Cracking the code: Unlocking the terminology puzzle of information literacy

By Sarah Pavey

Snapshot

Our 2024 Reflections and Actions guest author, Sarah Pavey, a UK librarian, explores the various understandings around the term information literacy raising important and interesting considerations for how we use and work with the term in our programming and collaborations.

Understanding information literacy has become increasingly important with the explosion of easily accessible information through the internet and digital technologies but the concept seems more confusing than ever to students and teachers let alone librarians. The term 'information literacy' was first used in a 1974 report by Paul Zurkowski but how people in a school community interpret its meaning is uncertain. During the research we conducted for the recent Erasmus BRIDGE project (BRIDGE, 2024),where I represented the UK partnership, we discovered that in England while school librarians were aware of the concept, teachers used different words to describe their practice. Ironically the school librarians had little opportunity to teach these competencies themselves! Indeed Godbey (2018) suggests librarians have adopted and standardised this term to refer to the ability to locate, evaluate, and use information effectively and ethically, but that teachers and practitioners working directly with students use a variety of other terms to describe similar or overlapping concepts. This terminology uncertainty can cause barriers to collaboration between school librarians and teachers. It may inhibit the development of co-designed information literacy teaching and assessment aligned to real-world needs if different partners are using different vocabularies. My recent book, *The Networked Librarian* delves into the challenges of working with teachers and the mismatch in our professional languages (Pavey, 2024). This invites us to question how and why did this dichotomy evolve?

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Why Is the language of information literacy so diverse?

As librarians we are aware of the definitions that various professional bodies promote to describe information literacy. For example, The Information Literacy Group (ILG) (2018) explains information literacy in the context of 5 areas of everyday life including education. However, such definitions are not always understood by others in the wider school community for a variety of reasons. These might include:

- Information literacy intersects with many academic disciplines, each of which may have its own terminology for similar concepts. Hicks et al (2022) although based on findings in higher education, show how information literacy terminology,

definitions, theories, and frameworks have been appropriated by other subject specialists in academia and the workplace outside of the library domain. Julien (2016) points out the same phenomenon within secondary schools. Here it is suggested that teachers may lack the level of understanding needed of information literacy to fully appreciate how a librarian might apply the term. And so, the barriers build.

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- Another aspect that may affect the terminology is apparent if we consider the origins and development paths of information literacy and information technology. These are different yet are now converging in the curriculum. When I attended university to undertake a master's degree in information science, I clearly remember being told we were in the era of Technology but that the I for Information would, in time, become more prominent and supersede the hardware and programming. Have we arrived at that point I wonder, where content is king? Leaning's research (2017) considers the historical background of the changing terminology and its use. A core issue found in this paper is that IT, until recently was a formally examined subject associated with national qualifications unlike information literacy. The formality of assessment would have standardised the terminology. Webber & Johnston (2017) lament that

> *Progress in the development of information literacy has been hindered by tendencies such as denying that information literacy is even a subject.*

Without the rigour of a curriculum plan the concept of information literacy has evolved over time, leading to variations in understanding and terminology. In addition, what was once a relatively straightforward set of competencies may now encompass digital literacy, media literacy, and other related areas. Indeed Leaning (2019) considers how digital literacy has been shaped through both the IT and information literacy routes compounding the confusion around this term too.

- We know as librarians that information literacy overlaps with other 'literacies' such as reading literacy or numeracy which can lead to mixed terminology and misunderstanding. Langford (2021) provides evidence of how the liberal use of the word 'literacy' as an adjective elsewhere in the school curriculum can lead to misinterpretation of information literacy as a concept. In fact, this then perpetuates confusion further due to the close association of libraries with 'reading culture'. Information literacy can be misconstrued with some believing it is to do with understanding books or other knowledge repositories ie a knowledge of literature.
- Different regions or countries have different educational curricula each with its own terminology and this can affect the language used to describe information literacy. Certainly, this hypothesis was underpinned by our research for the BRIDGE report (2024). Son (2017) found that English for academic purposes (EAP) university students in Australia and English as a foreign language (EFL) university students

in Japan had different expectations and needs in their digital literacy skills due to a different background and experience. This suggests that the language used to describe information literacy may vary based on the educational context. Similarly, Gasque (2016) calls for a globalised curriculum in developing information literacy skills given that research in this literature review indicates variable importance being placed on the topic in different countries and regions. Furthermore, Dupuis (2019) highlights that elementary school students often arrive at college with disparate understanding of information literacy. In a world where many classrooms are multicultural this does suggest we need to be mindful of the terminology we use for information literacy and try somehow to ensure we convey the meaning and understanding we intend.

But it is not just prior experience of students that can lead to misinterpretation of information literacy. Brecher & Klipfel (2014) point out that teachers and librarians often have different professional development opportunities, which can lead to differences in the vocabulary they use.

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> *Teachers come from a variety of educational backgrounds and may not have been exposed to library science terminology such as information literacy.*

They might use terms more common within their own areas of study or pedagogical training. If aspects of what we as librarians would term information literacy form part of a required teaching module but it is described differently to the language we would use, we can see how confusion arises.

- Maybe because there is no formal assessment, as discussed earlier, there is no universally accepted standard for the terminology of information literacy across educational institutions. This then leads to a variety of terms being used interchangeably within academic literature and in practice. Černý (2022) describes information literacy as a concept and through analysis of academic papers and student practice illustrates why the differences in terminology appear depending on the context of the focal point of study. Indeed, O'Connell & Henri (2021) found that teachers may prioritise the teaching of skills associated with information literacy over the specific terminology, leading to a focus on practical terms rather than theoretical ones. This difference was then re-enforced by academic research papers and then the vocabulary of choice is used by others citing the works.
- It is possible that students may hear conflicting terminology being spoken by their teachers. For example, older educators might be more familiar with traditional terms, while more recent graduates to teaching might use terms that reflect the digital age. Machin-Mastromatteo, J.D. (2021) shows how the proliferation of

'literacy' concepts including digital literacy and information literacy have impacted on different generations of teachers in the language they use.

Overall, there are many reasons why there is no common language surrounding the concept of information literacy. But as librarians supporting and collaborating with teaching staff we need to ensure that despite language differences, there is a consensual understanding of the competencies attributed to information literacy that our we wish to develop in students.

Teachers' understandings and terminology choices

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Several international studies have investigated in-service and pre-service teachers' familiarity with, and their use of terminology related to information literacy. The findings indicate while teachers value these competencies and skills, many are unfamiliar with the specific term 'information literacy' and instead use their own vocabulary.

Research conducted into this phenomenon is patchy and there are few recent examples. This raises issues because the terminology in the last few years has changed with new developments and legislative directions in technology. However, in 2019 in Northern Ireland a survey found only 10% of teachers understood the term 'information literacy' (Shannon, Reilly and Bates, 2019.) even though they used it in practice often referring to it as 'study skills'. Research in Australia mirrors these findings with one study (O'Connell & Henri, 2021) stating 'teachers continue to have a poor understanding of what skills and behaviours are associated with information literacy.'

An interesting study by Zimmerman and Ni (2021) examines how the term is used in academic research papers around the world. The research highlights the potential benefits of adapting the terminology and concepts to better resonate with the specific contexts, priorities, and challenges faced by different societies. They concluded that by using context-appropriate language and integrating information literacy with specific education issues and curricula, librarians may be better able to communicate the importance and relevance of information literacy initiatives to teachers, students, and the wider school community. These examples of research certainly add authenticity to some of the reasons behind the random nature of information literacy vocabulary but also underpin why it is essential that there is a common understanding of the learning outcomes even if the language to describe the practice differs.

Implications for collaboration and shared goals

This confusion and variability surrounding information literacy terminology may inhibit collaboration between librarians and classroom teachers if we are not careful. When different vocabulary is being used to describe similar instructional concepts, it impedes meaningful communication, resource sharing, integrated lesson planning, and continuity making it difficult

for the student to take on board the essential messages we are trying to convey. Situations may then arise where, as librarians, we design stand-alone information literacy sessions that are not properly scaffolded or aligned to what students are learning in their everyday classroom lessons. Conversely, teachers may develop research projects without adequately consulting our librarian expertise around topics like database usage, source evaluation, and academic integrity with citations.

Inconsistencies in terminology also risk information literacy being positioned as the sole territory of librarians in schools rather than a shared instructional responsibility. If teachers are not using standards for information literacy as developed by groups such as Australian School Library Association (ASLA), American Association of School Librarians (AASL) Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) or The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) to guide assessment and curriculum planning, student competencies in this essential life skill can become fragmented. It is also vital that examinations confer marks on process to include information literacy skills and probably even more so given the critical thinking aspects that will be needed in an era of generative AI.

Building shared vocabulary for progress

While complete universalisation of terminology is unrealistic given local contexts and personalised teaching methods, several solutions could improve shared meaning around use of the term information literacy. In our own practice, we might think about:

1. Early discussion with teachers about vocabulary preferences and exact definitions of terms being used with students. This might help identify overlapping concepts described in different words.
2. Co-creation of an agreed-upon term for use in a group of local schools. This discussion could capture joint definitions and help merge disparate vocabularies.
3. Delivering professional development sessions with teachers to unpack the nature of digital, media, visual, and information literacy.
4. Using, analysing and understanding national and international learning standards as common language touchpoints.
5. Focussing on students themselves, to guide teachers and librarians towards shared goals and unified language. More youth participation in co-design of learning experiences can bridge divides and use a terminology understood by all.

Conclusion

Variability in terminology use will probably always exist between librarians and teachers surrounding the concept of information literacy. However, purposeful collaboration, professional development, standards alignment, and student voice can mitigate confusion and improve cooperation. Establishing enough shared vocabulary and joint understanding of essential competencies is key so that all in the wider school community can complement one another in building immersive information literacy learning for our students, regardless of exact word choice they personally prefer. Moving forward with a more unified vision and goals, anchored by evidence of real student needs for higher education and the workplace can help overcome the existing barriers and help to prevent future issues in a changing world of information.

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