

# Thinking outside of literacy: Moving beyond traditional information literacy activities

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## Abstract

A brief reflection on what might be becoming the traditional way of conducting information and digital literacy activities, together with some recommendations in order to move beyond these traditional grounds. This reflection is framed within this age of social media and draws upon information literacy concepts, tools, and experiences.

**Keywords:** information literacy, digital literacy, innovation, technology

Information literacy (IL) is a contested concept; library and information professionals (LIP) have some idea about its essence, though it is hard to make the point about what it involves, its boundaries, and what it is outside of it. Some side with related concepts as skills or competencies, some subordinate it to digital literacy (DL) and new literacies, while others do the opposite. Yet others seem to favor terms such as media literacy, transliteracy, or multiliteracy, either to adopt a seemingly larger stance or to avoid the use of a more complex conceptual framework. Despite occasional turf wars, the essence of many of the related concepts provided in the literature is similar. IL might be and will be driving all these conceptions for the years to come because they all involve the access, handling, use, storage, and evaluation of information, regardless of the medium where it is presented or the tools used to mediate it. IL is the sum of skills or competences that individuals may acquire in order to be competent in tasks involving information.

The purposes of IL are quite diverse, among others they are: problem solving, decision making, emancipation, the exercise of active citizenship, overcoming oppression, achieving critical stances, education and learning in general, and for lifelong learning. Although the emphasis on the importance of IL tends to lean more toward formal education, it is clearly vital for development and the business sector as well. Beyond schools there are societies and their citizens in general, who should be as information literate as are university students and professionals. As O'Sullivan (2002) states "both information literacy and the closely allied concept, lifelong learning, are critical for social and professional empowerment in a knowledge-based economy" (p. 7).

The need to be information literate is even more important in this age, when social media (SM) is becoming the preferred means of information and communication, especially among young people. The role that IL has for SM users is to ensure a 'good' and diverse use of these tools. Some people argue that young people are being born with these technologies, so they use them better than pre-Internet generations. It may be so; however, this idea involves DL, not necessarily IL. Moreover, some authors have contested this characteristic of digital natives, or they have added some nuances to it. Maybe digital natives can handle technology quickly and naturally, but they do not necessarily use these tools efficiently when it comes to harnessing these technologies for other purposes than entertainment, communication or sharing

the same trendy information ad infinitum. Furthermore, some authors (e.g. Prensky, 2010; Dans, 2014) have argued that digital natives may exhibit quick loss of focus, short attention spans, laziness, compromise of the quality of work when multitasking, poor construction of information strategies and being ineffective at harnessing technologies. Older generations may share these issues as well. There is also something that, for the lack of a better term at the moment, I will call the 'ready-made information culture' (RMIC). This is a term that I am borrowing from art and it involves a loss or lack of IL when it comes to really using information, e.g. to read, cite, and make arguments about and from the retrieved information. RMIC might be caused or at least inspired by the use of SM. Its direct symptom is not being willing or interested in looking at more than a page or ten slides, even at organizational settings, otherwise any larger content starts to appear confusing. So, information has to be pre-digested and reduced to its minimum expression in order for it to be worthwhile. Reduction would surely mean some loss in the message this information was intended to convey. I believe this unwillingness to deal with larger amounts of information is starting to be more pronounced than excuses such as 'time is money', 'word economy', or 'be brief, I am in a hurry' would allow. The dangers of this issue are clear to science, academia, and research, let alone to informed decision making and the other purposes that IL is intended to serve. This is especially evident if we are talking about the social sciences, where we mostly work with discourse.

The issue of trust in SM might be alleviated by IL. This issue refers to being able to discern who is trustworthy on these platforms. It is further complicated in some countries facing strong political and social polarization, where two competing truths are often highly divergent. Furthermore, the problem is also present in other countries which have been exposed as having doubtful transparency and serious problems regarding technology users' privacy. Hence, key aspects to be included in IL initiatives are to empower individuals with the tools (not only technological) to be critical regarding the information they consume and to suggest correct online behaviors. These may be vital for the exercise of their citizenship and well-being. Considering the above ideas, in the following paragraphs I define what I think are the traditional ways to conduct IL activities.

While trying to innovate, I have been thinking about which activities might be considered 'traditional information literacy' (TIL). The following two types would be characteristic of a perspective where IL and DL are tackled together, and they may or may not apply to all possible IL initiatives, because they emerge mainly from looking at and doing IL within higher education settings, which is my area of practice. So, these TIL training activities may take the following two forms:

- a) **Resource specific trainings:** these are about a tool or resource rather than particular skills. They are highly specific and resemble software demonstrations, such as those involving the use of the library catalog, academic databases, search engines, or information intensive ICTs. We usually conduct these activities in a computer room, and they involve demonstrations. In most cases trainers prepare examples and practical exercises tailored to the users, i.e. drawing from their academic field. In these activities it seems to be difficult to maintain the audience's focus on the demonstrations, which is evident at the moment of the practical component, when a participant may ask the trainer something involving what they just explained.
- b) **Theoretical teaching of information skills:** their emphasis lies on particular skills rather than on tools. It is a sometimes 'preachy' form. The danger of this approach is to be too theoretical and being unable to transfer anything that participants may use in academic or life scenarios.

I believe these TIL ways are worldwide trends, and as trends it is not easy to overcome them. Perhaps we are too used to them, either separately or in combination, but we need to recognize them to try and innovate beyond; for this we must think outside of the box. If we think exclusively in terms of TIL, we run the risk of being detached from information users' real needs and everyday practices. Our view of IL might be paradoxical: we see it as a very practical matter, because we think we can develop it through ICTs (see (a) below); while also thinking about it as being quite abstract, because we intend to provide proper IL conceptual tools to our trainees (see (b) below). The key issue in determining if TIL is here to stay or if experimentation may

begin is the importance that a given institution (or even a country) has placed on IL. If not important, the library is on its own, it may be understaffed or unprepared to provide IL training, so the awareness that stakeholders have of its importance is limited. Alternatively, IL can be a key issue and to be information literate may be an institutional or policy goal. This might be the best scenario, because LIP are more free to innovate and thus they might overcome TIL. In order to start helping us move beyond TIL, I offer the following thoughts (in no particular order):

- Trainers must develop teaching skills; not many LIP are trained with these. This way they can provide a good structure, as well as the use of a sound educational and pedagogical design, and a correct alignment between IL with a given curriculum.
- Avoid 'one size fits all' approaches. IL activities must allow for versatility while maintaining a rich structure and tidy organization. It is not enough just to tailor the examples and practical exercises to the audience.
- It is best to deal with participants that already have information needs. If not make them up, but effectively, because any IL activity might be boring to participants if they lack an information need. Shenton and Fitzgibbons (2010) suggest considering their behaviors, motivations, preferences, and interests.
- Play on LIP's specialties. This is hard in developing countries where a few LIP are accustomed to take on all library roles and specialization is not very common. For example, one LIP specialized on research may conduct IL training together with methodological and research workshops.
- Keep lifelong learning at the forefront; you may center on participants' immediate information needs, but try to give them tools for the future, both for professional and personal life scenarios. Be sure to "impart skills that go beyond the ostensibly limited relevance (from a student's perspective) of academic assignments" (Shenton and Fitzgibbons, 2010, p. 165).
- As also mentioned by Shenton and Fitzgibbons (2010), try and make participants realize the possible drawbacks in their practices and show them the way toward diverse and more informed purposes of information tools.
- Think outside of the library: "integration and relevance are the keys to successful information literacy strategies" (O'Sullivan, 2002, p. 13). Offer diversity and a string of options of IL activities, while trying to find allies in the institution in order to connect IL with different needs and make it more contextualized, pertinent, and useful.
- We cannot escape from some software demonstrations. Some IL and DL must be developed by showing certain tools. The trick might involve limiting how much demonstration we include in our IL activities.

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