Training for Religious Information Literacy and Community Dialogue: The experience of WOREM Theological Institute Library, Southeast Nigeria

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Abstract:

This paper discusses steps taken by the author who served as a volunteer librarian in WOREM theological institute to train and equip clerics/participants who were students of the institute with library, literacy and research skills to enable them impact their community and harness religious historical data. It was discovered from an earlier research on clergy information needs that there was dearth in indigenous religious history and data; more so works cited were mostly records on foreign missionary activities in Nigeria decades ago. It was therefore needful to attempt bridging this gap with related research using local communities by the student-clerics, totaling 35 in number. Most of them only attempted secondary school education and were not really proficient in spoken and written English. However, these were influential leaders and overseers of religious congregations in about twelve surrounding villages under four Local Government Areas. Their peculiarity became added advantage in generating indigenous and other primary data. The Institute's library set up in 2009 spearheaded the literacy training effort which spanned for a year and half. Training sessions handled by the Volunteer librarian (author) were on library use skills, research methods, grammar and speech drills, writing and vocabulary tests, weekend exchange programmes, site visits to city libraries, language translation workshop, internship, seminar and other presentations, as well as computer rudiments in data storage and dissemination. Final training sessions culminated in field research using a structured interview format to generate socio – religious, historical and contemporary data. The entire exercise thereby established that in considering tools for 'open dialogue', the human factor becomes a vital first-hand resource..

Keywords : Literacy, Research, Church, Nigeria, History, Indigenous data

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Background

The clergy in Christian religion generally wield a lot of influence in Nigeria by reason of their role as spiritual leaders of various congregations usually characterized by forms of worship and beliefs. The Evangelical- Pentecostal church category lays emphasis on doctrines surrounding evangelistic woks, salvation, holiness and Holy Spirit leading (Philip, 2004). These characteristics translated into the notion that formal theological education was not significant to their assigned vocation. Thus the seeming lack of emphasis on the indispensable

role of training which being fundamental to growth, was not far-fetched owing to skepticisms that such training may tend towards secularism rather than spirituality thereby denying worship and sacred functions of their sole divine embellishments (Philip, 2011).

However, as the designated groups began experiencing growth structurally, numerically, geographically and otherwise, the insurgent need for related training was brought to the fore. In Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, one of the leading proponents who established a theological seminary for the clergy in 1990, advocated to the chagrin of some fellows that pastoral education goal is for "eradicating illiteracy from the pulpit" (Bassey, 2000). Though training needs of the clergy are likely to vary based on goals and aspirations, an established fact remains that knowledge when broadened is fundamental to every vocation and indeed 'knowledge about knowledge is power' (Mole, 2009). These were some of the factors that propelled the setting up of WOREM theological institute otherwise referred to as Institute of Christian Theology in February, 2005.

The institute was trans-denominational and Clerics (clergy) who enrolled were drawn from twelve surrounding villages in four Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Akwa Ibom State, namely Ikot Abasi, Mkpat Enin, Oruk Anam and Eastern Obolo local government areas, all situated in sub-urban Southern part of Nigeria. Academic structure was theological-based and laced with practical sessions to enable students gain some level of mastery in pastoral works within the three year part-time diploma programme. Three years afterwards, the plan for an institute library was set in motion following an invitation for an institute librarian (the investigator). The library resources comprised core theological texts and other collections in the humanities and behavioral science, newspapers, manuscripts, dictionaries and encyclopedias. In view of the composition of student-clerics, the author who served as a volunteer librarian carried out sessions of semi-formal library, literacy and communication skills programme on weekends basis, between 2009 and the last quarter of 2011. Mbagwu and Nwachukwu (2008) discussing on library services to rural communities, posit that the type of services a library could offer depends upon the type of library, categories of people and other varying interests that would avail of its services. This paper therefore discusses the librarian-led initiative in this regard, methods adopted and impact with implications.

Rationale

Much of endogenous and original information on religious history and events are lost for the lack of expert knowledge and interest to assemble them. In an enquiry driven discussion by the author with an academic sociologist Essoh (2013), the same confirmed that students and researchers were no longer keen to study subjects in the humanities such as traditional history, anthropology, archaeology and philosophy which tend to lack appeal with the increase in modern disciplines. The need to 'comb out' this information was cogent as some of the clergy (clerics) have been key players, being religious leaders at their various communities. This compelling factor became the fulcrum for the library outreach and training programme which basically was pro-interventionist and further more instigated by goals of institute's goal of equipping the clergy (intended and serving) to excel and be able to express self at any given situation or level, be it locally or internationally as re-iterated by the Institute's professor and

president (Ekere, 2005). Establishing the Institute was therefore a means of extending these educational privileges through continuing education and mentorship. According to Rogers (2011) adult learning experiences are rooted much in experiences which open up other new learning opportunities while Reder and Bynner (2008) explain otherwise that low level of skill may lead to marginalization of individual in modern society, thereby bringing about low levels of civic participation.

The design and development of a training programme often begins with identification of trainee's strengths and weaknesses, as such a preliminary survey was conducted prior to the library outreach and training activity through the author's interactions with student-clerics concerned to determine their characteristics. It was noted that several of them had experienced a disconnect from modern trends, having lived in the rural area for quite a while and having not updated their knowledge base several years after their last encounter with formal education. More so, their cognitive level and grammatical strength in English language was low, though they greatly desired to extend vocational frontiers beyond their local environs. The training was therefore a sense of using literacy education to achieve socio-religious goals and a wide reading culture beyond discipline. Coburn (2001) and Spillane *et al.* (2002) argue that how teachers enact instructional policy is influenced by prior knowledge, connections to policy and the social context within which they work. This was the situation with the Institute's volunteer librarian who doubled as programme facilitator within the two-year intervention training session in view of her heterogeneous academic background in Communications, Religious education and Library science. During times of change and transformation, literacy practices are often called on in new and different ways (MacGillivray, 2010) and by formulation of thoughts and allowing time for exploration of new ideas while collecting information, information search process and learning is thereby heightening (Kahlthau *et al.*, 2008).

Training Aims

The mediated service which WOREM theological library rendered took into cognizance the institutional and educational goals which led to its being established, other than the fundamental role of the library in organizing, managing and making information available when required. Plan of action with the following aims were therefore drawn by the institute's librarian to actualize the following:

-To orientate the student-clerics in library-use and information search process, thereby increasing awareness of the library as a vital educational resource.

-To develop English language proficiency in written, oral and communication skills in general.

 -To train student-clerics in research methods for systematic data gathering and analysis.

-To implement Practical Productive Activities (PPA) for competence in the afore mentioned areas.

Theoretical considerations:

Constant reading builds up positive reading attitude to which Dare (2007) opines that when an individual habitually and regularly reads books that are not necessarily required for the advancement of career, such is said to have a reading culture. The following issues raised were of concern in the course of training implementation: what predictive effect does library learning have on reading ability and vice versa? Does much learning result in intensive reading or otherwise? However, the culture of lifelong learning is efficacious to functional literacy, which enables an inter-play of information synthesis, resulting in self direction/ personal leading as illustrated in figure 1 below:
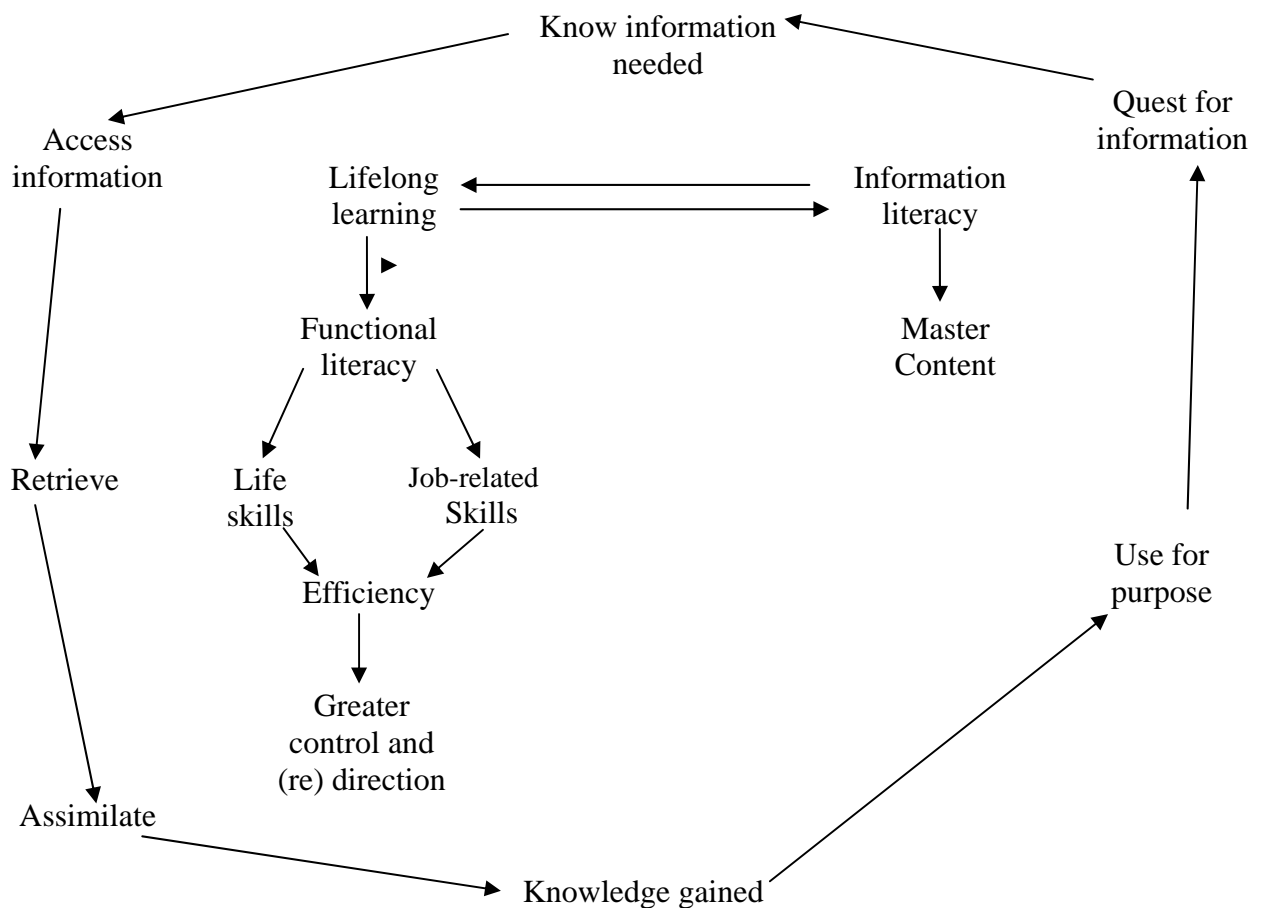
Fig. 1: Information literacy and learning continuum. **Source**: This study.

Learning is a continuous process and whatever the level in learning process, the quest for knowledge expressed through information seeking culminates in the expected outcome and ultimate being knowledge gained. It goes on as in a continuum with the initial step of realizing forms of knowledge one requires, determining their intended value, assimilating content and using the information to meet ones purposeful need. Processing of message is mentally demanding while situational and personal factors influence same. It follows that

factors influencing the ability to process a message as established by Burleson (2006), are preexisting knowledge about the message, ability to acquire information about other people and social situations; that is the 'interpersonal cognitive complexity'. Similarly, Reitz (2012) adds that the way a person habitually organizes problem-solving or learning experiences have important implications for the delivery of bibliographic instruction. The foregoing formed the basis of plan and action for training of the community-resident clergy of which Pacheco (2010), purports that cultural, socio historical perspectives have mediated literacy teaching, learning and reading in particular.

It is no gainsaying that the result of collaborative learning produces knowledge and variety in ideas. This could be further heightened through different processes of social involvement, whereby people with common interest and shared practices being involved (such as the clergy) contribute to the empowerment of communities by producing self directed practices and act as motivating members (Araceli and Biota, 2012).
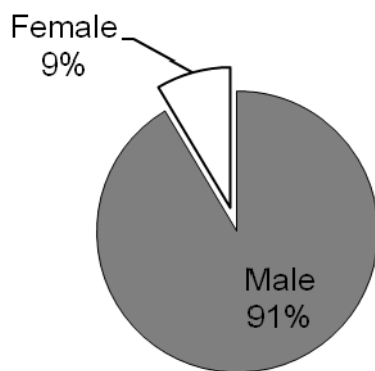
Student Characteristics

Fig 2: Distribution of Student-clerics by gender

There were more males than female indicated by a very high percentage. Figure 1 above shows the usual trend in most religious groups globally, where males usually constitute greater number.
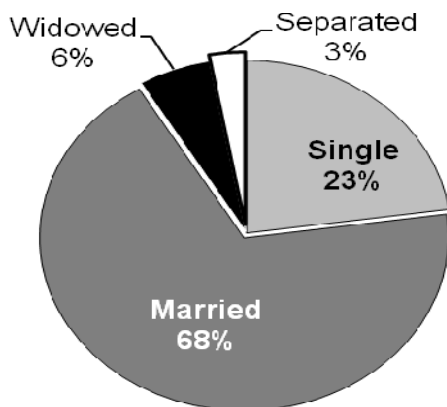

Fig 3: Marital Status.

The figure above indicates that most of the clergy are married and this has been a strong requirement for some religious groups before attainment of this responsible position.
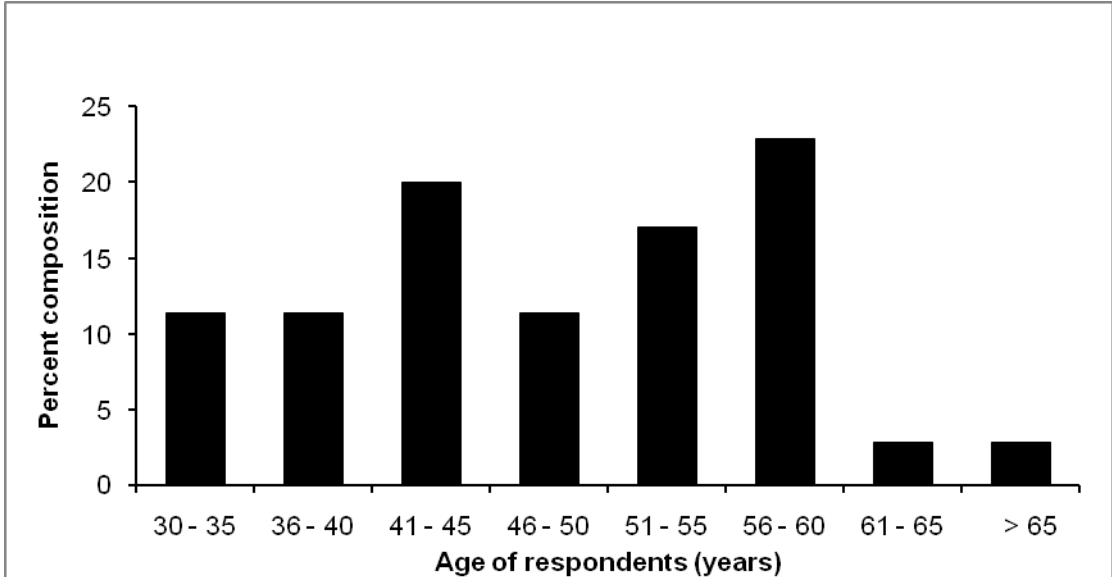

Fig. 4: Age composition

Some of the clergy were approaching their mid age and most of them were already within that age group; theirs is a position of responsibility and requires some level of maturity of which age is a factor. This age representation also indicates that most of the trainees were adult learners.
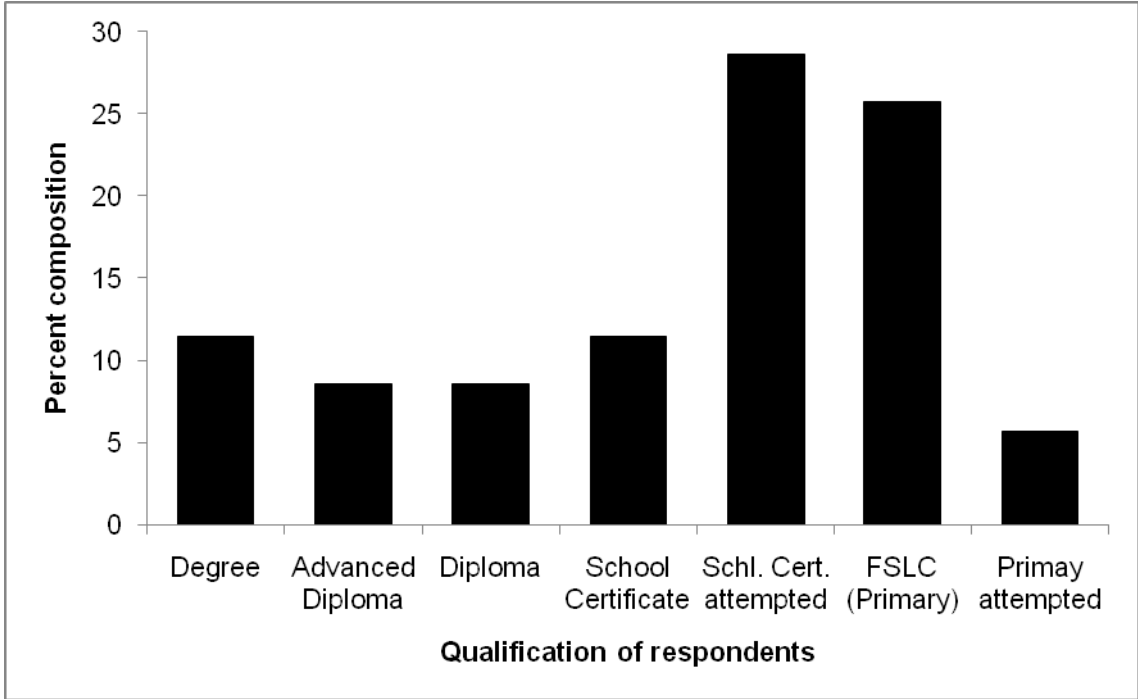

Fig 5: Educational qualification.

Student-clerics who have not attained tertiary education constituted highest number of trainees. This was the major consideration to the implementation of the library mediated learning programme.

Methods

Project design: primarily practical and cognitive based with focus on library use skills, reading, writing, vocabulary tests and other literacy constructs culminating in field work e.g. research process, internship and others.

Duration: training spanned for about a year and a half including activities extended beyond the institution, while most of the sessions were scheduled during lecture free period on weekend basis and within the students' consent for their maximum cooperation and sustained interest.

Participants: trainees were composed of student-clerics in WOREM theological college in their first and second year of study with no exceptions or distinction by educational qualifications, to avoid prestige bias. Non student audience were sometimes invited to witness open sessions and other activities such as debates and discussions. Select faculty members were encouraged to adopt some approaches beneficial to their tutorials while the library assistant aided in prompt release of print resources for tutorials and student use.

Indicators: The wpcm measure was modified and adapted to gauge reading proficiency using constructs such as speed, accuracy, prosody, rate of reading, comprehension and expression which are relatively easy to measure (Samuels, 2007; Valencia, S. et al., 2010) along other determinants based on effective communication principles. Library and other literacy components were guided by ACRL 'Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education'- 2000 while research methodology for field work was from the humanities and behavioral science. This study therefore provides a framework for related training strategies.

Table 1: Library Intervention Literacy Module/component (LILM).   Source: this study.

S/N	ACTIVITIES	DESCRIPTION
i.	Library orientation exercise	a) Organization and retrieval of information; library resources and usage, ready reference, lending services, guided inquiry, general library-use skills; b) Library tour/site visits to urban theological libraries; c) Pleasure reading, content analysis, parts of a book, conducting library research; reading exercises.
ii.	Grammar and communication skills	a) Assigned reading, identifying key words, written and expressive communication (homiletics). b) Essay writing, read-aloud interactive sessions; speech drills; use of non-verbal communication (semiotics), word learning strategies, cross cultural communication, vocabulary test. c) Semantic and syntactic construction; impromptu speeches and narratives from books; biographical surveys.
iii.	Research methodology	a) Data gathering methods and analysis; literature review and citation; b) Kinds of research; conducting library research; bibliographic citations; c) Interviewing techniques for gathering religious historical facts.
iv.	Field and practical work (external programme)	a) Practical Productive Activities (PPA): open-parallel debate on societal issues; speaking engagements at other religious groups; b) Three-week internship; c) Language translation workshop at a Federal university in the state capital; d) computer appreciation/rudiments in MS-word, information dissemination via email, data storage and retrieval; e) Fieldwork/survey to generate religious, social, & historical data (Rounding of activities).

Training sessions adopted involved guided, participatory and independent learning based on four components- Library orientation, grammar and communication skills, research methods and field work.

Training Outcome

The library mediated programme was not implemented with the purpose of administering a formal assessment/test, but a means of inculcating life competencies to equip the clergy (who registered as students) in their positional authority thereafter. Fjallbrant (1996) posits that a sustained pedagogic quality should be manifested in programme design, learning materials

and delivery methods fit for the purpose with quality evidenced in student progression and conformance to academic standards.

i) Field research: this was carried at community and religious group levels by the student-clerics based on the following topical issues assigned to them, though they were given the option of selecting own research themes. Most of the topics were headed under the following: Church history and development, crises management, community conflict and resolution, stewardship and administration, indigenous missionary activities and movements, counseling and family issues.

ii) Library search: Nearly every training schedule required the use of reading materials in the library, particularly with little or no literature at their personal disposal. This was deliberate to inculcate library use effort and reading which prior to the training seemed herculean. More text materials of easy to read version and high density types (secular and religious) were donated & purchased, following recommendations made in view of the library's relevance.

iii) Reports: data generated by student in all practical field work and research using investigative methods, were documented by them in standard report writing format; this being indicative of improved writing skill. Report was also required from various religious groups where the clergy served as interns and few of the responses was that 'the clerics proved diligent, but need to improve their spoken English.' However, **most** of the report from denominations which the student-clerics belonged to, had acknowledged visible improvement in the latter's work responsibility and in verbal communication. One of the overseer's statement was: 'There is remarkable improvement in my church leader, he can now stand before others confidently to minister'.

iv) Cost implications: The location of WOREM institute in a relatively rural area had adverse effect on income generation monetarily, and other forms of support which basically was targeted at the student-clerics for encouragement and sustenance of training programme voluntarily run. Benefaction came from individuals who witnessed publicized student activities of WOREM institute while others were generated through solicited external activities such speaking engagement and internship.

v) Serendipity: The pedagogical experience of the librarian (author) in the course of training equally enriched her knowledge base through observance of cultural idiosyncrasies and learning certain local ideologies while working with participants.

vi) On-going projects: In the last quarter of 2012, few computer systems had been procured with the plan towards internet connectivity and for general administration. This in turn would accord opportunity to upload and process research data generated by student-clerics as electronic content and for the possibility of wide dissemination in the public domain.

vii) Challenging representation: A learner's dispositions earlier discussed in this paper are likely to interfere with learning process, positively or adversely. Earlier views upheld by student- clerics particularly those of advanced age groups, posed some level of cognitive barrier and few others particularly those with low educational background were agitated and expressed misgivings over the certain aspects of the training which they felt was too academic, and not required for their ecclesiastical vocation. Most of the remarks as noted were during tutorials on 'research methods'. Later, three of the students discontinued from the programme. Ironically, students who had earlier passed through University education showed much interest throughout the library initiated training programme which to them, served as a refresher course.

Conclusion

This paper has buttressed the need for training of religious leaders (the clergy) to broaden their knowledge towards meaningful religious discourse. It was also established that the efficacy of library's role as a service domain, would generally be re-inforced when information needs of its community are being addressed and met.

It is widely acknowledged that Information literacy as a key component of lifelong learning ensures that individuals have the intellectual abilities of reasoning and critical thinking (which should extend beyond formal classroom setting) and provides practice and self directed investigations as individuals move into internships and increasing responsibilities (ACRL, 2000).

Essentially, common ground was established in the case of WOREM training programme to drive home the point and allow oneness, while using standard terminologies when communicating. However, care was taken in the use of academic language which is specialized and technical in contrast to social setting which are characterized by casual conversations, relationships, habits, social experiences, universal themes and language that conveys meaning about community (Bailey, 2007; William and Townsend, 2012).

Through vocabulary instruction and various forms of reading offered to WOREM student-clerics as participants, they were enabled to learn wide variety of words, complex and simple to understand.

IFLA (2002) re-iterates the importance of education in various forms and acknowledges library services as gateways to knowledge in providing access to information, ideas and works of imagination in various formats through providing essential support for lifelong, cultural development for all. More so, through variety of collections, the library offers guidance and learning opportunities to improve education and social skills, while furthering reading habits and information literacy.

From the foregoing, training for a leader is meant to be an ongoing process for it affords opportunity not only for gaining new knowledge but sharing of ideas, experiences and problems.

Author's profile: **Kathryn Philip** is a practicing and chartered librarian (CLN) with the University of Uyo library, Nigeria since 1996 where she has been head of various sections/units. She combines her initial background in Communication Arts with her professional activities in librarianship, basically in Reference Information Dissemination and Community Literacy Extension Programmes. Kathryn Philip is a recipient of 'The Most Innovative Library Staff of the Year 2008' Award in University of Uyo and was enlisted in Akwa Ibom State compendium of women 'Who Is Who' in 2010. She has presented papers in the field of librarianship in over ten local and international conferences in countries like Ghana, Kenya and India. She offers volunteer services to community libraries and is presently a doctoral student of Library and Information Science at the University of Nigeria, Nigeria.

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