Storing and Sharing Knowledge and Wisdom

Abstract:

This paper reports on Kenyan university women’s relation of two concepts: knowledge and wisdom. Their uses of these terms suggest a need to reconsider traditional knowledge (TK) in librarians’ practice in information literacy programs as a means to reduce the disjuncture between the dominant educational practices and wisdom, or TK.

Résumé:

Cette communication porte sur la relation des femmes universitaires kényanes avec deux concepts : la connaissance et la sagesse. Leur utilisation de ces termes suggère un besoin de reconsidérer la connaissance traditionnelle dans les pratiques des bibliothécaires relativement aux programmes de maîtrise de l’information afin de réduire la disjonction entre les pratiques pédagogiques dominantes et la sagesse, ou la connaissance traditionnelle.

This paper reports on Kenyan university women’s relation of two concepts: knowledge and wisdom. The hermeneutical phenomenological study analyzed oral, visual, and textual sources of information to explore participants’ information practices. Their use of wisdom and knowledge suggest a need to reconsider traditional knowledge (TK) in librarians’ professional practice. The distinction between knowledge and wisdom has been discussed in the literature, from a philosophical view and in reference to TK and ecological biodiversity. This paper suggests that incorporating local or TK-systems in libraries and information literacy (IL) programs could reduce the disjuncture between the dominant educational knowledge practices and wisdom, or TK.

Theoretical Background

As an ideology, the information or knowledge society has substantial influence over what kind of things are valued. Advancements in ICT, from the printing press to digital technologies, have increased the economic value of “paths to knowledge” that stem from positivistic assumptions about knowledge, that it is a discernible thing that can be stored, disseminated, and accessed with certainty.
Research Questions

- What is the reported difference between wisdom and knowledge?
- What types of containers house wisdom, and how can wisdom be disseminated and accessed?
- How can libraries house and facilitate the use of both knowledge and wisdom?

Literature Background

Knowledge as transformation: Literature on wisdom often relies upon a reference to knowledge. For example, Haeckel and Nolan (as cited in Eisenberg, Lowe, & Spitzer, 2004) have developed a multi-level information hierarchy describing how information becomes wisdom. From facts to final synthesis, the model relies on ambiguous concepts and processes and implies moments of transformation and also points toward potentially distinct states of understanding which are of particular importance to this paper.

Education as disruption: Western educational systems imposed on developing nations do not take into account TK which sometimes results in social and ecological disasters. As an example, Falgout (1992) described the process of Westernization in Pohnpei (Micronesia). The American curriculum introduced “primarily Western [rewards]—jobs, money, and manufactured goods” (39), and the coeducational system improved women’s workforce prospects. However, the new academic rites of passage also had unintended sociopolitical consequences in which a new elite competed with traditional society.

Information storage: Hendon (2000) explores the relationship between the storage of material objects and a community’s social and moral practices. She suggests communities develop an “ethic of storage” that “varies in conjunction with the need to define and validate social status, reflecting how people in different kinds of society interpret social relations and enact social values” (45).

Information literacy: Jefwa (2009) observes Kenyan undergraduate students generally dislike reading and doing library research, preferring lecturers’ notes and handouts, in part because texts might contradict the their teacher’s viewpoint. Jefwa recommends that teachers “expose learners to different ways of getting information and responding to it” (126), suggesting implications for teaching IL in the classroom to account for different types of knowledge, and where it might be found.

Findings

Participants made marked distinctions between wisdom and knowledge, explaining that knowledge is gained through education, school, books, and people and was not necessarily associated with life beyond the educational setting. In contrast, a common theme regarding wisdom was its relevance to everyday life. Wisdom was packaged in various containers – myths, stories, proverbs – which are notorious for embodying shared knowledge but which also require further situational interpretation. Furthermore, wisdom
was directly related to experience. Wisdom required the receiver to interpret and apply the value of the sender’s past experience to their own life situations. Expert knowledge, based on direct and active involvement in the topic of knowledge, had an affective (i.e., motivational, inspirational) impact. Women were exposed to wisdom from elders and through religious institutions, and they gained knowledge from experts at conferences.

Discussion and Implications

The literature suggests that contradictions between books and their lecturer cause students distress, yet this study reports that books and texts are required for completing assignments (e.g., term papers). Findings that people, rather than books, contain an important type of knowledge or different knowledge (i.e., TK) than textual sources points toward a need to acknowledge less mainstream sources of authority than the dominant educational-setting allows. For example, more opportunities for exposure to wisdom could be facilitated by integrating the concept of “human” or “living” libraries (Abergel, 2005), recordings of oral history, and critically assessing non-text sources. Associating such sources of wisdom with the library gives the library legitimacy beyond the classroom and validates TK as a legitimate source of knowledge in students’ school work.

Selected References:


