Information Literacy :
Promoting Ourselves as the Experts

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In this brave new so-called Knowledge Society, probably the most important skills that anyone can possess are information literacy skills and we Librarians are ideally positioned to encourage, teach and foster these skills in our students and colleagues to help them in their study, teaching and research. What I want to do in this session is to tell you a little of my experience that I have gained in my years as the Instructional Services Librarian at AUT. If I'm preaching to the converted, my apologies, but I hope that we will be able to share and learn from each other. Incidentally, I am aware that the numbers of clients we deal with will vary considerably, depending on the size of the institution we work in, but that doesn't matter. The principles are the same whether you are dealing with individuals, small or large groups.

So, where did this concept come from? Is it just another passing fad? To many, the term "information literacy" seems to be just another bit of jargon that forms the "technobabble" of the Information Age, joining an ever-growing list of "literacies" deemed necessary for survival in the 21st century. But, in fact, information literacy is not just about computers and technology, nor is it a very recent invention.

Although the concept was already being discussed in the mid 1960s, Paul Zurkowski first used the term in 1974 in a report entitled *The information service environment, relationships and priorities* (Zurkowski, 1974). At that time, Zurkowski was the President of the Information Industry Association in the U.S., and in his report he introduced the concept thus:

> "People trained in the application of information resources to their work can be called information literates. They have learned techniques and skills for using the wide range of information tools as well as primary sources in molding [sic] information solutions to their problems." (Carbo, s.d., p.2)

That same year, at the National Conference on Library and Information Science, Zurkowski suggested the goal of achieving information literacy in the U.S. by the end of the 1980s (Guangjun, 1998). What did happen was that in 1989 the American Library Association adopted a definition of information literacy that became - and still is - universally accepted.

So, what is this definition? The American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy considers that to be information literate, people must be able to:

> "Recognise when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the information needed. Ultimately information-literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to learn because they know how knowledge is organised, how to find information and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for lifelong learning because they can always find information for the task or decision at hand." (p.1).

Later definitions make explicit skills that are implicit in this definition, eg, Christine Bruce (1997) suggests that an information literate person:

- Recognises the need for information
- Recognises that accurate and complete information is the basis for intelligent decision-making
- Identifies potential sources of information
- Develops successful search strategies
- Gains access to [appropriate] sources of information, including computer-based and other technologies
- Evaluates information
- Organises information for practical applications
- Integrates new information into an existing body of knowledge
- Uses information in critical thinking and problem-solving.

From this, it is clear that information literacy is a process that incorporates many different and often complex skills. Contrary to popular belief among the technocrats, information literacy is not to be confused with computer skills or information technology. Knowing how to use a pc is becoming increasingly important – some would say an absolute - but it is only one of the many skills that can help to make one information literate.

I hope that all I have said so far has made it patently obvious that being information literate is the best possible aid when undertaking research. Researchers today have far more information available to them to sift through than at any other time in human history. In fact, according to Gert Hopstede, a Dutch Professor who specialises in organisational behaviour, human beings are in danger of killing themselves with information stress (Bundy, 1997). Consider this extract from an article published in the *Professional reading guide for educational administrators* in which the professor was quoted (Bundy, 1997):

> "We are awash with information. We are surrounded, prodded, consumed, and overwhelmed by it... A weekday edition of the New York Times now carried more information than the average person in the 17th century would digest in a lifetime. One thousand books are published every day. The total of all printed information doubles every five years. More information has been generated in the last three decades than in all the previous 5000 put together. We are in the midst of an information explosion. And, as is the nature with explosions, the casualties are mounting up. Psychologists are increasingly talking about a strange new ailment – Information Fatigue Syndrome." (Ida Silva quoted in Bundy, 1997)

To return to our Dutch professor:

> "Human beings were not designed to handle huge volumes of data. Basically, humans are very smart chimpanzees – there's only 1.6 difference in our genes and those of our primate cousins – we program VCRs and fly space shuttles with the same brains our ancestors used to grunt or carve stone tools." (Hopstede quoted in Bundy, 1997)

Plenty of food for thought there, though I think the professor's observation really highlights the amazing capacity for humans to develop and adapt. But I digress...

One of the greatest difficulties facing students and researchers in their quest for information is the ability to create good search strategies for locating appropriate information accurately. Usually wide searches have to be made of secondary sources of information such as indexes and bibliographies - these days the term "metadata" describes data about data - to arrive at the primary source. Once that is determined, then the researcher must literally get his or her hands on that primary source - and that is not always the easiest part of the whole process! In fact, it can be the most frus-

trating and difficult. Even at their most basic, literature searches need careful planning and methodical execution, and the researcher needs patience and tenacity in large measure.

Last year I attended the Commonwealth Library Association's Seminar on User Education that was held in Christchurch. The keynote speaker was Professor Peter Underwood from the University of Capetown, and formerly an Oxford don. In his speech, the topic of which was the need for a strategic framework for information literacy and user education, he talked at length about the effective search, or what he also referred to as the "Information retrieval game". For me, he highlighted something that I think we Librarians can often overlook when helping our clients. It's not deliberate, I hasten to add, but it is simply because our familiarity with the process makes us assume that our clients are as familiar with it as we are. Let me quote Professor Underwood:

"Our job is to work with information and the game I have outlined is a well-known part of any course on information retrieval within the professional discourse. It is, however, largely unknown outside our domain. To "know the game" is to be in control of searching and "knowing the game" has recently become of much greater significance. With the widespread availability of search engines associated with CD-ROM databases and Internet resources, especially the World Wide Web, searching has become a more frequently encountered task for users, as well as for those who work professionally with information. We do our users a disservice by not making clear that searching is often problematic and is certainly a skill that they need to acquire. To pretend, as some of the search engine publicity would suggest, that effective searching is only a matter of typing in a few words to describe a topic is simply crass and it is certainly not a sound motivational technique when we *know* that such an approach will, in most cases, result in failure and frustration." (Underwood, 2000, p.4.)

So, the challenge there to you and to me is not to assume that all researchers, students or staff who cross our path will automatically know about using searching techniques such Boolean algebra, or will know their MeSH from their LCSH. Dr Alan Bundy, a prominent Australian University Librarian and advocate of information literacy, used a quotation from T.S. Eliot's *The Rook* to preface a paper on the topic. I think it is apt.

Where is the life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

So what do we do about it? Well, the first thing to remember is that there are many, many ways to skin the proverbial cat, and you will probably use different approaches to different situations and clients. What suits one group won't necessarily suit another and it is important not to make assumptions about the client's level of knowledge. I have encountered postgraduate students who knew much less than undergraduates about how to embark on literature searches, for example. Sadly it's not uncommon.

Credibility is important, and I would strongly recommend that if you intend to teach groups of students and don't already have a teaching qualification, you should obtain one. Many Universities and Polytechnics offer Certificates in Adult or Tertiary Teaching that are taught part-time. Apart from gaining you credentials, it will give you the confidence and security to teach successfully. **Remember that you *are* the expert**. If you really don't like teaching, give the job to someone who does. A passionate teacher will inspire and there is no bigger turn-off than a lack-lustre performance. We each have our own unique style and we should develop it.

The next challenge is to make sure that you have the support of the academic staff. No matter how knowledgeable and keen you are to impart your wisdom to students, you won't get anywhere unless you have the support and collaboration of the teaching staff. The success of any information literacy programme will depend on collaboration. How do you do that? It can be done in a number of ways, for example, formally through boards of studies or through attending departmental meetings, but, in my experience, nothing beats the personal approach. Target key people and talk to them. If you are starting from scratch and it seems like an insurmountable task to cover all the students at once, focus on one or two departments to begin with where you have used shameless opportunism to cultivated sympathetic staff and work hard with them. Other departments will soon hear about the success of your tutorials and will want it for their students too.

The ideal is that your programme will be so indispensable that it will be integrated into the curriculum and become part of the students' assessment. I found that this strategy worked beautifully when I collaborated with the very enlightened programme leader of a first year undergraduate programme in the Health Studies Faculty. The information literacy programme for that course comprised a Library orientation, three tutorials and a Library-based research assignment that was worth 40% of the module, followed by annual revision for the students as they went through their course. The success of this programme led to its adoption by other schools, with adjustments to suit the course requirements. Flexibility and adaptability are the keys to success.

Once we had "sold" the idea of an information literacy programme, the next step was to plan the *when*, *where* and *what*. We had already taken care of the *who* and the *how* – the *who* were the students in their tutorial groups of about 15-20 and the *how* was by orientation followed by three weekly lectures. The *when* is crucial. Poor timing of sessions can completely negate what you are trying to do. In my experience, it is a waste of time to run sessions in the first few weeks of a new semester. At best, you can offer orientations then, but don't expect the students to remember everything you tell them. They are usually like stunned mullets by the end of the first couple of weeks because they are trying to adapt to a new and unfamiliar environment. For the same reason, I have found that sessions after 2pm are not a good idea. I strongly recommend that you try to link the tutorials to the first major assignment that the students have to complete and that you base any Library assignment on the topics that the first assignment covers. If the students see the relevance of what you are trying to teach them to their course work, they will take more notice and be more interested. The assignment that is done best is the one that is assessed and carries credit. You all know as well as I do that students are reluctant to put energy into work that won't give them marks.

It is possible to get good results from Library assignments even when they are not credit-bearing. One school I worked with wasn't able quickly to change its course outlines to include a credit-bearing Library assignment, so we got agreement to make the Library assignment part of the preparation for the first major essay. The assignment required students to locate, retrieve, analyse and critique information on given topics that then had to be included in their essays and reference lists. Evidence of their literature searches and an evaluation of the process they used had to be handed in with the essay and failure to do so meant that the assignment was not completed. In another course, the students had to present the results of their literature searches to their tutorial group and had to justify why they had used or rejected the information they had retrieved. I have digressed a little, but the timing of assignments is as important as the timing of tutorials.

Where you teach is entirely up to you and the resources available to you. I have taught in the Library, in computer labs., classrooms and lecture theatres. I prefer to teach in small groups of around 15, but that's not always possible. When I first started, I used classrooms with overhead projectors and whiteboards, but my preference now is to use datashow and the trusty whiteboard. I have found that splitting tutorials into a "look-and-listen-and-ask" session followed by "hands-on" with a p.c. works pretty well

with most groups. If I have to teach everything in a computer lab., I find that it helps to have a colleague there to do the trouble-shooting. Trying to teach a class solely in a computer lab. is like trying to herd cats – but take heart - my colleagues who teach computing classes all the time tell me that they fare no better. And what's more, teaching academics in the computer lab. is far worse than teaching students – it's impossible to keep them together!

If I might go back to timing for a moment, one problem with which we fought long and hard was the business of getting students logged in to their internet accounts. Until our Information Technology Group set up student support, we found that we wasted valuable teaching time just helping students to register their internet accounts. Early in the semester, many students wouldn't have internet accounts at all because their fees had not been paid for whatever reason. This was frustrating for the students and the Librarian since the students couldn't practise what the Librarian was preaching about online searching. I suspect that for most of you there will be little, if any, IT support and that you are "it", so you will probably have to take this into account in your session-planning.

Another *where* that we have not yet considered is online. Distance learning is increasing exponentially, but, although I did embark on creating an online module for distance students, I do not feel that I am yet in a position to comment on the success or otherwise of this mode of delivery. If any of you have ventured into online teaching, I would love to hear about your experiences.

That leaves us with *what*. Again, you will decide and vary what you teach according to the particular needs of your students. I have found that the best approach is to keep the process logical and simple. I mentioned before that it is dangerous to assume the students' level of knowledge. It will probably be as varied as the individuals in the class. I have always tried to separate teaching about the Library catalogue from teaching about journal indexes. I think it is a pity that lecturers expect students to be able to search journal literature before they know the very basics of competent catalogue searching. I really believe that this is where we Librarians should take a stand. Remember that **we** are the experts, **we** are the professionals, **and we** trained for this, **not** the lecturers. We know the complexities of how these various tools are arranged, their content and the correct mode of searching them. Unfortunately, although the principles of using indexes remain the same and were relatively straightforward with print, computer technology, I think, has made index use far more complex while, simultaneously, indexes have become far more accessible to all and sundry. Once upon a time, Librarians searched the National Bibliography or Index New Zealand for clients. Now the clients do it themselves and what's more, they don't have to go to a Library to do it. How often have you come across a student wading through a couple of thousand records when a properly planned search strategy using a little Boolean logic would have given them exactly what they needed?

We Librarians have an opportunity to make a difference by teaching the correct or best way to search for information and most importantly, to explain the missing link - how, having found a reference, do they find the item itself, whatever it is. As I said previously, keep the process simple and logical. Avoid jargon like the plague, explain and define the terms we take for granted - descriptors, citations, field labels, records, abstracts, call numbers, DDC, corporate authors and so on. It even helps to explain how journals are published because lots of people don't understand the difference between a volume and an issue number. By the way, when you take classes, don't be afraid to include the lecturers as well. They may or may not be experienced Library users, but they are not afraid to ask questions that their students won't ask and they can often highlight particular areas that their students need to know about. You can plan your sessions to be as general as you think fit or you can perhaps concentrate on specific databases that your clients need to learn about.

So, there we have it. A brief look at information literacy and what it is, followed by some pointers to help you get started in teaching, or for those of you who are teaching already, encouragement to continue. Just to end, let me tell you a story about a class of part-time students that I once had. It was an evening class and they were a lively group, all except for one young man. He was beautifully dressed and totally silent throughout the whole session, until, at the end, he came to me and thanked me for the session. Then he asked me why had the session happened when he was almost at the end of his course – why hadn't it happened at the beginning? He then told me that a friend of his had dropped out of the course because he didn't know how to do research and if he had had a session like the one we had just had he was sure his friend would have succeeded. You can imagine why I have never forgotten that young man and you will understand why I am passionate about information literacy. It's simple really. Information literacy skills are the best possible gift that we can give our clients. It is a gift that will last them a lifetime.

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