Information Literacy of Librarians and the Cultural Soft Power Construction of Libraries in Colleges and Universities in China

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Abstract. With a basis in the notion of information literacies and cultural soft power, this paper aims to present analyses of the construction of cultural soft power of libraries in colleges and universities in China from information literacy perspective. Literature review is adopted in the study. By discussing the cultural soft power of libraries in material, spiritual and practical dimensions, this paper elaborated ways of promoting the librarians’ information literacy and the libraries’ cultural soft power from library and librarian perspectives. To enhance the competitiveness of the libraries in information era, the libraries should construct material culture, system culture and spirit culture to better resources for information literacies education and the construction of cultural soft power of itself, and the librarians should improve their information literacy by self-study and training in order to participate in information activities efficiently.

Introduction

Information literacy, as the ability to search for, select, process, critically evaluate and use information for solving problems in various contexts, is defined as the ‘limitless access to information society’. Research on information activities such as information seeking and information learning and use, is of interest for various professional groups, such as educators and teachers throughout the educational system, as well as public, academic and school librarians. It is clear that a considerable number of libraries in colleges and universities in China have embraced the principles and practices of information literacy, thus the corresponding research on information literacy has received much attention, which focus on the situation[1,2], content[3,4,5,6], training approaches[7,8,9], its relationship with the training of innovative talents[10] and with personal knowledge management[11]. Furthermore, some researchers discussed the soft power of the libraries [12,13], while little literature explicates the construction of the cultural soft power of the libraries from information literacy perspective. Information literacy as an important part of soft power of the libraries has not been the focus of great attention and examination until now. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the specific approaches to improve the information literary of the librarians, so as to better constructing the cultural soft power of the libraries in colleges and universities.

Information Literary and Cultural Soft Power

Information Literary

The first instance of the use of the term ‘information literacy’ was by Paul Zurkowski in a 1974 report on future needs for various competences in work life in business and industry in the US [14,15,16]. The American Library Association defined ‘information literacy’ as a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information[17]. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP) defined literacy as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and
compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning enabling an individual to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge or potentials, and to participate fully in the community and wider society [18]. In 2013, the UNESCO integrated the definitions of media literacy and information literacy (MIL) in the Global Media and Information Literacy Assessment Framework. MIL is defined as a set of competencies that empowers citizens to access, retrieve, understand, evaluate and use, to create as well as share information and media content in all formats, using various tools, in a critical, ethical and effective way, in order to participate and engage in personal, professional and societal activities [19]. Of course, the approaches of seeking for and using information that are identified as appropriate and effective in one context might not be useful or valued in another. Standardized definitions are therefore, in this view, not sufficient for describing the various constituents of information literacy. Thus instead of trying to define information literacy once and for all, the specific situation should be concerned and explicated when understanding what information literacy might be.

**Cultural Soft Power**

Soft power was originally coined in the United States by Joseph Nye, and was firstly published in the journal *Foreign Policy* in 1990. Soft power is defined by Nye as the ability to influence others through agenda setting, attraction or cooption. He refers to soft power as ‘getting others to want the outcomes that you want’ without using payments or threats [20]. According to Nye, a country’s soft power can come from three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority) [21]. Since soft power was introduced to China, the growing soft power has been a topic of critical importance for the Chinese leadership. At the 17th Congress of the CCP in 2007 on behalf of the 16th CPC Central Committee, CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao for the first time called for enhancing the ‘soft power’ of Chinese culture, elevating culture to a high status as an ‘important source of national cohesion and creativity and a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength’ [22]. Meanwhile Hu emphasizes the importance of motivating the creation of national culture and concerns that the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will definitely be accompanied by the thriving of Chinese culture. Thus, enhancing cultural soft power has become national strategy, which gives a direction for the construction of civilization.

**The Relationship between the Improvement of Information Literacy and Construction of Cultural Soft Power of Libraries**

The cultural soft power of libraries is an important part of the soft power of libraries. The information literacy of the librarians in colleges and universities is a critical indicator to evaluating the management philosophy of the library, the quality of the staff, and the level of service. As an important factor, the enhancing of information literacy of librarians is an indispensable approach to improve the cultural soft power and the core competitiveness of libraries.

**Ways of Enhancing Information Literacy of Librarians and Improving Cultural Soft Power of Libraries**

As a cultural pattern, the cultural soft power of libraries has come into being in a given environment, which covers three dimensions: (1) material dimension, which refers to the essential conditions for librarians to undertake cultural activities, including the architectural style, facility layout, document resources and talents construction of the library; (2) spiritual dimension, which refers to the spirituality of the library, including the ideology, emotion, attitude, service policy and value of the librarians, and the cultural atmosphere of the library; (3) practical dimension, which refers to the actual activities of the library.
From Library Perspective

(1) Construction of material culture of the library: Although soft power has conventionally been conceived of as distinct from hard power, the latter can often be a precursor for the former. The construction of material culture of the library is the basis and material guarantee for the construction of culture, including document resources, building and its layout. Thus, the construction of both hard power and soft power should be paid attention to.

(2) Construction of system culture of the library: perfect management system and sound regulatory framework are the guarantee of the culture construction and the health development of the library, and the key of managing the library culture regularly and scientifically. As the medium layer between spirit layer and material layer, the system culture has become the standard norm of the consciousness and acts of the staff and an effective means to restraint the librarians, and a guarantee of carrying out the activities of the library vividly.

(3) Construction of spirit culture of the library: the spirit culture of the library in colleges and universities is a kind of cultural accumulation in a historic stage, which reflects the characteristics of the cultural activities of the libraries. As the concept of value and the culture achievements from the construction of the culture soft power, the spirit culture of the libraries has played the leading role of the three-dimension cultures and become the core and soul of the library culture. Once the spirit culture came into being, it decides the value and thought of the librarians and stimulates the librarians to exert themselves.

From Librarian’s Perspective

(1) Information concept and consciousness: Various understandings and definitions of information literacy emerge from the ways in which the concept is perceived, enacted, and negotiated in collective, social, and linguistic practices. Thus, the objective of measuring individuals’ levels of information literacy is replaced by an interest in understanding what information literacy might be for different people, or within a specific context, and why this might be so [23]. In the competitive information society, library, as an important department for the teaching and learning as well as the research work, impacts the academic ability of the colleges and universities. Some scholars consider that the librarians are not only the soul of the library career but also the main practitioners of social functions, and the quality of librarians decides the quality of the library in practicing its social functions. As the basis and premise of improving information literacy, the training of information concept and consciousness should focus on the change of traditional concept which considers that librarians are mainly responsible for books circulation. Without good information concept and consciousness, the librarians will be not good at searching for, identifying, spreading, evaluating and integrating information.

(2) Information ability and moral cultivation: Information has become more and more important within students’ disciplinary communities. Information ability is the core of information literacy. According to Mike Eisenberg and Bob Berkowitz, information literacy skills include Big6 skills which have been used in different settings to help those with variety of needs: clarifying and understanding, locating, selecting/analyzing, organizing/synthesizing, creating/presenting, and evaluating. Information morality refers to the norm that regulating the thoughts and actions of the related persons such as the producers, processors, messengers and users among the information fields of searching for, using, creating and spreading information. Librarians in colleges and universities in information era should abide by the related laws and regulations, the information moral code and the code of professional ethics for librarians to standardize their actions and fulfill obligations.

(3) Information education and sharing: There is no inherent skill and quality that any person is born with, and information literacy is the same case. Information literacy has been both a long-standing goal and a challenge for librarians who should improve their information literacy by leaning and practice because literacy information is key to students’ development as talents in different fields in the future. Though many commercial databases and such websites as Wikipedia, Google and Baidu can provide much common information for students’ learning, students had little
understanding of how to find, elect, locate and use the quality information, and thinking critically when applying that information to the program at hand. Thus libraries in colleges and universities should provide information literacy training chances for librarians, such as integrating internal training and external exchanges, short term training and long term training. Furthermore, librarians should enhance their knowledge and try to be information literacy experts by implementing an information literacy program that emphasized library instruction for students, embedding themselves in all sections of the study and research for students to promote the integral role of the library, collaborating with teachers in designing the information-literacy components, and devoting the expertise as librarians to improve the discussion of research from teachers and students.

Conclusion

The information activities is always challenging in information community which requires librarians to search for and utilize the information wisely and efficiently. Information literacy education is the need of training creative talents and of the rapid development of information era. The information literacy of the librarians contributes not only to the service quality but also to the cultural soft power of the libraries in colleges and universities. Being at the forefront of knowledge collection and population, librarians should continuously improve their information literacy to meet the requirement of the users, devote to the construction of the cultural soft power of the library, and highlight the multi-dimensional and harmonious environment of the campus.

References


