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## Information Literacy Development within Oral Cultures: Challenges and Opportunities within a Southern African Country

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### **Abstract**

*The paper discusses orality and reading as communication systems. It draws out the underlying information cultures and their contribution to learning and the "dimension of literacy that embraces the ability to find, read (listen, view) information; understand, interpret and apply it with critical discrimination, building knowledge". (G.Gawith 2005. 'Information Literacy and Inquiry' Good Teacher Term 1, 9). Through a case study, challenges and opportunities for creation of a supportive information environment are explored. The integration of an oral, home culture with the script, based culture, through story telling, writing and performance is proposed as a basis for establishing a recognizable continuum between the oral and script cultures. Through this process it is expected that transition will be facilitated from a people-linked interactive enquiry and cognitive processing to an internalized individual information literacy practice i.e. enabling a child from a predominant oral culture/information environment to "move confidently from handling oral information and incidental learning to learn intentionally with a combination of text, pictures, numbers, graphics and electronic information sources to meet educational goals" (P. Moore (2002) "Information Literacy: What's it all about?" Willington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research; p27).*

*It is further expected that the telling and writing will contribute to publication of products in the mother tongue, thus providing opportunities for local content creation, a first step to the creation of a knowledge society.*

## **Introduction**

The majority of people and communities in Sub Sahara Africa rely on orally based information networks and interpersonal communication for personal decision-making, survival and contributions as citizens. This results in orality becoming a dominant communication system which is defined as:

a characteristic of a communication system that emphasizes aural (audio) perception, which contrasts with scripturality, a communication system with a visual bias, usually referred to as literacy.  
(Houis, 1980:12)

However, literacy as a term has complex meanings which are variously linked to a measure of "development of skills aimed at acquiring the dominant standard language" (Macedo, 1991:147) and as "a notion that writing and reading are ways of making, interpreting, and communicating meaning, where reading is defined as the ability to take meaning from print and writing is the ability to use print to communicate with others" (McLane & McNamee 1990:2). It is further linked to assessment of development levels reflected through "literacy rates that are factored into the growth rates of societies" (Dossou, 1997:282). Recently literacy is being associated with various competences including analytical skills in the interpretation of content, for example in information literacy.

Through simply being human, people have skills to communicate orally, exchange information and share knowledge. They make meaning through questioning, analysis of information and clarification of issues. Interpretation and integration of received information facilitates assimilation of new information into a person's context, with personally held knowledge that is embedded in the mother tongue and culture. This process results in the creation of new knowledge (Burton 2001, 222 in Stilwell et.al.)

The making of meaning assumes prior knowledge of an aspect of received information, accompanied by interaction between held knowledge and received information. The resultant integration may bring about change in knowledge. If this occurs, development is facilitated in accordance with the definition of development which is seen as a "participatory process of social change in a society intended to bring about social and material advancement (including greater equality, freedom, and other valued qualities) for the majority of people through their gaining greater control over their

environment". (Rogers, 1983:121) Development occurs at the individual level.

The process of social change in an oral society cannot, but, depend upon people-centered communication channels, exchange of information and participatory engagement to facilitate mutual personal growth.

### People-centered information networks

Information and knowledge sharing in oral cultures rely on people-centered information networks and trust relationships. Trust relationships and networks develop where individuals and communities have an opportunity to meet, have issues of common interest or need in which they engage in discussion, solve problems and/or produce new information or simply exchange perspectives. Even when no solutions to shared problems are derived from communal exchanges, the stimulation may provide inputs for a chain of thought, observations on alternative approaches or life-world-views, in relation to identified needs, or issues of common interest, thus facilitating learning. Person to person interaction, rather than the solitary intellectual engagement with print media, (i.e. reading or 'taking meaning from print'), is the information communication framework for an oral society.

In the analysis of successful methods for providing information to predominantly oral, rural communities in developing countries, Leach (2001) identified factors that contribute to exchange of information and sharing of knowledge as:

- Convenient time and place
- Established relationship between the provider and those who seek information.
- Absence of the authoritative (top-down) information between an institution/organization that owns information and the user that has information need and objectively reaches for it.
- Development of an interactive process of sharing information based on interdependence in the exchange of news, information and knowledge, thus creating a trusting relationship.

This approach to information provides a participatory method of sharing 'ways of knowing' and creation of knowledge for addressing problems and

information needs of individuals or communities. It has nurtured and sustained indigenous knowledge systems for centuries. It is an outcome of an inquiry process articulated orally, as far as is possible. The process thus demonstrates applicability, to orality of information literacy, defined as:

- Recognition and definition of a need for information
- Locating and selecting appropriate sources of needed information whether people (orally) or from script or electronic)
- Evaluation of information at hand
- Identification of relevant information for solving an issue or problem
- Organization for sharing with others orally or in writing as necessary ([www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org))

### Orality and entry into the Information Society

The rapid growth of information and the need to harness and exploit telematics and information communication technology (ICT) for access to information has ushered the information society (IS). Successful entry into the IS demands that people develop new attitudes towards information use and its exploitation.

There is a need for consciousness about the fact that although information is a commodity, it is not diminished by the process of sharing. In fact, the value of information is enhanced in differing ways, depending on the knowledge environment/context into which it is embedded. Thus there is a need for the traditional societies to discard the oft held belief that power is embedded in the hoarding of information without its profitable usage or addition of value to it through enhancements. The development of an authentic information society is further dependent on a realization of a culture of freedom of access and exchange of information, balanced through globally negotiated and accepted safeguards that provide for the acknowledgement of intellectual property rights of individuals, groups and communities, regardless of whether the medium of information transmission is print or aural. The internalization of this principle as a way of life will lead to routine recognition of information needs and resultant trigger effect for searching, accessing, selecting and exploitation of information available locally and/or globally, for decision-making as a fundamental skill for all.

The requirements for being part of the Information Society is thus causing a paradigm shift whereby oral communities and their social systems can no longer depend on their own local or indigenous knowledge systems as the predominant source of information for resolution of problems and decision-making. Further, successful entry into the information society is dependent on expertise in the manipulation of ICTs as carriers of information and as tools that facilitate rapid access to information sources. The ability to read is currently a distinct advantage. Given the information glut, empowerment of users in efficient search methods, effective content assessment for relevance to personal needs is equally important. However, the prescribed methods for successful entry into the IS must build on existing information literacy competencies which are central to successful aurally mediated and orally negotiated information exchange or access skills and smart use or exploitation of information.

The deluge of information in variety of media that confronts society in general and, specifically, oral communities is a challenge for all societies. There is a pressing need to develop ways of making meaning in order to address human development needs related to health, food security, education etc. for building personal control based on self reliance and empowerment. Traditional channels of communication and selection of relevant sources of information have widened and adapted over time to engage knowledgeable informants (such as extension specialist workers in the various sectors) who may be accessible in person or through, for example, ICT platforms that aurally or visually extend information access or reach, such as the mobile phone, radio, and other audio-visual media such as film or television. Underlying successful information search and use, is problem posing approach through which personal and community challenges are identified, analyzed and decisions taken on basis of reflection about personal/community needs, and context of their lives for development of critical literacy or awareness and understanding which leads to action (Paulo Freire, 1970.) This process reflects aspects of information literacy which is a characteristic of an information society in all active information environments, including the context of orality.

### Information society and children

Children in the 21<sup>st</sup> century face challenges and opportunities offered by the tools of the information society, which were unknown to those of earlier generations. Traditional social systems generally shielded children as far as possible, from influences external to their context of life, except during periods of upheaval such as in times of war, and famine. The 21<sup>st</sup> century children are bombarded by content carried in a variety of media, the internet, video games etc, that are inaccessible to parents due to either time

constraints or outside of their interests or beyond their comprehension. In describing the challenges of childhood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Scott (2004) says: "in the post modern world, parents and other adults are often not available to act as mediators. Furthermore, adults often have little comprehension of the realities of the cultural neighborhood that children inhabit. Consequently the media and other forms of digital interfaces act as surrogate mediators for children".

Children in Sub-Sahara Africa are also dealing with unprecedented social challenges that demand development of alternative or new ways of knowing in the absence of parental guidance, due to the loss of parents in early childhood, on account of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In other cases, as infected people, children have to grapple with the reality of their health issues and deal with the impact of social and psychological isolation imposed on them by stigma that tends to be associated with the HIV/AIDS disease, as a result of destabilization it causes in peoples' lives and communities.

Access to useful information and knowledge that solves an immediate problem or triggers appropriate action, in a time of crisis, can mean the difference between life and death. "Twenty years after the first clinical evidence of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) was reported, the UNAIDS Report (2004) states that the actual number of people living with HIV has not decreased, but the epidemic continues to grow due to new infections. It was estimated that, in 2003, of the 38 million people living with AIDS globally, 10 million were young people, aged 15-24 years whilst 25 million of this global figure, were in Sub-Saharan Africa, of whom more than 50% are women. The report further indicates that Asia may be considered to be the home of the fastest growing AIDS epidemic in the world. Regrettably, it is noted in the same report that the availability of antiretroviral drugs in high income countries, does not reduce the number of people living with AIDS, but encourages high risk behavior, leading to an increase in new HIV infections.

(<http://www.unaids.org/bangkok2004/docs/EPIFACTS-2004-en.doc>).

For children, the challenge is to develop a defensive, informed lifestyles that permeate their approach to relationships whether among themselves or with adults. Yet their cultural contexts have not developed the necessary language and behavioral codes that have embedded successfully in the psyche that creates a culture of appropriate attitudes, behaviors and ease of communication of information that is normally considered as taboo or in the private sphere.

Children have a right to expect to receive care and succor from significant adults. Further, by tradition, children are expected to listen and obey their

elders. The era of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, however, has brought about subtle, but significant changes in the relationship between elders and children. The demise of infected, parents results in orphaned children who are left to live with grandparents or relatives or in extreme cases live in households headed by children. In 2001, child headed families in Botswana accounted for 2% of the total number of households. In 2003, 42000 orphans were registered in Botswana. 54% of these lived in homes where the head of household is unemployed; 55% lived in female headed households (UNICEF: 2003). A report in South Africa indicated that there were 11 000 children headed households (The Star 24/02/05).

An increasing percentage of children, therefore, is either affected or infected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The combination of the loss of parents and lack of psychological security has brought to the fore the importance of empowering children to develop competences in knowing when they need information and how they find and select the most appropriate information. The development of critical analysis of information in order to make appropriate decisions, for their own learning and survival is more critical than ever before. For an increasing numbers of children Sub-Sahara Africa the sources of information on life challenges they face cannot be provided within trusting relationships of family. The school environment has become a significant space, not only for formal education, life skills development but also for construction of self-identity, and general social support.

In those Sub-Sahara countries where the HIV/AIDS pandemic is rampant, children are in the custody of grandparents within the home and taken care of by the school when they are of school going age. However, there are cases when children are heads of families taking care of younger siblings. Children living under these conditions need to articulate and verbalize, within trusted of relationships, their experiences of death of parents and their inner feelings, to empower them to adapt to changed circumstances. Talking authentically about such topics with teachers and elders within the school system is seen as an intervention that fills the gap. They use their shared thoughts to learn to write and read. The articulation of their thoughts and discussion with a teacher and/or elder contributes to thinking about and discussing their own views of these experiences. The process assists to develop a critical analysis of their situation and information literacy skills approach to learning, skills for writing and reading and address areas of concern for control of their lives. Information literacy under these circumstances of psychological deprivation may save lives. For example playground scrapes and scratches, require thoughtful prophylactic approaches for handling blood and outflows for which each child has to be informed and trained as a matter of routine, whilst they are also socialized to respect and maintain relationships that value empathy and mutual support.

## The tale and storytellers in the oral tradition

The following discussion of the storytelling process is based mainly on the Southern African oral traditions expounded by Jordan (1978). It is presented herein as a proposal that story telling might be a useful framework upon which a conscious engagement with and development of information literacy may be facilitated in a predominant oral culture. It might also provide a bridge for the development of writing skills and encourage the linkage of oral-based information literacy to an emerging reading culture.

The oral tradition is well known for the richness of its culture in story telling, that spans all generations, through the different genres identified by Jordan as: the fictitious or mythological; the legendary and the historical. Each tale told is adapted as the performer (story teller) 'develops her narrative by objectifying images and it is in the construction of the image before an audience that ideas and social values are communicated... And as she objectifies the ancient cliché [of the tale], the members of the audience learn" (ibid.:2). It is this art and information literacy dependent skill that we seek to evoke and harness through the renewal of story telling by elders for mutual empowerment of the orphaned, the HIV/AIDS affected and/or infected school going children; as well as adults, who have to find and exploit tradition compatible methods of dealing with the children's views of the reality of the pandemic; help children to develop ways of meaning making based on informed sources that empower them to enquire and address personal problems.

The use of story telling as an empowerment tool for learners has been successfully applied in school environments to develop what has been referred to a "thoughtful literacy" (Diehl, 2005: 57,58. The process is interactive social communication that helps pupils to develop individual cognitive processing that results in internalized ways of knowing.

The harnessing of story telling as a framework for creating a cultural bridge between successful social interactions at home and those within the school setting, is explored in the following case study.

## Case Study

The case study presented below has been prompted by the vision of an educated, informed nation (Botswana vision 2016) as an approach to pilot the development of change towards information access and freedom of expression, and to facilitate the emergence of an Information Society for future generations.

It is a case study of a multi-pronged project. Its aim is to nurture local content creation through the break down of cultural barriers in intergenerational information expression/access. It seeks to encourage the involvement of traditional tutors (usually grandparents) who are willing to share their traditional knowledge within the school setting and are referred to as "Elders" in this context. The approach capitalizes on the tradition of grounded friendship relations between grandparents and grandchildren. They are expected to nurture children to understand that they are permitted to ask questions; be open to answering children's questions whilst developing children's awareness of their rights and duties to seeking information from various sources, and sharing of information, within the cultural and schooling norms. Story telling also provides a culturally aligned medium, within the school environment, that encourages intergenerational discussions and acceptance of non teacher status elders as being an acceptable information resource. It is hoped that it will empower children to verbalize their inner thoughts, share experiences and relate these to better understanding of their own lives in relation to the various aspects of HIV/AIDS and other personal challenges. In the process education on appropriate behavioral norms within boy-girl inter-relationships will be re-integrated within the school curriculum whilst also building on appropriate cultural knowledge.

The project involves Elders in sharing of local culture and tales with rural primary school children in their mother tongue. Children are encouraged to ask questions about the stories as well as issues they consider important as they model the story telling process to their peers, within a library setting, as a follow up to the session with the Elders. The stories are taped for heritage purposes, used as a base for learning how to communicate orally and in script, with the help of the teacher.

The primary school library is the focal point for these activities, with the support of head teachers, the agency of librarians and elders. Parent-teacher committees contribute as partners in raising awareness of the communities of the role Elders can play in the infusion of orality through traditional and cultural information sources embedded in artefacts, idiomatic expressions,

songs and in local tales. The various permutations of partnerships empower each group to engage in sharing of information from a position of sharing their own knowledge and validation by being listened to by 'others'. It thus breaks communication barriers by facilitating change of the culture between:

- The western educated teachers and the traditional learning tutors (Elders) by providing a platform for information sharing in support of children's learning.
- Elders and children by breaking intergenerational silence on issues regarded as important by children, and acceptance of the right for children to ask questions, access various sources of information and introduction to the principles of an Information Society as an entry to the ethos of freedom of expression for children.

The process is extended through the creative writing of the retold stories, facilitated through a pedagogical method referred to as 'Breakthrough to literacy'(1) With the help of the teacher, the words that are understood and used by the children in telling their own stories, are written, linked phonetically to develop the 'whole word recognition and 'learning to read and write system" in the context of the story telling process. The discussion between the teacher/elder and the child facilitates questioning, problem posing, integration of ideas, inferences to fill gaps, processes that build information literacy. Books thus created are owned by the children, and may be shared among themselves.

A significant part of the project is the provision of computers and appropriate software, in partnership with UNICEF. It is envisaged that the ICTs will serve the children in learning to word process their stories as part of learning to use the keyboard as a tool for writing. In addition, UNICEF provides child and culture friendly information on HIV/AIDS issues. This information is made available through appropriate level books and CDROM media for use in support. These materials are located in the library space, which has print materials and integrates artefacts on local culture contributed by Elders as an integral part of the learning process that occurs during story telling.

The project is multi-pronged at another level. It was conceived by an NGO Children's Information Trust (CIT), which consists of Library and Information Professionals (LIPs), Teachers and Parent-Teacher Associations. One of the other partners is the national Vision Council, which has a mandate to raise awareness of the population of Botswana to recognize (among other values)

the value and strategic action required by the populace in order to be an educated, informed nation by 2016. The CIT has a coordinating role based on active consultation with all stakeholders ranging from the grassroots to various government ministries. As significant stakeholders in the development of the information society in the country Ministries that controls the following are active partners through their portfolio responsibilities:

- Primary school infrastructure in rural areas.
- Policies for development of curricula, teaching and resource based learning in primary school nationally
- Library services, including youth and cultural issues
- National ICT policies and infrastructure development

There are efforts to engage the private sector through their acknowledgement of their social responsibility commitments, as well as a long term interest in investment in human resource for development of the country. The strategic action is to convince the private sector that it is in their interest to contribute to the development of youth who understand the emerging role of information; who develop critical analytical skills as competent cadres of all types of information and enjoy creation of local information and its integration into global information resources for a competitive edge.

Although this project is at its early stages of development it has demonstrated challenges, opportunities and rewards of holistic engagement with communities by librarians in the emerging information society: The experience, so far, has confirmed the findings of [www.BuildLiteracy.org](http://www.BuildLiteracy.org): "community partnerships demand patience, persistence, and politics".

In this case the politics include working with four government ministries each with its own approaches, though they share the same vision of an educated, informed nation by 2016(2)

## **Conclusion**

The presentation has sought to show that orality, as a communication system, demonstrates its applicability to information literacy in the way communities use the heard and spoken word for exchange of information to

develop and sustain indigenous knowledge and cultures. Underlying the successful entry into the Information Society of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is the development of information use attitudes and approaches that are driven by curiosity about life issues and problems that trigger a chain reaction for the search, critical assessment and profitable use of information for personal growth and development. Story telling as a process for engaging the imagination and other intellectual faculties may provide a method for enhancing the traditional information literacy through which predominantly oral societies have developed and sustained their cultures and indigenous knowledge systems. The alienation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century children from continued learning and cultural influence by significant adults, by various factors, provides an opportunity to explore the story telling medium in an assistive approach to the development of information literacy, which is fundamental to thriving in the Information Society.

## **NOTES**

Note1." Break Through to Literacy" is a whole language approach where reading and writing is built upon the language and experiences of the learner; learners learn to read and write as they talk. For detail see: The Concentrated Language Encounter: A program sponsored by Rotary International, District 9350 in partnership with the Western Cape Education Department. Compiled and written by Janet Condy and Jana Forrester edited by Lloyd Whitfield (2000) Edumedia.

Note 2. Botswana Government.(1997) Vision 2016: Towards Prosperity for All. A long Term Vision for Botswana-Vision 2016:An Educated, Informed Nation.

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