

Information Literacy is dead?

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Abstract

For many years information literacy theorists and practitioners have lauded information literacy as a major role for librarians, particularly for those working in academic environments. To be successful requires librarians to be leaders in the teaching and learning process, well versed in pedagogy and practice. We must work side-by-side with academic staff re-engineering the curriculum to incorporate information literacy principles thus ensuring the next generation has the skills to become lifelong learners. But are we really succeeding? Do we really make a difference? Is it worth all the effort, time and expenditure? If we weren't doing information literacy what else would we do? This discussion paper identifies the issues and explores some answers to these questions.

Introduction

Information literacy (IL) is a term synonymous with librarianship, particularly so for library staff working at the frontline in academic libraries. A plethora of publications tell us what this term means and how to apply it; and so we do so, with passion and commitment, safe in the understanding that we are contributing to the next generation's path to becoming lifelong learners. This is not a new concept or movement; librarians have been undertaking IL programs for many years. But are we really succeeding? Do we really make a difference? Is it worth all the effort, time and expenditure? If we weren't doing information literacy what else would we do? This last question is the one that interests me the most and the answer, I believe, is why we must re-think what we do in the name of information literacy

Defining information literacy

The debate on the usefulness of IL often hinges on what we define as IL which can range from simply bibliographic instruction sessions to more theoretical versions that discuss defining an information literate person (Webber and Johnson 2006). As part of learning and teaching organisations, academic libraries tend to define our IL programs based on the latter, we don't do IL we *are* IL. To assist academic libraries in defining IL there are several versions of IL competency standards available, such as *Australian and New Zealand information literacy framework: principles, standards and practice* (Bundy 2004) and *ACRL's Information literacy competency standards for higher education* (2004). These standards are useful guides for libraries and indeed have been successfully used by academic libraries in developing their IL programs placing a greater emphasis on embedding IL throughout the curriculum. However, what we often see in academic libraries are IL advocates who use these 'formal' standards that include all encompassing definitions of IL as a means to inflate the value of IL particularly in justifying a program that extends from first year university students onwards. Their view is that without a regime of IL students will leave university ignorant and unable to become lifelong learners. As Williams (2006, p20) puts it:

Information literacy, it is said, one of the skills learners need in this new world. So far, so good. But then the IL proponents make a rather big intellectual leap. Somewhere in their argument, information literacy becomes the main precondition for lifelong learning and all its envisaged benefits.

Similarly Nimon (2002, p21) observes that librarians' obsession with making IL synonymous with lifelong learning has actually resulted with:

'...much of the indifference or even hostility on the part of academics and others to librarians' information literacy campaigns...'Literacy' has become so elastic a term, especially when used in combination with other words, as to confound discussion as much as clarify it'.

Debating information literacy

As we can't seem to agree on a definition of IL, debating the value IL becomes problematic. Whenever anyone dares to raise the subject there is an instant flurry of responses disputing what has been said with cries of insulting our professional integrity and over simplifying what IL actually is (and out come the various IL definitions to prove it). Thus for many librarians these debates become just minor annoyances and are OK so long as they are not taken too seriously. A recent example of this was last June's ACRL's President's Program debate, *The Emperor has no clothes: be it resolved that information literacy is a fad and waste of librarian time and talent*. Prior to the debate, contributors to the ACRLog (2006) questioned the value of the debate given the fact that IL was an 'established priority' for ACRL and doubted that a positive outcome would affect ACRL's commitment nor would it 'change the position of any librarian that attends'. Similar opinions were found in the summaries of the debate, Henry (2006), for example, states 'the comic interludes added a touch of fun, and in the end, not many minds were changed. Pre- and post-debate audience voting supported the importance of information literacy...', and Bradley's review (2006) stated that the debate was, 'Highly entertaining, but few were surprised that the negative of this resolution won!' Thus it would appear that such debates are pleasant interludes in the world of IL but never really a threat to its survival.

Fortunately there are those who persevere with the debate. One of the most recent is the already quoted opinion piece from Peter Williams (2006) who argues that the IL movement has failed because its rhetoric bears little relation to reality and the concept it promotes has not made any impact on public consciousness. In other words, the only ones who think IL is vital to society are librarians.

The information explosion

In Williams' paper he cites Wilder (2005) who muses that IL makes all the wrong assumptions; one premise is that students are being overwhelmed by information and need help in finding the right information and how to use it. (Williams also comments how Wilder's article typically "caused quite a stir in the profession" which is probably why he was asked to be on the positive side of the ACRL debate). However, even back in 1990 the 'information explosion' was already being used as a reason for IL; information was hard to find, it was even harder to sort the good from the bad and libraries were difficult places to use, 'The simple unfortunate truth is that what you don't know can hurt you. Ignorance is not bliss' (Max 1990, p84). Emotive descriptions such as 'information explosion' "awash with information" and 'oceans of information' are often used to imply that our users are drowning in information with the obvious conclusion that only librarians can save them or as Wilder puts it, 'Teach them [students] the information-seeking skills they need to stay afloat'. However, as Wilder goes on to say, students are able to find what they want and can do it without librarian intervention,

...Google provides her with material she finds good enough and does so instantaneously. Information literacy assumes that she accepts unquestioningly the information she finds on the internet, yet we know from research that she is a skeptic who filters her results to the best of her ability...Simply put, information literacy perceives a problem that does not exist. Furthermore, it misses the real threat of the Internet altogether – which is that it is now sufficiently simple and powerful that students can graduate without ever using the library.

Yet librarians argue that information seeking and analysis is far more complicated than that and so continue to disbelieve that users are capable of learning by themselves. To be information literate requires intervention by those in the know - and this requires librarians to teach.

The yen to teach

Despite the rhetoric that IL is more than bibliographic instruction many librarians still measure IL in the amount of training they do. Whether this is face-to-face or online, teaching collaboratively with academics, training one-to-one or in small or large groups, holding subject specific classes or demonstrating generic skills, undertaking tours, participating in orientation programs, etc, the basic premise is that the librarian is the expert/educator/specialist eager to instil their knowledge to others. Of course this is not to say that this IL training is unnecessary and there are many excellent examples in the literature of good IL practice and activities, however, there are also practitioners who have questioned the value of this effort arguing that our limited resources are better used elsewhere. Seventeen years ago, for example, Joanne Bessler (1990, p77) argued that whether at the reference desk or in the classroom the 'yen to teach' was central to librarians' purpose with little consideration of its value;

librarians continue to revamp programs, take courses in marketing and educational theory, and harass administrators for institutional support because they know that library instruction is good for patrons – whether the patrons want it or not. The yen to teach strikes librarians working at the reference desk as well as those standing behind podiums...For these librarians, handing out answers is simply not enough...'

Not knowing when to stop means that student/librarian encounters often become a 'learning experience'; 'But even if they should all be first-year students, there is the awful, and largely unresisted, temptation to tell everything. So what the students get is a 50-minute oral bibliography' (Eadie 1990, p44). In 2006 the situation has not changed. Roxanne Missingham comments, 'I sometimes hear librarians saying "We just need to make clients have lots and lots of training to be able to use our services.' (and I have been guilty of saying this too)' (Barkworth and Missingham 2006, p18).

Despite the yen to teach, from a logistical point of view it is not easy for librarians to keep up with the teaching. Back in 1990 Eadie argued that the number of librarians had decreased yet number of students had substantially increased. In 2006 Anderson (p7) again points out that things have not changed,

'Libraries are poorly equipped and insufficiently staffed for teaching. Ask yourself what your user-to-librarian ratio is (at the University of Nevada it's about 680 to 1) and then ask yourself how you're going to train all those users'.

Zabel (2004) also states that it is simply not possible for librarians do any more with librarians feeling overextended in the hours of teaching already and where possible they are using graduate library students to assist in their training. Not only numbers are overwhelming there are also barriers such as last minute timetable changes that have put whole programs into jeopardy. Zabel reminds us that there are costs involved in setting up credited programs and with cash-strapped faculties and students who are time and financially poor there is little enthusiasm to change, extend and/or create new programs and courses.

Yet librarians persevere, not only do we teach because we are passionate about IL but also because it is easier than the alternative. Indeed, for those who question the value of IL, the most common lament is that IL is used an excuse to teach our users how to use our systems rather than creating systems that don't need instruction. What is required are better designed services and facilities that provide seamless access to our resources, 'While not all expectations will ever be met, a library that devotes its resources to collections and services valued by its patrons will fare far better than one that expends its energy on programs to build better patrons (Bessler 1990, p77). Lewis (1990, p80) concurs with Bessler stating that he must teach his students time and time again about how to use library tools because there's no way to make it self-explanatory. Most disturbingly, though it may be technically possible, a solution is considered too expensive and thus teaching students is consider the only realistic solution to the problem, 'We try to build better patrons at least in

part because it is often easier than building a better library'. Similarly Eadie (1990, p45) states, 'I think...that we should dismantle barriers rather than train people to climb over them'. A decade and a half later, Anderson (2006, p7) also comments 'If our services can't be used without training, then it's the services that need to be fixed – not our users'. Missingham (p 18) believes to achieve this we must stop thinking like librarians and more like our users; 'I always say that we will know when we are successful when our users do a Google search and the first hit is written by a librarian. We need to appear where our users appear – we have to step into the shoes of the user and not send them to re-education camps'.

Online IL tutorials

In an attempt to empower the user and also to cope with the increasing number of students it is *de rigueur* now for every academic library to provide an online IL tool. Most are terrific, designed to be used within face-to-face training sessions, for external users, be incorporated within the institution's own learning systems, etc. But why do we have so many versions of them? If our goal is to empower our users to be independent learners and lifelong learners by instilling particular skills and knowledge that they can take with them for the rest of their lives, why do we need customised online courses that only apply to one institution? Why don't we take a program such as Queensland University of Technology's Pilot online IL tutorial (2006) or Unilinc's Web-ezy Solutions (2006) and build one non-customisable system that is hosted in one spot and everyone else links to? Similarly, how-to guides, etc. – why, for example, are there several Endnote online training tools in use? Put simply it is because librarians don't like what others have done, they want to customise to suit their own library's resources and teaching programs (including making pedagogically correct) and/or they want to brand their own product in a belief that this is a good marketing tool. Many, many hours are wasted reinventing the wheel time and time again.

Measuring information literacy

Here's my alternative IL definition for academic libraries: "information literacy refers to activities that keep librarians busy teaching users how to sort the wheat from the chaff". This definition may sound facetious however much of what is undertaken under the guise of IL, particularly in academic libraries, is exactly this. Look no further than the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) annual statistics (2006) and the similar Association of Research Libraries (2006) statistics to demonstrate how important IL is in proving that librarians are busy. The CAUL statistics cover a broad range of library activities to be used for benchmarking, including IL. If IL is core to our function then we can presume that these numbers are to be used as a measurement for IL. So what are we benchmarking for IL? The categories of number of persons/groups undertaking IL and number of reference transactions simply measure activity (how busy we are) with no measurement of actual outcomes. The statistics database can even rank institutions, for example, in comparing ratio of number of persons over number of groups but due to a lack of meaningful definition of each category these rankings are questionable. Do these statistics imply that the more people an institution is exposing to 'IL training' the better? What would happen if there was a sudden drop in numbers? Would it suggest that an institution was failing their clients because fewer were being trained in IL or would it suggest that there was just no need for IL because barriers to finding and using information had been removed? Perhaps it would depend on who (librarian v. non librarian) was interpreting the statistics. No doubt many others have questioned these statistics (and probably not only in reference to IL) - yet we still collect and publish them year after year. Why? Because it shows us how busy we are; it justifies our existence and it makes us feel good.

At the local level we also use these quantitative statistics to promote what we do and at face level they can look very good. At Macquarie University, for example, annual IL training statistics show that we hold an average of 550 training sessions (ranging from one to three hours) with a yearly total of 9,000 participants. This gives an average of 17 students per session which is a good class average. However, if 'big attendance items' such as library tours are removed the number of students per session is reduced to just seven. Often

library staff would note that attendances would be disappointing with only one or two students turning up, and not only for elective classes, compulsory classes held in conjunction with academic staff are not much better. So despite all the efforts of librarians; preparing and presenting programs, liaising with academics etc. over two thirds of our students are not exposed to a library IL session. Yet this work took many many hours of reference librarians' time, for at least six months of the year there is a frenzy of activity, it can be stressful and difficult.

Reference desk activity is also often used as the other measure of how successful our IL programs are; if reference statistics drop then an IL program has stopped repetitive questions and is a success. If reference statistics go up, it means that the program has successfully promoted library services. Eadie (1990) argues that there is little substance to either of these assumptions; most programs reach only a small proportion of students and repetitious questions continue to come to the reference desk despite user education. All in all the IL agenda places a great deal of pressure on librarians to perform when in reality the amount of effort expended does not reflect (at least in quantitative terms) any real benefit at all.

So we rely on qualitative data to justify our IL programs. How often do we hear how students attending our sessions are transformed by what they learn, they are 'amazed' at what's out there, wish they had learned about what we have in first year, etc? We promote these comments in our library newsletters and reports; satisfaction level of our students is used as a measure of how well we are doing. The University of Hull Library (2006), for example, measures effective learning skills by the number of students registered on the postgraduate training certificate module and by the percentage of students who feel more confident after attending an information skills training session. The main target is for 75% satisfaction level with 65% being acceptable. If 25-35% of students leave a training session unsatisfied why should the training session be considered a success?

In Kuh & Gonvea's (2003, P258) study they comment on how there is really 'relatively little known about what and how students' academic library experiences contribute to desired outcome of college [students] (including information literacy)...'. Their study of analysing student responses between 1984 and 2002, found that though the library is a positive learning environment for students, library use does not contribute directly to gains in IL, '...the findings of this study offer no silver bullet (or single intervention) that will produce an information-literate college graduate'.

So despite all our efforts over thirty years or so, if libraries are still only reaching a small percentage of their student/staff population and of that small percentage only two thirds are satisfied, there appears to be still quite a lot of users passing through university systems with little exposure to IL programs.

Time to reconsider our priorities

So what should we be doing? In my view this is the crux of the issue. If libraries had unlimited staff and unlimited budgets then (perhaps) I would be very happy to see IL continuing as we have traditionally done. But this is not the case, most university libraries are under great strain to perform with smaller budgets and less staff in an ever-changing environment. In order to survive and remain relevant to our users we must change too and we don't have much time to do it. We must free up our time and concentrate our efforts on matters that will have the greatest impact for all our clients. To do this we must start thinking top down rather than bottom up:

Challenge 1 – Stop teaching undergraduates.

Our primary IL clients are *not* undergraduates. Linked with this is that librarians must stop thinking that undergraduates need us to make them information literate.

Challenge 2 – Concentrate our efforts in postgraduate research students and academic staff

Focus our efforts with IL where it matters and develop programs for these client groups in collaboration with other university units such as research offices and teaching and learning centres. There are three advantages: 1) these client groups are the ones that will most value the IL assistance 2) collaboration with other areas of the university assists with the workload and most importantly, 3) these client groups are the ones that teach our undergraduates. However, our focus with these client groups should not *primarily* be in relation to IL, there are many other issues that we need to deal with.

Challenge 3 – Stop thinking that we have to be teachers

All librarians do not have to teach nor do they need a sound understanding of pedagogy. These are roles for others in the university community. We need librarians to have a broad range of skills, including understanding and developing sophisticated systems and infrastructure.

Challenge 4 – Stop reinventing the wheel

Every time something changes in the university or with library services many librarians fret about ‘what training implications will this have?’ Rightly so, as there is *always* something that needs to be changed because we customise everything. This is a huge waste of time and money.

Challenge 5 – Start thinking what else we can do and reshape our libraries for the future

Here I will give two examples.

Example 1: At Macquarie University Library the department responsible for providing reference and research services was restructured and position descriptions were re-written to shift the focus from teaching and learning to research. This resulted in the majority of professional staff working to build closer relationships with research students and academic staff and a smaller number of frontline staff to cater to the needs of undergraduates. All generic teaching in the library (eg general ‘how to use’ sessions) ceased and librarians were discouraged to take on any more IL programs for undergraduates, including collaborative teaching with academic staff. This meant seriously questioning everything that had been done in the past and two very difficult things; learning to let go and learning to say no.

Example 2: During 2006, The University of New South Wales Library undertook an even greater leap by merging a network of special libraries into one information services department. The purpose of the restructure was to free up professional staff to provide services to support research and maximise the understanding and consequent use of UNSW Library’s extensive content. Frontline services staff use a tiered service to deal with all service enquiries and levels of reference service have been clearly articulated and scaled down. A large academic services unit is responsible for building relationships with the university community (academic staff and postgraduates research). Even more exciting is the unit of staff dedicated to service innovation with a role to keep abreast of new technologies and services, and a unit of staff who takes on appropriate new services and makes them happen. IL processes are certainly part of this new world but it does not drive the agenda as it has done so in the past.

Conclusion

Here's what Charles Leadbeater had to say about people using libraries in the closing speech at last year's *Libraries and the creative economy symposium*:

They didn't go there for the wisdom of librarians, they went there to do things themselves. They went there for self-help; the library is a space in which they could use tools, not just receive a service. Libraries I think are spaces for self-organisation. That's when they really, really work. They're not actually services. The best experience of going to a library is when you don't use a service because you can find exactly what you need without having to ask someone.

In other words, services should be structured and delivered in such a way that users can access them without asking. Leadbeater was talking about public libraries but what he says is relevant to academic libraries too. He believes that in the future we will see far more collaborative creativity, such as the phenomenal success of *Wikipedia* and *eBay*. *Wikipedia* has achieved this with *one* employee and *eBay*'s success is based on giving people the tools to do business themselves– the challenge, Leadbeater argues, is how do we do this in library space? His answer is to stop looking at our clients as consumers but as players and contributors – provide the self-help infrastructure and then set them free. He argues that libraries try do this by being opening and welcoming places, however, then we put up barriers such as having our own kind of rituals and languages, '...librarians want to talk the language of participating and openness but actually you're torn back to language of guardianship'. What we need is new ways of thinking and creating far more collaboration; and we need people who can act as mediators and guides and provide the platforms to achieve this. Unfortunately Leadbeater doubts that librarians, as we are currently trained, are the best people to do this. The big danger here is that the ones who are doing it are the big organisations such as *Google* and *Microsoft*. Whilst librarians argue how to make our clients information literate and how important we are in making this happen, these global organisations are building the tools that will by-pass the need in the first place. So, be passionate about IL by all means, but keep it in perspective with everything else that we have to do. Because if we don't think of the bigger picture and start building better libraries then we will be more concerned about libraries' survival than worrying about whether or not information literacy is dead.

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