

Information Literacy

Elaine Magusin

Athabasca University Library, USA

Information literacy is essential in the creation of lifelong learners. As educators struggle continually to ensure that students are able to successfully navigate the plethora of information available, and be able to think critically about this information, it is logical to consider information literacy skills instruction as a method of helping meet this goal. However, in order to provide information literacy instruction it is necessary to fully understand the concept and all it entails, including how it can be implemented and what benefits it offers to students, educators, and higher education institutions as a whole.

The concept of information literacy was first introduced in the 1970's and referred to the ability to utilize information resources in the workplace (Eisenberg, Lowe & Spitzer, 2004). Since then, this definition has been expanded to include a variety of other ideas. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* define information literacy as the ability to recognize the need for information, and be able to locate, evaluate, and use the information effectively (2000). The document goes on to state that in a world where technology is ever-changing, and where the number of available information resources is increasing significantly, being information literate is essential if success is to be achieved in academic studies, the workplace, and other aspects of our lives. ACRL recognizes that the number of information sources has increased. These sources include libraries, the media, and the Internet. In addition, information is available in many formats, including print, aural, and graphical, and each format poses different challenges to individuals in evaluating and understanding the given information.

Information literacy is not discipline-specific, nor is it solely the realm of academe. The skills that are encompassed by information literacy include the ability to find the needed information in appropriate sources, the ability to think critically about the information and evaluate it, and finally the ability to apply

the information to particular circumstances in an ethical and appropriate manner. These skills naturally lead the learner towards self-directed learning.

In this age of rapid change in technology, it has become a necessity to have information technology skills as well. Much of the available information is in electronic form, requiring learners to be able to use a computer and software to be able to access it. Information technology skills therefore support information literacy, in that they allow learners more opportunities to find needed information. Information literacy is also comprised of network literacy, media literacy and visual literacy (Eisenberg, Lowe & Spitzer, 2004).

It is important to recognize that distance education students have as much need for, and right to, information literacy skills instruction as traditional on-campus students. ACRL delineates this in their competency standards (2000). However, for an information literacy program to be successfully implemented in higher education, several things must happen. First, there must be a strong institutional commitment to information literacy, one that recognizes its importance in the creation of lifelong learners. This institutional commitment must be made at three levels: administration, faculty, and librarians. Second, information literacy initiatives must be developed and implemented in a collaborative environment. Faculty and librarians must work together to provide information literacy instruction. Each must recognize the importance of the role played by the other partner. Faculty members are the subject matter experts, and introduce topics to students in such a way as to broaden their horizons. Librarians are experts in the retrieval of information, and are usually the first to learn about new database platforms etc. In this way, each has an important and significant role to play in teaching information literacy skills.

The implementation of information literacy in higher education institutions has become important in accreditation initiatives as well. Organizations like

the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) consider the information literacy programs offered by institutions when they are being considered for accreditation with the commission. MSCHE includes information literacy in Standard 11, Educational Offerings, and 12, General Education, of their accreditation standards and it is interesting to note that they include critical analysis and reasoning, and technological competence in Standard 12 as well (2000).

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