



But does it work? – Building the evidence base for Information Literacy development

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Whatever sector we work in, we all know how important it is to support our students, clients or customers in developing their information literacy skills. Nor is this belief any longer a minority concern of librarians, but increasingly a matter for national and international policy.

The last ten to fifteen years have seen exciting developments in Information Literacy (IL) across the globe. Librarians have become increasingly skilled and experienced as teachers and as learning designers. We have learned to work more effectively in partnership with academic or practitioner colleagues to integrate and contextualize information skills. We are also gaining recognition and influence within our organizations – librarians have of course led the evidence based practice movement in the health sector for many years. In Higher Education we are seeing librarians nominated for national teaching awards on the strength of their information literacy work.

It is still, however, a relatively new area for research. This can put us at a real disadvantage when we compete for funding, either within our institution or nationally, for development projects. We cannot point to any convincing evidence to support our assertions that the IL initiative we are proposing will improve the students' learning experience, academic attainment or career opportunities

And it isn't just about fighting for resources. In my sector, which is distance education, the students are extremely time poor. I need to be able to convince them that IL is a worthwhile investment of their time and energy.

There are, therefore, so many questions we would like to be able to begin to answer:

For example:

1. Do information literacy development programmes improve academic outcomes?
2. What kinds of intervention work best?
3. What kinds of intervention work best for which groups of learners?
4. Do information literacy skills help to improve student retention?
5. Do information skills improve employment prospects?
6. Are information skills valued by learners themselves?
7. What level of skills do 'new' undergraduate students have? Do these vary with age, gender, education?

There is of course some excellent research in this field, but not very much. In the UK, the newly formed Higher Education Academy has joined forces with SCONUL (Society of College, National and University Libraries) to invite tenders for a literature review on 'the impact of libraries, information resources and associated technologies on the student learning experience in higher education' (HEA 2005) with information literacy as one of the main areas to be considered. This review is long overdue but I suspect that it will confirm my assertion that there are substantial gaps in the evidence base.

Why should this be?

The majority of people carrying out innovative work in IL are busy practitioners, working at a pace to keep up in a fast-moving and increasingly volatile environment. If they do carry out systematic evaluation this will often be done in the margins of their time. Sadly, a lot of excellent work is lost to the community through lack of time to reflect, write up and disseminate. It is increasingly difficult to release the best people to pursue research opportunities. Even when funding opportunities are available the timing and demands of the bidding process are often prohibitive.

There are a number of ways in which this problem could be addressed. We could set up better partnerships between academic departments of library and information science, on the one hand, and practitioners on the other. We could seek funding for practitioner research fellowships and lobby national organizations to invest in more research programmes.

In the meantime, however, I suggest that the practitioner community could itself lay some foundations to strengthen the evidence base.

This is a very simple and pragmatic proposal, and I will use some examples from my own institution, the UK Open University, to explain further.

Our Information Literacy Unit is responsible for developing courses, programmes and learning materials (mainly online). The kind of work we do will have parallels in many other similar institutions around the world. In general we know how many learners we have, who they are and we ask them for feedback on the course or programme they undertake.

For example we run a twelve week on line course called MOSAIC – Making Sense of Information in the Connected Age. The University routinely collects demographic data on its students, so for each presentation of the course we know quite a lot about the cohort. We know their age distribution, where they live, whether they have studied with the Open University before and their educational qualifications. The course results are themselves illuminating – submission rates, pass rates, standard and areas of difficulty. After the course the students are surveyed. The survey results tell us why they took the course in the first place, whether their personal objectives were met, what they thought of it, how long it took, how they have used the skills and knowledge and so on and so on.

At the other end of the spectrum we run on-site staff development sessions of one or two hours, covering all the usual topics from e-journals to reference management. Again we know who attends, where they are from and we carry out a routine evaluation which asks people to estimate their skills/knowledge before and after the session.

My final example is our online IL diagnostic test, Info-Rate. This is providing us with valuable data on our learners' skills and knowledge. There is huge potential for comparing populations and also pre and post testing to look at the effectiveness of our interventions.

I am sure that very similar data must be collected in organizations and institutions the world over. If we could begin to tailor the information that we collect routinely so that it could be pooled and shared, we could open up new opportunities for low-cost practitioner research. Initiatives as simple as standard evaluation forms coupled with demographic profiles of learners could provide exciting potential.

I hope that the conference will provide an opportunity to discuss ideas such as this. Collaborative initiatives sharing resources and expertise across national and domain boundaries could benefit the entire IL community.

References

HEA and SCOUNL (2005) Invitation to tender – Academy reviews of research literature