Information literacy and the first-year learning experience

Alison Park

This article will demonstrate why information literacy and information skills teaching should be an important part of the first-year learning experience at Leeds Met. Numerous definitions of information literacy exist, but for the purposes of this article I will use one by Johnston and Webber (2003):

"Information literacy is the adoption of appropriate information behaviour to obtain, through whatever channel or medium, information well fitted to information needs, together with critical awareness of the importance of wise and ethical use of information in society."

Information literacy is not simply about students acquiring a set of skills or tools. It is about developing higher level attributes: the ability to think critically, to compare, evaluate and synthesise information and to reflect on and develop a deeper understanding of the content. An information literate graduate is empowered, effective in the workplace and has lifelong learning skills. International interest in information literacy has developed since the 1970s. Key definitions and practices have emerged from Australia and the US in particular but it has been suggested that in the UK developments have been less progressive (Johnston and Webber, 2003). In 1999 the Standing Conference of National and University Libraries (SCONUL) developed a framework model for higher education, with students progressing through seven 'headline' information skills (Advisory Committee on Information Literacy, 1999). There has been little explicit mention of information literacy in official Government policy or reports. It is worth noting, however, that the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) refers to critical evaluation and information skills in its subject benchmarking statements (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008). Such skills readily fit into the information literacy agenda.

It is timely that we consider information literacy in relation to our first-year students. A recent report published by the Centre for Information Behaviour and the Evaluation of Research (CIBER, 2008) demonstrates the likely characteristics of our scholars and researchers of the future, based on the information-seeking habits of today's school children. The findings of the report, commissioned by the British Library and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), suggest that the increased use of technology and improved computer competency have had little impact on levels of information literacy. Children and young people spend little time evaluating information and find it difficult to develop effective search strategies. Their preference is for familiar resources like search engines which deliver a quick fix. The message is clear: without effective information skills it is likely that our young people will be unable to benefit from and participate fully in an information society.

In response to some of the issues I have outlined above, Academic Librarians and Information Services Librarians at Leeds Met set up two project groups which ran over the academic year 2007-08. The librarians form the Library Academic Support stream within the recently restructured Libraries and Learning Innovation service. Each Academic Librarian has responsibility for teaching information skills for a particular subject area or areas, alongside their other duties. The first project was set up to help raise the profile of information literacy at Leeds Met by running an event on the ALT Options Day during the 2007 Staff Development Festival. The objectives of the event were to identify what information skills meant to academic staff and what they considered to be most important for their students; to highlight current areas of good practice in information skills teaching at Leeds Met; and to explore how these might be developed further. Around 15 staff attended, from both the library and faculties. As part of a short exercise, individuals were asked to jot down what they felt were the most important skills for their students. Responses focused on common concerns such as plagiarism, distinguishing between good and bad information, over-reliance on websites and the importance of using evidence-based research. Some comments related directly to the first-year learning experience, for example:

"Inductions repeated later in term, too much information overload at the start."
"An explanatory tour of the library late in first term when work has been given."
"Students need help to get started with research using online resources in their first year."

These comments flagged up issues such as the timing of library inductions, the provision of support over time with follow-up sessions or refreshers, and the need to be strategic when delivering information skills teaching, for example to coincide with first assignments. The session provided much food for thought and the feedback from the event will be used to inform the Library Academic Support stream's current and future initiatives on information literacy at Leeds Met.

The second project explored teaching and learning methods to develop and improve information skills teaching. Working with a revised framework adapted from the SCONUL model (Advisory Committee on Information Literacy, 1999), members of the group took a skill level and devised suitable activities and exercises that could be used in practical sessions. The group researched good practice in other institutions as well as current thinking on the role of information literacy in higher education. To provide a theoretical and pedagogical basis for the activities, several colleagues explored the literature on teaching and learning theory (Bloom, 1956; Coffield et al, 2004; Fleming, 2005; Kolb, 1984). The group collated these activities into a resource bank, which was then developed into a teaching and learning support wiki (**https://teachingandlearningsupport.pbwiki.com**) so that colleagues could easily access the resources, share good practice and develop new ideas and activities to support their own teaching.

Reflecting on the work of both projects, I believe there are three main questions we as an institution need to address, through the assessment, learning and teaching strategy, with reference to information literacy and the first-year learning experience. Firstly, we need to establish just how information literate our students are when they first come to university. Research would suggest that some gaps exist between the skills school leavers possess and those expected of them by universities (Crawford and Irving, 2007). The recommendation is that information literacy should start in school and some work is being done in this field. One such example is the Scottish Information Literacy Project (Glasgow Caledonian University, 2008) which seeks to encourage partnerships between the secondary and tertiary education sectors to improve children's information skills. When working with first-year students, my own observations are that they rely heavily on books and the internet as their main sources of information. Few appear to use subscription-based resources such as journals and databases, indeed it may be the first time they have encountered this kind of material or even been expected to reference sources properly.

Most of us would agree that our students need information skills, but exactly how they are expected to acquire them is still unclear. I would argue that it is not something they will necessarily 'pick up' as they go along. My own experience of working with students in both further and higher education is that without strategic and timely support in that crucial first year, many students may struggle in this area. I would welcome further research into how this may impact on student retention and achievement rates.

This leads me to my second question: how do we deliver effective information skills teaching? There is much debate over how to incorporate this into an already tightly packed curriculum. It has been argued that information literacy can stand as a subject in its own right with formal assessment (Johnston and Webber, 2003); others advocate embedding it into subject modules (Bordonaro and Richardson, 2004; Walton et al, 2007). Frequently, information skills are taught in a fragmented, ad hoc fashion, usually in one-off sessions. As the Academic Librarians demonstrated at their event during the 2007 Staff Development Festival, there are areas of good practice at Leeds Met already but much more could be done. Whatever approaches we take, we need to ensure that effective, timely information skills tuition is an essential component not only in the first year but throughout a student's studies.

Third, we need to consider what our future first-year students will be like in terms of their information-seeking behaviour. The findings of the CIBER report suggest that even in the era of Web 2.0 people will experience difficulties sifting through online content. This simply reinforces the need for effective information skills teaching. Those

of us engaged in supporting students in this area must develop innovative ways in which we can equip students with the ability to locate information appropriate to the task they are working on. I welcome a debate with colleagues on the issues and how we might work together to improve and develop information skills teaching at Leeds Met to support our first-year students through to graduation and beyond.

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Alison Park
Academic Librarian for Childhood, Early Years, Education and Continuing Professional Development
Headingley Library