

---

# **Tara Brabazon, The University of Google: education in the (post) information age (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008)**

*Reviewed by:*

Peter Williams

*Assistant Campus Library Manager,  
University of East London*

*Tel: 020 8223 7843*

*E-mail: p.j.williams@uel.ac.uk*

---

If there were more academics like Tara Brabazon, being a librarian would be a lot easier than it sometimes is.

Perhaps unusually for a lecturer, Brabazon is deeply concerned about how the expansion of the internet has impacted upon her students' expectations and research skills. In particular, she recognises that the ability to select and evaluate information has become a crucial skill, integral to their eventual success. She argues that both teachers and librarians must take steps to guide students through this new landscape.

She devotes a whole chapter of her book to the description of an assignment she sets new students, which requires them to provide a detailed, annotated bibliography for an essay. The students don't actually go on to write the essay but are assessed, instead, on the quality of their preparation and on evidence that they have thought about the different types of information they might use. It's the sort of guided exercise many subject librarians will be familiar with, but it's refreshing to read about a non-librarian doing it, just as it is to hear a university lecturer echoing many of our professional concerns.

Elsewhere, Brabazon repeatedly emphasises the central role of libraries and librarians in the edu-

cation process, quotes us alongside John Gray and Irvine Welsh, and says things like: 'Librarians are important because they punctuate the information landscape, controlling and managing enthusiasm and confusion' (p 35).

Her book isn't just about the importance of information skills. Rather, for Brabazon, the tendency to rely on Google is just one example of the way the sector has embraced technological change as it attempts to expand with limited resources. University managers often overlook the difficulties and challenges that these advances bring, seeing them as a simple solution to the imperative to increase student numbers. So many developments that ostensibly promote 'flexible learning' do nothing of the sort. I-lectures, for example, merely replicate traditional lectures, with little recognition of either the difficulties or the potential of the new medium. Similarly, the practice of putting course materials online can make students lazy and discourage true reading.

In common with the more enthusiastic proponents of information literacy, Brabazon believes that there exist a number of 'literacies' that people must acquire to participate successfully in the modern world. As such, she is against the old-fashioned notion that there is a single literacy as it is perhaps commonly understood (that is, adult literacy). Instead, there are multiple literacies, including cultural literacy, media literacy, web literacy, aural literacy and so on. These literacies are not just about 'encoding and decoding' but, rather, imply 'higher levels of interpretation' (p 212) and 'the deployment of interpretative skills' (p 197). Furthermore, they are not self-standing but relate to each other. Sometimes, for example, it is necessary to possess a particular literacy in order to be able to develop another, and one of Brabazon's main arguments is that true digital literacy is impossible without the prior possession of other literacies.

Personally, I feel these various literacies could have benefited from more rigorous definition. Instead, they appear in somewhat confusing formulations, such as 'new aural literacies are developing, which will destabilize the hierarchical valuation of sight and sound' (p 141). It remains unclear to me how, precisely, a 'literacy' differs from a 'skill'.

Brabazon recently spoke at the annual LILAC conference and was by all accounts an engaging and persuasive speaker, but her writing style is an acquired taste. Dense and at times abstruse, it is

perhaps characteristic of cultural studies discourse. Brabazon also draws heavily on personal experience and the book is filled with anecdotes, extracts from e-mails apparently written by her students and one chapter is apparently structured on the model of her yoga classes.

Another criticism of the book might be that Brabazon writes from a particular political standpoint and her argument is based on the premise that there is a 'hidden curriculum' in the education system that maintains 'the power of the powerful' (p 94). She detects 'pedagogical terrorism' (p 136) in criticism of cultural studies courses.

There is, then, plenty to take issue with in *The University of Google*, but since when has it been our job to agree with everything our academic colleagues say? Despite its eccentricities, this is a significant book for our profession. The question is: how much will it be read by non-librarians?