



Building Strong Libraries and Library Associations through Continuing Professional Development: the case of Ghana Library Association

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Abstract:

Qualified librarians in Ghana possess a postgraduate qualification in librarianship from any school of library and information studies. To ensure that they remain in tune with the changing trends and new developments in the profession, librarians should maintain a process of continuing professional development on a formal and informal basis. Library associations at the local, national, regional and international levels are of great importance to libraries, the profession and the society. Library associations must act as major players in the continuous development of the profession within this rapidly changing world. Librarians in Ghana and for that matter Africa need to be educated to understand and adapt to new ideas, new technologies and new services. The Ghana Library Association (GLA), must be able to provide educational opportunities through conferences, workshops, publications, among others. The Association of Information Specialist in the Republic of Georgia provides such needed training for its librarians. This helps to influence the development of standards of education for the profession like it is done in the US and Canada. The global community is a reality in the twenty-first century. Many of the issues that were national issues for libraries, such as copyright and technological standards are now international issues. Decisions made at international venues now have a dramatic impact on how libraries in a specific country are able to function, and determine what services they can provide. In this regard, the members of the GLA need to work together share experiences and ideas on initiatives beyond the countries borders. This paper provides a brief overview of the general role of the Ghana Library Association and how Continuing Professional Development (CPD) could help build strong libraries and the library Associations in Ghana.

Keywords: Education, Librarians, Information Specialist, Lifelong learning, Training

Introduction

Excellence in quality delivery in any library cannot be achieved if the library staff is not of a high professional standard. Continuing professional education has been important in the past as it is today. The on-going revolution in information technology plus the information explosion demands changes not only in what we learn, but also how we learn in the classroom and beyond. To succeed in this new environment means not only knowing how to access information, but also how to analyze and use it efficiently and effectively. Keeping up with the explosion in information and technology challenges those in the work force to continually renew their skills and expand their frontiers of knowledge. Education and lifelong learning are equally important for the growing number of older librarians who may or may not be actively employed. For people of all ages, lifelong learning is the key to longer, healthier, more satisfying and productive lives.

Continuous learning is critical to renewing the expertise and skills needed to assist patrons in this information age. Library workers must continually expand their knowledge in order to keep up with the rate of change. Whether a librarian is at an entry-level professional, mid-career librarian, support staff, or senior management staff, the Ghana Library Association (GLA) should have continuing educational resources for its members' professional development. "Library is a growing organism"- so says Dr. S. R. Ranganathan. As libraries grow, changes become inevitable. Changes sweeping across libraries have never been so pronounced as seen in recent times with the advent of Information Communication Technology (ICT) applications in libraries (Broady-Preston, J. 2009a). Phenomenal changes are seen in the way users' access information and how libraries are acquiring, managing and using their information resources in the present era. These changes are also affecting libraries, the library profession and information science in new ways as never before. Library professionals of today need to be skilled in many ways and they can do so through continuing professional development. Broady-Preston (2009a) is of the view that the information profession is experiencing a period of profound change in relation to its qualification base. Continuing Professional development (CPD) is the means by which members of professional associations maintain, improve and broaden their knowledge and skills and develop the personal qualities required in their professional lives. CPD can also be defined as the conscious updating of professional knowledge and the improvement of professional competence throughout a person's working life. It is a commitment to being professional, keeping up to date and continuously seeking to improve. It is the key to optimizing a person's career opportunities, both today and for the future (Wikipedia, 2010). It is the participation in an activity that enhances and or increases the knowledge and skills of a professional in relation to his or her work. The initial formal education of every professional provides him or her with his or her professional qualification. Engaging in Continuing Professional Development is about increasing and enhancing that professional qualification (Broady-Preston, 2009a). As one participates in the CPD Scheme or plan, one is showing a commitment to his professional growth. Keeping ones professionals' skills up to date and being abreast with new and changing technologies not only benefits professionals, but also give the employer a staff member with expansive skills and experience. (Broady-Preston 2009b)

Libraries and information services help people to improve educational and social skills, which are indispensable in an information society for sustained participation and development. Therefore having a continuing professional development program, scheme or plan by GLA will offer the library professionals in Ghana the opportunity not only to demonstrate equivalency with other professions, but also to move forward with confidence in an ever-changing landscape. It will also serve as a solid foundation for an employer engagement strategy, ensuring recognition of the value of professional qualification and training, thus equipping GLA to meet the rapidly changing needs of its members in a volatile environment. This will empower Librarians and Information Professionals to let stockholders to understand the key role that libraries and library staff play in the economic, social and educational fabric of a nation. They can speak passionately on the importance of not only sustaining, but also increasing support for libraries. For example in America “Authors Speak Out for Libraries”, is a new campaign that enlists American authors to become articulate and powerful spoke people for libraries.

There is, however, a growing body of research-based evidence that is changing the perceptions of mentoring as being an ‘underground’ form of continuing professional development which, while it was to be encouraged, was too amorphous and of too uncertain value to be incorporated into the services that professional associations provide to members. In particular, the growing evidence suggests that while informal mentoring is valuable and will undoubtedly continue, there may be even greater benefit to mentoring relationships that are conducted within properly managed and supported programmes, (ALA 2011).

Conducting such programmes under the auspices of a professional association like the GLA has benefits for the mentors, mentored and the association. Mentors benefit by being able to demonstrate their commitment to the profession, learn from their relationship with their mentoree, and receive training. For the mentoree, in addition to the learning and support they receive from their mentoring experience, such programs bring with them the added support offered by having a gateway to the wider networks, services and advantages to be found in association membership. For the association, mentoring programmes facilitate the transmission of professional values, and also offer an individually targeted attraction to professionals to join and then retain their membership.

This paper provides a brief overview of the general role of Ghana Library Association in Ghana in relation to continuing Professional Development (CPD) and how it can help build strong libraries and the library Association in Ghana.

The development of Ghana Library Association (GLA)

The Ghana Library Association (GLA) was founded in 1962. It was an offshoot of the West African Library Association, (WALA). It was the dawn of a new era and it was considered vital for library development to have national associations. Since 1963, the GLA has been the main body representing libraries and information services formally in Ghana since 1963. This was Gazetted (page 228 of the Ghana Gazette No. 17) on 29th March 1963 (Oddoye, 1989). It was registered under the Professional Bodies Decree NRCD 143 of 1973 with Registration No. PB 21 dated 2nd August 1986 (GLA, August 2006). Currently it has 400 members with a governing council chaired by the President of the association. Annual General Meetings (AGM) as well as one or two workshops are organised every year which from the researchers’ point of view is inadequate to produce highly trained and motivated individuals, who are abreast and ahead of the key information issues.

Continuous learning is critical to renewing the expertise and skills needed to teach and assist library users in the new information age, (Dowling and Fiels 2009). Therefore education and continuous learning should be one of the key action areas that must be adopted by the Ghana Library Association for promoting the highest quality library and information services for all people. Its role should be to provide librarians and library staff with opportunities for professional development and promoting continuous, lifelong learning for all people. The Ghana Library Association should also promote the highest quality library service by providing leadership and support for both the professional education of librarians and the development of library programs and services that support continuous learning for the public. These strategies could help build strong libraries and strengthen the library association in Ghana.

Challenges faced by libraries in Ghana

For about three decades now, libraries in Africa have not been in good shape. From school through public to special and academic libraries, the same problems present themselves, making it difficult for them to discharge the duties expected of them effectively. School libraries are where the firm foundation for a reading culture, independent and resourceful learning are laid in the citizenry in their formative years. Unfortunately classrooms are usually used as the school library and any unqualified staff are put in-charge. Public libraries are the haven for students, regular and part time, where they have access to textbooks. They also provide general informational and educational materials to the public, from children to the aged. These libraries are seriously struggling with funding, high staff turnover among others. Academic libraries provide current information to support teaching, learning and research. They also have low funding and have made the academic libraries ill-equipped for serious academic work. Special libraries are developed to support the mission of their sponsoring organization and their collections and services are more targeted and specific to the needs of their clientele.

From observation, all these types of libraries are not functioning to expectation because of low priority given to their development. Inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, including limited Internet access and unreliable electricity supply, limited qualified personnel, inadequate ICT facilities, lack of technical support for ICT, are some of the major factors that limit the support Ghanaian libraries can give to the creation and sustenance of the knowledge society. It should be noted that libraries by nature and function, provide a service without direct financial gains. They are meant to be non-profit making as they create opportunities for education, information, economic development, leisure reading etc. They assist greatly in a successful knowledge and democratic society. This therefore means that they should not be measured with services which are meant to be profit oriented when funds are being allocated. Perhaps the time is ripe for libraries in Ghana and other developing countries to consider charging fees for some of their services to reduce their over-reliance on their central governments for funding.

The state of libraries and the image of Librarians in Ghana

Antwi (1987) argues that although there has been a considerable output of educated Ghanaians during recent years, Ghanaians have not cultivated reading as a habit, this may be due to the absence of good libraries in institutions they attend and where there are libraries they are not properly organized and effective. In Ghana, Libraries lack suitable

accommodation, equipment, competent staff and sustained financial support. The need to improve the deplorable state of these libraries should occupy the attention of the Ghana Library Commission, librarians and the Ghana Library Association. Since the potential user of libraries for life-long and continuing education start from schools and colleges.

The concept image has to do with the impression, perception or conception the public holds about a person or a thing. A person or a thing which has a good image is held in high esteem by society. Such a person or a thing is viewed as to have made and/ or continues to make positive or virtuous contribution to the well being of society. Their importance notwithstanding, libraries and librarians tend to have a generally low image in Ghana (Bani, 2003). Much as librarians in Ghana can be blamed for poor image projection, much can also be blamed on external such as inadequate funding and an unfriendly library environment. Blunden-Ellis (1992) point out that library personnel themselves are vital to image, and this should be acknowledge in staff training.

Building strong Libraries in Ghana

Libraries have always served as places where people of all ages and means can connect to ideas, information and each other. Today, in most developed countries, communities large and small are reinvesting in public libraries as centers for culture and lifelong learning. A 1999 survey, conducted by the ALA Public Programs Office with funding from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, confirms the role of the public library as a dynamic cultural centre with book discussion groups, author presentations and other cultural programming offered by nearly 9 out of 10 public library respondents (ALA, 2011). A similar study, funded by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, reports an abundance of educational programming for school-age youth, including summer reading programs, author appearances, and musical and drama performances. More than a third of the 1,248 respondents offer instruction in using the Internet, and quarter offer special homework help. (ALA, 2011).

Libraries are also leaders in the adult literacy movement; therefore they should offer reading programs for adults in Ghana. Besides libraries need also to offer family literacy programs designed to ensure that both parents and children become readers and lifelong learners. Like the public library, the school and academic libraries have a key role to play in preparing youth to be lifelong learners. Using digital technologies, as well as traditional formats such as books and magazines, librarians in school, college and university libraries teach students how to find and use information for their studies, future employment and lifelong enjoyment. In developed countries like America, libraries are uniquely positioned to serve as community centres that enable people of all ages to keep learning throughout their lives. In person and online, libraries connect even the smallest communities with the whole world of ideas and information (ALA 2011). In this regard if GLA is able to equip librarians through continuing professional development, they can act as an advocacy group that can lobby the government of Ghana and other agencies like legislators and policy makers to pass laws and fund libraries in the country.

It will also offer Librarians and Information professionals the opportunity to market themselves positively as highly trained and motivated individuals, abreast and ahead of the key information issues.

Promoting learning for all by Libraries

Helping all people to be lifelong learners is the goal of Roads to Learning, an initiative to improve services to people with learning disabilities, their families, professionals and other interested individuals. The project could be administered by a wing of the Ghana Library Association that could be called the Specialized and Cooperative Libraries (SCL). It aims to bring information about learning disabilities to the general public through libraries while increasing public libraries' capacity to serve their communities in this area.

Why GLA

Library associations at the local, national, regional and international levels are of great importance to libraries, the profession and society. Ghana Library Association (GLA) must be a leader in library education and continuous learning efforts in keeping with its mission to deliver the highest quality library and information services to all people. It must liaise with the universities, research institutions and the Ghana Library commission to draw the best practices for libraries and librarianship in Ghana. The information age has brought opportunity for libraries to exponentially expand the information and services provided to users through the Internet, digitisation of collections, and new technologies. Libraries and librarians must be forward thinking in adopting and implementing new technologies and services to keep pace with the demands of users, without which libraries will find themselves on the fringes of the information age.

Conclusion

Professional associations with a desire to engage members in a full range of continuing professional development options should now see training as not only being desirable, but as something they can provide through formally structured and facilitated programs. This may appear a challenging task, given that other forms of continuing professional development such as conferences and short courses have far more in the way of precedents, guidelines for success, and measurable outcomes or benefits.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are hereby made for the improvement of Ghana library Association activities in building strong libraries and library Association in Ghana.

1. Ghana library Association should have a unique role to play in assessing the continuing education needs of its members and of those in the profession; coordinating programs to meet those needs; communicating their availability; and delivering training where appropriate. As a priority for the association, continuing education of members should be sponsored and delivered by the association. Every effort must be made to find sponsors for this laudable programme when the GLA cannot organise it due to financial constraint.
2. In addition to professional education for librarians, the Ghana Library Association should encourage and supports public libraries as community centres for lifelong learning. These activities can take several forms like regularly organising debates and quiz competitions with attractive prizes for winners.

3. GLA should provide electronic discussion lists to promote communication on a range of issues, as well as opportunities for networking and mentoring within the association.
4. Workshops, Seminars and short training courses for members on current developments in the profession must receive the priority attention of the Ghana Library Association.
5. GLA should increase on the number and variety of refresher courses they run within a year for the upgrading of skills for the members.
6. As a way of keeping their professionals in top form, they could require that membership be categorised into some level and members could move from a level to another level after achieving some level of accomplishment e.g. published 2 or more researched articles. And that one can attain a certain professional level on the market only when you are at a certain level in the profession association.

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