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Information literacy of undergraduate Vietnamese students viewed from the perspective of cultural context

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Abstract:

This paper reports the results of the study on information literacy (IL) of undergraduate students, conducted at the University of Danang. Participants were 353 undergraduate students. Data were collected with a paper survey consisted of 12 open-ended questions. Then, semi-structured in-depth interview method was applied to enrich the information left by respondents in questionnaires. This study contributes to the body of literature on IL in Vietnam by exploring the information skills and information behavior of the group of undergraduate students. It shows the main constraints and challenges in development of IL education and underlines a very slow change in Vietnamese academia that inhibits actions to be taken to develop an IL educational offer at the universities. Presentations of study results is enriched with the description of IL initiatives undertaken in Vietnam so far and with references to cultural context and background in higher education that may influence both IL initiatives of policy makers and information competences and information behavior of users.

Keywords: information literacy; Vietnam; Vietnamese students; cultural differences

Introduction

Sinic education¹ is being developed rapidly, similarly to other sectors in Southeast Asia. High information competences are one of the most marketable skills that will allow future employees to feel comfortable and self-confident while searching for information.

¹ I use here the term Sinic civilization, following the definition from (Li & He, 2010, p.3): "The Sinic civilization, or Confucian civilization, refers to the shared and related cultures of China and the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia,

In 2017 I conducted a research on information literacy (IL) at the University of Danang, Vietnam. The research project was titled *Students of University of Foreign Language Studies – University of Danang and Their Information Needs. The Study on Academic Users' Information Behavior and Information Literacy*. In this paper I report the results of interviews and questionnaires analysis with the focus on quantitative data left by students in open-ended questions in questionnaire forms. They are, in my opinion, the most valuable data gathered within the study, besides they are related to library and IL issues what is the main theme of this IFLA WLIC session. Data collected separately by the two instruments (questionnaires and interviews) were linked for the purpose of the final analysis presented in this paper. I enrich my paper with the description of information literacy initiatives undertaken in Vietnam so far and with references to cultural context and background in higher education that may influence both IL initiatives of policy makers and information competences and information behavior of users (Al-Muomen, Shaw, & Courtney, 2016).

Study Background

Selected information literacy initiatives in Vietnam

Several initiatives have been undertaken so far to improve the IL development in Vietnam, I describe chosen ones below. However, it is not difficult to notice that all of them were project-based, without any long-term development. I do not feel entitled to provide an analysis of such situation, but undoubtedly the complex management hierarchy in Vietnamese public institutions (characterized by a top-down mechanism) and lack of sustainable planning resulted in waste of what has been worked out earlier and in fact, led to beginning each new initiative from the scratch.

Year 2000 marked a new opening in Vietnamese academic libraries services. This year Atlantic Philanthropies, the US NGO, initiated a project that aimed at designing, constructing and development of modern library facilities, named Learning Resource Centers (LRCs). There are some interesting papers describing the long and complex, also due to cultural context, process of establishing LRCs in Vietnam (Robinson, 2007) as well as first, promising years of their activities (Nguyen, 2006; Robinson & Chien, 2006). Four LRCs were opened in universities of Cantho, Hue, Danang, and Thai Nguyen. The goal was to combine in a holistic way a modern infrastructure with new generation library services. Information literacy was considered to be one of those:

At its most fundamental, it was intended that the classroom and PC based training laboratories should be included in the overall design of the LRC to provide venues for professional library staff to conduct classes in library orientation and information literacy for the staff and students of the university (Robinson & Chien, 2006, p. 15).

But it seems like another missed opportunity. The Learning Resource Center at the University of Danang was opened in July 2005. After twelve years, during my stay at UD, I could observe that not much from the initial goals has been maintained. Budget deficit, staff shortage, lack of e-resources and up to date publications as well as underestimation of library role, the lack of cooperation between the faculty and librarians, and prioritizing other university services resulted in maintaining UD LRC mainly as a quiet study space and a traditional library in a modern building, and not in offering an advanced support for students

which includes China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Korea, and Vietnam. It also includes the Chinese diaspora, especially in relation to Southeast Asia”.

and researchers. A perfect space for an expanded IL education is functioning as a separate university unit with low statistics of visits.

In 2005 UNESCO established a one-year project on Information Literacy for Vietnamese academic libraries. Within this project, staff from ten selected academic libraries were trained and some guidelines prepared to be disseminated in libraries². A list of selected IL resources from years 2006-2012, available in Vietnamese can be also found in an overview of worldwide IL resources published by UNESCO (Nghiem, 2013).

In 2012 <http://infolit/vietnamlib.net> – a portal dedicated to IL development in Vietnam was inaugurated (shut down at the end of 2017). The portal provided, among others, Vietnamese translations of the core IL documents, like for ex. international IL declarations, Big6 Model, etc. VietnamLib.net working group was working actively till 2015, by organizing workshops for librarians and publishing articles or translations³.

Apart from the abovementioned projects, there have been several research studies on information literacy conducted in Vietnam. Some of them resulted in doctoral theses published in Vietnam and abroad (see Diep, 2011; Truong, Dai, 2015); others were research papers published in Vietnamese and foreign journals (for ex. Denison, Pham, & Kim, 2017; Diep & Nahl, 2004; Huyen & Walton, 2016) or communicated on international conferences (Nguyen, 2006). All of those were solid works that underlined current problems and suggested further developments. However, I can risk a statement that they came to nothing. A centralized Vietnamese governmental administration, a multi-level university administration, a big rotation on key administrative positions (where still political ideology counts more than professional knowledge), and a long procedure of decision making are not an environment friendly for grass-roots initiatives. Besides, the lack of IL recognition among faculty is not without meaning. As long as IL will be perceived as a “library issue” and librarians as only administrative supporting staff, it will not be possible to move forward.

Teachers and learners in Vietnam

Confucianism influences powerfully Vietnamese teaching and learning. Teachers and learning process are highly respected, and education is perceived as a gate to social promotion. Vietnamese education is still teacher- and exam-oriented; a teacher is a knowledge provider, pedagogy is a one-way communication. Vietnamese learners' main goal is to pass the exams with the highest note, so the skills of repetition and memorization of teacher's words are the most commonly developed ones (He et al., 2010; Li et al., 2010). It is against the social rules (also rooted in Confucianism) to discuss with the teacher, thus Vietnamese learners lack critical thinking or analytical skills, so important in a knowledge-based society and emphasized in the recent definition of IL, issued by CILIP in February 2018:

Information literacy is the ability to think critically and make balanced judgements about any information we find and use (CILIP, 2018).

² Source:http://www.unesco.org/new/en/brasilia/about-this-office/single-view/news/project_on_information_literacy_for_vietnamese_librarians_ju/ [Retrieved: May 31, 2018]

³ Source: VietnamLib.net Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/vietnamlib.net/> [Retrieved: May 31, 2018].

Indeed, Vietnam has recognized this problem and is currently undergoing several projects to introduce new methods of teaching and learning and equip learners with the skills and knowledge necessary in a free market economy. These are, for ex. “Building a Learning Society 2012-2020”⁴ or “Educational Development Strategy 2011-2020”⁵. But still, these changes need time and it will be difficult to introduce elements of Western pedagogy in Vietnamese socio-cultural context.

Information literacy in Vietnamese university libraries

In 2011 Diep and Nahl (Diep & Nahl, 2011) studied the perceptions of academic stakeholders about the development and delivery of IL instruction. Findings were not optimistic. They showed a lack of understanding the value of IL by faculty and university administration and a weak recognition of the importance of academic librarians is shaping information competences. It has been seven years since Diep and Nahl conducted their study in four Learning Resource Centers (including the one in Danang) and in fact nothing has changed. It looks like a next wasted opportunity. Still, librarians and faculty do not collaborate what seems crucial for a successful IL development within academia and has been widely discussed in literature (see for ex. Caspers & Lenn, 2000; Montiel-Overall, 2005; Raspa & Ward, 2000). Vietnamese academic librarians do not have a faculty status what makes providing IL education more complicated. While faculty who are supposed to be the only ones responsible for teaching, are not aware of IL importance for academic success; besides they recognize IL as responsibility of the library. This is a vicious circle. Librarians cannot rely not only on faculty’s support, but also on the university leaders. We cannot observe any promotional initiatives related to IL since the library depends on administration’s decisions and is underestimated, so it does not receive financial, resource, and staff support to develop IL activities. In sum, academic library education limits to a one-shot “old-style” library orientation compulsory for 1st year BA students.

The low recognition of IL from the part of administration and faculty is dangerous and can be idiomatically compared to scoring an own goal. Current students are future researchers so there is a risk that they will continue to promote negative attitudes towards the library. If Vietnamese education wants to improve and several governmental projects have been already introduced to achieve this aim, university leaders and faculty must acknowledge the importance of IL not only for didactics, but also for research. And this is not the case till now, as Denison et al. (2017) reported in their qualitative study conducted to identify the gaps between library services and researchers’ needs at two big Vietnamese universities: in Ho Chi Minh City and in Hanoi. Similarly to Diep and Nahl, Denison et al. interviewed faculty, librarians and university management staff. They reported a weak librarians’ position in academia and hierarchical structure of Vietnamese universities. This additionally complicates the cooperation between librarians and faculty that in fact, does not exist at all. Interviewed researchers gained IL skills while studying overseas or through self-learning; and they stated that services offered by their Vietnamese academic library were not good enough and librarians did not have specialized knowledge as well as language and communication skills. Researchers underestimated the library role and did not see the library as a partner in research process support. The faculty who studied abroad, however, had a different opinion on the library and its services, but they reported that in Vietnam there were not enough resources offered. This study confirmed the findings of Diep and Nahl’s research—the libraries offer inadequate collections, collaboration between librarians and faculty is desirable but difficult

⁴ Source: <https://uil.unesco.org/document/vietnam-framework-building-learning-society-period-2012-2020-issued-2013> [Retrieved: May 31, 2018].

⁵ Source: <http://vietnamlawmagazine.vn/decision-no-711-qd-ttg-of-june-13-2012-approving-the-2011-2020-education-development-strategy-4704.html> [Retrieved: May 31, 2018].

to achieve because of complex social and organizational structures, negative views in the library's role, a lack of support and communication and institutional IL policy. This is also related to power distance, one of cultural dimensions defined by Geert Hofstede, a cross-cultural psychologist. Power distance is the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally (Boski, 2009). Vietnam is a large power distance society what means that people accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification. Hierarchy in an organisation is seen as reflecting inherent inequalities, centralization is popular, subordinates expect to be told what to do and the ideal boss is a benevolent autocrat. Challenges to the leadership are not well-received⁶.

In my study I went a step lower in university hierarchy. I investigated students' perception of information skills and library services to explore the ways how they manage with information search and retrieval when in fact, they have minimal support from their university library and no structured IL education is offered. And what can be done to support them in educational process.

The Study

Participants, Methods, Instruments

The study was conducted between February and May 2017 at the University of Foreign Language Studies (UFLS), one of the University of Danang member colleges. The sample size consisted of 353 respondents (N=353) with two subgroups: students of International Studies Department (n=267) and students of English Studies Department (n=86).

First, a printed questionnaire consisted of 12 open-ended and multiple choice questions was prepared in English, with Vietnamese translation of some library- and information-related terms that in my opinion students could not know in English. Then, the semi-structured in-depth interview method was used to enrich the information left by respondents in questionnaires. Eighteen interviews were conducted. The interview guide had 14 questions, it was developed in more detail. As Patton (2002, p. 343) writes, the guide helps make interviewing a number of different people more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting in advance the issues to be explored.

Results and Analysis

• Libraries and Librarians in students' opinions

The study revealed a low level of library services offered for students. And, in fact, no IL education what obviously links directly with students' information competences and information skills, their readiness for a long-life learning process and development of skills indispensable nowadays, often named as "21st century skills". The majority of respondents (n=212) self-assessed their level of information competences as intermediate, 40 as low; only six respondents assessed their level as high. Even though the majority of respondents (n=247) declared their participation in the library instruction at the 1st year of study, 104 of them stated that it was not useful. *I didn't learn anything from this [Int_Stud_3rdBA#5]*⁷; *It was boring, information was not provided in an attractive way [Int_Stud_3rdBA#6]*. On the other hand, respondents would like to be trained by library professionals. They are aware that high information competences will make them feel comfortable and self-confident while searching for information that will be not only useful for their studies and future life

⁶ Source: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/vietnam/> [Retrieved: June 3, 2018].

⁷ Respondents were coded as follows: [Field_Name_YearStudyLevel#Respondent no.], for example [Int_Stud_2ndBA#1].

activities, but also trusted, accurate, and reliable; they will save their time, searching for information fast, easy, and effectively. Asked whether librarians have the expertise to advise students how to search for relevant literature, they reported *They could show me how to search for information more quickly and exactly* [Int_Stud_4thBA#4] or *Librarians could really help me improve information searching* [Int_Stud_#rdBA#3]. But also *Librarians could help me if they were willing to* [my underlining-ZW] [Orient_Stud_3rdBA#2]. Here, a next theme opens – a low appreciation of librarians’ work and their attitudes towards students. *Librarians are not easy-going* [Eng_Stud_3rdBA#1]; *Librarians cannot help students. They are totally useless, they don't show their willing to help* [Int_Stud_2ndBA#2]. *I talked few times to librarians but it was complicated. They have 'difficult attitude', I didn't get a satisfactory answer. It was at the 1st year of my studies, then I felt discouraged and I gave up* [Russ_Stud_3rdBA#1]. These respondents’ opinions were acute. In my opinion, on one hand they were result of the lack of librarians’ reactivity, described by Dinh (2011) as tendency to focus only on those people who specifically request library services, rather than proactively reaching out to the general public. On the other hand, they showed students’ frustration caused by a poor condition of university library that has not much to offer and that get only negative and critical opinions about its collection. *Books at our university library are useless for me* [Int_Stud_4thBA#2]; *University library does not have the books I need* [Orient_Stud_3rdBA#1]. Many respondents complained that they cannot rely on UFLS Library since it has a very limited, closed-stacks collection and unpleasant rules of circulation. If they want to read books, they go either to the Danang City Public Library, appreciated by students for its nice atmosphere, useful staff, and big collection of books, or to bookstores in the city, *I go to the bookstore, like to the library. Just to read books there, not to buy them* [Int_Stud_4thBA#4].

In general, respondents perceive UFLS Library as a calm place for individual and group study with own materials, even though Wi-Fi connection is weak and there is no air-condition. Here I see an opportunity for library administration. In a difficult budget environment, without perspectives for library collection improvements, they could go towards adjusting the library to the students’ learning needs. Library as the third place has been widely discussed in literature (see for ex. Montgomery & Miller, 2011) and this kind of transformation might be a good solution to prevent outflow of users and library anxiety that can also be a future side-effect if the underqualified librarians’ attitudes do not change.

- Role of the Teacher in shaping information skills

As mentioned before, teachers are highly respected in Vietnamese society. Teacher-oriented education with a theory-overloaded curriculum and learners who show no interest in critical thinking or analytical skills, but rather in passing exams (He et al., 2010) is somehow conflicted with the principles of information literacy and Western education. This might be another reason of undervaluing IL in Vietnamese academia. Also, a predominant role of teacher in education might impact on downgrading of librarians’ position. A strong relying on teachers’ words could be noticed also in my respondents’ replies when asked whether and how librarians could advise students in searching literature for assessments and help in improving their information skills. *Librarians could help me improve, but libraries here do not have money to buy resources, a teacher said so* [my underlining-ZW] [Eng_Stud_3rdBA#2]. *My searching skills have improved at the university; we have many lecturers, each of them shows us something different. That's very useful* [Int_Stud_2ndBA#1]. *Teachers told me that much information from Google is not good. Librarians can help find better one* [Int_Stud_3rdBA#4]. But also: *Teachers often say 'search in Google'* [Int_Stud_2ndBA#2]. In this environment where teachers are supposed to

be the main knowledge providers, the more frustrating is the lack of cooperation between faculty and librarians. The success in IL implementation in curriculum is unlikely without establishment of strong links of cooperation.

- Preparing for Assessment and Knowledge Sharing

So how do the students manage with regular assessments in the situation when in fact they can rely only on themselves and on teachers' advice? *I don't focus on type of source, but just on information that I need to find* [Eng_Stud3rdBA#2]. This is possible when critical thinking skills are perceived as unnecessary, they are ignored and underestimated. Learners are uncritical of the information they receive from their teachers or from the textbook (He et al., 2010, p. 98). So it does not surprise that some interviewees reported using for assessment a following compilation: a book referenced by a teacher (or, very often, a course textbook), and/or Wikipedia (for extra information) and/or Facebook. Facebook itself and Facebook groups/pages appeared to be very popular knowledge sharing channels among my respondents (see details below). In fact, they serve more as knowledge sources than sharing channels since the majority of respondents declared to be only passive users and not content creators. But still these are the platforms that library should discover as the potential ways of promoting IL. Particularly the services dedicated to IELTSTM tests hints⁸, where IL skills could also be useful. Google is used by the majority of respondents very often (n=254) or often (n=87); however they rather do not use Google Scholar (never n=132; sometimes n=143). High response of never (n=132) and 20 answers left blank might suggest that the respondents do not know this tool. Interviewees asked about reliable websites found on Google mentioned those with many visits, written by professionals or native speakers, recommended by lecturers or other students. Word-of-mouth communication is not without a meaning here. Students recommend each other sources useful in their opinion to achieve assessment success.

- Use of Social Media

The respondents are very often users of Facebook to share information (very often, n=146; often n=124) and often users of Groups on Facebook (very often n=82; often n=171). Among other social media used for information sharing Instagram (n=47), Zalo⁹ (n=59) and personal e-mail and Google accounts (n=32) were listed the most often. Interviewees mentioned also Wikipedia and courses on YouTube as sources of searching for additional information useful for studies and assessments. These are not revolutionary findings, they confirm the popular trend and shift towards Web 2.0 tools that has begun in the first decade of 2000s. It has been more than 10 years now and still Vietnamese university libraries have not fully benefited from Web 2.0 advent. Nguyen's (2014) research confirms this reality. He interviewed ten Vietnamese library management staff, they all were active Web 2.0 tools users for their personal purposes. They saw the advantages of Library 2.0 and engagement users through social media tools, but only few of the libraries they were working in used any of those. Some of the reasons of such a situation was a strict Vietnamese state policy on social media that does not allow libraries and users to take full advantage of those tools. As Nguyen wrote, the rationale for this situation was that it is necessary to do so in order to protect the country from reactionaries misuse of social media (p. 159). However it should be clearly said here that in Vietnam, unlike in China there is no censorship on any kind of Internet resources. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. are freely accessible. That is why some interviewees of

⁸ IELTSTM – International English Language Testing System. <https://www.ielts.org/> [Retrieved: June 3, 2018].

⁹ Zalo is a Vietnamese mobile messaging application.

Nguyen's study declared that in spite of the rigidity of national policy, some libraries and librarians appeared to be flexible. They try to harmonize with the policy and take advantage of emerging technologies open thoughts and willingness of librarians (p. 160, my underlining-ZW). So the willingness is again recalled here...

Conclusion

This study confirmed a current trend that students use mostly social media and Google tools to search and share information. Regarding this, Vietnamese academic libraries should undertake the marketing steps and consider being active users of Web 2.0. For a long time libraries worldwide have been using social media to promote their services and to educate users. This is a low-cost and relatively low time- and staff-engaging activity that can be applied immediately and helps achieve quick and efficient results.

Data analysis showed the students awareness towards IL and their willing to develop information skills. However, they expect to do that in attractive, modern way, adjusted to their learning styles and most common used tools. The respondents would like to have a modern library with a good collection of books and staff who could assist them and help answering on the information needs. Web 2.0 tools seem to be the most convenient modes to succeed in this task.

This study contributes to the body of literature on IL in Vietnam by exploring the information skills and information behavior of the group of undergraduate students. It shows the main constraints and challenges in development of IL education and underlines a very slow change in Vietnamese academia that inhibits actions to be taken to develop a real IL educational offer at the universities. This study should also alert stakeholders—if IL does not gain appreciation and if higher education pedagogy remains teacher-textbook oriented and theory-overloaded, based mainly on repeating and memorizing and not on critical thinking, active self-learning, and problem-based learning, alumni of Vietnamese universities will still be underskilled and not adapted to market economy and knowledge-based society; far from strategical goals set by governmental development and modernization projects. And Vietnamese researchers will not be competitive on a global research area. Their lack of information competences and an IL gap is visible particularly when they go overseas to continue their education on Master or PhD programs. The findings of my another research, related to Vietnamese students in Poland, confirm this statement (see Wiorogórska, in press).

In long-term perspective, this study might be of particular interest for two groups of librarians and information professionals: 1] local, Asian ones, who, while planning information literacy education, will be able to include the issues very important in Western educational environment (like critical thinking, problem-based learning, multiple resources approach, etc.) since the Confucian tradition holds a more authoritative view of knowledge and learning (Lei & Zhang, 2010:135); 2] Western academic librarians who educate Asian students coming from overseas—this study will help them identify differences in patterns of thinking, learning, and reasoning, and thus will facilitate empowering Asian students with information literacy skills.

In narrow perspective, this study provides a short-term promotional recommendations for Vietnamese university libraries that can be summed up in a slogan “Think locally, less formally”. It seems that libraries might approach to students by using the communication channels more attractive and popular among the latter. Social media tools are a good way to

fulfill the needs of students embedded in visual culture. By creating Facebook discussion groups, library's Facebook pages, or Instagram account libraries could provide additional services and information as well as IL educational materials and thus gather students virtually, anytime, anywhere, and work on ameliorating its opinion and promoting its value. Another benefit is that going virtually (and virally) on social media helps avoid the complex formal hierarchy in decision making, and does not require additional funding or staff.

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