Information Literacy: intellectual scaffolding for the information society

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Workshop facilitated at ANZTLA conference 1999

In facilitating this workshop I adopted a constructivism approach. The participants were encouraged to construct their own meaning of Information Literacy. They were divided into 4 groups. Active participation was required of all workshop members. My role was to provide a structure for the workshop, stimulate discussion using trigger questions/statements and keep discussion focussed. The paper summarises the delegates unedited responses to a series of trigger questions and statements, resulting in a snapshot of how the theological community has conceptualised Information Literacy.

The Information Age
We live in an age of expeditious technological, social and economic change. Using communication technology, such as the Internet, individuals at work or home can access and transfer multimedia information - sound, video, pictures, text, software - from every part of the globe. Information exchange is rapidly becoming a major economic commodity. (Cheek 1997, p. 243)

Educators are increasingly realising that "even the best and most comprehensive degree program cannot anticipate and include all the changes that are likely to occur within an individual's lifetime..." (Candy 1994, p. 31).

There is a tsunami of data that is crashing onto the beaches of the civilized world. This is a tidal wave of unrelated... bits and bytes, coming in an unorganized, uncontrolled, incoherent cacophony of foam." The myth of the Info age [Online, accessed 19 June 1999, URL http://www.simplerwork.com/newsite/b/b1.htm

To reduce social inequality while realising the potential of the information society, we need to broaden our concept of information to include the social, political, and cultural roles of information. There is also a need for people to develop an understanding of their information rights and become information literate... [given] the subtle nature of information, [information literacy should] not be equated with computer skills (*Australia as an information society*, 1992,p. 26)

Delegates were asked to reflect on the quotes above and discuss how the Information Age has affected them and their clients.

Delegate feedback :
The Information Age requires a new conceptualisation of the power, while maintaining a critical stance with respect to the data and its sources, within a diversity of social, political and cultural settings. Sophisticated skills are needed to effectively access and filter information.

Our profession needs to play an active role alerting clients that much of the informa-

tion, readily available via the Internet, has questionable authority. Unfortunately payment for "valuable" information will soon be the norm. Even now we are witnessing escalating prices.

There will be an emergence of 2 client groups:
- Computer literates who can use the technology efficiently but in some cases are unable to discriminate and evaluate the information they are receiving.
- Computer illiterates who feel like they are walking through a fog and are in awe of technology and fail to see it only as a tool or a conduit for obtaining information. Often this group of clients is economically disadvantaged.

There is a distancing developing between the librarian and the client – clients can get more for themselves with less assistance from the librarian. We need to negotiate a new relationship. We need to forge a new role. Librarians need to become facilitators of life long learning.

Client expectation of library services and resources has greatly increased. They expect most resources to be available electronically. Some libraries still have card catalogues. Most students want "instant gratification" and ignore the card catalogues.

There seems to be an inverse relationship between computer literacy and the ability to critically think and evaluate information. Clients with the greatest technology skills appear to have the least understanding of how to select and assess appropriate and relevant information.

Delegates were then asked to establish a working definition of Information Literacy for the theological community.
Because of the nature of the theological discipline it is essential to move beyond solely focussing on the technological manipulation of information. Knowledge is critical in all academic settings – for the theological community judgement is essential and this relates to wisdom. Thus for us information literacy is seen as using information wisely for the benefits of others (Bruce 1998). Advances in information technology facilitate a great exchange of information between theological communities, which were previously disparate and focussed on separateness.

Information Literacy is the ability to locate, access, evaluate and use information for lifelong learning. In a theological educational environment lifelong learning is needed for personal growth and ministry.

Since God is involved in all of life there is no division between the sacred and the secular. The group opted to adopt a modified version of the definition by Radomski (1999)

> Information literacy enables one to extend, connect, apply and communicate within and across disciplines, fields of study or practice. It is the cumulative experiences from a range of subjects and learning experiences, [including critical thinking and awareness of ethical issues,] that enables learners to learn how to use information effectively in familiar and unfamiliar contexts. (Radomski 1999, p 21)

Information Literacy in the theological community involves the ability to address the text, acknowledging the possibilities of numerous interpretations. Practically this will involve an ability to discern and assess additional perspectives available in the information society and accordingly to review and impart theological assertions.

Finally each group was asked to construct a portrait of a 'typical' client.

Group one - Having read widely, including required texts, our student, Theo, has carefully defined his research. He comes to the library having decided on the topic, "Christology in the thought of John Wesley" He goes to the reference collection to consult dictionary and encyclopedic material providing definitions and the historical context for Wesley's thoughts. He then looks for Wesley's works and monograph materials on the subject, which he has identified through the subject catalogue. Next he searches periodical indexes both print and electronic. To review recent scholarship, he uses the Internet, knowing the availability of material listed by Wesley Historical Societies from the UK and USA. Our student needs skills to use both traditional print resources and the latest electronic resources.

Group two – Our clients can be divided into four categories
- Non reader who wants to know as much as possible about God without reading a book.
- Middle of the road reader who is only willing to read the bare minimum.
- Deep philosophic thinker who grapples with deep issues but finds it hard to identify the information that s/he wants or needs
- Faculty trying to keep up to date with professional reading.

The librarian needs to help all clients attain the skills and knowledge to function as self sufficient and competent information consumers. The delegates in this group resolved to :
- Talk to faculty about integrating information literacy into subjects.
- Integrate into their own practice issues discussed in the workshop.
- Develop and maintain a patient attitude to information illiterates.

Group three : In our libraries we have a wide range of students:
- Retired people with no computer skills but advanced degrees
- Undergraduates with computer skills but a lack of understanding of the qualitative aspects of information.
- Mature-age students predominate. They generally want their information needs to be met on a one to one basis

We need to convey to all students that the skills needed to find and use information effectively are transferable to a variety of contexts and formats of information. This group resolved to:
- Teach students to access the Internet using appropriate search strategies
- Use knowledge of different learning styles to develop strategies for teaching information literacy
- Work more closely with faculty
- Become more aware of curriculum content
- Lobby faculty who acknowledge the importance of information skills and collaboratively integrate information literacy competencies into the curriculum.

Group four : Clients are very diverse :
- Undergraduates – practically oriented. Generally they only want skills to complete as-

signments.
- Postgraduate – more inquiring – require sophisticated skills
- Faculty – personally committed but sometimes unaware of current information resources.
- Many mature age students have no recent academic experience. They find intellectual inquiry a challenging novelty, however they often find the IT environment threatening.

All delegates in this group agreed that the biggest professional challenge is to devise strategies for enabling off-campus students to acquire information literacy skills.

Conclusion
Emerging from this mosaic are two main themes.
- Computer literacy, media literacy or library literacy must not be equated with information literacy. Information Literacy encompasses all of these literacies, but is more than the sum of them (Adler 1999). Skills to use the tools to access and retrieve are not enough. The quantitative aspects of information need to be addressed. Information needs to be an integral part of the learning process and the attainment of Information Literacy skills and knowledge should be regarded as a developmental cumulative process - a continuum from first year to graduation. Information skills should not be taught for the sake of teaching students how to use library resources. They should be taught so that students become discerning information consumers in acquiring knowledge and skills in relation to their jobs, social roles and as full participants of a democratic society.

- The rapid development of the information society, emphasis on life-long learning and the impact of electronic sources of information have influenced the educational role of the academic librarian. The role has evolved from that of a passive custodian of information resources to a learning facilitator actively contributing to the educational mission of their parent organisation. In an educational setting it must be recognised that Information Literacy can only be fostered when the learning environment requires students to be actively involved in filtering, critically analysing and synthesising information from a wide variety of information sources and formats outside the traditional lectures and set texts and books of readings.

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