Information Literacy in Higher Education

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There are few things more gratifying for a librarian than teaching a student how to identify useful sources for a research project. What seemed a daunting topic can be transformed into something the student is keen to pursue. The relief and gratitude of the students they help, as well as an awareness of their role in the learning process, have spurred many academic libraries to develop extensive information literacy programs. In recent years, academic librarians have begun to seek greater integration of information literacy into the programs of their institutions. This article offers observations from one academic library about what can hinder that integration and what can help.

Importance of measurement

It is difficult to convince anyone of the need for information literacy instruction if the nature of the problem cannot be articulated or if increased knowledge and understanding are not objectively measured. But when people hear that 48 per cent of Canadian adults do not have the literacy skills required for full participation in the knowledge economy,[1] they listen.

Those are the kinds of measurements we need for information literacy to succeed as an integral part of any learning process.

One of the difficulties we face in Canada with any educational issue is that education is a provincial responsibility and, as a result, there are no national education policies. Information literacy is not mentioned in Canada's Innovation Strategy, announced in February 2002, even though it is implicit in many of the targets presented to position Canada to succeed in the global, knowledge-based economy.[2] Individual institutions may be starting to collect data related to information literacy, but we seem to lack an effective mechanism for talking about and securing funding for programs on a national level.

Useful work by others

In thinking about information literacy evaluation, it is important to be aware of initiatives that fall outside the library sphere but have possible application to the field. For example, the Educational Technology Service's work on information and communications technologies (ICT) literacy may be very relevant. ICT literacy is

defined as "using digital technology, communications tools, and/or networks to access, manage, integrate, evaluate and create information in order to function in a knowledge society."[3] Although ICT literacy includes skills outside the concept of information literacy, there is some remarkable overlap. For example, one of the sample tasks developed for diagnostic assessment involves looking for reliable sources on the web that recommend treatment options for a particular heart defect. The task is intended to assess, amongst other things, the ability to access and evaluate information.

Academic librarians should also take note of the work of their colleagues in school libraries. For instance, Ken Haycock, a professor at UBC, conducted an extensive analysis of more than 30 years of research on the relationship between student achievement and teacher-librarians' involvement in education.[4] The studies he examined showed that the development of student competence in information skills is most effective when integrated with classroom instruction, through a partnership between classroom teachers and the teacher-librarian, and that academic achievement is

directly linked to the size of the resource centre staff and collection. Similar statements would be very interesting in the realm of higher education, and it is hoped that current studies on information literacy evaluation and university libraries' impact on student learning will result in such useful summaries.

Experience at UBC Library

At the University of British Columbia, librarians have only recently begun to address assessment methods, in part because they have had little opportunity to interact with students beyond a single class meeting. There are some exceptions, but in general there is little information about the skill levels of incoming students, and generally feedback forms are gathered immediately after instruction. In the one-off, single-encounter situations that form much of information literacy instruction, it is a challenge to assess students' application of information literacy concepts to the overall objectives of the course. With advice from a doctoral student in the Faculty of Education's Measurement, Evaluation and Research Methodology department, UBC Library is in the process of developing a more complete framework of evaluation, and plans to pilot it in 2003.

Many UBC faculty see the need for information literacy skills, though they do not usually use that term. Librarians recently interviewed 50 faculty in a variety of academic units, asking what kinds of challenges their students encounter doing course research. Many of the comments related to information literacy: understanding the nature of scientific research; becoming familiar with key authors, journals and other resources in a field; defining and researching a topic; selecting and evaluating materials; knowing what primary sources are and where to find them; conducting a comprehensive literature search or case research; citing sources; preventing plagiarism.

What's needed

The interest in information literacy shown by individual UBC faculty is encouraging, but it has also resulted in a model of instruction that is difficult to sustain. Some UBC Library branches receive so many individual requests for in-class instruction or development of online tutorials that they cannot meet the demand. What is needed now is a systematic approach that looks to the academic program as a whole.

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Curriculum planning needs to include consideration of the information literacy objectives of each course. The costs for a librarian's time need to be considered along with other costs such as instructors, teaching assistants, web designers, and so on. In other words, we need to treat information literacy as part of the curriculum, not simply part of the library.

One final observation: in addition to bringing real data into the conversation, let us remove any tones of defensiveness and evangelism. If we hear someone say that the web has made it easier for people to find information, let us applaud and agree that it is true, not interject with "but…." To the educated person who has just found exactly the right source online, we can sound somewhat protectionist. Instead, let us emphasize that the information age has provided the opportunity for a more highly educated population than ever before, and that information literacy is key to maximizing that opportunity.

Information literacy programs in higher education have come a long way in the past few years. Efforts to integrate them more fully into academic programs are ongoing, and will be helped by more solid data about information literacy in our populations and the impact of information literacy on learning and our knowledge-based economy. In addition, maintaining an awareness of developments taking place outside libraries will help. Librarians often take on other titles such as "information specialist" to explain our roles; in order to advance information literacy we need to think of ourselves as educators as well as librarians.

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Notes

1. National Literacy Secretariat, *A Snapshot of Literacy in Canada – Update*; available from www.nald.ca/nls/nlsild/fact3.htm; accessed January 8, 2003.
2. Government of Canada, *Canada's Innovation Strategy*; available from www.innovationstrategy.gc.ca; accessed January 8, 2003. CLA's response to the Innovation Strategy is available at www.cla.ca/issues/innovation.htm.
3. International Information and Communication Technologies Literacy Panel, *Digital Transformation: A Framework for ICT Literacy* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2002), available from www.ets.org/research/ictliteracy; accessed January 8, 2003.
4. Ken Haycock, "Reinventing School Libraries: Alternatives, Models and Options for the Future," *Forging Forward: National Symposium on Information, Literacy and the School Library in Canada*, November 21, 1997; available from gateway1.uvic.ca/symposium/haycock.html; accessed November 6, 2002.