Information Literacy and Communication: A Theoretical Approach to an Interdisciplinary Issue

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Abstract

As the existing literature shows, many models of IL, as well as curricula point towards the close ties between IL and communication. IL is closely connected to literacy and functional literacy in their traditional sense, comprising of reading and writing as well as other activities which produce discourse that is dominantly verbal but can include multimedia. Information seeking and relevance, that are central issues to IL, can also be put into this context, as critical reading and academic literacy are also closely connected to IL.

Introduction

There are a number of arguments that point towards the importance of information literacy (IL). Let us satisfy with one of these. "To be an active and lifelong learner, they must develop not just basic literacy and other competencies such as reading, communication and information and communication technology (ICT) skills, but also problem solving skills, autonomy, critical thinking and the ability to learn to learn" (Dudziak 2007, 43). In one world – we can add – there is a need for information literacy. Dudziak (2007) goes further by saying that "for workers, lack of these skills can result in unemployment, low productivity, absenteeism, health problems and inequality of life. For citizens, lack of these skills can result in loss of opinion and discernment, because they can be unaware of their social and political transformation power. These problems represent uncalculated harm for the nations." (43)

That is why the work of libraries and librarians of the 21st century are required to be the source of information literacy education and that is the reason that Library and Information Science (LIS) education is increasingly characterised by a necessity to include information literacy into the curricula.

Information literacy has its roots in library user education. Nowadays it has significance within education in a wider sense. The rapid development of digital technologies resulted in a proliferation of information sources and caused information overload. This development serves as the basis for the information society and the knowledge economy that require competent information customers and informed workforce. Information literacy developed to meet these challenges and requirements (Andretta 2005).

Definitions

There seems to be a consensus forming that information literacy be understood as umbrella term that encompasses computer, internet (or network), digital and media literacies and only a single one of these. Perhaps the best known and most often cited definition of information

literacy says that information literate people are able to recognize when information is needed. They are also able to identify, locate, evaluate, and use information to solve a particular problem (ALA 1989).

From the thoughts cited above it can be seen that information literacy is not only about using ICT effectively. There seems to be no evidence that the huge investments into ICT would have brought improved student performance despite the fact that e-literacy has become a prerequisite for information literacy (Bundy 2004b). The sheer abundance of information and technology will not in itself create more informed citizens without a complementary understanding and capacity to use information effectively. What is really needed is technology mediated but not technology focused pedagogy (Bundy 2004a).

IL, as LIS education itself is characterized by the presence of communication in different understandings. One of the broader educational contexts of LIS is given by communication studies (Hjorland 2000). For the library knowledge exist in the form of texts. Texts are also subject to analysis, as well as source of those intellectual tools that are used in library work as and library and information science. Text undergoes not only analysis but is worked on in the library it can be summarised or stored in its entirety (as full-text). In most cases the final goal of library activities is generating texts (Horváth 1999). This is why LIS is of linguistic nature, in other words related to verbal communication.

An issue for librarians

Information literacy is an issue for librarians but it is not, fundamentally, a library issue. Why is this statement by Bundy (2004b) true? The "knowledge domain of the librarian is the acquisition and evaluation of information resources. The librarian usually does nothing more with this knowledge base beyond offer it succinctly and freely to those who request it. This evaluation of resources across subject domains, selecting the valid and useful, is common practice of librarians." (Jones 1996) We can continue with the words of Beeson (2005) who says that in a traditional library environment "the store of documents is large but finite, maintained by professionals" and we can be confident that the library is well organised, and if it contains material relevant to us we should be able to find it. If there are difficulties in finding anything, the library staff is trained and capable to help and will help us find what we are looking for." Still, we have to know that information literacy is about lifelong learning and critical thinking an important part of which is related to libraries, nonetheless goes in many cases beyond it and relates to all levels of education.

An issue for LIS education

Librarians are potentially information literate. Without getting a proper education themselves however they will not be able to act as providers of information literacy. This education has to be built into Library and Information Science (LIS) education. The basic requirements for integrating IL into LIS education have been fixed in 2005 by Virkus et al.

LIS students are required:

- To be aware of IL as a concept;
- To become information literate themselves;
- To learn about some key aspects of teaching information literacy.

Key aspects include:

- Key definitions and models of IL;
- Different contexts for IL:
- The relationship of IL with other literacies;

- The relationship between IL and other LIS skill and knowledge areas (e.g. Knowledge Management, Information Retrieval);
- Key models and theories;
- The functions and scope of key IL organisations and initiatives;
- The history and origins of IL.

Integration of IL into whatever curricula seems to require its integration into already existing courses. This is not different either in the case of LIS education. To achieve this there should be at least a minimal framework of IL in LIS education that could contain the following elements:

- Literacy, functional literacy (in the original sense),
- The different literacies (Internet, digital etc.);
- Literacy as an umbrella term;
- The definition of IL (e.g. the ALA definition);
- The importance of IL for information professionals in context of the changing role of library and lifelong learning.

This minimal framework has been put into practice in the LIS programme at Szent István University, Hungary where IL figures in the course "Information systems".

Dimensions of IL

There are many models of IL that express different dimension, approaches, processes, as well as skills and aptitudes of IL.

Activities

The model of IL outlined by Eisenberg (2007) contains a number of elements that pertain to verbal communication. Beside of activities that can be attributed to any planned activity, these are the following:

- Engage with information (read, view, listen);
- Extract information;
- Present information:
- Judge the product (effectiveness);
- Judge the process (efficiency).

The agenda proposed by Loo and Chung (2006) follows this model, nonetheless it contains new elements. They dedicate a separate heading to the communication and presentation of information that includes the following issues:

- selection of the communication medium for the intended purpose and audience;
- integration of new and prior information/knowledge;
- citation styles and formal referenced report;
- delineation of one's own and others' contributions;
- oral presentation.

Under "Evaluation" they include extraction and summarization of information that are of especial interest as they are the main components of classification, subject indexing and abstracting and are of undoubtedly linguistic nature. The activities central to classification, subject indexing and abstracting are analysis and synthesis. The results of classification materialises in the form of some code, while indexing in the form of words and phrases.

Abstracting means producing texts, thus it is a writing activity. An important element of the classification, indexing and abstracting process is reading, obviously closely connected to literacy and communication.

Higher level skills

Greater Expectations, a document of the Association of American Colleges and Universities envisions "empowered" and informed learners who are able to:

- Transform information into knowledge and knowledge into judgment and action.
- Effectively communicate orally, visually, in writing, and in a second language (AACU 2002).

Similar abilities are proposed by D'Angelo and Maid (2004). These are the following:

- Understanding the relationships among language, knowledge, and power;
- Recognizing, understanding, and analyzing the context within which language, information, and knowledge are communicated and presented;
- Using appropriate technologies to manage information collected or generated for future use.
- Learning to critique our own and others' works;
- Learning to balance the advantages of relying on others with the responsibility of doing our part.

Critical reading

The abovementioned critical thinking would be unimaginable without critical reading. Critical reading requires us to do the following:

- Determining the purpose of the text and assessing how the central claims are developed:
- Making judgements about the intended audience of the text;
- Distinguishing the different kinds of reasoning in the text;
- Examining the evidence and sources of the writing (Jones 1996).

IL as a new form of liberal arts

Shapiro and Hughes (1996) speak about seven dimensions of literacy. One of these is publishing literacy that encompasses the ability to format and publish research and ideas electronically, in textual and multimedia forms. They put IL in a broad context by comparing it to the trivium of basic liberal arts (grammar, logic and rhetoric) was to the educated person in medieval society.

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