The Increasing Importance of Information Literacy as a 21st Century Skill*  

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Never before in the history of the planet have so many people - on their own -  
had the ability to find so much information  
about so many things and about so many other people  

T. L. Friedman, 2005  

Introduction  

The concept of information literacy has long been discussed and its importance for life long learning has long been recognized in the literature of librarianship and information science. Today, as the amount of information increases, quality of information becomes uncertain due to the new technologies and tools such as Web 2.0 which allow everyone to participate in creating and spreading information. Additionally, characteristics of the new generation (known as Internet or Google generation), such as believing that what is on the web is correct, require high level critical thinking skills. As a result, information literacy skills become a survival skill in the information age, and the traditional content and the mode of information literacy instruction require alteration.  

Information Literacy and Life Long Learning  

Transition to an information society demands today’s societies to restructure themselves. There is neither an individual nor an occupation today, which hasn’t been affected by the current economic, social and technological change. It is almost obligatory for any individual to become acquainted with these new developments. Individuals who fail to keep up with the change are likely to fall progressively behind, and to become less employable and less competitive (Candy, 2002). An existing or static body of knowledge is no longer enough to cope with information explosion, changing work * This paper is a revised and enlarged edition of a paper presented in the Electronic Library: International Scientific Conference, Belgrade, September 25th-28th, 2008.
patterns and rapid growth of technologies. While providing countless opportunities, developments have dramatically altered the knowledge and abilities individuals need to live productively. As a result, there is a pressure for learning throughout life to meet the challenge of change. On one hand, lifelong learning helps to maintain economic competitiveness and employability; on the other hand, it is the best way to fight against the social exclusion. There is no doubt that lifelong learning is the key to ensuring social integration and to achieving equal opportunities.

Lifelong learning refers to learning across the lifespan. It extends well beyond the boundaries of formal education, and promotes the development of knowledge and competences that will enable each individual to adapt himself/herself to the information society (Candy, 2002). Lifelong learning can be defined as a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances and environments (WILL, 1994). Lifelong learning offers the opportunity for people to bring their knowledge up to date and enables them to work consciously at extending their intellectual, vocational and personal horizons by seeking to understand and grasp the significant advances of recent times, which have affected and transformed their worlds (Chapman, 2002).

Societies of the information age need confident and independent learners equipped for lifelong learning. Hence, the manpower needed by today's societies can be described as effective consumers of information who can find, evaluate, use, produce and share information. Information literacy forms the basis for lifelong learning by enabling learners to become more self-directed, and assume greater control over their own learning (Abid, 2004). An information-literate individual, who has the ability to use information to acquire knowledge, is an independent lifelong learner and is able to contribute productively, effectively and responsibly to the society (AASL & AECT. 1998). Information literate people are critical thinkers and effective consumers of information. Information literacy - the ability to recognize an information need and then locate, evaluate, and effectively use the needed information - is the key skill required not only for lifelong learning but also for success in the information-based societies. An information literate individual knows how to learn and is capable to achieve lifelong learning.

Information literate individuals are well prepared for whatever challenges and changes arise in their careers and personal lives (Breivik, 2000). Information literacy is about developing people's critical and creative abilities and it is part of the basic entitlement of every individual to freedom of expression and the right to information and is instrumental in building sustaining democracy (Abid, 2004).
Information Literacy as a Survival Skill in the 21st Century

Information literacy has been recognized as a survival skill in the information age. The impact of the new century on information literacy can be emphasized mainly under two main categories: The increasing importance of the information literacy skills, and the expanding content and the changing mode of information literacy instruction.

Increasing Importance of Information Literacy

Mastering information literacy skills is crucial to survival in a world where change is the basic driving force of the daily life. Information is, in fact, the most precious resource of the mankind. The challenge today is to make sense of a world described by some as “information overload”. The issue is no longer not having enough information; it is the opposite – too much information, in various formats and not all of equal value (Rockman, 2004). Today individuals are faced with diverse information choices in their studies, in the workplace, and in their lives. Information is available through community resources, special interest organisations, manufacturers and service providers, media, libraries, and the Internet.

In a time of millions of Internet sites, billions of Web pages, more than a million items in a typical medium-sized academic library, about 170 terabytes of information on the surface of World Wide Web, some 92,000 terabytes of information on deep web, millions of active weblogs (blogs) (Lyman and Varian 2003), the ability to act confidently and not be paralyzed by information overload is critical. These ongoing proliferation of information poses special challenges in accessing, evaluating, understanding and using information in an ethical manner; and requires information literacy skills to meet these challenges.

Increasingly, information comes unfiltered. This raises questions about authenticity, validity, and reliability. New technologies associated with Web 2.0 allow everyone to participate in exploring, creating, spreading and commenting on information. This trend toward user-driven content is growing with the use of Web 2.0 tools such as, social networking, blogs, wikis, tagging, and folksonomies, which make it easier to communicate, collaborate and share information (Secker, 2008). Web 2.0 tools enable the rapid production and consumption of information. The line between the creation and consumption of content is blurred (Godwin, 2006). Web 2.0 sources are another form of publication and the lack of peer review and editorship are the challenges they introduce. They are not of the same reliability as traditional resources, but this does not eliminate their value, this however increases importance of critical thinking skills.

The new generation, who were born during the computer age and grew up in a technological world are referred to as Generation Y, Echo Boomers, The Plug-and-Play-Generation, Millenials, The Game
*Boy Generation, The-Cut-and-Paste Generation* (Rockman, 2004). Although they may have taught themselves how to surf the Internet, download files, or send e-mail, they have not taught themselves to be efficient in their searches, or to evaluate the sources of the information they are using. They are computer literate, but numerous studies have shown that they are not information literate. Certain characteristics of this generation, such as navigating the web by trial and error and ignoring manuals and help sheets, believing that everything is on the Web and what is written down and on the Web is correct, being either confused or ignorant about ethical issues of the content they are using, cutting and pasting rather than reading and understanding what they find (Godwin, 2006; Salo, 2006), prove that information literacy skills become crucial than ever for this generation.

Furthermore, especially with the development of Web 2.0 technologies and sources, ethical issues such as intellectual property rights, privacy, and plagiarism have become blurred. Ease of copying information, difficulties in identifying the original source of information, reuse of information without acknowledgement and lack of knowledge on how to cite these new sources of information are just a few problems to address.

The need for guidance on how to access relevant information among the piles of information available in a timely manner, and more crucially, the ethical use and evaluation of the quality of information have never been so important. Individuals of the twenty first century require assistance more then ever through the information maze, particularly with the growth of unfiltered content deriving from Web 2.0 applications.

**The Expanding Content and The Changing Mode of Information Literacy Instruction**

The uncertain quality and expanding quantity of information resources, variable methods of access to information, challenges in evaluating and using information in an ethical manner and the characteristics of the new generation imply changes in information literacy instruction.

First of all, the content of information literacy instruction needs to be expanded to cover new sources of information, mainly Web 2.0 sources, such as blogs, wikis and social networks as well as how to access, use, contribute, evaluate and cite them. Web 2.0 tools, such as RSS feeds, tags and folksonomies should also be covered along with the privacy and copyright issues of social software.

Secondly, the mode of information literacy instruction needs to be changed. Librarians need to meet the new generation of users where they are. Since information literacy becomes even more critical, librarians need new teaching tools which attract rather than patronise or bore the users. Web 2.0 seems to be one of the best options to meet new generation’s learning styles and time-shifting requirements.
Web 2.0 technologies offer libraries many opportunities such as serving their existing audiences better, reaching out beyond the walls and Web sites of the institution, reaching potential beneficiaries where they happen to be, and reaching them in association with the task that they happen to be undertaking (Miller, 2005).

Web 2.0 has potential for teaching and learning. For instance, blogs could be be used for active learning and also for marketing, wikis could be used to encourage collaborative work in classes, blogs and wikis could be used for developing evaluative skills, YouTube could be used to upload video materials for promotional or training purposes, Facebook could be used to publicise various instructional activities, podcasts technology could be used for library tours, Second Life could be used to offer training sessions. Evidence suggests that several libraries are already experimenting with these ideas (Godwin, 2006; Secker, 2008).

Librarians will need to use the new tools (Web 2.0) where appropriate, to promote their information literacy instruction. This technology should be used if librarians are to appear relevant to the new generation.

**Conclusion**

Information literacy skills have been recognized as one of the most salient skills for the individuals of information societies for many reasons. First of all, it is a prerequisite for lifelong learning as well as for the creation of new knowledge. Secondly, it is vital for participative citizenship, social inclusion and for the competitive advantage of individuals, enterprises, regions, and nations. Thirdly it is essential for socio-economic development and for survival in the future.

Today, certain developments such as proliferation of information resources, the uncertain quality of information and the challenges in evaluating and using it in an ethical manner along with the characteristics of the new generation constantly enhance the importance of information literacy skills.

Since the importance of information literacy proliferates, librarians’ role as information literacy instructors requires a serious consideration of new teaching tools to attract the Internet generation. Following the developments of Web 2.0, Library 2.0 and Librarian 2.0, *Information Literacy Instruction 2.0* which would give library users a participatory role in the development and improvement of instruction programs can be suggested. Users, should they desire, would be able to tailor information literacy instruction to best meet their own needs and would be involved in training other users. Librarians would know when users are lost, and would offer immediate and real-time assistance to solve the information problem in their hands; and would be able to use this opportunity to equip their users with information literacy skills.
References


