

Information Literacy

*Infiltrating the agenda,
challenging minds*

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Information literacy in the context of contemporary teaching methods in higher education

Chris Wakeman

Abstract: This chapter will explore contemporary Higher Education (HE) facilitation methods and their influence on student Information Literacy (IL) skills. Central to the discussion will be ‘enquiry-based learning’ including problem-based approaches and webquests, each of which has become an integral part of HE practice. Dialectic approaches to delivery and facilitation will also be considered including Socratic methods, which are now commonly used in many HE schools and faculties. The principal aim of the chapter is to broaden commonly held beliefs relating to information literacy to include wider aspects of information access and exchange in the context of contemporary classroom culture. The ability to recognise a need for information, to critically evaluate information and its sources, and then to use that information effectively in order to construct new concepts or create new understandings, is now a fundamental part of HE classroom practice during which contemporary HE students increasingly engage in dialectic processes in the quest for effective learning. In essence, this chapter will seek to expand the concept of information literacy beyond the accepted principles and frameworks established by the Australian and

New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy, to include the day-to-day aspects of IL that are often overlooked or unrecognised.

Key words: information literacy, contemporary HE culture, enquiry based learning, dialectic approaches, Socratic methods.

Introduction

The perception of Information Literacy (IL) as a 'library or study skill' has more recently been broadened to embrace the wider concepts of lifelong learning, research and proficiency in the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT). Even so, the development of IL competence through the processes of contemporary Higher Education (HE) teaching methods often goes unrecognised and despite a major shift towards enquiry-based and dialectic approaches to delivery, IL is still considered as the preserve of the university library or learning centre rather than an integrated and inseparable part of the HE curriculum.

The authors of the *Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy (ANZIIL) Framework*, 2nd edition, 2004, begin to acknowledge the relationship between IL and teaching method, stating that: 'The responsibility of educators promoting information literacy is to engage in best practice in *all* areas of teaching and learning' (page 27). They go on to note that:

The most effective strategy for 'embedding information literacy into the total educational process' starts with incorporating best practice assessment where information literacy is included in the objectives and

learning outcomes of units of study and assessment tasks. (page 27)

The notion of embedding IL into undergraduate curricula, and more specifically into module programmes and assessment tasks, had already been explored by Hepworth (1999), who outlined plans for such provision in the School of Applied Science at Loughborough University. Further works by Hepworth are cited by Johnston and Webber (2003) who themselves describe approaches to IL teaching in HE. They draw attention to Hepworth's continuum of IL teaching (page 342) though they seem to be at odds with his proposal that the best approach to IL teaching is to integrate its delivery into that of another discipline, instead favouring a credit-bearing IL package that is separate from disciplinary modules and programmes. Despite their preference for a discrete IL programme of study, Johnston and Webber go on to highlight what they perceive as 'problems associated with current practice' (page 342). One such problem is what they describe as the 'prescriptive agenda' set by leading bodies such as the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). The assumption by the ACRL they suggest is that 'the skills have been mastered for good once each unit can be labelled as complete' (page 342).

They go on to describe this as a 'tick the box' approach to education in key skills which leads to a 'surface learning approach' that is largely based on memorising rather than a 'deep approach' in which the student intends to make sense of the content and develop personal understanding. Perhaps more ominously, Johnson and Webber highlight concerns regarding the personnel delivering IL teaching, focusing in particular on librarians. They suggest that librarians themselves need more education about learning and teaching

and in some cases leave much to be criticised from an educational perspective (page 342).

Storey-Huffman (2008) writes about models of IL integration and recommends what she calls a 'specific disciplines model' (page 1). She describes an approach through which each discipline on campus would develop an IL component that would highlight IL theory and concepts specific to the discipline in question. She goes on to suggest that in this model subject tutors would work closely with librarians to develop a team approach, identifying the specific assignments and activities that represent the outcomes and learning objectives for both the discipline and the ACRL standards. This methodology would seem to alleviate some of the concerns expressed by Johnston and Webber who, as noted above, refer to a perceived lack of educational knowledge in the case of some librarians. Despite the merits of the Storey-Huffman approach, it could be argued that this does not represent integration in the fuller sense as although what she suggests would make IL teaching more discipline specific, the model still advocates a separate unit for IL delivery rather than full integration into existing modules of study.

So where are we at present in the debate which surrounds IL teaching and the best forms of delivery? There appears to be two distinct schools of thought, on the one side of the fence are those who see IL as a distinct and generic subject which should be taught by a central team regardless of the discipline or subject background of the participant; and, on the other side of the fence, are those who propose integration, in its various forms, which range from full assimilation into existing module programmes at the one extreme to separate but discipline specific IL units at the other.

Despite the two contrasting schools of thought, the consensus appears to be moving towards the former and

more complete approach to integration, which advocates would contend is already an integral and fundamental aspect of many contemporary methods of delivery in Higher Education. It is from this premise that this paper shall now describe two contemporary approaches to learning delivery which fully cover the IL agenda.

Enquiry based learning and the IL perspective

Enquiry based learning (EBL) has become a fashionable approach to delivery in many Higher Education institutions. The concept of EBL is wide and varied and the term should be considered as an umbrella statement for a host of approaches that are founded on student enquiry and in which the student has ownership of their work, which may become increasingly self-directed. Group work is often the platform for EBL delivery, though independent learning may also be a principal feature.

For the purposes of this piece of writing, it is appropriate to focus on a specific approach to EBL, which has become known as the 'WebQuest'. WebQuests offer opportunities for EBL in its purest form and can be adapted for large groups, small groups or individual students. Timescales for the WebQuest may vary from hours to days to weeks, sometimes continuing throughout a module programme. Above all, the contemporary Higher Education student enjoys and embraces the WebQuest experience and few would argue against the fact that if learning is enjoyable and fun, whatever the age of the participant, then it is far more likely to be motivating, engaging and lead to the more desirable forms of deep learning (see Biggs, 2006). Information literacy skills are integral and deeply

rooted within the WebQuest culture and a well designed WebQuest will address all six core standards from the ANZIL framework (2004)¹ in a meaningful and discipline specific way.

The term 'WebQuest' first emerged in 1995 when two practitioners² at San Diego State University (SDSU) first introduced the WebQuest method with participants on their 'Master' and 'Distance' programmes. In the intervening years practitioners in all fields of education have embraced the WebQuest methodology, applauding its pedagogical and andragogical merits and in particular, its contribution to the development of IL skills. WebQuests, of course, take many forms, but in HE, the accepted format would seem to be a research or problem orientated package which stimulates participant curiosity, encouraging them to search for and manage new information and to use this knowledge to construct new concepts or create fresh understandings. Ethical and moral issues concerning the use and application of new knowledge are an integral part of the WebQuest as is a growing understanding of cultural, legal and social issues relating to the outcomes of the quest.

Take a simple WebQuest designed for level 2 undergraduate students working in groups of three. The discipline specific nature of WebQuest design makes it difficult to provide a generic overview of how WebQuest activities should be introduced; in this example the WebQuest is firmly rooted in the area of Educational Psychology, and practices in other subject disciplines may differ. In the context of this piece of work there is neither the time nor space to provide the whole WebQuest in the form it would be presented to students, for this reason the example given will focus entirely on the 'WebQuest task' which is included as Figure 4.1. In this case, the timescale for completion of the WebQuest task was 2½ hours.

Figure 4.1 WebQuest task

At the outset of today's session you will be asked to place yourself in a group with 2 other participants in order to undertake a 'WebQuest'.

1. Once you are in your group you will pick the name of an Educational Psychologist from a vessel which will be brought around by your tutor (one per group).
2. You will have 2½ hours to research the educational psychologist assigned to your group and you should aim to find out the following information:
 - Nationality, date of birth/death, education, disciplinary background.
 - Area(s) of work (i.e. intelligence, memory, social psychology, personality etc.) and major findings attributed to the person concerned.
 - Major publications.
 - A paragraph indicating why *you* consider this educational psychologist to be important in the context of this module and to which areas of the programme the person's work relates.
 - Links to resources that are relevant to the Educational Psychologist concerned and may be of use to participants on this module.
3. Your findings from the WebQuest should be produced in word format on a single side of A4.
4. *Once you are happy with your work, you should access the folder which has been set up on the module VLE site under your Educational Psychologists name. You should upload your A4 sheet with your findings to the folder and return to the lecture room for the close of the session.*

The merits of the exercise from a learning perspective should be clear. Each individual group researches a single Educational Psychologist, but the final resource for student use is significantly larger. Sixty students in the wider group would mean twenty groups, and consequently a resource focusing on twenty Educational Psychologists which students can then access for the purposes of their studies – the synergy generated through the WebQuest is in the order of 20:1.

More importantly, the IL skills which students need to use and develop throughout the task pervade all aspects of the ANZIL framework, permeating all six strands as students endeavour to accomplish the task. There is little doubt that WebQuests, as a form of EBL, provide excellent opportunities for the development of IL skills.

Dialectic facilitation approaches: an alternative approach to IL development

Dialectic approaches or techniques based on dialogue have become a popular facilitation style in contemporary university settings. Mackeracher (2004) suggests that 'learning is a natural and dialectical process' (page 5) and advocates dialectic teaching as an essential and fundamental aspect of HE facilitation.

As in the case of enquiry-based approaches, the term 'Dialectic Teaching' should be considered as the higher level construct under which many variations of the dialectic theme co-exist. One such approach which has become known as 'Modern Socratic Dialogue' (MSD) is commonly used on post-graduate programmes or during sessions where student numbers range from 15–20 participants. MSD with larger cohorts is possible, though as the number of participants grows 'sampling' becomes an integral part of the practice.

MSD is underpinned by a method which encourages participants to reflect and think independently. It is often practiced in small groups led by a facilitator, but skilled participants may become independent and operate within the Socratic culture without external influence. Delivered and coordinated in the right way the Socratic method enhances self-confidence in one's own thinking and develops