# Ganga Dakshinamurti: A true researcher has to be information literate

*Ganga Dakshinamurti\* practiced innovative services in the Canadian academic libraries much before the advent of technology. With over fifty years' dedicated service in the library profession in Canada, she has worked in different segments of academic librarianship from college to universities, advocating and practicing information literacy programmes for the effective utilisation of resources. She has equally marked her contributions as an educator, researcher, institutional builder, and volunteer. She has been awarded many prestigious global awards including Queen Elizabeth Golden Jubilee Award for her outstanding contributions.*

*In this interview for <u>Open Interview</u> with <u>Santosh C. Hulagabali</u>, Ganga talks exclusively on information literacy services which she practiced since the mid- 1960s in the Canadian academic libraries.*

*She believes that the basic goal of information literacy is still unchanged irrespective of limited resources in the past and the exponential growth of information sources and tools in the present. She is of the view that there is no foreseeable end to this explosion of information sources and therefore educating the patrons about the effective use of resources is necessary.*

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**You moved to Winnipeg from the USA in 1965 and have been over there ever since. In the same year, you started your professional career as Librarian at the <u>Red River Community College</u> in 1965. What was the status of librarianship in colleges then?**

The sixties were good years to join the academic workforce in Canada, and accredited librarians, along with teachers, were readily welcomed and accepted in schools and colleges. The very next day of my arrival in Winnipeg in April 1965\*, I was invited for an interview at the <u>Manitoba Institute of Technology</u> (now <u>Red River College</u>), and after a quick in-person interview, was readily offered the position of Librarian in charge of establishing a college library.

The status of college librarian even then was equivalent to teaching instructors. As a newly established library, the emphasis was on acquisition and organisation of materials needed for retrieval by students and faculty. I was also fully involved as the library representative to the College systems group in establishing an in-house developed computer system for the library. During the second decade of my stay in the College, I

took up the position of Instructor of Library Technicians in the College Technology program, and thoroughly enjoyed exploring the intricacies of the then new AACR2 in teaching cataloguing, and how MARC records enabled copy cataloguing. I also took a keen interest in matching retrieval data with the information needs of the users, which helped me immensely later in my career with my direct interaction with library users.

Librarianship was a growing field then in teaching institutions, and was gaining more respect among teaching professionals due to the increasing automation in libraries, thereby showcasing librarians' expertise in locating needed material amidst growing collections.

**You worked in college for over two decades and then joined University of Manitoba Libraries in 1988 when technology was at its infancy. What was the status of information literacy programmes in the university environment those days? Was that totally different from what you experienced in a college environment in Winnipeg?**

With my practical and teaching experiences of cataloguing and acquisition in the community college, I joined the University of Manitoba Libraries as the Technical Services Coordinator, in charge of areas working on acquisition and cataloguing of books and serials. Of all the areas of service in the Library, cataloguing was the most automated area then and emphasis was placed on increasing copy cataloguing to augment making catalogued materials available to users more readily, particularly needed at the time of increase in acquisition of information sources in the University Library. Information literacy was in its infancy, outlining keyword search through automated catalogue records.

My interest in information literacy increased as I explored more ways to increase the ways catalogued records serve the diverse interests and needs of the users. I remember being asked by Systems personnel why would we need subject retrieval if we could retrieve through keyword search of the title; and I was able to convince them by showing a book titled *What do you do with a Lemon,* that dealt with car mechanics!

**There is a need of reasonable level of information search skills. How challenging this task was to teach search skills to the patrons before the advent of Internet?**

Before the advent of the Internet, information search skills and data retrieval in automated libraries were dependent on the information available from automated catalogued records of library materials through keyword search of author, title and subject headings of the catalogued records. To provide good service to users, it was necessary to have good communication and rapport between Reference and Cataloguing staff, to ensure that the catalogued items were retrievable more readily. I used to hold information sessions for librarians to discuss the intricacies of MARC records and the ways and means to improve retrieval of relevant information from automated records.

Once the Internet opened up the resources of the world through keyword search, emphasis of service to patrons in libraries shifted from Technical Services area covering acquisition and cataloguing to Public Services area covering Reference and Information retrieval functions. With less in-house work of direct acquisition and original cataloguing in individual libraries and more of outsourcing of acquisition and cataloguing work to outside sources, I was actually part of the management team that shifted workload and personnel from Technical Services to Public Services for effective use of trained personnel with knowledge of automation, thereby outsourcing my own position! This is when I had also completed the requirements for my Ph.D. thesis titled *Human Resources Development of Academic Librarians in Post-Secondary Institutions in Manitoba* and was requested to join the Management Library in the Asper School of Business at the University of Manitoba as the Instructional Services Librarian, in order to use my academic knowledge-base more purposefully. My focus of responsibility also shifted from being a provider of information records to a user and a teacher of information retrieval.

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**Information literacy in the present times – what has really changed and what old-aspects or practices of information literacy still prevail or unchanged?**

I believe that the basic goal of information literacy is still the same. To paraphrase Dr. S. R. Ranganathan, the father of Indian library movement,-  a librarian's function is to search for the 'right book (i.e. source) by the right author to the right person at the right time'! The differences are in sheer volume of breadth, depth, and variety of information and information sources that are available universally, much more readily and comprehensively through varied access points, all because of universal and pervasive access to automation. There is no foreseeable end to this explosion of information sources! Instead of specific author/title/subject searches, we can now seek information through multiple keyword combinations.

What has not changed is our thirst and need for information developing into knowledge – knowledge obtained through information sources and analysis of sources that satisfies the ABC rules of relevant information retrieval: authoritative; bias-free or unbiased; correct, complete, and current or up to date.

In this context, one major change has to be noted. Due to the sheer increase in quantity of sources and dramatic acceleration of our ability to retrieve data in general, the vital need for information literacy is exponentially growing in all areas of our lives, and is starting much earlier. Whatever we have learnt – and continue to learn – in our work on information literacy has to reach out to all people, both young and old, in all walks of life, at all times. COVID19 has brought this urgent need to the forefront: Seniors in care homes not having access to their family members and unable to use technology to reach out to family or information sources; children being taught online suddenly expected to absorb information without adequate training on information literacy; exponential manipulation of print and visual data of all kinds, using photo-shopped pictures and texts,

leading to misinformation at all levels across the world. Misinformation has a spiraling negative effect. A solid training in information literacy is much needed to withstand the onslaught of misinformation in this politically driven climate.

**You are known for your work in conducting information literacy programs for students, particularly for those from other countries. Could you please share your experience?**

Asper Business School at the University of Manitoba is known for its significant number of foreign students, particularly from China and India. When I offered seminars on information literacy for first year Business students, I noted that those from India were always ready to attend. They invariably had a good understanding of the mechanical process of information retrieval but had to be taught and initiated into the process of questioning and analysing information obtained for bias and reliability. Often, I found them using information obtained readily and fully without proper acknowledgement of sources. So, I changed my information literacy seminar into two parts: the first would cover relevant information sources, effective retrieval of information and acknowledgement of sources; and the second would cover analysis and usage of information itself, and the dangers of plagiarism to avoid, and protocols to follow, while retrieving and using information. I found the Indian students to be very receptive to this and often made a point of letting me know later how they have used my lessons in their works. Several of them, now employed in various companies all over Canada, continue to keep in touch with me to let me know how they fare.

Another area where I found students newly arrived from India needed encouragement was in the area of questioning, and challenging data, when in doubt; and initiating and voluntarily participating in discussion. Vocal participation is a necessary trait in classes here, and at the University level a student has to be vocal to be noticed and credited for participation. I always made a point of referring to this need at my initial meetings with students from India, and have often been told it has served them well.

**We have been using different terminologies for different contexts such as research literacy, visual literacy, digital literacy, science information literacy, etc. Could you please talk about these growing 'literacy tags' and ways to practice them?**

The growing number of 'literacy tags' is a sure sign of the growing place for specialised information literacy in associated subject areas, with their own sources, terms of retrieval, and criteria of determining accuracy, relevancy, and acceptability of information. A Subject Librarian in charge of providing assistance in any of these subject areas needs to be familiar with different emphasis on information criteria, as established by specific subject areas, and incorporate their presentation and involvement accordingly. Often specific subject area within a broad subject may call for a different emphasis, for example, financial literacy in Business Management calls for different emphasis and criteria of information as compared to Human Resources area.

**Should the Librarians only be concerned of 'information literacy'? How can library professionals rope in the educators and research supervisors to make 'information literacy services in the library more effective?**

In this day and age, I cannot see how a stand-alone Information literacy class can survive without alignment with specific subject areas. It is no longer about 'how to use library information sources effectively', because 'libraries' of information sources are all around us, available to us wherever we are, instantly. It is important that information literacy is aligned with specific subject areas in considering the criteria of information and to match and grade information sources accordingly. Subject guides in academic libraries are developed just with this purpose in mind.

The best way to 'rope in the educators and research supervisors' would be through these subject guides. Prior consultation with the educator/researcher in a subject area is vital to ensure the subject guide stays relevant to what is being taught or researched. It is important that the librarian develops familiarity with the specific topics within the subject areas covered and align them with relevant sources covering all media. This will ensure the teaching and researching faculty to see the librarian as an effective partner in educating the students.

I remember presenting a paper titled *The Pro-active Librarian: The How and the Why* at the World Library and Information Congress: 75<sup>th</sup> IFLA General Conference at Milan, Italy in August 2009, and it was very well received, generating considerable discussion. Subsequently, I collaborated with the Textiles Department Head at the University of Manitoba to establish information literacy classes embedded within the curriculum of teaching and examining students. Librarians' collaboration with educators and researchers has since grown considerably now.

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**There is an increased focus on non-formal and informal learning plus there is also an increased awareness of open educational resources among the patrons. How do you see this trend?**

I welcome this totally! Learning that is flowing like a river in a well cultivated area, shaped for it to flow freely, and kept unblemished and allowed for more to be added on its way, is there for the benefit of all to grow further!

Open educational sources that include editorial scrutiny before publication will allow easier and earlier access to research data and benefit researchers also in their publications.

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**How essential reasoning, thinking and critical thinking skills are in information literacy?**

They are all essential building blocks of information literacy. One cannot have understanding of a particular set of acceptable information from a reliable source without thinking about, and reasoning out the parts of the subject, and critically examining the information source for unbiased, complete and up-to-date relevant information.

**It is said that argumentative reasoning, in particular, is relevant to information literacy as opposed to other general elements of critical thinking? What is your say on this?**

Argumentative reasoning is logical reasoning that seeks to answer the 'why', in addition to 'what' and 'when'. It is logical reasoning to ensure both sides of an argument are evaluated before coming to a conclusion. Certainly, argumentative reasoning is a highly relevant tool for information literacy when the information being sought calls for many sides and shades of associated information, needing to be verified and reasoned, particularly when the sources involved present opposing viewpoints that need to be analysed before being accepted. In an academic or research environment, argumentative reasoning is a powerful tool to reach a conclusion in an information literacy setting.

**To serve researchers effectively, it demands a higher level of competence and knowledge about the research process for Librarians. What is your take on making researchers information literate?**

In an academic or research setting, it is highly important that the librarian concerned is fully aware of the research process as well as the subject matter involved. This will facilitate the librarian to first prepare a preliminary list of relevant sources and then undertake to have a series of conversation with the researcher/s concerned to bring about more awareness of these sources and their possible uses. Such an ongoing discussion, handled in a cordial manner, will enable the researcher to accept the librarian as a knowledgeable and friendly ally in the research process, and in due course, become information literate. A true researcher HAS to be information literate!

I strongly feel that the librarian should welcome this type of sharing, and not consider this as a loss of their professional space – just the same as the librarian would expect the researcher to be welcom this shared work!

**How LIS schools should teach and prepare students for mastering 'information literacy skills'?**

Let me answer this in some quick points.

- encourage a questioning mind. Before they can train or teach others. LIS students have to develop critical thinking skills;
- always get them to answer the 'why' in addition to 'what' and 'when';
- encourage wide reading on a particular subject before selecting one source and establishing why;

- after a thorough grounding on critical examination of selected automated bibliographic sources, get them to present their findings to class for evaluation of content and of presentation styles;
- teach them to paraphrase and cite sources according to varied bibliographic formats. This would be a useful practice before they start teaching others;
- encourage them to develop a good understanding of the subject area of their specialisation;
- teach them to prepare automated subject guides for library homepage for selected subject areas; and
- have seminars where the students discuss and learn ways to work collaboratively with teaching and researching faculty to establish building blocks of information literacy in the curriculum.

A well-trained person will train others well!

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**Note** · *All the answers/ opinions expressed in this document are of the interviewee.*

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*__More about the interviewee__: Ganga Dakshinamurti completed masters in Sanskrit and Indian Philosophy in 1961 in Chennai, India, when she got married and joined her husband Dr K. Dakshinamurti in USA. During their stay from 1961 to 1965 in USA, she audited courses in the University of Illinois, Tufts University and Harvard, and completed Master's Certificate in Librarianship from the State University of Pennsylvania. After moving to Canada, she completed Masters in Library Science in Queen's University at New York, and later worked on teaching certificates in Adult and Secondary School teaching, and thereafter completed Ph.D. at the University of Manitoba. She retired from the University of Manitoba in December 2015 and is currently a Senior Scholar at the University.*

*Since 1979 till she retired in 2015, Ganga was very active in professional organizations of librarians, from provincial to national, American and international organizations, working in many of their committees, often as Chair. She was the President of the Manitoba Library Association in 1995-96. She was part of Winnipeg City's Library Review Committee that established the foundation for the planning for City's Millennium Library. Ganga received Manitoba Library Association's 'Librarian of the Year Award' in 2001.*

*Ganga has long been associated with the Canadian Library Association. She has been fully involved with the American Library Association through many committees, often as Chair. She has served as the President of Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA) and was active as a member of the Steering Committee that organised a conference on coloured people in 2006 in Dallas.*

*Ganga has a significant record of publications and invited presentations both nationally and internationally. She has a total of 64 professional publications/presentations to her credit.*

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