

# INFORMATION LITERACY AS A HUMAN RIGHT

Paul Sturges  
and  
Almuth Gastingner

# What is Information Literacy?

- The term Information Literacy (IL) is used in two ways:
  - The competencies required to find, interpret, understand and use information
  - Programmes of instruction in IL.
- Currently many programmes are driven by librarians' priorities and are direct successors to User Education
  - “Information Literacy has been known by many different names: library orientation; bibliographic instruction; user education; information skills training.” [www.informationliteracy.org.uk](http://www.informationliteracy.org.uk)
- Our concern is essentially with IL as the set of competencies that human beings can bring to bear on information.
- This does have obvious implications for the content of programmes of instruction in IL.

# Expanding the definition of IL

- A modern definition of Information Literacy is
  - “A set of competencies that an informed citizen of an information society ought to possess to participate intelligently and actively.”
- This definition rolls together
  - Computer and digital literacy
  - Web Literacy
  - Media Literacy
  - Critical Literacy
  - Civic Literacy
- Authoritative statements on IL adopt this approach

# Statements on IL

- There have been several recent broad statements on the Information Society
  - The Prague Declaration ‘Towards an Information Literate Society’ 2003
  - Goals of the World Summit on the Information Society 2004
  - The Alexandria Proclamation 2005
  - Moscow 2012
- These statements represent the message from professional leadership

# The Literature of IL

- Whilst the professional leadership has issued bold, clear statements,
- The literature of IL -
  - Is rooted in the practice and theory of librarianship,
  - Still treats IL as development of 'User Education'.
- However, it has -
  - Started to stress the importance of user-centred approaches,
  - Occasionally discusses the relevance of psychological processes.
- It has hardly ever discussed the human brain as a basis for IL models.

# The Information Seeker

- What most LIS literature does is to imagine a rational information seeker who:
  - Perceives a need,
  - Defines and refines it,
  - Identifies search terms,
  - Uses the terms in a systematic way and
  - Obtains appropriate content.
- Such an information seeker would need
  - Highly structured retrieval systems and
  - Assistance to make these systems more accessible.
- That is what most IL programmes offer.

# Building a strong case for IL

- It can be questioned how often the accepted vision of the information seeker reflects reality.
- To build a stronger rationale for IL we will explore two lines of argument:
  - The principle of Human Rights (as formally expressed)
  - The reality of human information needs (as illustrated by modern neuroscience)
- The former takes us as far as the limits of current orthodoxy,
- The latter takes us into more speculative areas.

# The Human Rights Approach

- Arguments from the idea of Human Rights make a powerful case for an up-to-date vision of IL
- Article 19 of the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1947) states
  - ‘Everyone has the right to freedom of expression;
  - this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference
  - and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.’
- However, a ‘passive’ right such as this arguably needs interpretation to produce active principles for IL and programmes of instruction.

# Access made more specific

- For example
- New Clause 100 of the Norwegian Constitution (2005)
  - Affirms the principles of Article 19
  - Specifies the right of access to official documentation
  - Calls for ‘conditions that facilitate open and enlightened public discourse’
  - Leaves open the exact nature of these ‘conditions’.
- The philosopher Habermas’s discussion of the ‘public sphere’ suggests a way forward.

# Public Forums

- Habermas's idea of the 'public sphere', (thriving in the eighteenth century, subsequently in decay and requiring renewal) offers an answer this question
- It calls for the same response as does the Norwegian Clause 100
- The 'conditions' for 'public discourse' and Habermas's renewed public sphere both call for
  - Open government
  - Free media
  - Active civil society.

# The Library as a 'Public Forum'

- The library is an obvious addition to the list of public forums, and
- IL programmes are a natural function of the library looked at in this way.
- Such programmes would build on:
  - The synergies between different 'literacies'
  - Explorations of the potential for alliances with formal education to promote IL.
- Although recognising IL as a human right is important, it does not fully answer the question –
- Why is IL a human right?

# Adding a neuroscience approach

- We believe that a better understanding of the human brain offers a powerful vision of human interaction with information.
- This interaction, both at and below the level of consciousness, is such a fundamental human characteristic that it can be regarded as the source of both
  - a right to information and
  - a right to the skills to find and use it.
- Applying the lessons of brain science to disciplines including LIS is possible because of –
  - Advances in neuroscience, and
  - A growing popular neuroscience literature.

# Neuroscience in the past

- In the past, brain science could learn from
  - Dissection of dead subjects
    - This gave us a physical geography of the brain, but did not tell us how it worked
  - Inferences from cases of brain damage
    - The way a damaged brain functioned told us about both the damaged and undamaged areas
  - Non-intrusive experimentation
    - Can tell us about brain function from responses in structured tests of individuals and groups.

# Neuroscience today

- Today neuroscience it has scanning techniques such as:
  - Positron Emission Tomography (PET)
  - functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI)
  - Magnetoencephalography (MEG)
- These allow the activity of the brain to be observed in all kinds of situations.
- This is delivering powerful insights into how the brain works

# The hemispheres

- To select only one set of lessons:
- The left and right hemispheres of the brain seem broadly different in a significant way.
- Left side:
  - slow, deliberate, rational, applying attention, searching memory, testing ideas;
- Right side:
  - fast, intuitive, associative, metaphorical, impressionistic (and potentially unreliable).
- IL programmes have concentrated more or less exclusively left side activity.

# Right side thinking

- The right hemisphere of the brain processes
  - Massive quantities of information,
  - Coded deeply or lightly,
  - At amazing speed,
  - With only limited conscious intervention.
- The implication is that information scientists need to look for ideas on information seeking that value this subconscious activity at more like its true level.

# Information seeking

- Seeking information via electronic resources (principally the Internet) has powerful elements of right side brain function.
- When working with e-information we talk less of
  - Systematic, rational searching.
- We talk more of
  - Surfing (a metaphor for letting go, accepting the flow).
- We work with naturally associated structures and hyperlinks, following unpredictable routes.

# Implications for IL

- Neuroscience does not suggest a fixed and rigid capacity for coping with information.
- This reflects only part of the way the brain works
- The right hemisphere of the brain uses intuition, association of ideas and metaphor to deal with information.
- IL needs to take account of right hemisphere responses if it is to devise programmes that match real (as opposed to conceptualised) responses.

# A few examples

- University of Pretoria IL modules delivered to over 7000 new undergraduates each year use Hermann's Whole Brain Learning Inventory to assess and respond to student learning styles
- Because people use metaphor in their thinking Cole and Leide (2006) suggest information retrieval on the basis of 'something like this' rather than 'exactly this'.
- In the past, information was supposed to be delivered
  - Neutrally,
  - Without commentary and advice (or empathy).
- Many kinds of information, particularly in health care situations, are more comprehensible if delivered with empathetic human contextualisation.

# Conclusion

- Information literacy is a vital set of competencies which must not be dealt with in a narrowly professional way.
- A broad generous view of IL treats it as:
  - A human right;
  - Arising from natural brain function.
- This perspective suggests the way towards better IL programmes and more effective use of information in society.