

Interview with Dr. Andrew K. Shenton

Please, tell us something about yourself, where do you work, what do you like most about your work?

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There are three dimensions to my working life. Firstly, each year, at Northumbria University, in Newcastle upon Tyne, in the UK, I supervise the research projects of Masters students who are studying information and library management. I guide them through the investigative process from selecting a topic to submitting the dissertation. In an entirely voluntary capacity, I also mentor PhD students, giving them a little informal and additional help, beyond the support they receive from their official supervisors. Secondly, I do a lot of writing for publication, mainly on the subjects of information literacy, information behaviour and research methods, although I've also written about children's literature, science fiction and cricket – my favourite sport. I always feel a great thrill when I see my work in print. Thirdly, I'm employed part-time in a school for thirteen- to eighteen-year-olds in the north-east of England. I am responsible for the school's reading room and I staff one of the independent learning areas. In addition, I serve as my school's research officer. My work at school is very important to me as it helps me to stay grounded with young people. There is a danger as one moves up the levels of academia that one loses touch with the phenomena that are of particular interest. I guess that a similar problem emerges in all professions. For example, teachers generally gain promotion as a result of being good teachers but when they reach the top of their profession and become heads or principals they spend less and less of their time facilitating learning by pupils and more on administration and policy making.

Do you believe librarians' formal education is adequate for the new roles we play nowadays?

I think one of the big problems is that, when they are being trained initially through doing a first degree, many librarians have no idea where they will work and what their role will be when they graduate. So, when it comes to making

decisions on areas in which they will specialise at university, it is difficult for them to make decisions on the basis of what will be most useful in the careers ahead of them. When times are tough, especially, newly-qualified librarians obviously have to take whatever job opportunities are open to them, even though they may not consider what becomes available to be ideal in view of their own studies. Undoubtedly, in these circumstances, in particular, learning “on the job” is very important. There needs to be a helpful support structure in place within the organisation where the newcomer is employed so that they can learn good practice by talking to and working alongside more experienced colleagues, and the individual must be encouraged to attend courses and training events that are truly relevant to the requirements of the post.

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What, in your view, are the most important characteristics of an information literate person?

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An information literate person will recognise situations in which they need information, exploit appropriately the various channels, resources and organisations that offer information and access effectively the information that is necessary to meet the need that prompted action. When the information is put to use, this will be done ethically, with due regard, where appropriate, to copyright and, in an academic context, established citing and referencing conventions. An information literate person not only possesses well developed skills but also has a wide-ranging knowledge of different information sources. They understand their strengths and weaknesses and, in particular, the circumstances when different kinds of sources are most helpful. When faced with unexpected problems, the information literate individual is undeterred and simply takes a new approach or makes the necessary modifications to the original action.

Do you think infolit has any influence in people's quality of life?

Yes, undoubtedly. Information is so pervasive these days that it is virtually impossible in the developed world to live a rich, full and successful life without attaining a reasonable level of information literacy. We discharge many roles in our lives.

The most common include learner, hobbyist, consumer, parent, carer, employee, manager and citizen, and a lot of the tasks associated with these roles demand interaction with information. Consider, for example, how fundamental information is in satisfying personal interests and curiosities about the world, in addressing personal problems that arise in life, in enhancing one's self-development in the workplace, in gaining the level of knowledge necessary to make an informed contribution to democratic processes, in making wise decisions as a consumer and in understanding current issues, such as global warming, the terrorist threat and innovations in science/technology, and how they may affect us personally.

Do you think young people have developed infolit skills? Are they able to recognize and fulfil their information needs by themselves?

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One of the themes that emerges in a lot of research is that young people often overestimate their own information skills. They think they are more effective in finding and using information than is actually the case. Many believe that finding information on the Internet is so straightforward when they use a search engine that they don't need training or help from an information specialist. In truth, though, very often they are employing only the most basic facilities that search engines offer. They either struggle with more complex methods or are entirely unaware of them. Young people's skills are frequently good enough to enable them to develop a surface knowledge or to allow them to do what is necessary to complete an assignment at school but they may struggle to acquire deeper knowledge and gain true understanding. There is the danger, too, that youngsters do not question the information they encounter for accuracy and quality. They are prone simply to copy and paste whatever information they locate, provided it looks reasonably relevant to their purposes. This is partly a result of the fact that they find it easier to take information from one source than to assemble a pool of material from various places and then draw on the totality of it when tackling an assignment.

What, in your opinion, are the newest trends in the infolite world?

Libraries form a great training ground for the development of information literacy but, increasingly, in England certainly, schools are questioning the need to have libraries. Some new schools are opening with no libraries at all and many existing schools are doing away with them in the belief that the materials required by students can be offered via virtual learning environments (VLEs). In several of my recent articles, I have drawn attention to the fact that this attitude is dangerous and undermines opportunities for the development of information literacy. An information literate person does not rely entirely only on electronic sources, some of which may already have been preselected by educators anyway.

On a more positive note, I am encouraged by evidence which suggests that information literacy is an increasingly mature field. It is good to see theorists and practitioners making growing use of ideas from other disciplines beyond information science and these notions can help us teach information literacy in ever more creative ways.

It is important, I think, to appreciate that the key stages involved in finding and using behaviour, as recommended in models of information literacy, have much in common with those associated with scientific inquiry and the generic research process. Recognising these synergies enables us to present information literacy not as a subject all of its own but within the context of wider forms of scholarly activity.

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Could you tell us some anecdote about your work with young people?

Young people, like fully fledged adults, tend to be creatures of habit and often struggle when their tried and tested methods for finding information fail. This serves to demonstrate just how important it is for information literacy to include a problem solving mindset.

I well remember an eight-year-old boy telling me about his confusion when his teacher set him an unusual homework assignment. She demonstrated how a sheet of transparent plastic could be made to stick to another surface and asked her pupils to investigate why this was happening. The boy told me that in many situations where he wanted to find things out he would consult his favourite encyclopedia at

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home. He realised here, though, that such a course of action was impossible as he was not aware of any keyword that would lead him to information which would help him. Instead, after some thought, he told one of his parents what he had seen in the classroom and, through discussion with them, he developed an awareness of the phenomenon of static electricity.

This anecdote highlights various issues. It shows the problems youngsters can experience when they are not aware of the term given to a particular topic of interest; it reveals, too, the importance of having available more than one strategy for finding information and it demonstrates the value of going to other people as information sources. The interpersonal approach is often underplayed in models of information literacy and, indeed, we may well jump wrongly to the conclusion that use of such an informal channel implies that either the individual's information skills in other areas are questionable or the person is inclined to use the method that involves least effort.

Would you like to add something else?

These are difficult times for modern information professionals. In academic settings, their natural territories, i.e. libraries, are often either being discarded or transformed into radically different environments, like “study centres” or “independent learning zones”. Where libraries are retained, practitioners are frequently under pressure to demonstrate the contribution that the library makes to the wider mission of the organisation. Information practitioners have to “sell” themselves to a range of unconvinced parties – school managers, teachers and, increasingly, students.

Many youngsters assume that the World Wide Web can provide all the information they need in life and finding what they require is elementary. In their eyes there is no longer a need for the information specialist. In demonstrating their value, information professionals may find themselves taking on roles that may appear unnatural and far removed from the traditional remit of a librarian. Nevertheless, failure to move with the times can all too easily lead to the information professional becoming left behind in the modern, changing world.

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