

Chapter 12

Information Literacy in the Digital Age: Implications for Adult Learning

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ABSTRACT

The current debate within the realm of information sciences focuses on a new threat to society – the threat of an information and technologically illiterate population. This chapter focuses on a critical discussion of information literacy and the fallout of academic achievement amongst adult learners. The chapter takes into consideration the current research on information literacy, a historical perspective on information literacy, current best practices in supporting information literacy in the digital age, and as well as an active action plan on combating this new threat. Central to this discussion, the author evaluates the current literature on information literacy and best practices highlighting research from years 1998-2005.

INTRODUCTION

In the age of information, and communication technology, the opportunities for growth, development, and of learning are limitless. For the adult learner technological advances such as the World Wide Web or the Internet, computer storage, and in telecommunication and networking have made it possible for institutions of learning, schools, libraries, and higher education to compile vast amounts of infor-

mation. However, with these exciting innovations comes the ideal of adult learners to critically use information learning. While recent legislation such as the No Child Left Behind and other accountability policies indicate a positive correlation in testing and achievement, the reality shows that student undertaking a university education does not align with achievement and literacy rates that have been reported. It is now, at the adult learning stage where learners in post secondary learning settings in post secondary settings are not equipped to analyze, evaluate or think critically about information.

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As we move forward into the 21st century researchers and educators are starting to ask the central, most fundamental question of why adult learners do not possess capabilities in critical thinking, information analysis, or in information evaluation. This leads to the topic of discussion - information literacy in the digital age - where information and communication technology have become central to the interaction of society. As institutions of higher learning prepare students for citizenship in the age of information, communication, and technology, information problem-solving skills and critical thinking becomes paramount, especially for adult learners. Adult learners must learn to make meanings from complex amounts of data easily available through countless sources. Beyond these basic skills - skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic, the students who will one day become active citizen and workers of society will need to develop complex analytical skills. Technologies such as networking and telecommunication systems have put an unprecedented volume of information at our fingertips. Yet, many are unaware of what is available, when the information should be used, and to what extent the reliability of such information lies? Yet, with programs in accountability, research, and in technology, adult learners are still underprepared in areas of adequate and effective research or in critical thinking. The aim of this chapter is to provide a historical perspective of information literacy and its connection to adult learning. This chapter also hopes to present positive solutions through identifying best practices used to promote information literacy and ways adult learners can benefit.

CONTEXT

Increasingly, among 18-30 year olds, the Internet has been used as the primary tool for communication and research. Gerard Delanty, a British sociologist, has argued that a major cognitive shift is currently taking place in society. The divisions

between professional and lay knowledge (in the sense of expertise) are dissolving (Delanty, 2003: 80). A new profession, the learning technologist, is emerging. The application of technologies to teaching and learning has created a new term - *cybergogy*. Research on the impact of technologies on educational practice is only beginning. Most of this research is focused on 'blended' (online and face-to-face) learning and on the introduction of information and communication technologies for curricular and instructional purposes. Studies drawn from psychological analysis have shown that technology has an active role in fostering the development of higher cognition.

Teaching and learning in the digital age is a moving away from the passive acquiring of factual information towards the active application of knowledge. The focus is on assisting adult learners to construct knowledge both as independent self-directed enquiry and communally in peer groups in order to demonstrate their knowledge attainment through enactment and application.

To meet this goal, scholarship has identified the need to engage in active research; develop professional enrichment to engage the learner with the content; share research findings and develop students with the skills and abilities to critically think and analyze information from a variety of resources including print and electronic mediums. However, with the lack of opportunities to engage adult learners within a technologically rich learning environment that concisely with opportunities for critical thinking, we must begin to rethink our approach to developing adult learners into information literate knowledge producers and consumers. This leads to the discussion of information literacy in the digital age.

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