

THE CHANGING FACE OF READER EDUCATION

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The common conception of study in higher education is one where students work with initiative and independence, pursuing their research needs by reading around the topics in a course and then raising issues for discussion in tutorials. Although most students expect to accept greater responsibility for their study at university, many are unprepared for what this means in real terms. They find that rather than being pushed and directed they are expected to be self-motivated.

Similarly, academic staff expect students to be able to think critically and independently, using a wide range of knowledge and technical skills to combine and inter-relate their ideas.

To those being initiated, libraries are mysterious; even after some acquaintance they are bewildering. To most users they remain problematic.

The role of the library and the librarians involved in reader education in this process can be quite perplexing at times. To some extent it is governed by the broad range of reasons proposed for implementing reader education programs. They include:

1. Improve the ability of students to use the library.
2. Enable students to function independently in assessing library resources.
3. Assist students in dealing with the "information explosion."
4. Reduce the number of repetitive questions asked at the reference or information desk.

The discussion of these issues is somewhat confused in the international literature of librarianship by the diversity of terms for "reader education". While we have become quite conditioned to the phrase here in Australia, in the United States it will generally be referred to by terms

such as *library orientation*, *library instruction* or *bibliographic instruction*; while in the United Kingdom it is called *user education* or *user instruction*. There are many other variants to this terminology. I would like to suggest to you today that there may be value in examining the activities of reader education programs under the broad headings *library literacy* and *information literacy*. My reasons are partly conditioned by the fact that 1990 was designated as International Literacy Year, and the following quotation by the National Consultative Council for International Literacy Year effectively summarises what I believe is involved in *library reader education*:

"Literacy involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking; it incorporates numeracy. It includes the cultural knowledge which enables a speaker, writer or reader to recognise and use language appropriate to different situations;"

The principal aim of a reader education program is to empower a student to use a library effectively, and to open up the information resources of a collection to his/her needs. To make a student *literate*. The consequences of inadequate literacy in a library are that a student is:

- unable to make informed choices.
- restricted in access to information.
- dependent rather than independent in information gathering.
- lacks confidence through lack of skills.

The rationale for a reader education program is to provide either basic library skills or research skills. The teaching of Basic Library Skills I would call **Library Literacy**. It is largely an orientation activity, involving the use of pamphlets, tours, audiovisual programs, library signage, etc. to describe:

- library layout
- catalogue
 - card catalogue
 - OPAC

- microfiche
- CDROM
- classification scheme
- borrowing privileges
- photocopying facilities
- special collections
- format of materials (books, serials, newspapers, microforms, computer software, film/video, map, etc).

The teaching of Research Skills I would call Information Literacy. It lies closer to the heart of terms such as *bibliographic instruction* or *user education*. It will involve careful preparation and detailed instruction involving the use of self-instructional workbooks, guide sheets, bibliographic lists, etc, to describe:

- dictionaries, encyclopaedias
- indexes
- abstracts
- bibliographies
- online searching techniques
- CDROM searching techniques
- review journals/sources
- report writing
- citation practice
- research methodology

The paradox of Information Literacy is that in many respects it calls upon librarians to change more than users. In the 1970s most reader education programs were conducted almost with missionary zeal to try to reach as many students as possible with the message that libraries were exciting, vibrant places. The reality of the 1980s with funding cuts and staffing limitations has seen a rationalisation in the time and breadth of coverage possible for library instruction programs. Large group teaching to first year undergraduate students, whose motivation and research requirements are often minimal, has been replaced at Macquarie University by a far more realistic targetting of specific 2nd and 3rd year courses, and the development of intensive programs for

honours and postgraduate students. First year students are now catered for largely by the development of self-instructional guidebooks, with an exercise sheet that is to be completed and presented to their course tutor, or to be attached to their first major written assignment.

The dilemma for librarians is that information is generally seen as a "commodity". It is not knowledge and it is certainly not wisdom. The expectation of the library is that it will provide *the* answer. However, Information Literacy is a *process* rather than a *product*. As such, the librarian has to provide a vision for the future. As access to electronic information resources increases the intellectual capabilities of staff - the skills of organising and making information accessible; and the complementary skills of identifying, locating and getting inside the contents of various information packages - grows in prominence.

Computers can heighten inequality since they require specialised knowledge unique to particular hardware and software. Books and other print-based resources facilitate equality.

The task facing librarians involved in reader education is to *envision* information in such a way that it allows library users to be confident and competent when they enter a library, and to be able to ask the right sort of questions for their information needs.

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