University libraries and educational change:  
the information literacy window of opportunity

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Resumen

En la era de la información y el conocimiento existe la necesidad de acelerar los cambios en los métodos y resultados de la enseñanza y aprendizaje en todos los sectores de la educación formal. Las universidades tienen una responsabilidad especial para guiar e innovar en este sentido. El marco conceptual de la alfabetización informativa tiene el potencial de ser el catalizador en esta innovación y en la conexión más efectiva de los sectores educacionales. La alfabetización informativa no es sólo sobre el desarrollo de habilidades centradas en la biblioteca o de información genérica. No es tampoco sólo sobre las tecnologías de información y comunicación. Más bien, debe ser conceptualizada como una nueva forma de aprender a aprender y como un motor del cambio educacional para lograr educandos liberados y no domesticados. Los bibliotecarios académicos tienen la responsabilidad de contribuir al cambio educacional y a la conexión dentro de las universidades y a través de los diferentes sectores educacionales. Sin embargo, primero se debe alcanzar un consenso más fuerte sobre si la alfabetización informativa es sólo un conjunto genérico de habilidades a desarrollar en los educandos o si es un fenómeno que tiene diferentes características en diversos contextos para ser ejecutadas en formas culturalmente diferentes.

Palabras clave: Alfabetización informativa, biblioteca universitaria, biblioteca académica, educación, aprendizaje.

Abstract

In the age of information and knowledge there is a need to accelerate changes in teaching and learning methods and outcomes in all sectors of formal education. Universities have a special responsibility to lead and to innovate in this. The information literacy framework has the potential to be the catalyst in this innovation, and in the more effective connection of the educational sectors. Information literacy is not ultimately about library centric or generic information skills development. It is also not about information and communications technologies. Rather, it should be conceptualised as a new way of learning how to learn and as a driver of educational change to achieve liberated, not domesticated, learners. Academic librarians have a responsibility to contribute to educational change and connection within universities and across the educational sectors. First, however, they must reach a stronger consensus on whether information literacy is just a generic set of skills to be developed in learners, or whether it is a phenomenon which has different characteristics in different contexts, to be played out in culturally different ways.

Keywords: Information literacy, university library, academic library, education, learning.
Universities worldwide are challenged by many issues. These include the rapid growth in student numbers, values, standards, funding, pedagogy, and learning outcomes.

A major issue for them is the development of a teaching and learning framework to meet individual, national and global needs in the 21st century knowledge economy. There has already been an uneven move in developed countries from didactic teaching to a student centred learning at all levels of formal education. This is opening a window of opportunity and responsibility for librarians as educators beyond their role as suppliers of information resources and advice on their use.

Ten years ago, British librarian Maurice Line (1997) correctly concluded that this refocusing from teaching to learning makes the division in universities between teaching, library, information and communications technology (ICT) and educational technology, increasingly meaningless. This is yet to be reflected well in the way space planning for university libraries is being pursued. The current focus on the library as an ‘information commons’, rather than as a ‘learning commons’ is encouraging but is too narrow, as will be discussed later in this paper.

Line also argued that the importance of learning how to learn and information literacy should lead the partnership between teachers and librarians, and that the entire university should be restructured to meet societal and individual needs. He was right, because schools, colleges and universities are essentially 19th century constructs responsible for an educational continuum but which are largely operating in unconnected curricular, pedagogical and assessment silos. None of those sectors have a clear vision and framework for education for the information intensive world of the 21st century. Generally, at best they have paid attention to information literacy as a generic information skills issue. This does not suffice.

**Education: liberating or domesticating?**

Education, like democracy, means different things to different cultures and religions. Yet despite those differences and despite the complexities, in all forms of education there is a simple divide.

As Illich and Freire concluded, it is never neutral. Education’s purpose is to either domesticate or liberate. It domesticates where knowledge is deposited into learners and where the relationship between educators and learners is that of subject to object. This is surely not consonant with thinking as the analysis of information, and the development of people able to meet the Socratic ideal of the challenging of lazy assumptions. The issue is how do we develop people able to explore complex issues by generating webs of questions, and to find what Michael Leunig calls ‘the difficult truth’.
The educational paradigms

Nineteen seventy four, the same year as the term ‘information literacy’ was proposed by Paul Zurkowski, saw the publication of the seminal Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance: an inquiry into values (Pirzig, 1974). That book, and the educational debate which ensued, centred on a profound tension between two paradigms termed by Pirzigh the ‘classical paradigm’ and the ‘romantic paradigm’, which is sometimes labeled as the phenomenological view of knowledge and reality.

It was argued that the classical paradigm, rooted in Greek philosophy —especially Aristotle— gave us the scientific method. With its emphasis on analytic and dualistic reason, this has divided, classified and conceptualised knowledge and has had major impact on western thought, life and educational institutions. Pirzigh’s ‘romantic paradigm’, by comparison, is a holistic, quality view of knowledge and reality deriving from the Greek sophists and their search for excellence.

The classical paradigm of dividing, classifying and compartmentalising is still breathing comfortably in most education systems, with people who have learned how to handle everything except a new situation. They are domesticated, not liberated.

No one really knows just where educational institutions rate on the domesticating-liberating scale. Rarely, if ever, do educators in any sector seem to consciously analyse whether a curriculum, the pedagogies used and the teaching environment domesticate or liberate.

However their chances of scoring highly on the liberating scale are constrained by schools, colleges and universities still in the classical paradigm. They are unlikely to be focused on developing questioning and imaginative minds, despite the fact that as President Kerr of the University of Columbia stated ‘The university is not engaged in making ideas safe for students. It is engaged in making students safe for ideas.’

Librarians as educators

An issue —which now whether they welcome it or not—confronts all librarians in formal education, is their responsibility to challenge the system, and to help drive educational change.

It should not, however, be such a confronting issue. Librarians have always been in the educational and people business. Most are strongly committed to social inclusion through information equity, but understand that digital equity does not mean information equity. They
recognise that the divide is between those who have the attitudes, understandings and learning capabili-
ties to contribute effectively to that society and those who do not— and that this constitutes the information literacy divide, of which the digital divide is only one aspect. More librarians are now accepting, indeed are enthusiastic about, the fact that the role of the librar-
ians as the identifier, collector, custodian, organiser and disseminator of the record of human civilisation now has another critical element. This element is one of engagement with how people recognise their need for information and develop the capacity to identify ac-
cess, evaluate, synthesise and apply the needed infor-
mation. It is something implicit in their personal and collegial vision of an information enabled better world for all. Librarians, school, public and academic, know that information and reading can be transformational and that used well they change and liberate people, perceptions, society and improve lives.

Yet within schools, colleges and universities librarians continue to encounter the unsatisfactory outcomes of programs, pedagogies and assessment regimes which do not deliver a planned educational experience, and which assume that students are by osmosis information literate. Therein lies the tension. Information literacy is an issue for librarians but it is not a library issue. It needs to be understood and owned by all educators, from kin-
dergarten, to school, to college, and to university. But what do librarians do if other educators do not grasp, or equivocate about and reject such ownership?

Owusu-Ansah (2004) addresses this issue well, although Australian researcher Lupton (2004) does not address it in her severe criticism of librarians for generic approaches to information literacy development. However turning information literacy and learning how to learn into 21st century substance will, it seems, continue to require leadership by librarians. They will have the rare challenge of promoting critical educational change, of contributing to it, but of not wanting to own it. This is indeed a conundrum because that leadership will not often come from

- educational administrators, despite their capacity and responsibility to promote change and support their institutional change agents

- discipline focused teachers who may have dif-
ficulty in grasping the issue in an holistic way

- teachers who may be reluctant to move beyond a lecture and content transmis-
sion model, despite all of the evidence that this 750 year model is largely ineffect-
tive. As long ago as 1971, just before the naming of the information literacy concept by Zurkowski, Harold Taylor wrote about ways of teaching and learning to replace the whole system of which lecturing is part. He contended that

“One of the educational advantages of re-
moving the lecture system is that it is then impossible to avoid thinking about live students and what to do with them. The educational problem shifts to two other matters—how to convey the information and ideas which at present the lecturer passes on through the spoken word, and how to design a schedule for a set of ac-
tivities and experiences to give the most help to the student in learning what he needs to know.” (Taylor, 1971, p. 88)

- teaching and learning development centres in universities, which may see information literacy not as the issue, but as just one issue they need to promote for educational change

- professional associations, such as in medicine and law, which may have a financial interest in actually constraining the information literacy of potential clients of their professions

- the multinational corporate sector, which tends to prefer that people do not know and do not question

- politicians and bureaucrats, who also tend to prefer that people do now know and do not question.
This requires librarians with what Owusu-Ansah (2004, p. 17) calls ‘a lot of daring’, because the questions it raises are indeed threatening of almost everyone in the formal educational sectors. It inevitably produces negative reactions in those who have an anachronistic view of the role and interest of librarians and an inflated view of their own educational understandings and contribution.

**Information Commons or Learning Commons?**

As mentioned earlier, there is a trend in university libraries to reconceptualise their spaces as ‘information commons’. This usually refers to a digital space where people can gather and collaborate. The most complete source of information and discussion on the concept is possibly Beagle’s *The information commons handbook* (Beagle, 2006).

However the term ‘information commons’ suggests limitations analogous to the term ‘information skills’. If information commons are to evolve for full educational impact, the concept needs to merge with that of information literacy to become the learning commons proposed in the report for the US Council for Library and Information Resources’ *Libraries designed for learning* (Bennett, 2003). In it, Bennett argues that a different vision is needed if libraries are to achieve their potential as spaces for teaching and learning, and that

- library design should not be dominated by information resources and their delivery, but should ‘incorporate a deeper understanding of the independent, active learning behaviour of students and the teaching strategies of faculty meant to support those behaviours’

- the greatest challenge in designing a learning commons is ensuring that it is ‘owned’ by learners, not by teachers or librarians

- to better understand the potential for the library as education space, planning partnerships shaped around substantive questions of teaching and learning should be created with faculty and students
• the core activity of a learning commons should be the collaborative learning by which students turn information into knowledge, not the manifestation and mastery of information.

Information literacy: zeitgeist of our times

In 1996 Australian educationalist Professor Phil Candy asserted, after being introduced to the concept by this writer, that ‘information literacy is the zeitgeist of the times…an idea whose time has at long last come.’ (Candy, 1996, p. 139)

When it comes to educational change as a constant, it is now clear that ICT and so called elearning are not the change agents to be employed, although they will contribute. Something more fundamental and universal is required. That change agent should surely be the information literacy framework, because it is fundamentally about learning how to learn and developing people able to explore those complex issues by generating those webs of questions. There is no other educational change agent which makes sense in an information intensive society. As the Prague Declaration (2003) asserted, information literacy should be an integrated part of education for all.

Imagine, if you will, the benefits to learners and teachers, at every level of formal education – kindergarten, primary, secondary, university— if every piece of curricula, every pedagogy employed, and every assessment is mapped against an information literacy framework such as that developed by the Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy.
This specifies six standards

- **Standard One**  The information literate person recognises the need for information and determines the nature and extent of the information needed

- **Standard Two**  The information literate person finds needed information effectively and efficiently

- **Standard Three**  The information literate person critically evaluates information and the information seeking process

- **Standard Four**  The information literate person manages information collected or generated

- **Standard Five**  The information literate person applies prior and new information to construct new concepts or create new understandings

- **Standard Six**  The information literate person uses information with understanding and acknowledges cultural, ethical, economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information

This mapping is already, patchily, occurring, but to become pervasive it requires librarians and other educators to be very careful about pursuing information literacy development only through a generic ‘bolt on’ information skills development approach. This can greatly undermine the one true opportunity to progressively change formal education for relevance in an information intensive world. These considerations are covered well in the introduction and seven chapters of a new Australian book edited by Andretta *Challenge and change: information literacy for the 21st century* (2007).

Educational conservatism and narrow discipline interests are formidable barriers to such reconceptualisation of the form and outcomes of formal education in the 21st century. We do not have the greenfield situation which would surely see institutionalised education conceptualised, constructed and connected in a quite different way than what we have inherited. However educational leaders, such as university presidents, can provide an invaluable lead in encouraging teachers and academic professionals such as librarians, to collaborate as bona fide partners in the total educational process. It is too easy to conclude that because of entrenched interests and attitudes this will never occur, and that the voice of librarians and those other educators who recognise the issue, will be tacitly ignored. However it is a voice which should be heard because librarians have conceptualised and are debating and refining a new framework for the educational sectors. It is one which can also provide those sectors with the connection they now lack.

Australian researcher Christine Bruce’s book *The seven faces of information literacy* (1997) was seminal in examining the varying experiences of information literacy among higher educators, and proposing a relational model as an alternative to the behavioural model. It is now used as a text worldwide in information literacy education programs.

In 2002 she went further by proposing a future for information literacy as

“Conceivably the foundation for learning in our contemporary environment of continuous educational change…the catalyst required to transform the information society of today into the learning society of tomorrow.”  (2002)

In several countries and in numerous institutions, examples of good practice towards that vision and future are already to be found, and research continues. A recent Australian book *Panning for gold: information literacy and the Net Lenses Model* (Edwards, 2006) is a good example of such university research. Those precedents suggest that the growing interest in, and experimentation with, integrated concepts of information literacy will continue throughout this century at least.
Information literacy: the democratic imperative

It is important that attention to the educational change and connection potential of the information literacy framework does grow. For the sake of humanity and democracy the world will have increasing need of truly information literate and questioning citizens able to, what the American Library Association describes as ‘spot and expose chicanery, disinformation and lies’ or, to quote a recent Australian writer on the issue of misinformation ‘Read more widely, see more clearly, think more clearly, challenge authorities on every occasion, more importantly challenge themselves’. Witness the constraints on so called Freedom of Information legislation and access, company information, consumer information, journalists, books, the internet, and the imprisonment of librarians in Cuba and Burma. Witness also the consequences for public libraries of the Patriot Act in the US, and similar anti democratic legislation in other countries such as Australia and the UK, and the ever faster political spin many countries experience.

The United States of America has had just a few outstanding men as its president. Its current president is, alas, not among them. Its third president Thomas Jefferson was, and it is to him that the observation ‘Information is the currency of democracy’ is attributed. Information alone, however, is no democratic guarantor. The necessary complement to it is people who are information literate. Abundance of data, information and technology does not in itself create more informed or enlightened citizens.

This is the essence of the challenge for all educators in the 21st century. It is a challenge now being grappled with in a variety of embedded and generic ways. It is just as surely a challenge which those who follow us will be grappling with at the beginning of the 22nd century, and beyond. Futurist Kim Lang in his annual 1990 Forecaster assessed information literacy as a faddish buzzword that would be as transitory as many other educational buzzwords. He was wrong. Information literacy is no passing fad because it is about the self-maintenance of a new educational motorcycle. It is truly the educational zeitgeist of not only our time, but of times to come. We should be confident in this, celebrate what has already been achieved, and learn even more from each other at this important conference. But we should not be daunted by the educational change agenda upon which we as librarians should now be embarked, and of which our universities have much need of if they are to be the best they can be for current and future generations.

Academic librarians have something unique and distinctive to contribute to their universities through taking information literacy to the highest institutional plane. First, however, they must reach the strongest possible consensus on whether information literacy is just important generic skills to be developed in learners – or whether it should be envisioned and asserted as the relevant framework for educational change and connection in the information and knowledge society of the 21st century.

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