

Williams, P. (2006). 'Against information literacy'. *Library + Information Update*, 5 (7-8), p.20.

Last year in the US an article by librarian Stanley Wilder caused quite a stir in the profession. 'Information literacy makes all the wrong assumptions'¹ argued that the underlying tenets of the information literacy movement are fundamentally flawed. In Wilder's view, it is a myth that undergraduate students are overwhelmed by the mass of information now available and most of the problems they experience are a consequence of poorly-designed interfaces and confusing password systems. Furthermore, as a response to the perceived threat that the internet poses to librarianship, it is doomed: "simply put, information literacy perceives a problem that does not exist".

Like Wilder, I am an academic librarian with a background of teaching information skills. I am therefore writing as an information literacy practitioner – but one who is becoming increasingly disillusioned with both the term and some of the arguments made by its more prominent advocates. However, the reason for my disillusionment is different. His assertion that there is no problem flies in the face of my experience in a new university. Quite clearly, students do require help navigating the information environment and librarians have a key role to play in providing guidance. If this was all that the information literacy movement in the UK and Europe was saying, I would have no disagreement with them. The problem is that they go considerably further. Simply put, they vastly overstate their case.

What do I mean? Well, did you know that information literacy is the "zeitgeist of the times"² and that it should become "part of the day-to-day activities and life of the people"³? That it has the potential to remedy many "longstanding social and economic inequities"⁴ and help us deal with "whatever myriad issues challenge our world"⁵? That in the future "it will become a necessity for normal living"⁶ and that, without it, a person's ability "to mature intellectually and morally" will be "stunted"⁷? All of these statements have been made by leading proponents of information literacy.

What could be the basis for such extraordinary claims? Part of the explanation can be found in the connection these writers make between information literacy and the lifelong learning agenda. The need for a "learning society" is a widely-held idea based upon a conception of the economic needs of modern nations and the role educational institutions must play. Information literacy, it is said, is one of the skills that will be required by learners 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 single main precondition for lifelong learning and all its envisaged benefits. Effectively, they conflate information literacy with lifelong

¹ Wilder, S. (2005). 'Information literacy makes all the wrong assumptions'. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 7 2005, p.13.

² Candy, P. (1996). 'Major themes and future directions', in Booker, D. (ed.). *Learning for life: information literacy and the autonomous learner (Proceedings of the Second National Information Literacy Conference)*. Adelaide: University of South Australia Library, p.139.

³ Abid, A. (2004). 'Information literacy for lifelong learning'. *World Library and Information Congress: 70th IFLA General Conference and Council*. www.ifla.org/IV/ifla70/papers/116e-Abid.pdf

⁴ American Library Association. (1989). *ALA Presidential Committee on Information Literacy*. Available from: www.infolit.org/documents/89Report.htm

⁵ Andretta, S. (2005). *Information literacy: a practitioner's guide*. Oxford: Chandos, p.xvii.

⁶ eLit2005. (2005). 'Why eLit2005?'. www.elit-conf.org/elit2005/targetgroup.html

⁷ Paul, R. (1992). 'Critical thinking: what, why and how'. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 77 (18-2), p.4.

learning and appropriate the rhetoric, leading to the sort of statements highlighted here and endemic throughout the literature.

This is not the only problem with the discourse of information literacy. It is an article of faith amongst its advocates that information-seeking is a generic skill and many have become drawn towards pedagogical theory. Of course, if we are to take our teaching role seriously then an interest in educational principles and practice should be encouraged. However, the IL proponents seem particularly drawn to alternative educational theories such as problem-based learning, mind-mapping and critical thinking which, because of their non-subject approach, seem to offer a prime role for librarians. Information literacy, we are told, is not just about knowing how to find and use information; it is about “learning how to learn”. Some have even been moved to make rather broad pronouncements about the future of education, arguing that universities should accept that “skills are just as much a part of the course as any subject content”⁸.

But in my experience the key to successful information skills teaching is precisely to make a connection with the research that students are about to embark upon. Talking about information in abstract terms holds little appeal to non-librarians. First-year undergraduate computing students are not going to pay much attention to a talk about Boolean searching. However, show them how to find an electronic journal article about Bluetooth and their ears will prick up.

This inclination to regard information-seeking independently of its context leads to an associated tendency to over-complicate information skills. It is regrettably evident in SCONUL Seven Pillars model which in my view obfuscates rather than elucidates. It is also manifest in proposals for courses lasting “forty hours per week for a duration of ten weeks” or “twenty hours per week for a duration of twenty weeks”⁹.

But how difficult is it to evaluate a website or construct a basic search? Does it really take weeks of explanation? And if it is so complex how on earth can we expect undergraduates to grasp it? In the right circumstances, knowledge can be imparted to students pretty quickly. It depends what they already know and what they’re looking for. Ideally it happens in timetabled classes but sometimes it can be achieved in ten minutes at an enquiry desk or in a short tutorial on a VLE. Time is in very short supply in higher education and we have to make the most of what we’re given.

A final and fatal problem with information literacy is that it is an idea that has had its time. The information literacy movement seems very much a product of the initial period of the internet; a response by librarians to the sudden proliferation of information sources available to students via the web. It is based on a model of information-seeking and retrieval (databases and websites, search engines and subject directories) which is already changing and may disappear altogether in the new era of Web 2.0 and Google Book Search. How does IL fit into a world of blogs, wikis and tags? The ramifications of these changes remain to be seen but we are living in fast-moving times and the truth is that these changes have barely registered on lis-infoliteracy discussion list – the main forum of the UK information literacy movement. Quite simply it is being left behind by events.

⁸ Godwin, P. (2005). ‘Making life easier for academics: how librarians can help staff weather the technological storm’. *Journal of eLiteracy* [online], 2 (2). www.jelit.org

⁹ Lantz, A. and Brage, C. (2006). ‘Towards a learning society: exploring the challenge of applied information literacy through reality-based scenarios’. *Italics* [online] 5 (1). www.ics.heacademy.ac.uk/italics/vol5iss1.htm

I would argue for a model of information skills teaching that is both more modest and flexible than that envisaged by the IL proponents. It doesn't amount to a "literacy". It is a means to an end, not an end in itself. It is to do with ensuring students are able to make best use of the ever-changing information options available to them. As such, it is part of an academic librarian's traditional role and a crucial piece of know-how for students but no more than that.

I think it is time to say that the information literacy movement has failed. It has failed on its own terms because its rhetoric bears little relation to reality and the concept it promotes has not made any impact on public consciousness. Wilder's article was published in the national Chronicle but it's hard to imagine it appearing in an equivalent publication over here. Of course, as a profession we need to talk up what we do at every opportunity. But surely there is little to be gained by talking to ourselves?