

---

# Scanning, tailoring and promoting information literacy support – another string to the liaison librarian’s bow



Susan Boyle  
*Liaison Librarian*  
*UCD Health Sciences Library,*  
*University College Dublin*  
*Tel: + 716 6579*  
*E-mail: Susan.Boyle@ucd.ie*

---

A shift in tertiary education is acknowledged and this article discusses the implications for librarians engaged in information literacy support. The article demonstrates why liaison librarians need to scan and tailor new varieties of information skills support to match the changes in education. The importance of promoting new varieties of support services is also discussed and various measures to promote these new support offerings are proposed.

## THE SHIFT IN EDUCATION

It has struck me, as a liaison librarian working in an Irish university library, that in recent years universities have been shifting to meet the evolving needs of the student. On their website, the Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA) acknowledges that ‘expectations regarding the role of higher education and its contribution to society and the individual are changing’.<sup>1</sup> Driving forces are also ensuring a shift to higher education that is more ‘student-centred’. For example, university strategic documents are encouraging a change in emphasis from ‘teaching-centred’ to ‘student-centred learning’. In University College Dublin, the draft strategy for education 2008–2011 has embedded a ‘student-focused, life-long learning environment’ as an educational value and key principle.<sup>2</sup> The European Commission’s lifelong learning programme framework has also set out

‘digital competence’ and ‘learning to learn’ as key competencies that can contribute to ‘successful life in a knowledge society’,<sup>3</sup> and these have direct implications for higher education.

Coupled with this, the information landscape in which students operate is changing with the advent of new technologies and, because of their age group, students are ‘typically the first to adopt new technologies’<sup>4</sup> and adapt to them. Students skim and power-browse and favour intuitive and dynamic interfaces that give them a quick and exact answer. Schmidt maintains that the ‘users of today, particularly young people, are accessing and using information very differently’.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Rowlands, in his review of the Google Generation Project research, notes ‘considerable continuity in the use of information between generations’.<sup>6</sup> Students today have had greater exposure to technology, but are not necessarily more information-literate, which presents librarians with the opportunity to develop and use a whole range of new approaches to information literacy support.

It is not just the students who are changing or adapting their behaviours – the shift in education also extends to academics. Higgs and McCarthy suggest that ‘there are changing roles for staff who teach’ and that ‘academic teachers now see themselves as facilitators of learning, rather than as transmitters of knowledge’.<sup>7</sup> In addition, there is more collaborative learning: as Schmidt notes, the ‘disciplinary boundaries are blurring and faculties are working collaboratively’.<sup>8</sup> Currently lecturers are also exploring, and finding, new ways to get students to learn and are championing new teaching and learning techniques to reach their students. Today, ‘problem based learning’, ‘clickr technology’, ‘digital storytelling’,<sup>9</sup> ‘e-tivities’ and many other learning methods and technologies are now more commonplace and less of a novelty in universities. Fallon and Breen describe a ‘university culture in which flexible modes of delivery are being explored and utilised’<sup>10</sup> and how this is ‘part of the context in which librarians and libraries now operate’.<sup>11</sup>

This educational shift has implications for academic libraries and their liaison librarians, who provide information skills support in the higher education environment. This article seeks to explore the need to scan the educational environment and to tailor and promote new forms of information literacy support.

In light of the present shifting educational environment, liaison librarians need to ensure that information literacy is seamlessly connected to curricula. Liaison librarians can only achieve this with deliberate and regular scanning of the educational horizon. Scanning for emerging trends allows librarians to tap into what is changing and shifting in higher education so that they become more in sync with new waves of change. For the liaison librarian, monitoring such changes, whilst time-consuming, is a useful pursuit, as it can uncover valuable triggers for the development of new forms of information literacy. However, scanning can be quite an art, as we cannot predict the future perfectly. So how do we know what the emerging big ideas or trends are at any given time?

Liaison librarians are already equipped to scan the educational environment proficiently; we are very adept and skilled at helping others to extract salient information from the literature environment. We do this every day at reference and information desks. Why not use these skills to help ourselves in our own professional realm? We simply need to apply this skill to trend monitoring. Boon et al. outline several types of forecasting methods that can help to identify emerging trends. Some of the more interesting methods they describe include monitoring, or 'the process of scanning the environment and of organizing this information'.<sup>12</sup> They also discuss obtaining the 'opinion of experts' because 'the knowledge of a group of experts is superior to the knowledge of one person due to synergy effects'.<sup>13</sup> Boon et al. also describe 'scenario construction' as another useful method of forecasting trends,<sup>14</sup> which involves setting up a plausible range of scenarios for the future as follows: the most likely, most pessimistic and best-case projection in reference to changes in a given field.

### *Educational resources*

Core educational journals are a good resource for identifying trends in order to gain a better understanding of what is shifting in the educational environment. *Learning and instruction*, *Active learning in higher education*, *The journal of curriculum studies*, *The Oxford review of education* and *Innovations in education and teaching international* are just a few. Generally, liaison librarians deal with specific subject areas, so it can be useful to browse education journals that focus on a particular discipline, such as *Medical education*, *The journal of con-*

*tinuing education in nursing* or *Journal of education for business*. Themes that emerge at educational conferences can also be informative. AISHE – the All Ireland Society for Higher Education – is a good one to consider as it is a professional society that 'promotes the professional recognition and enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education through a range of activities including seminars, conferences, publications, and provision of online community forums and services'.<sup>15</sup>

Networks can be another source of valuable insight: the Network of Education Developers in Ireland (EDIN) provides access to discussion and collective experience amongst higher education practitioners. EDUCAUSE is 'a non-profit association whose mission is to advance higher education by promoting the intelligent use of information technology'.<sup>16</sup> EDUCAUSE has some useful horizon reports and it has a community sphere where individuals, groups and organizations from the higher education and IT community 'share information and advice on all aspects of the profession'.<sup>17</sup> Educational and technological blogs and trend reports can also reveal information on new, emerging student generations in terms of their behaviours, attitudes, expectations and information literacy needs. Scanning these and other educational resources may deliver useful trend information that can be further explored with academics.

Scanning the work of major thinkers in education can also reveal the trends that are likely to dominate. Professor Dee Fink, an instructional consultant, summarises forms of teaching that teachers have been experimenting with and exploring, including 'role-playing, simulation, debate and case studies', 'writing to learn', 'small group learning', 'assessment as learning', 'problem-based learning' and 'service learning'.<sup>18</sup>

### *Library professional resources*

Liaison librarians can also scan their own professional literature. 'Ulrich's periodical directory' lists a number of journals that focus on information literacy; a few examples are *Communications in information literacy*, *Journal of information literacy*, *Nordic journal of information literacy in higher education* and *Literacy research and instruction*. Signing up for table of contents alerts for information literacy journals, where possible, is an easy way to identify new themes in information literacy. Publications not strictly focused on information literacy can also be useful to consult. For example, *SCONUL Focus* brings together 'articles, reports

and news stories from practitioners in order to generate debate and promote good practice' in higher education and national libraries across the UK and Ireland.<sup>19</sup> Noting themes at library conferences is another means to identify emerging trends. The Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference (LILAC) is a useful one to attend.

Societies, associations and consortia can also provide key information. The Consortium of National and University Libraries (CONUL) has a webpage on its advisory committee on information literacy and it also lists useful presentations from its information literacy seminar on its website.<sup>20</sup> The Library Association of Ireland (LAI) has an equivalent web page dedicated to its working group on information literacy.<sup>21</sup> CILIP, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, has the CSG (Community Services Group) Information Literacy Group which provides a forum for debate and 'allows the exchange of knowledge in all aspects of Information Literacy'.<sup>22</sup> Subgroups of the American Library Association (ALA), such as the Medical Library Association, also produce notes on roundtable discussion topics. The collation of themes and trends from these locations will deliver a good overview of changes.

#### TAILORING

Once we extract and understand the educational shifts, we can critically evaluate our existing information literacy in a new way, in order to examine whether it mirrors these academic shifts and changes adequately and, if not, to begin to design new and exciting forms of information literacy to fill the gaps. Schmidt advocates that 'traditional library services must change to accommodate new kinds of users and new kinds of use'.<sup>23</sup> Of course, such change requires an open and adaptive mindset on the part of the liaison librarian. It should never be a question of change just for the sake of change, either. Nor should it be a case of removing traditional information literacy where this provides the better support for the curriculum. Newly designed or tailored information literacy sessions should be appropriate, should involve collaboration with schools and colleagues and should align with library management's thinking and the university's strategy. It is important too that scanning and tailoring activities are carried out in a sustainable way, since higher education will continue to change into the future. In her article on the future of librarianship, Dodd concludes that 'the worlds of information and

higher education will continue to change and shift unpredictably'.<sup>24</sup>

Some examples of tailored information literacy include the workshop, problem and fixed-resource approaches which cater to students of problem-based learning (PBL). PBL is considered to be learning-focused and offers a way of replicating problems at work and in life in the learning environment. In PBL modules, students are given an initiating trigger or problem in a tutorial and, through discussion, they identify their learning issues. The students then disperse to research these learning issues and then use the knowledge they learn to further their understanding of the trigger situation when they reconvene in the next tutorial. The table explains the processes involved in PBL and 'clinic' tailored sessions.

Tailored sessions	Process
Workshop approach	In the library session students 'work in their groups on the (PBL) problem. They report to the wider group on the value of information resources used. The librarian guides them through resources. Groups search for information again.' <sup>25</sup> This is quite different from the traditional information skills approach because students focus on finding information for their current PBL problem and any information literacy outcomes they learn are transferable to subsequent PBL problems on their course.
Problem approach	'Students are presented with a trigger or problem with development of information literacy skills as the main learning outcome.' <sup>26</sup> It differs from a traditional information literacy session in that the librarian designs a PBL trigger on an aspect of information literacy.
Fixed-resource approach	At the point of need, students request a 'class on a specific area they are struggling with', such as searching a particular database. <sup>27</sup>

'Clinic' approach	In the clinic, each student in the session describes his or her most significant information literacy difficulty to the librarian; the librarian records the main issue and it becomes a learning objective. The librarian then delivers pre-prepared demonstrations and exercises or games on these objectives to help the students overcome their difficulties.
-------------------	---

Of these tailored sessions, I have found the tailored 'clinic' session particularly effective as a follow-on session for fourth-year nursing and midwifery students in University College Dublin. After the initial session, these students often encounter additional information-seeking challenges that they do not know how to deal with. The 'clinic' session is designed to address these subsequent challenges. In the feedback forms about the 'clinic', the students commented positively on how the 'clinic' session was geared uniquely to them with comments like:

*'She asked us what we would like to learn first so all of it was very useful.'*

*'I found it all relevant and useful.'*

*'It was good to be able to voice your own personal problems.'*

*'A very worthwhile class, would be beneficial to other years I think.'*

*'Very helpful, thank you!'*

Tailoring offers great benefits for students. The 'clinic' session gives the students the choice to select what they want to learn about. Crow states that 'when people have some choice in a task, they buy into doing it'.<sup>28</sup> Tailoring may also address other concerns for students. In his book on creating significant learning experiences, Dee Fink outlines student concerns about education and the difficulty they experience in 'seeing the value or significance of what they are learning'.<sup>29</sup> He has also observed that students often feel 'fragmented' because 'their courses do not connect to each other'.<sup>30</sup> With tailoring, these connections become apparent to the student. Tailoring information literacy sessions makes sense to the students when they experience the reflection of their curriculum modules in the library sessions they attend. Tailoring also conveys joined-up thinking and the sense that libraries are in touch with the student experience.

Tailoring or packaging information skills sessions can be highly effective. Unfortunately, the examples of tailored information literacy cited above are not commonplace. Scanning and tailoring information literacy sessions has not reached the 'tipping point' in libraries and is for the most part patchy.<sup>31</sup> Admittedly, it can sometimes be difficult for liaison librarians to get even the most basic information literacy sessions embedded with some schools.

Having acknowledged this, librarians should try to pursue tailoring more proactively, because evidence from other fields, such as marketing, suggests that tailoring or packaging with the user in mind can be quite an effective approach. In his article entitled 'Rethink, repackage, reconnect', Ted Mininni reflects that 'when a package and product work to deliver emotionally engaging experiences synergistically, consumers will continue to seek out the brand and the product over and over again. The connection that packaging provides helps to cement consumer loyalty'.<sup>32</sup> Gladwell also maintains that 'there is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible'.<sup>33</sup>

New kinds of information literacy sessions are beneficial for students and also make for a powerful string to the liaison librarian's bow; they add to the liaison librarian's experience record and learning and enhance his or her continuing professional development. Investigating and designing tailored new information literacy sessions may also prompt liaison librarians to engage in more evidence-based and reflective practice, which helps to develop best professional practice. Tailoring new information literacy sessions also adds variety and spurs creative thinking in the teaching aspect of the liaison librarian role.

The library itself stands to benefit from tailoring too. Rossiter makes the point that 'surprising customers with new and interesting services can make them come back, even just to see if something else new is happening'.<sup>34</sup> Any new niche that liaison librarians can explore and exploit that might draw former library users back into the library fold and reaffirm loyal library users' patronage is a worthwhile pursuit. In the current economic downturn, we need to focus on other added-value elements to highlight the centrality of the library to university life, beyond the purchase of new resources. Thinking more creatively about new tailored forms of information literacy will help us offer more to our users without emptying the library coffers.

## THE NEED TO PROMOTE

However, any efforts to scan and identify shifts in education and develop new information literacy programmes will be in vain if we do not also raise awareness of what we have newly developed. It is imperative that we deliver the message that we are developing new information skills sessions through different communication channels, so that it is successfully received by academics and students. Schmidt contends that 'promoting the service is a vital component of service delivery'.<sup>35</sup> Our promotional messages should convey to our users how the new additional information literacy offerings are different from previous offerings. Furthermore, these messages should always be branded, to emphasise the library's role in their production. Apart from spreading these messages effectively, we should also be concerned with how memorable the content of the message is, or what Gladwell calls 'stickiness': the memorability of the message, and whether or not it can create change and 'spur someone into action'.<sup>36</sup>

We also need to promote new information literacy sessions to convey that we are mirroring the shifts in education. Promoting new information literacy sessions will deliver a positive underlying message to our users that the library is on the cutting edge and is actively anticipating changes within the university. With more tailored information literacy we have a better chance of remaining a relevant resource in our users' mindsets.

Promotion can also be used to showcase how information literacy benefits the student. Information literacy contributes greatly to lifelong learning and helps to equip the student for the workplace. This is important in a context where more and more universities are recognising that the student experience should go beyond simple knowledge-acquisition skills. Graduates need to be more than subject experts. Treleaven and Voola note that 'for some time now, commissioned reports into higher education have highlighted that discipline-specific knowledge is not sufficient for graduate employability'.<sup>37</sup> If more varieties of tailored information literacy are available for the students at third level, students and their future workplaces will benefit.

The liaison librarian can promote new tailored information literacy services at different levels. Just a few ideas are listed below.

### *Promoting in practical terms*

- Design a poster for display in the library to explain the kinds of support the library provides and display signs in information skills rooms and offices visited by academics or students, explaining how the library delivers support.
- Provide information on support models on liaison librarian library web pages.
- Highlight new tailored sessions at library induction sessions for new staff and include information on library support in packs for new academics.
- Create a podcast on varieties of library skills support that can sit on the library website.
- Disseminate clear messages about the short- and long-term benefits for students on pages of the library website that are known to have high visitation or on take-away book marks or guides at reference query desks.

### *Promoting at a personal level*

- Raise information literacy as an agenda item through 'personal selling' at school committees, and meetings with schools and in one-on-one appointments with staff.<sup>38</sup>
- Send refresher mail shots or e-mails to academics converting traditional lecture modules to new modules.
- Determine what the key teaching and learning issues are for the academics and then discuss ideas for a tailored information literacy session that might be able to address these issues.
- Find out who the early-adopter academics in the school are, in other words those who like to try the latest innovations. Collaborate with these innovators on a tailored session. If this is implemented successfully, other academics in the school may then follow suit.

### *Promoting at a strategic level*

- Demonstrate how varieties of information literacy sessions align with the teaching and learning objectives and policies in the university and show how a tailored library session can deliver lifelong learning skills, create self-directed graduates and improve student competency in professional life.
- Report on the strong benefits they deliver to students and use positive comments from student feedback forms as persuasive testimonials.
- Publish successful tailoring cases in papers or posters at academic or educational conferences.

In conclusion, higher education is changing and the needs of students in the third-level environment are continually evolving. Being core to the academic community means providing relevant services that cater to this shift in education. Liaison librarians need to keep scanning emerging teaching and learning trends and to remain in tune with educational shifts by designing relevant learning sessions for students in the future. The tailored information literacy sessions should be a product of collaboration with schools, senior management and colleagues, should be beneficial to students and should reflect institutional aspirations. It is imperative that liaison librarians become experts at promoting any new information skills sessions they devise to their respective schools. To promote effectively, the liaison librarian needs to gain a better understanding of academics and students, their needs and motivations, and then act on these factors to highlight the benefits of information skills at practical, personal and strategic levels.

#### REFERENCES

- 1 Higher Education Authority, 'Current policy projects', 2009, available at <http://www.heai.ie/en/node/142> [accessed 14 March 2009]
- 2 University College Dublin, 'Draft education strategy 2008–2011', Dublin: UCD, 2007, pp 2–3
- 3 European Commission, *Key competences for lifelong learning: European reference framework*, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2007, pp 7, 8, 3
- 4 T. Wilen-Daugenti and A. McKee, *21st century trends for higher education top trends, 2008–2009*, San Jose: Cisco IBSG, 2008, p 2
- 5 J. Schmidt, 'Promoting library services in a Google world', *Library management*, 28 (6/7), 2007; available from <http://www.proquest.com/> [accessed 13 March 2009], p 339
- 6 I. Rowlands, 'Information behaviour of the researcher of the future', *REFER, journal of the ISG*, 25 (1), 2009, p 6
- 7 B. Higgs and M. McCarthy, 'The changing roles and identities of teachers and learners in higher education', in B. Higgs and M. McCarthy, eds., *Emerging issues II: The changing roles and identities of teachers and learners in higher education*, Cork: National Academy for Integration of Research and Teaching and Learning (NAIRTL), 2008, p 2
- 8 Schmidt, 'Promoting', p 338
- 9 C. Murray and J. Sandars, 'Reflective learning for the net generation student', *Issues and news on learning and teaching in medicine, dentistry and veterinary medicine*, 18 (1), 2009, p 11
- 10 H. Fallon and E. Breen, 'The changing role of the academic library in learning and teaching', in Higgs and McCarthy, eds., *Emerging Issues II*, p 142
- 11 Ibid., p 142
- 12 J. Boon et al., 'Developing a critical view on e-learning trend reports: trend watching or trend setting?', *International journal of training and development*, 9 (3), 2005; available from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=buh&AN=18102632&site=ehost-live> [accessed 14 February 2009]
- 13 Ibid., p 207
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 See the AISHE homepage, at <http://www.aishe.org/> [accessed 26 March 2009]
- 16 EDUCAUSE, 'What is EDUCAUSE?', 2009, available at <http://www.educause.edu/> [accessed 24 March 2009]
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 L. Dee Fink, *Creating significant learning experiences: an integrated approach to designing college courses*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003, pp 20–1
- 19 See <http://www.sconul.ac.uk/> [accessed 30 March 2009]
- 20 See CONUL, Advisory Committee on Information Literacy, 2006; available at <http://www.conul.ie/committees/activities.shtml> [accessed 13 March 2009]
- 21 See LAI, Working Group on Information Literacy, 2009; available at <http://www2.libraryassociation.ie/working-group-on-information-literacy/> [accessed 14 March 2009]
- 22 See CILIP, 'CSG Information Literacy Group: about us', 2009; available at <http://www.cilip.org.uk/specialinterestgroups/bysubject/informationliteracy/about> [accessed 15 March 2009]
- 23 Schmidt, 'Promoting', p 340

- 24 L. Dodd, 'The future of librarianship: moving out of the library and into the faculty – how problem-based learning is transforming the traditional role', *SCONUL Focus*, 41 (2), 2007; available from <http://www.sconul.ac.uk/publications/newsletter/41/2.pdf> [accessed January 2009], p 7
- 25 S. Boyle and L. Dodd, 'Enquiry and problem based learning and the information literate student', poster presentation at the All Ireland Society for Higher Education annual conference, Maynooth, Ireland, 2008
- 26 See CONUL, Advisory Committee on Information Literacy, 2006
- 27 Boyle and Dodd, poster presentation
- 28 S.R. Crow, 'Information literacy: what's motivation got to do with it?', *Knowledge quest*, 35 (4), 2007, p 50
- 29 Dee Fink, *Creating*, p 4
- 30 *Ibid.*, p 5
- 31 See M. Gladwell, *The tipping point: how little things can make a big difference*, Boston: Wheeler Publishing, 2003, pp 16, 19, 20
- 32 T. Mininni, 'Rethink, repack, reconnect', *Packaging digest*, 45 (9), 2008, p 29; available from <http://www.proquest.com/> [accessed 14 February 2009]
- 33 Gladwell, *The tipping point*, p 165
- 34 N. Rossiter, *Marketing the best deal in town: your library – where is your purple owl?*, Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2008, p 105
- 35 Schmidt, 'Promoting', p 340
- 36 Gladwell, *The tipping point*, p 117
- 37 L. Treleaven and R. Voola, 'Integrating the development of graduate attributes through constructive alignment', *Journal of marketing education*, 30 (2), 2008, p 160; available from <http://jmd.sagepub.com> [accessed 12 January 2009]
- 38 Rossiter, *Marketing*, p 22