

Chapter 7

Information Literacy and Critical Thinking in Higher Education: Some Considerations

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ABSTRACT

This chapter acknowledges the widespread recognition of the importance of instruction in the area of information literacy and shows how information literacy and critical thinking, another vital skill demanded in more and more fields of endeavor, can be integrated as institutions seek to prepare their students to be able to function effectively in today's knowledge-based environment. Some attention is given to Information Literacy frameworks which aim to guide the development of information literacy and enhance delivery and assessment in this field. It recognizes the importance of information specialists and faculty in higher education institutions to be able to work together to establish and develop Information Literacy programs that will equip students with the relevant skills to be considered information literate. It also touches briefly on pedagogical approaches that may be taken in the delivery of Information Literacy instruction and emphasizes the importance of assessment as a means of enhancing the ultimate value of the process to students who participate.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are expected to produce graduates who can take their place in the world in a variety of productive areas. The challenge, therefore, is to offer programs that will equip the future graduates with the skills and capacity to fulfill the roles that the society requires. Over the centuries and to a very great extent in the last century and in the present, these roles have changed and continue to change rapidly. Preparation of students of the 21st century, the digital age, the age of technology, must of necessity include a focus on elements some of which were not even heard of in the industrial age and

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subsequently. It is not that progress from the industrial era to the digital age is not a good thing. It is. But somehow it has cheated students in thinking critically or becoming information literate. To understand the present, one should observe the past.

The industrial era, the 1700s, was a time of great inventions and discoveries in the world, starting the explosion of information. Now has come the digital age, beginning in the 1970s, when there has been an expansion of developments and inventions, when technology creates things to be faster, instantaneous, and obsolete quickly. It has changed the way people learn and want to learn; how they think and do things and how they perceive things. It cannot be that in both eras critical thinking and information literacy were never heard of or known to man. In fact, according to Fisher (2011), critical thinking has been with us for over 2000 years with Socrates beginning this approach to learning. John Dewey is widely considered as the pioneer of the concept of critical thinking in modern times. Information literacy, on the other hand, is a term coined in 1974. According to Andretta (2005), they both reappeared about the time that the educational icon of the 21st century, “life-long learning,” also entered the language of formal and informal education.

This chapter draws attention to the relationship between critical thinking and information literacy, and why and how they are important in the context of higher education. The integration of information literacy instruction into the formal curriculum has become an accepted practice. The chapter also gives attention to international standards established in order to guide and enhance the development of information literacy as an integral part of college programs.

BACKGROUND

What Is Information Literacy?

A review of the literature gives a good understanding of the terms “information literacy” and “critical thinking”. There is a widely accepted and often repeated definition of critical which runs like this: it is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing and or/evaluating information. Reece (2007) points out that information literacy and critical thinking belong to the cognitive domain and agrees with the same skill sets as outlined above. However, it must be remembered that information literacy is not just critical thinking. For a differentiation of critical thinking and information literacy, Starr and Gaskill (1997) follow Brookfield who explains critical thinking as implying a diligent, open-minded search for understanding, rather than for discovery of a necessary conclusion. Information literacy on the other hand, as Thompson (2000) points out, was spoken of by Henry Brooks Adams some 90 years ago when he expressed the concept by saying “they know enough who know how to learn.” That is to say that a person cannot retain all information given but certainly can know how to find, evaluate and use it wisely and effectively. Thompson (2000) goes on to explain that information literacy translates into the ability to derive meaning from information or the ability to access, evaluate and use information from a variety of sources. What information literacy is doing is teaching people how to learn.

The concept of information literacy was re-introduced by Paul Zurkowski, in 1974. Zurkowski makes the point of training in using information resources as a definition of information literacy. Such training would give the person the capacity to use information tools and primary sources to develop solutions to information related problems (Eisenberg, Lowe and Spitzer, 2004). Burchinal suggested that to be

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