
THE RELEVANCE OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS TO LIBRARY SERVICES

By

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Abstract

This discourse is woven round a basic fact of life today: a world that is propelled by the quest for knowledge that is dependent on information-information for service. Librarianship that is service oriented thrives on communication with clientele from all works of life. This work therefore discusses the importance, and the need for librarians to possess adequate skills for the achievement of the overall goal of the library which is efficient and effective service delivery-in this case service delivery which is hinged on effective communication skills. To discharge that onerous duty to member of any given community, communication becomes handy as the raw material for information. Not just communication, but ability to skillfully; with patience based on the understanding that one is serving a multifaceted audience of the good, the bad and the very nasty. So this study in it's entirety concludes that communication skill is relevant to information delivery through library services.

Keywords: Communication skills, Library Service, Services Delivery, Information

Introduction

Librarianship in its entirety is service oriented; not just service, but service delivery based on precision and timeliness, all of which must be geared towards the user's satisfaction. Precondition for such prompt service delivery will take its roots from effective communication between the perceived beneficiary of the services, the librarian and the material content of the library. Suffice to state therefore, that there must be an effective interplay between these factors in order to achieved success in the service delivery. The key to achieving that perceived success is good communication skills expressed in the human person (the Librarian) and the material content as expressed in directional guides/sign as in-road to the resources, (books, non-book materials and journals).

Within this framework, an attempt is made to look at communication in its ordinary meaning and again define communication in relation to inter-action between the librarian and its clientele with a view to interpreting resources to satisfactorily meet perceived needs.

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The word 'communication' comes from the Latin word 'communicatio' meaning "making common or imparting". In the words of McQuail and Windah (1993), it is the transmission of information, ideas, attitudes, or emotion from one person or group to another; more briefly, it is social interaction through messages. It is therefore implied, that in communicating, we are trying to establish a common ground for understanding, for sharing thoughts, facts, ideas and attitude in order to meet desired goals and aspirations. James (1999) encapsulated the whole essence of communication to mean that, "it helps us to understand ourselves, to keep in touch with other people, to understand them and to predict their response to situations, also as the medium through which relationships are established, extended and maintained; provides a means by which people act and interact; exchange information and ideas; develop plans, proposals and policies, make decisions and manage men and materials"

Communication could be verbal or written. Written communication could be formal or informal. Whatever the nature it assumes all its forms will be addressed as they are all imperatives within the library context. Communication has many definitions from simplistic to complex; but the one that clearly serve our purpose is the manner of presentation/skill by which one person (or a group) shares and imparts information to another person (or group) so that people (or groups) clearly understand one another (Udall and Udall, 1979)

It is against the above background that Ray and Ray (2001) saw the world of information and communication as becoming more and more complex with each passing day and with each day there appear a multitude of improvements and new resources, both print and electronic. As the world has become complex, so the librarian as an intermediary between the resources and the user should have the ingenuity, deft and sophistication in interpreting the complex new resources. It is here that communication skills comes into play as the lubricant that keeps the machinery of the library operations functioning, as well as a means through which roles would be identified; clientele thoughts clearly articulated and processed to their satisfaction, and to create a network of interdependence relationship between the librarian and the clientele on a result oriented platform. At this juncture, we may have to narrow communication down to specifics, as it relates to library transactions rather than the broad spectrum. On that note, we will look at oral communication in its variety of forms; intrapersonal, interpersonal and group. Cheek et al (2000) posit that communication is an

omnipresent human process wherein we spend most of our working hours communicating, speaking, listening, reading, writing and interpreting non-verbal signs.

Intrapersonal Communication

Intrapersonal Communication according to James, Ode and Soola (1999) is the process of information transfer which goes on within an individual. This is reflected within an individual who nurtures ideas and thoughts within himself before he gives vent to them. Before he does that he would have weighed, tossed over and over such thoughts or ideas before allowing them to escape from him. This process is necessary for a librarian whose stock in trade is to juggle into the minds of prospective library users; even at the very stage selecting materials to match the interest of varying users, creating subject heading for books and journals in the library. His ability to do that very well will assuage the frustration which users encountered when they have to approach any library collection via subject catalogue.

Interpersonal Communication: This is often referred to as face-face communication. It is the exchange of ideas and information between two people you and your friend, you and your boss in the library, you and your clientele; your colleagues in the office or any other person.

In this case, the librarian would not keep his ideas or information to himself. You share them directly with your clientele either face to face, or by telephone, other gadgets of information. Interpersonal communication dominates transactions in the library because librarianship is service based. Interpersonal communication has the singular advantage of immediate response. This is most applicable to a reference librarian, the porters at the library checkpoint and staff at the circulation desk. This is not to say that interpersonal communication is restricted to these sections alone.

Group Communication: A group is formed when three or more people come together, accidentally or by design, to work towards a specific goal. Group communication within the library context would involve librarians in various units (Readers services, technical services, even at the top management echelon) coming together to brainstorm on certain policy decisions that will enhance their efficient service delivery. It is for the effectiveness of this philosophy of Group

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Communication that John Harris Library of the University of Benin for examples operate at two managerial levels (the core Management and the expanded management), which includes the University Librarian, his two Deputies, Unit Heads as well as the heads of the various Faculty Libraries.

Whether intrapersonal, interpersonal or group, the point is that librarianship being service driven is woven round effective communication skills. Communication skills is therefore the live wire and hub around which efficient service delivery in the library resolves. Measurement of service delivery by staff and users satisfaction can therefore, to a very large extend, be tied to effective communication skills. So our goal through the use or oral communication process is not to simply communicate more but to communicate more effectively; communication that is result oriented and therefore manifested in user satisfaction.

How can this user's satisfaction be measured? User's satisfaction cannot be measured, if he (the Librarian) keeps to himself. There has to be a feedback, i.e. the beneficiary's reaction to the service obtained. As soon as we concern ourselves to the beneficiary's reaction to our services through feedback, we have expanded the one way communication model to a two way communication model. Feedback in its purest form is a monitoring device for librarians to evaluate the effectiveness of their communication prowess.

Feedback is therefore, an essential function in the communication process which has revolutionized communication thinking; as it engender the beneficiary's reaction to service rendered. Feedback in effect turns original beneficiary into a sender and original sender into a beneficiary. At this juncture, it is necessary to remark that communication skill as espoused above is an aspect of everyday activity which many librarians take for granted. Librarians assume that their own particular communicative activities, and perhaps those within the library as a whole, are adequate and efficient. The librarians communication skill is however, not a secondary or derived aspect of management, but one that is central to organizational activities as it is the basic process upon which other functions depends on their working and contribution to library goals. For this reason, it is important that librarians appreciate the significance of communication skills and make a conscious effort to consider, evaluate and modify their communication style and attitude. In this regard, individual's skills of communication should not

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be viewed or evaluated in isolation rather they should be seen as part of the total library management communication process, which in turn should be integrated in the light of general management philosophy.

The need for humans to transmit their thoughts and visions in an external medium to others, and the preservation of culture, brought about the idea of writing. The need to collect these writings for preservations so that they can be passed from one generation to the other could have been the harbinger of libraries (Aina, 2004). The material contents of this library in whatever format are at sometimes inaccessible to those who need them either as a result of wrong approach to them or misinterpretation of the knowledge content, so every librarian worthy of the profession must on daily basis be obsessed with the question – what information do I owe others so that they perform maximally in their assigned task, in what form, where, how and at what cost if any. The librarian, the library and its material contents are therefore the focal point of this discourse; most importantly however is the librarian's ability to interpret its clientele's thoughts, to meet his desires.

The librarian's strength in the articulation and interpretation of thoughts expressed or latent depends very largely on his understanding of the principle of communication skills. Here, he must demonstrate good listening skills built on patience; because some of the patrons could be very nasty and awkward in their presentation. Commenting on this, Byrne (1988) stated that 'user can sometimes be awkward and do not always state their wishes as clearly as we would like; the skilled intermediary will make them less awkward, less nervous and more articulate by welcoming them to the library' in this regard, user's satisfaction in all its ramifications is advocated, that is why Dixon, (1982) posed the following questions.

"Is your library service approachable? Are your staff approachable? Is joining the library an arduous ordeal?, or is it made a pleasure by the attitude and verbal approach of the staff and the way in which they handle such tender areas as identification and rules? Do you, if you deal with an enquiry give an impression of eagerness and efficiency, without being fawning or patronizing...? Do you convey to your enquirer the impression that he is welcome; or that his enquiry is an intrusion...? Do you continue talking to a colleague/friend/relative while a customer is waiting? He summed up by an admonition; saying: 'please make life

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easy for your users' if they approach the staff for help, don't bombard them with jargons-class number, charging, Dewey or library of congress and so on for these are meaningless terms to majority of users"

The librarian should therefore, be equipped with the following qualities.

- Possession of calm, welcoming, facial, expression that elicit warmth and readiness to assist.
- Use of a tone of voice appropriate to the nature of the transaction.
- Communicates in a cordial, receptive and encouraging manner.
- Provide the clientele the freedom and relaxed mind to state his information needs in his own best understanding without being harassed.
- Employ open-ended questioning method to encourage the patron to expand on his request.

In the case of students or users seeking information about choice of topic for their project of dissertation writing; be careful in your approach e.g. ask to ascertain:

- (a) How much information required from primary or secondary sources.
- (b) Seek to clarify confusing terminologies in his presentation; on your part, avoid excessive jargons.
- (c) Get background information on effort already made and achievements in that direction; all these will enable the librarian identify gaps, lapses, dearth.
- (d) Suggest windows of access to information available- books, journals, internet services of informal sources.

How much of current text do you already have, do you need current or historical text? The use of communication skills to enhance quality service delivery is not restricted to an aspect of library service; it spans the entire length and breadth of practical librarianship. Take for instance; a clientele who comes to use the university library for the first time automatically becomes a protégé to the reference librarian who knows his onions. This is because such a neophyte who is apparently tip-toeing not knowing where to go and what to do needs helps to take him/her through the library collection. Here the reference librarian will exercise his initiative, reach out to that individual who by all standard is unsure of

where he/she is going though he may know what he wants but not certain of how and where to go.

His (reference Librarian) approach will be Hello! Young lady, how may I help you? Or Gentleman, you need something? With this approach, the user's travail of near frustration will quickly abate knowing that somebody cares. The Reference Librarian must go the extra mile to make available relevant information, as Bakewell (1997) put it "even information that the individual may not know the needs" but exist in the library.

In addition to the above, the Reference Librarian has a lot to do in rendering efficient service to the users with his wealth of good communication skills. As a Reference Librarian he is usually confronted with sundry queries, which demand immediate answers and some that will take some days, while others may even take him outside the library. For answers to queries that take time, he should be civil and persuasive in his approach to the clientele to exercise some patience while he acts speedily to find solution within a minimum time limit. To the patron who appears groping the reference Librarian who is knowledgeable in the skill of communication must be there to give a sense of direction and build confidence in the user. This is because librarianship of the 21st century is dynamic and completely devoid of the arm-chair librarianship of the past decades.

Efficient communication skills, begets efficient library services and user's satisfaction. The card catalogue communicates; it is a communication tool that is meant to direct the user who is knowledgeable in its use as a link between him and the sought material. This directional tool does not speak, it is the pivotal role of a skillful communicator that makes them (card catalogue, indexes, abstract, bibliographies, etc) useful as information retrieved which corroborates the possession of communication skills as that "which destroys uncertainty (Newman and Newman, 1985). The library as a conservator and transmitter or recorded information and knowledge requires a librarian with deep communication skills to be able to identify, organize, interpret and synthesize his collection to meet the varying needs of his known and potential user. Some of these could be achieved in the use of symbols and directional signs well worded to give the desired message which are aspects of the non-verbal communication skills of the reference unit.

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The circulation unit of the Library is yet another section which carves an image of a receptionist/Public Relations Officer in an organization that can make or mar the reputation of the organization/library. This is where charging and discharging takes place. This major activity involves the patron's direct contact with the library staff. It is indeed the image-maker of the library. The circulation Librarian in charge of this section must possess a high level of communication skills to be able to handle patrons of different shades of character. So the librarian must be tolerant, humane and pleasant in handling many problems that emanates from users awkwardness in their request, approach and use of the library resources.

Here the registered users borrow materials for photocopy and home use which are supposed to be handled with care and returned with a given time frame. Such is not usually the case as materials given out on loan are sometimes misplaced/lost, torn or not returned at the date due. All these are challenges which the circulation librarian will have to deal with from time to time. For a lost book, explain in a subtle manner why it is necessary for the user to bear the brunt of replacing the lost book. Call the user of a lost item into your office; ask him/her thus; supposing every user who damages or misplaces a library material is allowed to go free without a penalty of replacing the lost item what happens to the entire collection subsequently? His answer is most likely to be that the collection will eventually be depleted and decimated. By this approach, he/she will not see your action as punitive rather as a necessary corollary of his carelessness and thus would feel justified to replace the lost item for posterity. If librarians imbibe this culture of civility and homeliness in their daily conduct of library affairs and transactions; the hybrid library (library without walls) which is fast becoming a threat to the orthodox library services (confined within the walls) will continue to be a Mecca to all and sundry. So this culture of civility and homeliness when built on the foundation of effective communication skills will make library service most attractive to patrons.

The summary of etiquette requires of the staff at the circulation desk demand that they must at all times be cheerful. This is because the routine of charging and discharging of books, issuing of library tickets, clearance for graduating students, retiring staff all engender a great deal of social interaction and effective communication skill is a key to effective service delivery.

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It is necessary to remark here, that though greater part of this discourse has been spent on communication skills as expressed in the human person, i.e. (oral or verbal communication skills); we also have such skills expressed in form of non-verbal medium, i.e. written communication which could be formal or non-formal. All these are expressed in signs and symbols. Take for instance, the library checkpoint, which marks the first contact with the patrons. It has been observed over time, especially within the academic library (University, Polytechnic or College of Education) that a greater majority of the patrons are mostly undergraduates. With the accompanying juvenile delinquency of these breed of clientele the porters and security personnel at the checkpoint are daily inundated with varying degree of awkwardness expressed in their tongue, mode of dressing, manner of approach; breaching library rules and regulations, etc.

To reduce this awkwardness in their approach to library services, the following signs, symbols and tags when laid out at the checkpoint and other strategic places will help reduce or correct such awkwardness.

- Dress the way you will be addressed
- Silence is golden
- Keep your private part private
- Your chest carries the milk of the Nation's future President, cover it up
- Close the door gently behind you
- Use of cell-phone is prohibited in the library. Please don't bring them in
- Snacks, water and other food items are not allowed in the library
- Bags are kept at owners risk
- Books are meant for reading don't abuse them
- Don't put valuables (Money, cell-phones, etc) in your bags
- The librarian is your friend, see him.

If you have ever stopped over at the check point of any library to observe interaction between the porters/security personnel and users, you will be amazed at the enormity of challenges the porters face. You will then better appreciate the presence of a Reference desk-manned by a Librarian who must be gifted with innate patience and tolerance to deal with juvenile delinquency armed with good communication skills. So the library management must as a matter of policy tailor the activities at the check point with the reference librarian at all times; as this will help to check the overzealous security personnel who sometimes arrogate to themselves "checkpoint librarian" by harassing users. In addition to the above,

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the library management may be constrained to employ some soft-sell humor especially in volatile situation that can likely generate tension amongst patrons (Garvey 1969). Take for instance, if a user frowns at library management decision on “fines” overdue fines, penalty for lost items, replacement of lost books, etc, a bulletin board or posters might be put up saying:

“we know that you are decent so you don’t steal, but...”

“To serve you better, help replace lost books”

“The library management will reward you handsomely with... for using our material well”

The effect of such eye-catching captions is to help douse tension, create a sense of humor and relaxed disposition towards staff and materials.

Conclusion

From the discussion above, we have seen that possession of good communication skills is neither restricted to a section of the library nor is it restricted to some librarians; but a veritable weapon towards conducting the business of managing users, using them well and even evaluating yourself against the attainment of organizational goals. The realization of organizational goals are therefore dependent on a network of harmonious internal relationships between staff, built on effective mechanism of good communication skills directed at their patrons expressed or latent.

The library as a conservator and disseminator of recorded knowledge and information would have lost its bearing in the scheme of providing access to its huge resources; if bereft of the right caliber of persons with the possession of robust skills and qualities of creating unfettered access to its content

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