



Information Literacy Section, Africa Section, Access to Information Network - Africa

IFLA RIGA 2012

INFORMATION FOR CIVIC LITERACY

The Small Guild Hall, 3/5 Amatu Street, Old Town, Riga, Latvia
8-10 August 2012

The instructional role of information delivery in a university library as a tool for developing awareness of citizenship among student youth: the case of the Central Library of the University of Douala in Cameroon

(La fonction didactique de l'information dans une bibliothèque universitaire comme outil de sensibilisation à la citoyenneté de la jeunesse estudiantine : cas de la Bibliothèque Centrale de l'Université de Douala au Cameroun)

Simon Jules Koudjam Yameni

Head of the Public Relations Section
Central Library of the University of Douala
P.O. Box 2071 Douala, Cameroon
Tel : + (237) 77 65 13 77 / 95 96 66 16
E-mail : yamenisimon@yahoo.fr

Abstract

One of the big threats that weighs on our African societies today is what we can qualify as ideological perils. Although our nations in the past were essentially based on strong and coherent political theories that succeeded in maintaining a certain equilibrium, in the era of information and globalization, where all the different cultures merge, such theories have been breached, plunging our societies into a tormented state in which the principal ills are corruption, political instability (Ivory Coast, Chad, Sudan, Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, etc.), various endemic diseases, incivility, among many others.

Faced with this societal crisis in Africa, all the actors of civil life – such as governments, educators, information professionals, opinion leaders – should mobilize themselves so as to make youth aware of the spirit of citizenship. Conscious of this principle, the Central Library of the University of Douala has developed a permanent educational activity entitled “Today at the Library”. Through an informational guide to the different world days instituted by the United Nations, the African days mandated by the African Union, and even the different national days instituted by the government of Cameroon government, the activities of Today at the Library consist of presenting the different official declarations of governments relating to the theme of the day as well as an exposition of relevant books and publications available at the university library. This educational activity is very much appreciated by our students and has contributed to modifying their negative behaviors within the library in particular and university campus in general.

Résumé en français

L'une des plus grandes menaces qui pèse sur nos sociétés africaines aujourd'hui est ce que l'on peut appeler le péril idéologique. Car si nos nations ont pu par le passé s'appuyer sur des théories politiques fortes et cohérentes qui ont pu maintenir un certain équilibre sociétal, à l'ère de la société de l'information et de la globalisation où toutes les cultures s'imbriquent, ces théories sont aujourd'hui battues en brèche, plongeant nos sociétés dans une tourmente dont les principaux maux sont : la corruption, l'instabilité politique (Côte d'Ivoire, Tchad, Soudan, Libye, Egypte, Tunisie etc.), les maladies endémiques diverses, l'incivilité et bien d'autres.

Face à cette crise sociétale en Afrique, tous les acteurs de la vie civile -- à savoir les gouvernants, les éducateurs, les professionnels de l'information, les leaders d'opinion -- devront se mobiliser pour sensibiliser la jeunesse à l'esprit citoyen. Consciente de ce postulat, la Bibliothèque Centrale de l'Université de Douala a développé une animation permanente intitulée « la journée de la bibliothèque » qui consiste à travers une veille informationnelle sur les différentes journées mondiales instituées par les Nations Unies, les journées africaines de l'Union Africaine et même les journées nationales instituées par le gouvernement camerounais, à présenter les différentes déclarations officielles des gouvernants ainsi qu'une exposition des ouvrages et publications de la bibliothèque relative au thème de la journée. Cette animation qui est très prisée par nos étudiants a contribué à modifier positivement leurs comportements irrespectueux au sein de la bibliothèque en particulier et au campus universitaire en général.

Mots-clés : citoyenneté, éducation, jeunesse, formation, information, bibliothèque, université
Keywords: citizenship, education, youth, training, information, library, university

I – INFORMATION AS A STRATEGIC ELEMENT OF CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Definition of information

The concept of information is not easy to define because it has many senses. For the French *Dictionnaire de l'information*, information is a knowledge communicated by a message transmitted by an individual to another individual. For some authors, information is an element of knowledge likely to be represented with the aid of conventions, so as to be preserved, treated or communicated.

There is a consistent element that comes out in these definitions: information is associated with *knowledge*; which means that someone who is not informed is in the dark, a condition that sometimes predisposes him to an antisocial character and antisocial behaviors.

In a generic way, the term information is seen as referring to instructional data, able to modify the cognitive state of the person who receives or uses it ; information is about more or less concrete, general knowledge, or a piece of news, a fact, a concept. It could be a number, a statement, a still or moving picture, a sound.

Viewed from this angle, information is an instrument of training and education. The pairing of information and training finds in this last definition its entire meaning; from this pairing we construct all the utility of information.

The utility of information

First of all, information serves to reduce our uncertainty about an event, a situation. It is also an essential element of decision making. In an academic library, the information distributed tends to be factual STI (Scientific and Technical Information). Marie-France Blanquet defines three types of information by type of use: “information transmitting knowledge” which is different from “information conveying opinion” and “information for pleasure”. Academic libraries, to be effective and attractive, should reconcile all these types of information; in other words, while giving knowledge, they should allow their users to find pleasure and to integrate into the civil society of opinions in which they live. This implies that an academic library in Africa should bring to its students an information spectrum that will allow them to defy the multiple pains which the continent endures. Our libraries must help students to interact with information in order to become autonomous members of society and to develop the attitudes of a citizen.

II - THE NOTION OF CITIZENSHIP, OR THE CULTURE OF CIVIC LITERACY

What is citizenship or civic literacy?

Citizenship, or the culture of civic literacy, can be defined as a set of practices and positive behaviors that an individual adopts in society. Citizenship is opposed to the notion of incivility which is, according to Sebastian Roché, “a set of extraordinarily varied social nuisances that don't wound people physically, but push aside the elementary rules of social life that allow mutual confidence. Thus, at the university we will be able to detect the behavior of incivility, or a climate of non-citizenship, or a lack of the culture of civic literacy, by the noise in the lecture theaters, the abuse uttered with regard to the teachers, the violence and the nuisances committed in the rooms of the academic campus, graffiti on the walls, cheating, the mutilation of books in the libraries, and so on. Incivilities are challenges to the public order. They are at the origin of the lack of security and acts of vandalism that one encounters in most university campuses of the African countries and indeed of numerous other crises in our societies.

The crisis of the citizenship in Africa

It is truism nowadays to say that African societies are in crisis in all sorts of ways. The main ills that are undermining Africa can be defined in terms of corruption, endemic disease (HIV AIDS), bad governance, fratricidal and civil wars, etc. These pains that Africa is enduring result in part from the abdication by our States from their duty of acting as guarantors of social cohesion against particularisms of all kinds and being solicitous to establish equal rights for all. States ought to be respectful to the first authority, that of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. But we are forced to admit that African nations don't play their role here. Human rights are regularly scorned in them, making their citizens embittered and quarrelsome. The rule of law is more a slogan than a reality. The choice of the government in Africa still does not express the will of the majority of the governed, which usually produces a lack of identification with the leader, weakening the idea of the nation-state. (Consider the recent examples of the civil war in Ivory Coast and the Arab spring in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya.) One of the major reasons for the crisis of society in Africa remains the ignorance of citizens themselves; that is why education for citizenship is so important. This role of the State is of fundamental importance for the transformation of the society, as Claude Nicolet said in the context of the history of France: “The permanent revolution that the Republic operates, is first of all the abolition in the minds of one and all of these its eternal enemies: reliance on a higher power, acceptance of truths ready-made, the selfishness of special interests. Therefrom arise its pedagogy and its morality.”

The imperative of educating African youth for citizenship

Education for citizenship should always and in all circumstances be a concern of partners and champions of African development as well as of all segments of African society, because it seems us that the real liberation of Africa will depend on the degree of public-spiritedness and

civic literacy of its populations. As the UNESCO preamble stipulates: *“It in the mind of men that wars are born, it is in their mind that one must set up the defenses of peace.”* That is why Africa’s financial partners such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and others, will have to take on the burden if they really want to help Africa, through financing programs that aim to train the population for citizenship.

Education for citizenship can be defined as an activity of socialization of the young, of their formation in the rules by which life is to be lived in society and in the environment. In Cameroon, civic education is a subject taught since primary school and goes on in secondary school until the graduating class. Once at the university, the young adult student, who recited without understanding very well and who blindly assimilated all the values that one tried to instill in him or her in those lessons of civic instruction at the secondary level, doesn't have these teachings anymore at the postsecondary level, the very level of study where adult mental faculties begin to develop well and to discern. Outside the courses in legal studies, there is really no more training for citizenship. In consequence youth, who are beginning to become independent and to get rid of parental authority, believe themselves to be quite emancipated and are therefore tempted to adopt deviant behaviors.

And yet the university is the very place where the educated civic-minded person is born and shaped, by struggling with the particularisms of society such as languages, religions, cultural convictions, divergent moralities and the prejudices instilled by traditions or ignorance. At the Main Library of the University of Douala in Cameroon, we discerned the necessity of youth education for citizenship at the post-secondary level, by using some stratagems in order to give a civic literacy to our students.

III–THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE CENTRAL LIBRARY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF DOUALA TO THE CIVIC LITERACY OF ITS STUDENTS

A brief overview of the University of Douala

The University of Douala is one of the eight State Universities that are found in Cameroon. It was created in 1993 by a decree of the Head of State. It was a question for the Cameroonian government of easing the pressure on the single State University in the inland capital, Yaoundé, which at that time already counted some 50 000 students.

The University of Douala is located in the city of Douala, the coastal economic metropolis of Cameroon. This University is composed of eleven established faculties or institutes:

- The Faculty of Letters and Social Sciences (FLSS)
- The Faculty of Law and Political Science (FLPS)
- The Faculty of Economics and Applied Management (FEAM)
- The Faculty of Science (FS)
- The Faculty of Medicine and the Pharmaceutical Sciences (FMPS)
- The Faculty of Industrial Engineering (FIE)

- The Institute of Technology (IT)
- The Advanced School of Economics and Commerce (ASEC)
- The Advanced Teacher's Training College for Technical Education (ATTCTE)
- The Institute of Fine Arts (IFA)
- The Institute of Fishing Sciences (IFS)

Currently the University of Douala has close to 45 000 students, with an instructional staff complement of about 700 teachers, a Central Library served by three professionals and 26 support staff, and about another 700 administrative personnel.

The University Library of Douala

The documentary collections and services of the University are organized into the Central Library, a Library of the Doctoral Schools and eleven specialized libraries in the different faculties and institutes. In the technical realm the Central Library coordinates the activities of the other libraries. It is located in the main campus of the University; its capacity is only about 300 places for readers, although it should be noted that the construction is nearing completion of a new academic library with a capacity of 1500 places. The Central Library is managed by a team composed as follows:

- A Director
- A Deputy Director
- Three division heads (Public Relations, Processing and Conservation, Interlibrary Cooperation)
- Four office heads

The daily intake of clients can be broken down as follows:

- Teachers: on average 20 per day
- Students at the level of the Licentiate degree: on average 300 per day
- Students at the Master's degree level: on average 70 per day
- Students at the Doctoral degree level : on average 20 per day. Note those students also have a special library reserved for them elsewhere in the city.

And here are some statistics on the collection:

- Monographs: 22 291 volumes
- Reference works: 400 volumes
- Reports: 570
- Theses: 112
- Magazines and periodicals: 63
- Electronic documents: 30 (essentially all on CD-ROM).

For the next budget, computerization will come into effect with the deployment of the free software PMB. However advice and orientation are already given to the teachers and researchers to help them use the books and electronic journals that are in OPEN ACCESS.

It can be seen that our library remains young, like the University itself, which was created only in 1993. It should also be noted that it is the younger student population, composed of the students at the licentiate level, who come more to the library. Thus arises our idea of training them in the positive norms of life in a civil society.

Education for citizenship at the Central Library of the University of Douala

We in the Public Relations Section had observed over a period of several years that the students who came to the library were, year after year, younger and younger and less concerned with the virtues and values of civil behavior. They appeared more and more disrespectful towards the staff of the library. They wore casual, indecent and extravagant clothes. We decided that it was in the interests of good taste to lead some actions in order to train and educate them for better citizenship in the university community.

Instructions were given to the agents in charge of reference inquiries to sensitize students verbally to their failings, and in the Public Relations Section of the library generally, to forbid library entry to all students (independently of gender) who were inappropriately clothed. This technique of verbal sensitization, if it brought some slight change of behavior, was not too successful, because it regularly turned into a cause of invective between the library staff and the students.

Meeting after meeting, it seemed essential to us to use the strength and persuasive force of information to achieve a change in the behavior of our students. This is how an ongoing educational activity called "Today at the Library" came to be instituted. A big glass-covered bulletin board was set up at the entry of the library, with the motto: **Journée de la Bibliothèque (Today at the Library)**. A team of three persons was put together to organize this bulletin board regularly, using the technique of an information watch. The team have a computer connected to the Internet and are assigned to review the sites of the United Nations and of the African Union on an ongoing basis, as well as to follow the Cameroon's national radio and television regarding upcoming special national days. To achieve the desired results, they use as a surveillance tool the Google Reader, through which they subscribe to the RSS feeds of these sites and have regular current information.

Once the information is acquired, the team makes an announcement on the bulletin board by posting, for example, a notice that "Tomorrow will be the Day of the African Child." Thereafter they download a relevant declaration by those responsible for the event, choosing for the Day of the African Child to use the Declaration of the Chairman of the Commission of the African Union, which they enlarge into A5 format. As the Library subscribes to the government's daily newspaper, the *Cameroon Tribune*, the team should also collect the statement of the government minister in charge of the sector relating to that day. For example, in Cameroon, for the Day of the African Child, this would be a statement by the Minister for Women and the Family.

When these elements are put together, the team, under my supervision as Chief of the Public Relations Section, writes a small commentary in relation to the theme of the day and proceeds to prepare a display of related materials: the declarations of the governing authorities, the commentary of the library, and a display nearby of all the publications available in the library and relating to the theme of the day concerned.

Examples of other special days honored in the library include : the Day of the Rights of the Child (20 November) ; the World Day of Struggle against HIV AIDS (1st December) and the Cameroonian Week against AIDS (last week of November) ; the International Day for the Abolition of the Slavery (2 December) ; the World Day of the Human Rights (10 December) ; International Women’s Day (8 March), the World Day of Bilingualism (30 January), World Day of the Book and of Reading (23 April), the World Day of Struggle against Malaria (25 April), and International Labour Day (1 May).

The influence of this ongoing educational activity on library visits

Created in the academic year 2008-2009, this ongoing educational activity has deeply modified habits not only inside the library, but also within the entire campus. Today at the Library is very popular with the students and the news spreads very quickly in the campus and attracts many students to come in and learn more, increasing our client audience attendance rate. The following tables are a perfect illustration of this effect.

Table 1: Attendance by faculty or institute at the Central Library, year 2008-2009

FACULTY OR INSTITUTE	AUDIENCE SIZE	ATTENDANCE	RATE (%)
FLSS	5126	564	11
FLPS	6513	1246	19,13
FEAM	10230	1432	13,99
FS	5421	2156	39,77
FMPS	654	25	3,82
FIE	687	54	7,86
IT	2956	09	0,30
ASEC	1752	879	50,17
ATTCTE	3857	498	12,91
IFA	31	0	0
IFS	59	0	0

The library is small in capacity. The ratio between the number of seated places and the number of students and teachers of the University is very weak and is about 300/45000. This is one of the reasons why the students in 2008-2009 didn't show any passion for coming to the library, because they knew that there were not many places to sit.

However, it should be noted that students and teachers from the last two institutes in the table, the Institute of Fine Arts and the Institute of Fishing Sciences, failed to come to the Central Library for a different reason; they are located out of the city of Douala, in the towns of Nkongsamba and Yabassi respectively.

Table 2: Attendance rates by faculty or institute at the Central Library, years 2009-2011

FACULTY OR INSTITUTE	AUDIENCE SIZE	ATTENDANCE	RATE (%)
FLSH	6418	564	16,26
FSJP	7055	2982	42,26
FSEGA	11138	2544	22,84
FS	6536	3024	46,26
FMSP	706	42	5,94
FGI	791	108	13,65
IUT	3462	18	0,51
ESSEC	1872	1452	77,56
ENSET	4381	708	16,16
IBA	63	0	0
ISH	112	0	0

The rebound of interest in the library reflected by the increased audience attendance rates is due particularly to the introduction of the ongoing educational activity “Today at the Library” which attracts many students.

Influence of this ongoing educational activity on student behavior

Since the introduction of “Today at the Library”, we have been noticing that students have been more and more responsible and polite. They don't drop trash any more because our programme has sensitized them to the effect of garbage on the environment and to the climatic changes that threaten the world. The Red Cross Club of the University has even joined the library in organize a campaign for a “Plastic-free campus”.

Students are dressing better and better and are paying more attention to illnesses such as AIDS. Since we celebrated the day dedicated to the handicapped, they show more respect to their handicapped fellow-students in the library. It is not rare to meet students looking for books for their handicapped classmates and friends.

In the same way, male students have more and more consideration for their female friends; they even respect the library staff, and often ask to help them in sorting and shelving books.

Students are inspired regularly by the themes raised on the bulletin board of the library, themes relating to the learning activity of the day or week, using them as a basis to organize conferences in the clubs and associations of the university. The bulletin board for Today in the Library has become a reference point for the whole university. Students and the whole academic community are informed by it to their hearts' content.

CONCLUSION

The experience of running this ongoing educational activity for civic literacy in the Central Library of the University of Douala has allowed us to understand the fundamental role that a documentation center can play both in the training and the education of its immediate environment and in the whole of society. It is therefore imperative that we African information professionals put all our knowledge and expertise to work in order to transform mentalities and to permit a harmonious development of the whole of civil society. This is particularly necessary in those of our African Countries that suffer from a deficit of civility, a lack of the civil literacy which is our pledge of stability and social peace. This remedy should be the creed of the “information society” that we call for with all our hopes.

BIBLIOGRAPHY IN FRENCH

- ACCART (J-P.), *Le métier de Documentaliste*, Paris, Éditions du Cercle de la Librairie, 2003.
- CACALY (S.) et al, *Dictionnaire de l'Information*, 3^{ème} éd, Paris : Armand Colin, 2008.
- CHAUMIER (J.), *Les Techniques Documentaires au fil de l'Histoire : 1950-2000*, Paris, ADBS éditions, 2002.
- MATTELART (A.), *Histoires de la Société de l'Information*, Paris, Édition La Découverte, 2001.
- PALLIER (D.), *Les Bibliothèques*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1997.
- VALADIER (P.), « L'Idée d'une République en péril » dans la revue *Études*, n°10, juin 2004 (Paris : Édition SER-SA)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simon Jules Koudjam Yameni, a library professional from Cameroon, was born on February 18, 1970, in Douala, and did her university studies in Yaoundé : Licence ès Sciences naturelles, Université de Yaoundé I, and DESS en Sciences de l'information et documentation, at the École Supérieure des Sciences et Techniques de l'Information et de la Communication (ESSTIC), Université de Yaoundé II. She works as head of the Public Relations Section at the Central Library of the University of Douala. She is an active member of ABADCAM, the Cameroonian Association of Librarians, Archivists, Documentation Specialists and Museum Experts (<http://www.abadcam.sitew.com>) and is webmaster of its section for the Coastal Region.