CILIP defines Information Literacy for the UK

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A Short Introduction to IL

Information literacy (IL) was adopted as the theme for the Presidential year of Professor Sheila Corrall, the first President of CILIP, in April 2002. At the end of her year as President, she called a meeting of experts and practitioners at CILIP, which concluded that the term was not understood or used consistently across all sectors in the UK. A working party was formed, charged with producing a definition, as well as supporting material such as case studies demonstrating how IL can make a difference to individuals.

Information literacy involves the knowledge and use of skills or competencies that together make for effective and appropriate use of information. The challenge that faced the working party was to discover a way of communicating this idea that would be acceptable to, and could be understood and owned by, all communities of users in the UK. Definitions in the past have tended to focus on a single community, most often that of the academics, tertiary education (see for example, SCONUL, 1999). Even here, there is evidence that each institution adapted the definition, or highlighted different aspects, to suit its own needs. The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) User Behaviour Monitoring and Evaluation Framework longitudinal study known as JUSTEIS (JISC Usage Surveys: Trends in Electronic Information Services) has provided ample evidence of poor information skills among students at all levels (Banwell, 2004).

The working party understood that any definition should be such that it was understood by, and helpful to, all information-using communities in the UK. In an era of lifelong learning, they recognised that IL has relevance for all ages from the primary school to the senior citizen. James Herring (1996), for example, is clear that "Information skills … are the skills which *pupils* use to identify the purpose of, locate, process and communicate information concepts and ideas."

Information literate people understand more than how to find information, they understand its limitations and the need to examine how they use information, and they understand how to manage and communicate information. IL is an essential and discrete dexterity – everyone relies on information everyday.

Perhaps one important point that can be drawn out, and which it is useful to emphasise here, is that IL is about information in all forms. Information may come from another person, from a paper-based magazine or book, report or newspaper, from a digital source such as a database, a search engine or an e-book accessed through a computer, or it may come from any other form of media: film, video, DVD, radio, television, etc. The definition and associated skills or competencies cross all media.

Other definitions

Perhaps the most recent alternative definition to the one offered here is that originating in the UNESCO-sponsored Meeting of Experts on Information Literacy in Prague:

> "Information Literacy encompasses knowledge of one's information concerns and needs, and the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, organize and effectively create, use and communicate information to address issues or problems at hand; it is a prerequisite for participating effectively in the Information Society, and is part of the basic human right of life long learning." (US National Commission on Library and Information Science, 2003)

The United States and Australia have used the same construct in their earlier definitions:

> "To be information literate, a person must be able to recognise when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information." (American Library Association, 1998)

> "Information literacy is an understanding and set of abilities enabling individuals to 'recognise when information is needed and have the capacity to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information'." (CAUL, 2004)

While Sheila Webber, who was a part of the CILIP working party, had also developed an earlier definition:

> "… information literacy is the adoption of appropriate information behaviour to obtain, through whatever channel or medium, information well fitted to information needs, together with a critical awareness of the importance of wise and ethical use of information in society." (Webber and Johnston, 2003)

Some common threads can immediately be seen in these (and our) definitions. The CILIP definition, which appears below, is:

> **"Information literacy** is knowing when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner."

The definition tries to encapsulate the important elements simply, and in plain English, so that it can serve as a base-line interpretation of IL for all communities in the UK. The skills, which follow it, serve to explain in greater detail what it means to be information literate. SCONUL have used a similar approach using seven "headline skills" (SCONUL, 1999).

ICT and Media Literacy
Information Technology (IT) and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) often are used largely without any attributed definitions; some see ICT and IL as deeply intertwined, with the term 'e-literacy' sometimes used to convey the union of the two, while others see no need for a distinction. For example, the Department of Education and Skills', *Towards a unified e-learning strategy,* made reference to "raising ICT literacy" and noted that, "[f]or skills for Life: e-learning can help adults in developing their literacy and numeracy skills, while also building ICT skills for life and work" (Department of Education and Skills, 2003). It made only one reference to IL, despite frequently referring to "econom[ies] of scale through wide access to digital resources and

information systems, combined." CILIP does not subscribe to the view that all these terms are synonyms.

The term 'media literacy' was also coined in mid-2004 to join visual and other literacies (Ofcom, 2004). Ofcom say that while there is no agreed definition, "media literacy is a range of skills including the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and produce communications in a variety of forms" and that "it moves from merely recognising and comprehending information to the higher order critical thinking skills such as questioning, analysing and evaluating that information." Confusing similarities with the IL concept can be seen, indeed, it should be noted that these elements are included in our definition and have always been included in the other definitions mentioned above.

Like media literacy, IL has no agreed, universally-accepted definition, but unlike media literacy there have been repeated attempts to define or circumscribe it. A useful and comprehensive review by Professor Sirje Virkus was recently published (Virkus, 2003). In an attempt to draw a line under this debate – at least for the UK – CILIP has produced this simple definition, supported by a list of skills or competencies, with examples of issues for each of these skills.

A context for Information Literacy
Information Literacy is here defined as a part of knowledge or learning, and this is in accordance with the views of the Department of Education and Skills. It comprises a series of skills or competencies that must be acquired. There are other aspects. One might say that an information literate person should have an ability to be a lifelong learner and to reflect on what they are doing. That is not part of IL; rather it is a necessary attitude, as you cannot develop IL without it.

In his recent book, Herring argues "that information literacy is a broader term, which encompasses not only skills but also attitudes to and motivation for learning"; and cites Loertscher (2000) who argued that 'reading and enjoyment of literature' are within the scope of information literacy. While CILIP has defined information literacy only in terms of skills, we acknowledge the force of this argument, believing it self-evident that motivation and enjoyment of both learning and literature are necessarily present in someone who is truly information literate. IL is also about commitment to value, to worth and to success. The information literate person cares about the quality of the answer to whatever he or she is investigating, and is prepared to work to guarantee that quality.

Finally, we acknowledge that IL will mean slightly different things to different communities; it may also require a greater degree of skill or understanding by some communities than others. IL is relevant (and an important skill to be learned and used) in primary and secondary schools, in further and higher education, in business, and in leisure.

What follows is the definition, with its list of associated skills or competencies, as it can be found on the CILIP website (http://www.cilip.org.uk/professionalguidance/informationliteracy/definition/).

The Definition

> **Information literacy** is knowing when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner.

This definition implies several skills. We believe that the skills (or competencies) that are required if an individual is to be information literate necessitate an understanding of:

- a need for information
- the resources available
- how to find information
- the need to evaluate results
- how to work with or exploit results
- ethics and responsibility of use
- how to communicate or share your findings
- how to manage your findings

These are explained in more detail below.

The Skills

Understanding a need
Recognising that information is needed; understanding why information is needed, what (and how much; what kind of) information is required, as well as any associated constraints (e.g. time, format, currency, access); recognising that information is available in a wide range of formats in various geographical and virtual locations. The ability to articulate a question and so develop a focus for the research is an important skill.

> *Note:* Information may be available on paper (books, reference works, journals, magazines, newspapers, etc), digitally (on CD-ROMs, over the Internet or the World Wide Web, on DVDs, on your own computer or network, etc), through other media such as broadcast or film, or from a colleague or friend. It may or may not be conveniently close to hand and easily accessible, and quantifying your need and making a decision about the use of an information source may be tempered by the ease and speed with which an answer can be obtained.

Understanding availability
Be able to identify what resources are available for exploitation, where they are available, how to access them, the merits of individual resource types, and when it is appropriate to use them.

> *Note:* As suggested, this requires an understanding of types of resource (paper-based, electronic/digital, human, etc) and when to use each; what are the merits of individual resource types; what are the differences between them.
> *Examples:*

1. A journal article may be available in print, as a part of an e-journal or as a record in a database of full-text articles
2. Not all search engines offer the same facilities
3. A company website, a market research report, or the website of a national statistical organisation may offer differing views
4. Access channels to information resources may vary according to who or where you are.
    e.g. For an 8 year old child, availability is subject to having to go through various gatekeepers such as their parents' views or willingness to buy books, the library's filtering policy, access to a computer at home or at their friends, etc. Whether the exact same information sources can be reached by different children depends on the local channels available to them.
5. Any resource may be subject to cultural, political, industrial, national or other bias.
    e.g. Newspapers are notoriously politically biased and this same bias is continued in Web news sources; it is also important to be aware that PR companies are employed to create 'spin' websites. Think, for example, of lobby group (e.g. animal rights, anti- or pro-abortion, extreme left or right wing political groups, religious groups/sects). The organisation behind the information you are being given may have an ulterior motive.

Understanding how to find information

An ability to search appropriate resources effectively and identify relevant information.

Note: Strategies need to be tailored to the resource being used, so as to get the best results from that resource. Users need to respond to search results – possibly because there are too few or too many – and know when to stop searching. An information literate person would also understand that, in addition to purposive searching, information can be acquired by browsing, scanning and monitoring information sources.

Examples:
1. Searching across several resources
2. Using back-of-book indexes
3. Using abstracting and indexing journals
4. Scanning RSS and news feeds
5. Participating in e-mail, discussion lists, bulletin boards, etc
6. Using hypertext, URLs, bookmarks, etc
7. Understanding and using Boolean logic
8. Understanding and using truncation
9. Understanding and using fielded data
10. De-duplicating search results
11. Understanding and using relevance and relevance-ranked searching

Understand the need to evaluate results

Be able to evaluate information for its authenticity, accuracy, currency, value and bias. Also, be able to evaluate the means by which the results were obtained in order to ensure that your approach did not produce misleading or incomplete results.

Note: This is not just whether the resource appears to answer the question, but whether it is intrinsically trustworthy.

Examples:
1. Use prior knowledge of author, editor, series, publisher
2. Examine
    - Relevance to problem/question/task in hand
    - Appropriateness of style for users
    - Availability of index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, multimedia, etc
    - Authenticity and origin

- Authority (ownership, reputation, coverage, scope)
- Bias or point of view
- Error rate/accuracy
- Purpose/audience
- Currency/timeliness
- Consistency
- Design (output, presentation and arrangement)
- Organisation/Navigation (ease of use)
- Access and Use (documentation, accessibility, comparison with other sources)

Understand how to work with or exploit results

Analyse and work with the information to provide accurate, presentable research results, or to develop new knowledge and understanding.

> *Note:* To understand, compare, combine, annotate, and apply (use) the information found. Recognise and understand a possible need for further information searching.
> > *Examples:*
> > 1. Use of appropriate software (spreadsheet / database / statistical / reference management / etc)

Understand ethics and responsibility of use

Know why information should be used in a responsible, culturally sensitive and ethical (professional, business, personal ethics) manner. Respect confidentiality and always give credit to other people's work. Understand the nature and uses of bias, in order to report appropriately. Where appropriate, provide a balanced (unbiased) report.

> *Note:* This could include issues of intellectual property, plagiarism, unfair practice, fair use, freedom of information, data protection, codes of practice and ethical principles as set out by your employers, institution or professional body (e.g. CILIP).
> > *Examples:* CILIP's Ethical Principles and Code of Professional Practice for Library and Information Professionals are available at:
> > http://www.cilip.org.uk/professionalguidance/ethics/

Understand how to communicate or share your findings

The ability to communicate/share information in a manner or format that is appropriate to the information, the intended audience and situation.

> *Note:* This goes beyond analysis to the synthesis, organisation and/or creation of further information, presented in an appropriate form.
> > *Examples:*
> > 1. Understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of different communications channels (e.g. web page, presentation, written report)
> > 2. Participating effectively in collaborative writing and publication, including use of collaborative software (e.g. student group report; internal knowledge base; collaborative blog; wikipedia)
> > 3. Understanding of appropriate writing styles (e.g. for reports, essays, presentation, etc)
> > 4. Knowledge of citation style
> > 5. Use of footnotes / end notes
> > 6. Use of a succinct and easily understood style when reporting findings verbally
> > 7. Use of appropriate style and understanding of conventions when using e-mail

Understand how to manage your findings

Know how to store and manage the information you have acquired using the most effective methods available. Reflect critically on the process and achievement as well as on the sources found in order to learn from the experience of finding and using information.

> *Note:* Continual or ongoing management for yourself and/or others.
> *Examples:*
> 1. Consideration of re-finding resources (either locally or in the original) at a later date
> 2. Use of, and relocation in, filing cabinets and/or shelves for physical resources
> 3. Use of folders to organise computer-stored data
> 4. Organisation of e-mail and e-mail attachments
> 5. Use of appropriate software (spreadsheet / database / statistical / reference management / etc)
> 6. Security and backup copies
> 7. Tracking changes in documents
> 8. Personal content management

Conclusion

The CILIP definition of information literacy was published in October 2004. We can only say that it is the most recent definition of which we know. Whether it will withstand the tests of time, and of colleagues, has yet to be discovered but CILIP hopes that the simple definition, followed by a list of skills that have both explanations and examples, will make it a definition for use across the UK. To help in its adoption by the different sectors and communities, further examples, a set of FAQs, and some case studies will be added to the CILIP Information Literacy web pages during the next few months (http://www.informationliteracy.org.uk/).

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