

Taking stock: Professional perceptions of information literacy

By Dr Susan Boyce

Improving Students' Web Use and Information Literacy

Herring, L. (2011)

Facet Publishing, London,

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Teaching Information Literacy: 50 Standards-Based Exercises for College Students Joanna M.

Burkhardt and Mary C. MacDonald (2010)

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Within the bounds of the library profession, publication lists reveal information literacy as a topical, if not perennial, fail-safe subject for publishers. Two books came my way recently: *Improving Students' Web Use and Information Literacy* by James Herring (2011) and *Teaching Information Literacy: 50 Standards-Based Exercises for College Students* by Joanna M. Burkhardt and Mary C. MacDonald (2010). The fact that both titles indicate a specific focus on information literacy caught my attention because, since its institutional inception in 1989 by the American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy, and through the following decades, I have been an interested, but sceptical, follower of this library pedagogy - observing its spread world-wide and trying to figure out why its fundamentals continue to hold such unwavering attraction for my librarian colleagues.

I know that for most in our profession, the meaning of 'information literacy' has assumed a useful, if amorphous 'catch-cry' label encompassing an emphasis on learning as well as a wide scope of research-based/bibliographic/library-user skills, particularly in regard to specialist online data bases, multiple modes of communications technologies and the internet more generally. But what amazes me is that, inevitably, at the heart of theory and practice, information literacy still remains soundly rooted in the mono-logical, 'information skills process' model, reflective of the culture of print technology from which it was derived during the 1980s and 1990s by academic librarians. This occurred in: the United Kingdom – Marland (1981), Herring (1996) and Willams and Wavell (2001) – and in the United States of America – Irving (1985), Eisenberg and Berkowitz (1988, 1990), Kuhlthau (1988a, 1993b, 1994, 2004), Mackenzie (1999) and Oberg (1999). During the same period in Australia, most state departments of Education, as well as the Catholic Education Office, also developed frameworks for integrating information skills with curriculum (Kirk, 1986). The Australian Library Association's (1994) *Teaching Information Skills*, Bennetto and Manning's (1995) *Learning for the Future: Developing information services in Australian schools*, as well as Wall's (2004) later edition of *Learning for the Future: a Professional Development Kit* established the information literacy discourse within the Australian school library profession, with further encouragement from other professional leaders such as Todd (2000, 2001).

Notably, it was during the mid 1980s that both Kirk (1986) and Breivik (1987) made unselfconscious, alternate use of the terms 'information skills' and 'information literacy', indicating that in terms of both concept and language, information literacy already had an established currency in tertiary library discourse, and an assumed interchangeable relationship. This convergence then facilitated the information skills/information literacy process to become popularly understood as the 'Big Six' model, as devised by Eisenberg and Berkowitz (1988, 1990), a paradigm that has sustained the information literacy concept

throughout the turn of the century and across the communications transition to digital technologies in the twenty-first century. Transmission across cultural change was sustained by belief that the basic tenets of information literacy were sufficient to transcend the different set of cultural and technological logics supporting the range of electronic technologies we currently employ and their associated communications environments.

My doubts about information literacy were originally inspired by assumptions such as this, as much as they were by its formulaic orthodoxy – its emphasis on the informational aspect of communications to form a separate literacy of its own, as if information could ever be transmitted without some mode of

communications; its failure to recognise the non-neutrality of communications technologies; its culturally exclusive way of knowing and its discounting of nonconformist learner subjectivities and unorthodox cultural mores within learning communities. Of course, I recognise that learners require help in accessing and navigating unknown and unfamiliar aspects of this environment. We are all learners in this regard, but I cannot believe that those who negotiate everyday life (transport systems, social networks, electronic pay systems, timetables, supermarkets, DSIs, game rules, learning to drive, software protocol, new generation computers, digital phones) truly require to be burdened with the culturally specific mores of 1980s librarianship.

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Now, well into the twenty-first century, two recent publications, from eminent library publishing houses, assist in helping us to gauge the status of information literacy, to see how it might have adapted to the diversities of current times. Herring is a Lecturer in Teacher-librarianship at the School of Information Studies, Charles Sturt University (NSW), whilst Professor Burkhardt and Associate Professor MacDonald both teach sections of the information literacy course at the University of Rhode Island.

Herring's book is intended as a practical teaching aid, offering a variety of strategies and tools designed to enhance instruction in web use within learning communities and to promote the integration of information literacy in school curricula. Of the nine chapters in this book, one promises the 'big picture' of teaching and learning, six focus on the web and web instruction, another concerns information literacy and the last speculates on the needs of twenty-first century learners. Altogether, it is concisely structured with an Introduction that clearly identifies Herring's goals (transforming web users to web learners and promoting information literacy) and his target audience (teachers, teacher-librarians and ICT administrators). Learning opportunities are outlined in a dot-point list on the cover page of each chapter, which include a generous selection of graphics, figures and tables. A Bibliography and a subject Index complete the book, but my purpose here is to discover what it tells us that is new about information literacy.

Herring's presentation of information literacy is not new. A single chapter, devoted solely to this topic, keeps faith with the traditional understanding of information literacy as a separate 'library' literacy based on the Eisenberg and Berkowitz (2010) paradigm (being a new edition of the earlier 1988, 1990 work), and also offers several similar versions of this model, including his own 'PLUS' adaptation (Herring and Tarter, 2007). Herring's thoughts on the subject are of interest, however, because his reflections in the following chapter illustrate commonly held ambiguities associated with the scope of information literacy. Here, he seems to mellow and become less conservative, but this is where he creates an unintentional, but interesting, paradox for the reader. For example, he refers to research showing that most students do not transfer information literacy from one discipline to another and then he appears to slide away from his earlier orthodoxy, musing on the possibility that "... students might be allowed to develop their own models of information literacy rather than have them imposed upon them. This would be more likely to suit their learning style" (p. 87). This is quite a daring break with the institutional doctrine elaborated in the previous chapter. Elsewhere, he indicates a further shift, identifying other literacies such as digital, media or visual literacy that might also be included in information literacy – because they share information as a common component (p. 74 and p. 133). (Can there be any mode of communication that doesn't?) This concession is not exactly groundbreaking, but it might at least be seen as an advance and I believe many librarians hold the same view. Indeed, from this perspective, I rate Herring's six chapters about the web to be an exercise in information literacy instruction as much as they are also explanations of digital literacies – inescapably

involving information. Nevertheless, given the generous amount of space afforded to fundamental versions of information literacy earlier, this nod to other literacies seems somewhat tokenistic.

These small instances of change on Herring's part might well be deemed as progressive, but they illustrate the tendency for librarians to incorporate various techniques into their interpretation of information literacy, providing they fit with current educational philosophy and meet their approval, thereby creating a convenient hinterland of porous ambiguity around the hard core of standard orthodoxy. Many librarians juggle the duality of this telling dilemma: on the one hand, they are duty-bound to pay homage to the traditional formula for information literacy, whilst on the other, they engage pragmatically, every day, with expansive multi-modal practices, culturally diverse mind-sets and multi-literate student subjectivities. Considering this situation, I think Herring's representation of information literacy reveals its powerful status as an institutional discourse more in service to profession than to student learners.

Do Burkhardt and MacDonald offer a more dynamic picture of information literacy? This book is a second edition, a fact that may well account for its very efficient organisation. It offers fifty, college level, information-seeking exercises, contributed by teachers at tertiary schools of librarianship in North America. Each exercise is designed to incorporate a selection of 'Performance Indicators' drawn from the [American] Association of College and Research Libraries' *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*. These six standards run more or less parallel to the 'Big Six' model, but are more concretely elaborated and more sternly categorised.

The fifty exercises have been carefully chosen so that, collectively, they target every possible information resource a library could provide. In this regard, the authors' mission is to promote the library as much as it is to provide bibliographic and information literacy instruction. No stone is left unturned – every possible print and human resource is covered, along with an equally thorough repertoire of digital and electronic sources: wikis, blogs, RSS feeds, twittering, Google books, and many other new devices by which information is available. So, the book is openly and usefully library-oriented, and resource-centred, as much as it is concerned with information literacy standards; furthermore, its format demonstrates a happy understanding about the marriage between information and the mode of communication. An added plus is found in the Introduction and Preface, which acknowledge cultural, social and generational diversity amongst student learners, even though '... non-traditional students . . . with not-so-up-to-date technological skills . . . require information literacy training as well'(p. vii).

The scope of the fifty exercises is extremely wide, ranging from 'Creating a Research Question' to 'Let's Buy a Car', from 'Website Worthiness' to 'Free-Range Searching' to 'Research Analogies' to 'The Wikipedia Challenge', 'Statistics, Statistics, Statistics' and 'How Plagiarism Changed a Life'. The final exercise, 'The Paper Trail', is a fifteen-week assignment designed to be absolutely comprehensive – a practical culmination of standards and performance indicators. Undeterred by this rigorous aspect, I think secondary school teachers and teacher-librarians might make good use of, or draw inspiration from, some of these exercises with senior classes. The exercises are grouped into eight or nine categories such as: 'Getting Ready for Research', 'Issues of the Information Age', 'Periodicals and Databases' etc. Following all the exercises, Chapter 11 is dedicated to Assessment information, which in turn, is followed by an Appendix comprised of the ACRL Standards, a list of contributors and an index.

To return to the question of whether Burkhardt and MacDonald indicate a fresh approach to information literacy, my verdict is negative. Despite my recommendation of its usefulness and its allowance for contemporary student subjectivities, let there be no doubt that the core values underpinning this initiative never stray from the rigorous principles of the ACRL standards, representing the foundational model of information literacy as an unshakeable, immutable institution, at least within the confines of the teaching establishments their authors represent.

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This is not to say, however, that the lifespan trajectory of information literacy has gone unchallenged or unexamined by other academic librarians. My own scepticism is not unique. Within the capitalist nation-states that have fostered its pedagogy, many scholarly librarians have dared to question its inadequacies or

suggest modifications designed to bring it in closer alignment with contemporary educational theory. The work of Snaveley and Cooper (1997), Bawden (2001), Marcum (2002) and Virkus (2004) provides a broad overview and informed critique of its historical relevance and otherwise. Some librarians express specific doubt, with varying degrees of intensity, about the integrity of information literacy's foundational rationale (Nimon, 1997; Luke & Kapitzke, 1999; Clyde, 2002; Kapitzke, 2003a & b; Tuominen, Savolainen and Talja, 2005); or, they perceive the need to value-add, expand or transform the basic fundamentals whilst still paying homage to their original thrust (Gordon, 2007; Asselin and Doiron, 2008; Asselin and Moamyeri, 2008; Limberg, 2005; Lupton, 2008). Others, concerned about professional leadership and the future of libraries, challenge the cultural ideology underpinning information literacy, and require the profession to re-think its practice and pedagogy (Kapitzke, 2005; Limberg, 2005; Todd, 2006; Fabos, 2008; McNeil, 2008).

There is much at stake, for the library profession, in the future of information literacy as both discourse and pedagogy. As a specialist pedagogy combining information, learning and literacy, it served to forge a hard-won niche for librarians in the educational domain and also contributed to renewing the profile and authority of the profession during a period of cultural transition. For schools of librarianship and library science, the teaching and jurisdiction of what constitutes information literacy forms a significant component of their curriculum and marketable coursework. Now, in the light of such rapid social and cultural change since its official inauguration in 1989, by the American Library Association, can such institutions afford not to review the ideological underpinning this pedagogy, the efficacy of its promise and its continuing (ir)relevance as a separate, 'library' literacy? For school librarians, information literacy represents an ever-changing, ever-widening repertoire of literacies and learning responsibilities that surely cannot remain their sole responsibility. Many school librarians and proponents of the information literacy movement would agree that this is true, but will they have the courage to relinquish the iconic 'information literacy' label that defines their professional identity and authority, and to survive as . . . teacher-librarians?

For school librarians, information literacy represents an ever-changing, ever-widening repertoire of literacies and learning responsibilities that surely cannot remain their sole responsibility.

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