

Information Literacy

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INTRODUCTION: INFORMATION LITERACY

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* defines information literacy as the ability to recognize the need for information, and be able to locate, evaluate, and use the information effectively (2000, p.2). Information literacy is essential in the creation of lifelong learners (Wallis, 2005, p. 221). Educators struggle continually to ensure that students are not only able to successfully navigate through the plethora of information available, but that they are able to think critically about information, and put it to use in all aspects of their lives. Information literacy skills instruction can serve as a method to help meet this goal. However, in order to provide information literacy instruction it is necessary to fully understand the concept and all it entails, including how it can be implemented and the benefits it offers to students, educators, and higher education institutions as a whole.

BACKGROUND

Initially a concept that referred to the ability to utilize information resources in the workplace (Eisenberg, Lowe & Spitzer, 2004, p. 3), the definition of information literacy has since been revised and expanded to include a variety of other ideas as the ACRL *Information Literacy Competency Standards* indicate. The ACRL standards go on to state that in a world where technology is ever changing, and where the number of available information resources is increasing significantly, being information literate is essential if success is to be achieved in academic studies, the workplace, and other aspects of our lives. Information can be found in many formats, including print, aural, and graphical, each format posing different challenges to individuals in evaluating and understanding the given information, but it also can be found in many places, including libraries, the media and the Internet. It is the task of educators

to assist learners in determining which information is best suited for individual situations.

MAIN FOCUS: TECHNOLOGY, BEST PRACTICES, COLLABORATION, PEDAGOGY AND ASSESSMENT

Information literacy is not discipline specific, nor is it solely the realm of academe. The skills that are encompassed by information literacy, as defined above, naturally lead the learner towards self-directed learning and can be useful in both formal and informal educational situations. Given the rapid change in technology, it has become equally as important to have information technology skills. An increasing amount of information is in electronic form, requiring learners to be able to use a computer or portable device and software to be able to access it. Information technology skills therefore support information literacy, in that they allow learners more opportunities to find needed information. As Eisenberg, Lowe & Spitzer note, information literacy is also comprised of network literacy, media literacy and visual literacy.

All students have the right to, and need for information literacy skills instruction, whether they be remote learners or campus-based. ACRL delineates this in a number of documents, including the information literacy competency standards (2000) and in the 2008 *Standards for Distance Learning Library Services*. In discussing information literacy, the *Standards for Distance Learning Library Services* state that “[t]he library must provide information literacy instruction programs to the distance learning community in accordance with the ACRL *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* . . . The attainment of lifelong learning skills through general bibliographic and information literacy instruction in academic libraries is a primary outcome of higher education, and as such, must be provided to all distance learning students (ACRL, 2008, para. 31).

The Association of College and Research Libraries *Characteristics of programs of information literacy that illustrate best practices: A guideline* (2003) identifies several key factors in the creation of excellent information literacy programs. These factors include a mission statement, goals and objectives, planning, administrative and institutional support, articulation with the curriculum, collaboration, pedagogy, staffing, outreach, and assessment/evaluation. The *Characteristics* recognize that an effective program must be responsive to different approaches to teaching and learning, incorporate relevant information technology and media sources, and be student based, not only in the utilization of student centered learning activities, but by building upon the current knowledge of students. Hunt and Birks (2004), in an article which expands upon several of the factors listed in the ACRL(2003) document state that “[i]nformation literacy must be an integral part of the curriculum so that skills are taught and developed in context, and students can apply the learning to real situations” (2004, para. 12).

As noted above, institutional commitment to information literacy is essential, and must be made at three levels: administration, faculty, and librarians. This commitment may be reflected in the institutional mission statement, or other organizational planning documents. Second, information literacy initiatives must be developed and implemented in a collaborative environment. Faculty and librarians must be encouraged to work together to provide information literacy instruction. Each must recognize the importance of the role played by the other partner and be responsive to the input provided based on the individuals skill set, i. e., faculty as subject matter expert, and librarian as information retrieval and database expert. Collaboration is key, in that it encourages a collegial sharing of ideas, pedagogies, and teaching methods (Hunt & Birks, 2004). It also allows for information literacy to be integrated into the curriculum seamlessly, and thereby be accessible to learners. For distance learners, and in particular those who do not have physical access to a campus library, an integrated information literacy initiative that identifies resources that are accessible remotely can be of significant importance because these learners often feel isolated from their institution and may not be aware of the wealth of information available through the institution’s library.

Pedagogy is another important consideration in the creation of successful information literacy activities

and programs. There must be recognition on the part of the librarian that pedagogies will vary by discipline. A guiding point might be that the utilization of context driven, meaningful topics and examples is one way to ensure that the learner’s needs are met in a way that is appropriate to the discipline they are studying in. In a collaborative environment where faculty and librarians are working together to create interactive and innovative assignments and library tutorials, it is easier to ensure that appropriate pedagogies are used. An example of an assignment utilizing library resources might be one which requires students to use a particular electronic library resource in a creative manner. Providing information literacy skills training is particularly challenging in the distance education environment, and will require creativity and innovation. The implementation of information literacy initiatives in higher education institutions has become important to accreditation bodies as well. Organizations like the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) consider the information literacy programs offered by institutions when they are being considered for accreditation with the commission. MSCHE includes information literacy in Standard 12, General Education, of their accreditation standards and have produced a guidelines document which can be used in establishing this type of initiative (MSCHE, 2003).

Increasingly, there has been recognition that information literacy skills instruction at post secondary institutions is only one part of the puzzle. It has been suggested that more collaboration must occur between “librarians, administrators, and teachers from a variety of educational institutions” (Wallace, 2007). This collaboration must include not only teachers from higher education institutions, but secondary and primary schools as well.

A crucial aspect of any information literacy program is assessment. Information literacy outcomes should be evaluated on two levels: the individual student, and the program as a whole. In the ACRL’s *Information Literacy Competency Standards*, it is noted that a students basic information literacy skills should be evaluated, but that it is also crucial to “develop assessment instruments and strategies in the context of particular disciplines” (2000, p.6).

Assessment and evaluation should be considered from the outset, that is, during the implementation process of an information literacy program. Counting the number of students served by an information lit-

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