



Making Information Literacy Relevant

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Introduction – The Problem

The tasks of engaging learners with the principles of Information Literacy (IL) and then ensuring that they apply the associated knowledge, skills and understanding effectively in appropriate situations are among the greatest challenges faced by information professionals working in educational settings. Undoubtedly, much depends on the ability of the practitioner to convince learners of IL’s relevance to their particular situations. In an article with Maureen Jackson, one of the authors has emphasised the importance of showing that IL is fundamental to the success of learners in discharging their academic responsibilities. Jackson’s research in Further Education environments in northern England found that where such a relationship is not established students are frequently reluctant even to attend the sessions (Shenton and Jackson, 2007). It is, however, wildly optimistic to assume that arguments linking IL with academic success will be sufficiently persuasive to all individuals. In order to reach out to young people who are unconvinced by such claims, the information professional must be prepared to pursue another line and cede to them a measure of “ownership”. IL instruction can be made more effective if learners’ inherent behaviours, motivations and preferences are taken into account.

Topic Selection for Assignments

For some youngsters, demonstrations of the role information skills can play in helping them to find out more about matters of particular appeal to them and practical experience in applying the skills in this context provide the best opportunity for showing the relevance of IL, in addition to bestowing on young learners a strong sense of empowerment. Five years ago, Shenton and Dixon (2004) proposed, “To capitalise on youngsters’ enthusiasm for a subject of personal interest and to enable them to apply fundamental information-seeking principles to a matter that is genuinely meaningful to them, pupils should be asked to undertake an actual information search on a favourite topic, using a variety of suitable resources” (p. 14). In a similar vein, Cooper (1996) writes of the wisdom of allowing young people to follow “their most natural interests and inclinations in the pursuit of knowledge” (p. 48), and Burdick (1997) believes that the freedom which emerges when teachers let students choose their own topics for assignments forms a key element in enabling youngsters to express their own “voice”.

For several years in one school in north-eastern England, all incoming thirteen-year-olds were taught and asked to practise IL within a project relating to the European Community. Although the work afforded considerable scope for the teaching and learning of information skills, it is difficult to believe that the students would apply the inherent principles with the same level of commitment and enthusiasm that would be evident if they were able to choose their own topics for investigation.

Lessons from elsewhere would appear to suggest that the person-centred focus may especially motivate those for whom learning comes less naturally and may play a major role in facilitating the acquisition of skills that may otherwise be beyond these individuals. In discussing the value of television tie-in books, Coil (1978) quotes the findings of a report devoted to a US programme designed to promote reading, called Project READ. The report for 1976/77 asserts, "Poor readers can and will read books that are far above their 'tested abilities' when they are motivated to do so" (p. 36). Perhaps it is possible that the attraction of developing skills which can help an individual to find out about a favourite subject can provide a similarly strong willingness to develop abilities which, in another context, may prove much less appealing.

Potential Disadvantages

Given the benefits that the more person-centred approach offers in enhancing student motivation, the question emerges, why is it not employed more frequently? The low profile of IL in many schools and the pressures today of covering much content in a limited period of time dictate that IL often has to be seen to serve other areas of the curriculum, hence the preoccupation with teacher-assigned topics. In addition, from a historical perspective, the popularity of an alternative teaching approach, which has formed the conventional wisdom at various times over the last thirty years in both Britain and North America, has meant that schools have not always favoured a method of fostering information skills that involves any kind of wider, curriculum-integrated perspective. This alternative view – i.e. that instruction should be delivered in dedicated, standalone sessions – is laudable in emphasising the primacy of information skills; time is made available specifically for their development, yet the strategy has nonetheless been subject to criticism. Notably, the charge has been made that skills are taught in isolation and within what amount to no more than "exercise" contexts, without reference to

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“real” assignments or situations. Lincoln (1987) is one sceptic. He claims that, when the body of information skills is presented within a “study skills” umbrella, “For pupils it remains out on a limb and is rarely transferred to the main core of their studies in subject areas” (p. 8).

Since the information specialist loses a considerable degree of control over the proceedings, the more open-ended approach to topic work, with youngsters choosing their own subjects for investigation, can alter the traditional relationship between adults and youngsters that tends to exist in schools. As Joyce and Joyce (1970) appreciate, “truly learner-centered inquiry takes students in all directions” (p. 10). There is a danger that the topics selected are ultimately revealed to be unsuitable or poorly covered by the kinds of information materials whose use the practitioner is keen to promote. It will be impossible, too, for the intermediary to investigate all the appropriate sources in advance, and students attempting to access Web sites may well find at least some of them unexpectedly blocked by their organisation’s filtering software. Indeed, Chelton (2004) draws attention to the anecdotal reports of school librarians which indicate “that Internet filters impede legitimate school-based information seeking” (p. 389). Furthermore, students may be content to explore Web sites on a surface level and their lack of ambition may lead to their seeing no need to develop the skills necessary for the use of richer information sources. Even if the skills that the educator is intent on promoting are acquired, there remains, of course, no guarantee that the learner will apply them in more traditional, academic situations. Implications may also emerge for the management of the learning environment. If every student selects a different topic for investigation, the project is likely to be very labour intensive, with each individual requiring one-to-one attention and supervision.

The shift from projects involving assigned topics to those where students choose their own changes the balance between the student and the educator with regard to “expert” opinion. A distinct benefit of the latter approach is that, since language relating to the topic involved will almost certainly be more familiar to the learner than if the subject were merely imposed, it usually increases the ease with which the student is able to tackle one of the information-seeking tasks that many youngsters find particularly difficult – that of broadening or narrowing the search in the light of unsatisfactory initial results. Since Hirsh (1997) concludes that subject knowledge is a key factor in youngsters’ search success, this benefit is not to be underestimated. When an entirely free choice is allowed,

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3 however, the topic selected by the learner could be entirely unfamiliar to the information specialist,
4 who is thus poorly equipped to advise on alternative terms that may be used to modify a search which
5 is unsuccessful in the first instance. Yet, this situation does mimic the conditions that are likely to
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however, the topic selected by the learner could be entirely unfamiliar to the information specialist, who is thus poorly equipped to advise on alternative terms that may be used to modify a search which is unsuccessful in the first instance. Yet, this situation does mimic the conditions that are likely to pertain in less contrived interactions between students and information specialists. Practitioners are *not* experts in every subject but their professional skills are such that they can adapt to the circumstances presented to them and guide students towards selecting alternative terms themselves or direct them to sources likely to offer the information they seek.

Another problem with the learner-centred approach lies with image. Traditionalists in schools are prone to dismiss the pursuit of information for personal interest as frivolous and incompatible with the kind of serious study that educational establishments should look to encourage. **This is a particular risk in the face of current trends, with managers of school libraries having to demonstrate more and more the extent to which they contribute to the school's wider educational mission in terms of "hard criteria".** Phil Jarrett, the HMI Subject Advisor for English in the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), comments, "Increasingly, the best schools... ask themselves: what impact does this [library] have on standards and achievement?" (Jarrett, 2006, p. 3). It is an indication of the importance of the issue nowadays that Todd (2003) is able to cite an impressive range of modern studies that pertain to the role of school libraries in fostering student learning. **Given this emphasis on the academic,** staff may well feel uncomfortable if they are required to justify to parents why their charges have been allowed time in lessons to find out more about their favourite film, sport or pop star. Nevertheless, in addition to providing a motivating context for the learning of information skills, there is a longstanding view among some information scientists that urges to find out about matters of personal interest *do* constitute a proper information need. In the mid-1970s, Line (1974) declared unequivocally, "a recreational need may be just as much a need as an educational need" and, much more recently, Reuter (2007), in her own research, has expanded the notion of information need to include "gratifications" (p. 139). The work of Raymond Williams, the noted commentator on culture and society, shows the prevalence of such ideas in areas beyond information science discourse. Williams (1965) maintains that the reading of what he terms "ephemeral writing" can, despite its

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apparent levity, meet an important need in times of “illness, tension, disturbing growth as in adolescence, and simple fatigue after work” (p. 193).

The Role of Information Needs

Although some helpful multi-category typologies exist, notably those of Minudri (1974), Walter (1994) and Agosto and Hughes-Hassell (2006a, 2006b), much of the literature tends to concentrate on just two kinds of situations that give rise to information-seeking action – firstly, those which demand that students look for information in support of academic work and, secondly, scenarios in which youngsters are motivated to find out about a subject because of personal enthusiasm. Large, Nessel and Beheshti (2008), in fact, open their review of research dealing with the information behaviour of children by stating that they pursue material “for a variety of leisure purposes and to help them with their school-based assignments” (p. 121). Such a stance can lead to a simplistic, dichotomous view of the drivers for young people’s information-seeking action. In a reading context, the UK Department of National Heritage (1995) dogmatically divides these factors into “needs” and “wants” and, if one accepts the Department’s elaborations of the terms, namely that the former stem from educational obligations, whereas the latter arise from “self-interest” and “the search for enjoyment” (p. 5), it is all too easy to equate Gross’s (1997) “imposed” and “self-generated” categories directly with these groups, even though Gross herself defines the latter in more general terms, asserting that questions of the “self-generated” type arise from “a person’s own life context or circumstances” (p. 157). Shenton and Dixon (2003) subsume information wants within a wider information needs category, an action that may be seen as leading to a further oversimplification – it perhaps gives the impression that the concepts of need and want are so similar that it is possible to use the former term to embrace the latter. Yet, paradoxically, it was the complexity of separating them satisfactorily that formed one of the reasons for the writers’ decision to deal with them together!

A major difference in terms of how information needs of youngsters and adults respectively are conceptualised is the relative prominence attached to problem situations. Problems form an area that is frequently underestimated in coverage of young people’s information needs. Maybe it is assumed that they play a minor role in the lives of youngsters because parents either prevent such

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3 problems from emerging or deal with issues before their offspring have to take their own remedial
4 action. Certainly, when delineating the composition of the category, “reading needs”, the Department
5 of National Heritage (1995) makes no mention of problem situations (p. 5). In contrast, an emphasis
6 on the problem dimension is such a key feature within many studies of adult information needs that
7 Case (2007) has been prompted to observe, “Some writers assume that information seeking is always
8 motivated by a need to solve a problem” (p. 88). Bosman and Renckstorf (1996), whose backgrounds
9 lie in communication, rather than information science, and whose perspective is thus slightly different
10 from the norm in our field, make a similar assessment, nonetheless, commenting in the context of
11 their own research that “problems have a monopoly position in explaining information needs” (p. 52).
12 If those promoting IL were to give more attention to the full range of situations that result in
13 information-seeking action, including problems of various kinds, the primacy of information skills
14 could be established much more effectively in the minds of young people.
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29 A lead can be taken, in this respect, from the findings of Walter (1994) and Agosto and
30 Hughes-Hassell (2006a). These writers demonstrate how information needs are associated with
31 broader life situations and draw upon the work of theorists outside LIS to underline their wider
32 importance. Indicating how information needs stem from more fundamental human needs, Walter
33 (1994) arranges them in a hierarchy akin to Maslow’s framework, whilst Agosto and Hughes-Hassell
34 (2006a) refer to the developmental tasks of adolescence identified by Havighurst. Any teachers of IL
35 looking to highlight the ways in which information is necessary to cope with “real life” would be well
36 advised to familiarise themselves with work of this kind. Inspiration can also be found in the older,
37 although still highly relevant, writings of Dervin (1976), who offers a typology of scenarios in which
38 information is useful. Specifically, she isolates four:
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- 50 • *decisions*, in which a choice is to be made from the options available;
 - 51 • *problems*, where a barrier stands in the way of an individual’s progress;
 - 52 • *worries*, in which a person is hindered by a lack of predictability and control;
 - 53 • *comprehendings*, where an individual is seeking to understand.
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Little imagination is required of the information professional to formulate, in each of these categories, exemplar situations that could be drawn to the attention of students within an IL teaching programme. Other frameworks that may offer inspiration include Taylor’s (1991) eight classes of information use and Todd’s (2005) five “information intents”. Examining the merits of different forms of information searching, Liebscher and Marchionini (1988) argue that the skill of recognition, which browse-based facilities exploit, is less cognitively demanding than the more active task of having to generate an appropriate term. A similar argument can be applied to the use of the need types presented by Walter, Agosto and Hughes-Hassell, Dervin, Taylor and Todd in order to emphasise the value of information. It may well be easier for the information professional to note within their typologies categories that are particularly appropriate to their users and then define more specific scenarios than to conceive relevant situations themselves from the outset, without any such guiding.

The way in which ideas can be drawn from frameworks of information need or use when teaching IL underlines the importance of appreciating that IL instruction and the study of information behaviour should exist in a perpetual cycle, somewhat analogous to the information – knowledge loop elucidated by Orna (1999). Just as she maintains that knowledge, when communicated, becomes information and information is necessary for the enrichment of knowledge, the mutual dependency of IL teaching and the investigation of information behaviour is evident from the fact that, at least in an ideal world, the former should play a substantial role in providing a background for the latter and in aiding the understanding of research findings, whilst what is learnt in studies of information behaviour should itself inform the teaching of IL.

Educator-Learner Collaboration within IL Sessions

It is not just in the areas of topic selection for assignments and demonstrating the diverse ways in which information is necessary that the information professional teaching IL can seek to engage with learners’ ideas. Indeed, as Heinström (2006) argues, IL instruction can motivate students by giving them ownerships of tasks within a context that is relevant to them, as determined by their existing skills and preferred search styles. Very often IL is delivered in a somewhat preachy form, with individuals urged to adopt a prescribed, “correct” course of action in which they are instructed. Such

an approach renders IL rather too similar to other areas of the school curriculum where a comparable didactic line is taken. It is important, when addressing IL principles, that information specialists make a determined effort to allow students to admit without fear of admonishment their predispositions towards the expedient methods that they often employ. The practitioner should incorporate such open dialogues in teaching programmes, offering sound arguments against the favoured shortcuts, rather than simply imposing a rigid framework.

Learners must also be given the scope to consider problems that they have faced in their own information-seeking experience. If students adopt a passive perspective and merely accept that they are comfortable and effective in finding information via Web search engines, for example, without feeling the need either to employ no more than the most rudimentary features that they offer or to go elsewhere, they are unlikely to see the relevance of the information specialists' counsel to use different techniques or sources. As Shenton and Dixon (2004) suggest, if the reasons for bad habits among students "are discussed by the educator and counter arguments to draw attention to their shortcomings are offered, the latter are more likely to be accepted" (p. 14). Such open exchanges provide scope both for youngsters to put forward their point of view, thereby allowing them to feel that their voices are being heard, and for librarians to address directly the issues raised. In recent years one of the authors has extended into more specialist areas the principle of responding specifically to learners' admissions with regard to their ill advised actions in terms of finding and using information. In an article that has just been completed at the time of writing (Shenton, submitted), he outlines a series of arguments that he prepared to combat some of the justifications he had noticed students to use when defending their inclinations towards practices that would generally be considered to amount to plagiarism.

The information professional's personal relationship with students can also deeply affect learners' engagement with IL instruction. Information educators often do not have as clearly defined a role as teachers, a situation that leaves them needing to demonstrate their value to students. This may lead them to employ "scare tactics" in order to encourage learners to listen to their message, relying on appeals to teachers' requirements or threats about the consequences of plagiarism. Their authority may be undermined, too, by a lack of appreciation of their function by teaching colleagues. In Britain,

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Clarke (2009) has detected “an undercurrent of a divide between teaching and non-teaching staff” in both the educational establishments in which she has worked. However, the unique position of information specialists affords them an opportunity to develop deeper relationships with students and to foster a more holistic engagement with information-seeking skills. Information educators who show a genuine interest in students’ ideas and an expertise beyond the prepared script of a lesson can gain much credibility in the eyes of learners. Evidence of an empathic understanding of students will increase the learners’ willingness to seek assistance when needed. For information educators, the relaxing of the reins of control in instructional sessions assists in building rapport with students.

Learning Theory and Ideas from Elsewhere

Drawing on material from Squires, Webb and Powis (2005) note how learning may be prompted either by an internal stimulus, with the individual learning alone, or by an external influence, such as a teacher. The possibility arises that, although the initial IL stimulus will be external, if the learner recognises the potential of IL to improve his or her quality of life, after completion of the teaching programme the individual may well feel inspired to experiment further with more personal techniques for finding and using information. Such enthusiasm is most likely to be engendered if the learner is already aware of how information can increase knowledge in the context of a subject about which he or she is passionate.

Bain (2004) highlights how the most successful teachers facilitate significant growth and learning by challenging students’ assumptions, and practical, active learning exercises that reveal to individuals gaps in their skills can be pivotal in both demonstrating the importance of IL and providing a motivation within students to improve. Moreover, theorists in educational psychology, such as Ausubel (1963), Ausubel, Novak and Hanesian (1978) and Novak and Gowin (1984), postulate that meaningful learning involves the integration of new information into learners’ existing knowledge structures. In these constructivist approaches, instructors capitalise on students’ interests, intrinsic motivations and pre-existing knowledge in order to optimise the learning process. Information specialists have the opportunity to increase the effectiveness of their teaching by

embracing students' existing behaviours and facilitating the incorporation of new knowledge and skills.

The information professional should not be reluctant to draw upon concepts that have arisen in other disciplines to increase the width and appeal to learners of IL teaching. The introduction of ideas from other fields is, in fact, a growing trend in IL and one indicative of the area's increasing maturity. Streatfield (2006) isolates education, psychology and information systems as domains from which appropriate material has been taken, and one of the authors of this paper has himself recently recommended the use of search image concepts originating in anthropology (Shenton, 2009a) and techniques consistent with the principles of lateral thinking in psychology (Shenton, 2009b). A key challenge lies in inserting the ideas from elsewhere as naturally as possible. Otherwise, the links may appear tenuous and contrived. The educator should not underestimate, either, the time and effort necessary to familiarise oneself with the appropriate material when one's true area of expertise lies in another discipline. It **may seem** daunting to the average practitioner to study and then apply theoretical findings from academic work in such fields as anthropology, psychology and education but a commitment to openness and to achieving a harmony with learner inclinations in instructional design is an important first step in the development of more relevant and effective IL education.

Conclusion

Isolated rote learning, without any self-motivation on the part of the learner, will limit the degree to which information skills can be applied in other situations. If lifelong learning is the true goal of IL education, information specialists are ideally placed to impart skills that go beyond the ostensibly limited relevance (from a student's perspective) of academic assignments. They can open for learners a remarkable and unlimited world of information and tools. By tapping into students' internal curiosity, interests and motivations, they can inspire as well as edify. The notion of equipping students with the skills they need to explore areas of interest, whether these lie in personal or scholarly domains, is now becoming central to education itself. The CILIP School Libraries Group (2007) suggests that schools in the twenty-first century should aim "to light sparks rather than fill vessels". Since, as commentators such as Faibisoff and Ely (1976), Krikelas (1983) and Westbrook (1993)

remind us, very often the acquisition of information and the changes in an individual’s knowledge state that accompany the process stimulate further urges to know, the teaching of IL plays a key role in establishing the conditions that enable those sparks to be lit.

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