of universal infoliteracy can, unwittingly, raise serious questions in developing societies when the focus of public discourse seems to be primarily concerned with:

[inviting] individuals from key stakeholder groups to focus (discussion) on the full range and wide variety of challenges facing the advancement of information literacy as a key strategic Internet Age skill needed by all populations...;

making digital literacy an integral part of the basic educational skills that each individual should be encouraged and allowed to acquire...[and]

[defining] the stakes involved in successfully explaining and effectively utilizing information literacy throughout all nation-states, societies, populations, sectors, disciplines, and cultures...[as]

ensuring that all elements of society are... able to operate computers and utilize the Internet, [and]

ensuring that both children and adults acquire the necessary skills to utilize the Internet efficiently and effectively...(Source: Conference papers)

Indeed, one conference organizer goes so far as to claim that “the rapid development and the pervasive [use] of information and communication technology tools...is changing the nature of society forever and irreversibly.”

Our concern is that, while nobody can deny the importance of “digital literacy”, or “information literacy as a strategic Internet Age skill”, or being “able to operate computers and utilize the Internet, these desirable capabilities are, at best, secondary infoliteracy priorities in much of Africa today. This international conference of experts on information literacy should, in our view, be equally interested in discussing the challenges currently facing many developing societies, and in helping African countries in particular, where using the computer and the Internet remains but a distant dream for most citizens. Therefore, the rest of our paper positions infoliteracy campaigns as a vital component of Africa’s socio-economic development, especially from the perspectives of:

- identifying a *goal* and a number of measurable *objectives* for such initiatives;
- considering the most appropriate *strategy(ies)* in the context of African realities;
- evolving appropriate *education and research* programmes and projects to address distinctly African circumstances;
- assessing the relevant administrative, personnel, material, and financial *resource inputs* to implement and sustain both *ad hoc* and longer-term initiatives;
- demonstrating the criticality of *African content* in promoting any short-, medium- or long-term initiatives; and
- presenting a number of concluding remarks which emphasize the significance of promoting infoliteracy campaigns in Africa as discernible *components of broader international initiatives*.

Questions of terminology and evolving an appropriate definition of infoliteracy may be addressed directly or by implication in the context of our discussion of these primary concerns, starting with the identification of an appropriate goal from which a number of objectives may be derived.

2. Goal and Objectives

What should be the goal of an infoliteracy campaign? Put differently, what should constitute the discernible attributes of a person or society that is certified as being ‘information literate’? This is by no means a simple question and the answer might be expected to vary significantly over space and time. In any event, an international conference, such as the present one, would seem to bear the responsibility of providing leadership in finding an acceptable answer. We propose, for discussion, the following rather limited but reasonable and pragmatic goal as a possible way forward in the Africa Region:

Helping to inculcate a lifelong habit of identifying an information need and efficiently searching for, and using, indigenous oral, print, electronic and other sources of information to satisfy that need and thereby enhance personal, community, and national socio-economic interests.

The full range of every keyword in this declaration of intent will have to be carefully spelt out. For example, “other information sources” might include ‘the Internet and other electronic networks’, while the determination of “personal, community, and national interests” would almost certainly be location-specific. In our view, one usefulness of an international conference, such as this one, is the articulation of clear, broad guidelines as the basis for the formulation of national and regional goals of infoliteracy – goals which may well vary from an internationally acceptable definition of the term.

Would it be necessary to derive appropriate and measurable benchmarks (objectives), say, over a five-year period, from an agreed goal of infoliteracy? Our response is an unequivocal ‘Yes’, so long as such benchmarks reflect the African priorities set out in the introduction to this paper. Consequently, we propose that the objectives of infoliteracy in Africa include at least the following:

- Determining the *elements and measures of effectiveness of an agreed strategy* (or a series of strategies) over a specified period, including provisions for both internal and external evaluation of progress;
- Spelling out how *African content* will be substantially increased, in both print and electronic media, within, say, five years;
- Specifying the *‘critical mass’ of infoliteracy workers* required for a given African society, the appropriate location(s) and level(s) of their training, and the definitive attributes of information literacy in a given African society;
- Identifying the *minimum resources* – administrative, personnel, material, and financial – required to mount and sustain infoliteracy initiatives on a short-medium- or long-term basis, as well as the *probable providers* of such resources; and
- Making infoliteracy initiatives in African states a *part of wider, global initiatives* to improve education and create more equitable access to information and communication.

We shall now discuss each of these objectives in some detail, starting with the question of appropriate strategies.

3. The Question of Strategy

Bruce (1997a) has identified three strategies to infoliteracy initiatives as follows:

- (a) *the behaviourist approach*: in this view, the information user, to be described as information literate, must exhibit certain characteristics and demonstrate certain abilities. Thus, the emphasis is on measurable skills, similar to those used in the ACRL (2000) standards;
- (b) *the constructivist approach*, with the emphasis on learners constructing their own picture of the domain through, for example, problem-based learning; and
- (c) *the relational approach* which starts by describing a phenomenon in terms of the way in which it is experienced.

We observe that the relational approach is closest to African realities and are encouraged by the fact that Bruce (1997b), using phenomenographic methods, has identified seven different ways in which individuals experience information literacy, the so-called ‘seven faces’ of information literacy, ranging from an ‘information technology conception’ (the view apparently favoured by the sponsors of this conference) to a ‘wisdom conception’, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Seven Faces of Information Literacy

Category	Explanation
The information technology conception	Information literacy is seen as using information technology for information retrieval and communication.
The information sources conception	Information literacy is seen as finding information located in information sources.
The information process conception	Information literacy is seen as executing an information-related process.
The information control process	Information literacy is seen as controlling information.
The knowledge construction conception	Information literacy is seen as building up a personal knowledge base in a new area of interest.
The knowledge extension conception	Information literacy is seen as working with knowledge and personal perspectives adopted in such a way that novel insights are gained.
The wisdom conception	Information literacy is seen as using information wisely for the benefit of others.

Note: From Bruce, C. (1997b). *The Relational approach: a new model for information literacy. The New Information and Library Research*, 3: 1-22.

A combination of categories two and five in Table 1 would seem to come closest to describing the desirable ‘face of infoliteracy in Africa’, as perceived by these authors. Indeed, we would prefer to add an eighth category: ‘the information for coping/survival conception’ which encapsulates much of the basic concerns of Rural Africa where most

of the Region's populations are concentrated. Ours is a Region plagued by many natural and human-made disasters, which often render large numbers of our people impoverished for extended periods of their relatively short lives. In our view, therefore, any strategy for addressing infoliteracy in Africa which ignores the 'coping and survival conception' would have little impact in large areas of the Region. Evidently, an appropriate education and research strategy would be crucial to the attainment of the identified goal and objectives of infoliteracy in any African society. However, in an exploratory paper such as this, only the basic elements can be examined.

4. Education and Research for Infoliteracy

Two distinct educational outcomes for an infoliteracy campaign seem desirable in Africa, as elsewhere: (a) the desired attributes of infoliteracy workers – those charged with the responsibility of mounting, monitoring, and evaluating specific infoliteracy initiatives at whatever levels; and (b) the desired attributes of an information literate person in a given society. Much of the published literature has, typically, concentrated on (b) rather than (a); a notable exception is the recent work of Webber and Johnston (2000). The authors rightly emphasize the need to ensure that those who bear the responsibility of making others "information literate" are themselves appropriately information literate. The keyword is "appropriately" and the authors go to some length to demonstrate that enough attention has never been accorded this valid concern.

The three authors of this presentation – all of whom claim to be 'information literate' – are drawn from the departments of information science, library studies, and adult education respectively of a major African university, the University of Ibadan. Adult Education at Ibadan has had a fairly long and distinguished experience in Adult Basic Education (literacy and numeracy) campaigns in Nigeria; library studies shares the long and cherished tradition of librarians' pioneering work in (library) user education; and information science may be forgiven for laying primary claim to at least some of the 'conceptions' described above (Table 1). There is no question that we all share a strong conviction that each of the three disciplines can make valuable contributions to the appropriate education of infoliteracy workers who will be charged with mounting or monitoring or evaluating infoliteracy programmes in Africa. The real question is, how?

At the moment, we would have to experiment with offering one or more courses on infoliteracy at the following possible levels of delivery:

- offering the credit-bearing course at the master's degree level (MInfSc, MLS, MEd);
- offering the course at the bachelor's degree level (BLS and BEd);
- offering the course at the diploma, non-degree level (DipLib and Dip AdEd);
and

- offering elements of the course at all three levels.

We are a long way yet from agreeing on curriculum content, teaching modes, funding arrangements, and other vital considerations to ensure effective delivery and would benefit immensely from the suggestions of participants at this international conference. However, we do have some ideas about the administrative environment for a cost-effective infoliteracy programme in a major African country, Nigeria. Considerations of a research agenda will have to wait a little longer.

5. Considerations of Resource Inputs

One item on the long list of challenges facing infoliteracy initiatives in Africa is adequate resource support. However, we do not share the often-heard excuse that the deciding factor in such scenarios is always financial. Indeed, it is public knowledge that in many African settings, other factors – especially personnel and administrative – often have a much greater bearing on whether public sector initiatives succeed or fail, and infoliteracy initiatives are no exception.

In the specific case of Nigeria, it seems reasonable to try to launch a sustainable infoliteracy campaign within the framework of existing public sector programmes. For example, the National Library of Nigeria has, for decades, been at the vanguard of promoting the reading culture at all levels of Nigerian society. The campaign has had little impact, so far, largely on account of the imponderables discussed (below) in section vi of this paper, while the comparable National Adult Literacy Campaign seems to have enjoyed greater success. Thus, the collaborative commitment of specialists in adult education, library and information sciences to the current initiative to implement an African infoliteracy programme stands to benefit considerably from the lessons learned in both Nigerian experiences. Indeed, a decision has already been taken to invite the National Librarian to join the three-man pioneering team at Ibadan as quickly as practicable. In so doing, the host institution for a National Infoliteracy Forum may well be the National Library of Nigeria, or the parastatal responsible for adult literacy programmes in the Federal Ministry of Education. Whichever is the outcome, either institution would have adequate personnel, financial, and administrative resources to cope with the needs of a National Infoliteracy Forum for quite some time – a big advantage in a resource-scarce environment like Nigeria's.

It would be reasonable to encourage similar *ad hoc* arrangements to Nigeria's in much of Africa at the initial stages of infoliteracy programmes, if they were guaranteed a certain measure of international support as well. This international conference seems to be in an excellent position to make valuable recommendations on such key issues as the following:

- (i) availability of sources of support, in cash and/or kind;
- (ii) the range and probable magnitude of such support;

- (iii) the time frames associated with such support. For example, support might be provided for a maximum of one year at a time, renewable for another year or two, and no more;
- (iv) the minimum indications of national commitment required to attract support;
- (v) whether or not support is tied; and
- (vi) provisions for internal and, especially, external evaluation of impact.

While our list is clearly not exhaustive, we would like to comment briefly on the significance of (iv) to (vi) in particular. Experience with several members of the international donor community, such as Canada's International Development Research Centre, has shown that a firm and verifiable national commitment is vital to the sustainability of internationally supported programmes in many African states. It has also been demonstrated that tied support stifles invaluable local initiative and resource inputs – a particularly sensitive issue in considerations of local and indigenous knowledge systems (LINKS) in the production of relevant content for African infoliteracy campaigns. Finally, as effective measures of programme impact are being actively refined from an information perspective (Menou, 1993; McConnel, 1995), infoliteracy campaigns in Africa (and elsewhere) would seem to present an excellent opportunity for further refinement of the evaluation variables and techniques being thrown up.

But, first, the pivotal issue of content must be addressed: What type(s) of information will an African infoliteracy campaign promote?

6. Content, Is It?

Nothing in all of the issues we have raised and discussed so far in this paper, or are likely to raise in future on the theme of this international conference will matter much without a firm and continuing commitment, from the outset, to substantially increasing the indigenous information base of African states. This is clearly a big subject whose dimensions are being presented in broad outline, with only brief comments, at this international forum, primarily to elicit understanding and empathy. Four aspects of the issue would seem to deserve particular attention here:

- *Promoting the reading culture by revitalizing indigenous publishing:* All over the industrialized world, the exponential growth of electronic publishing has occurred simultaneously with an equally dramatic increase in book and paper-based publishing. In the memorable words of Jenkins (1995), “the [expected] death of the written word”, in light of the growing use of electronic sources of information, has failed to materialize and probably never will.

- Most African countries including Nigeria, have a very weak print industry and are largely dependent on a book industry whose content is heavily foreign. As the National Library of Nigeria has found out, to its considerable cost, promoting the reading culture in such environment has been, at best, frustrating; an infoliteracy campaign could not be expected to fare much better in a situation where indigenous publishing cannot produce the relevant information resources in the local languages.
- *Enhancing resource investments in local and indigenous knowledge systems:* The World Bank and UNESCO have led the way in drawing the attention of the international community to the crucial significance of conducting research into local and indigenous knowledge systems (LINKS) and disseminating research outcomes as widely as possible. The World Bank's *IK Notes* in particular have continued to demonstrate the authenticity of LINKS and their complementary function in African development strategies. The potential of the fledgling Africa Regional Centre for Indigenous Knowledge to substantially increase access to, and use of, a growing pool of indigenous literature on all manner of subjects – from the arts to science and technology – has been aptly demonstrated (Phillips and Titilola, 1995). Without a doubt, local and indigenous knowledge systems constitute a veritable source of relevant information and knowledge in support of any African infoliteracy campaign.
 - *Substantially increasing African content in public domain and other electronic networks:* It cannot be a healthy situation where less than 5 percent of content on the Internet is of African origin, with more than half of that percentage coming from one African country (Aiyepku, 1994). However, as Lan Franco (1997) has correctly observed, there is no technical barrier to doubling, literally overnight, the contribution from the Africa Region on the Internet. The challenge lies in the *production* of relevant content on African issues, especially by Africans themselves. The Consortium of African Schools of Information Science (CASIS) was launched in Rabat, Morocco, on 24th April, 1994 to address this crucial issue, among others (Aiyepku, 1997). Although CASIS has, so far, made little impact in this area, it should be clearly understood that an African infoliteracy campaign would ensure “that both children and adults acquire the necessary skills to utilize the Internet efficiently and effectively” only when they are guaranteed access to, and use of, primarily African content.
 - *Popularizing record keeping and records management as a vital component of infoliteracy:* Many educated Africans, at both personal and corporate levels, are notoriously indifferent about record keeping and the management of print media and written records generally – personal diaries, newspapers, books, journals, etc. However, much of Africa's “records of civilization” have been preserved in oral form and accurately transmitted from generation to generation for centuries (Ogunsheye, 1976). Since many educated Africans

appear ambivalent in combining the oral tradition with the written in their attitude to record keeping and records management, the target populations for African infoliteracy campaigns may be expected to exhibit similar behavioural characteristics as well. Therefore, an effective mechanism may have to be worked out which explicitly recognizes this tendency in any campaign to make African societies information literate.

Other aspects of the fundamental issue of content will, no doubt, be raised and discussed at follow-up meetings to the present one. Meanwhile, we would like to conclude this paper with a few remarks.

7. Concluding Remarks

In the final analysis, efforts aimed at promoting infoliteracy in African states must be understood and evaluated in the context of a much larger concern: the Region's sustainable socio-economic development. We cannot afford to merely debate it; every personal, institutional, community, national, sub-regional, or international initiative to promote an information literate African citizenry must identify with the ultimate goal of Africa's socio-economic emancipation. At the international level, we would like to end this paper by suggesting that an 'African Infoliteracy Campaign' be integrated, from the outset, into larger initiatives at both UNESCO and The World Bank.

Education is by far the biggest sectoral programme at UNESCO. The organization's 'Education for All' initiative has already recorded notable achievements, as the Plenary Session of the 31st Session of UNESCO's General Conference clearly demonstrates. Moreover, UNESCO is in the final stages of launching a cross-cutting 'Information for All' programme and is destined to playing a lead role in the forthcoming 'World Summit on the Information Society' in Geneva and Tunis in 2003 and 2005 respectively. No other inter-governmental organization, in our view, has a better mandate nor richer experience to promote the success of an 'African Infoliteracy Campaign' than UNESCO.

Reference has already been made in section vi of this paper to The World Bank's continuing research and programme on LINKS. Very much like UNESCO, The World Bank has several other programmes which specifically target African interests. For example, its Knowledge and Learning Center publishes, periodically, research findings on human development on operational, economic, and sector work carried out by the Bank and its member governments in the Africa Region. One such recent publication (Lauglo, 2001) titled: *Engaging with Adults: the Case for Increased Support for Adult Basic Education in Sub-Saharan Africa* catches the eye. The study has one major finding and raises two research questions that seem pertinent to the concerns of this paper. The finding is presented as follows:

Most completers of ABE [Adult Basic Education] courses show only quite modest mastery of literacy skills. However, what matters more is whether the mastery is sufficient to facilitate further learning: and it could be that

'empowering' social skills and networks are even more important outcomes than literacy and numeracy acquisition as such. (our emphasis)

The two research questions from the study are presented as follows:

- *Apart from literacy and numeracy, what should ABE teach?*
- *What role should information and communications technology play?*

It is hard not to jump to the conclusion that 'information literacy' is one of the "empowering social skills" required in the reported research finding, and that the first of the two research questions points, almost inexorably, to 'information literacy' as the probable answer. Would The World Bank be prepared to fund Africa-based research projects to address these and similar questions that could contribute significantly to the cause of infoliteracy campaigns in African states?

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