
Information literacy: as endorsed by Barack Obama and UNESCO



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'This month, we dedicate ourselves to increasing information literacy awareness so that all citizens understand its vital importance. An informed and educated citizenry is essential to the functioning of our modern democratic society, and I encourage educational and community institutions across the country to help Americans find and evaluate the information they seek, in all its forms.'

Barack Obama, National Information Literacy Awareness month proclamation, Washington DC, October 2009

Has information literacy at last arrived on the world stage?

This recognition in the States is in fact the crowning glory for the National Forum on Information Literacy, whose 20th anniversary celebration fell on 15 and 16 October 2009. The forum was founded back in 1989, based on recommendations from the American Library Association.

This is a good time to draw attention to the work done by UNESCO on information literacy. Some time ago I did a paper on this for the SCONUL working group on information literacy. The following is the edited highlights.

I can remember, when the first meeting of IL experts met in Prague in 2003, being very sceptical of how this could change the world! I was wrong to be so cynical, but right in that the impact of the work has a long way to go. I shall sketch the UNESCO aims and their main areas of activity and then suggest some ways that IL stakeholders could assist in this country.

'UNESCO's main strategy in the area of Information Literacy consists of awareness-raising about the importance of information literacy at all levels of the education process – basic education, primary and secondary education, technical and vocational training and lifelong education – and of establishing guidelines for integrating information literacy issues in curricula.'

UNESCO and information literacy

http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=19812&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

As we can see from the statement above, UNESCO has taken a wide view of IL, which applies to everyone in the educational process. They are therefore firmly taking the lifelong learning rather than the 'library skills for passing your course' view of IL. They see it as a means of helping individuals to play their full part in society – transformational and potentially disruptive. IL should be considered in relation not just to education but also to work, civil society and health and well-being.

THE PRAGUE DECLARATION ([HTTP://PRAGUEDECLARATION.ORG](http://praguedeclaration.org))

'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 lifelong learning.'

Prague Declaration, 2003

This excerpt from the Prague Declaration reinforces the idea that IL is very large and a basic entitlement of every citizen. This is well beyond what many librarians consider in their information skills sessions. This is not surprising because, as Patricia Iannuzzi remarked at LILAC (Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference) 2009, 'Librarians should not expect to cover all of IL.' Here lies the central problem: IL is often seen as a librarian thing and is called different things by different groups yet, undeniably, the phenomenon does exist and is crucially important in 2009. How can we engage with other stakeholders to ensure that as many people as possible become information-literate and able to cope in an uncertain future? As an international agency, UNESCO can play a key part in this.

UNESCO have now convened at least three large meetings (Prague 2003, Alexandria 2005 and Ljub-

jana 2006) and the quotes here give only a flavour of their deliberations.

IL 'is a basic human right in the digital world' as it empowers individuals 'in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals'.

From the Alexandria Proclamation, 2005

RECENT MAJOR INITIATIVES

- 1 The 'Training the Trainers' initiative: this major recent initiative has organized 11 workshops throughout the world, where IL experts provide a platform for creating a group of IL trainers for their respective countries that can be cascaded downwards through schools and universities. Here are some examples:
- 2 A logo for badging information literacy throughout the world: during the UNESCO session of the World Library and Information Congress held in Quebec, Canada, in August 2008, Mr Abdul Waheed Khan, UNESCO's assistant director-general for communication and information, gave an award to the winner of the international information literacy logo contest, a young Cuban designer, Mr Edgar Luy Perez from Havana (see below)



- 3 UNESCO has set up a major initiative to provide guidance on how IL can become part of the teacher training curriculum. This has been taken forward at a meeting of an international expert group to develop teacher training curricula for media and information literacy held 16–18 June 2008 in Paris.

CONTEXT AND ADVOCACY

The UNESCO IL initiative should be seen as part of the UN Literacy Decade, 2003–2012. Libraries should be playing a part in this. There is a very useful case study by R. Sayers (2006) that could help this to improve: *Awareness raising for Information Literacy, a case study* (available at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001476/147637e.pdf>).

In this the SCONUL model is seen as a progression from basic skills through to more sophisticated ways of understanding and using information. It 'provides a practical and robust framework with which we can identify and examine the skills an average person in any society across the world requires to be an active and informed citizen'. It sees SCONUL's pillars 1–4 as common to all issues and topics but 5–7 as more challenging. Within a known context, such as health science for nurses, these pillars could be understood and mastered but with no firm context they would be difficult. Sayers sees solutions to this through ensuring that there will be sufficient general information about a topic or issue available, or through providing independent advisers to interpret, translate or re-package information to suit the needs of the relevant community (see pp79–82).

In the past awareness-raising of IL has been through:

- policy statements (e.g. the Prague Declaration)
- curriculum development for schools (learning outcomes, competencies and evaluation criteria)
- CPD for academics, teachers, librarians and so on
- development of IL teaching and resource materials, including online
- ongoing dialogues through conferences, workshops and exchange programmes of IL researchers and practitioners (e.g. the International Workshop on Information Skills for Learning in Sri Lanka in 2004).

PUBLICATIONS

There have been some notable UNESCO publications, including:

- F.W. Horton, Jr. (2007) *Understanding information literacy: a primer* (UNESCO) (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001570/157020E.pdf>)

This claims to be 'an easy-to-read, non-technical overview' of what IL means, and is designed for 'busy public policy-makers, business executives, civil society administrators and practicing professionals'. There is a big section on advocacy and awareness-raising within various communities – government; business; academic; library, archive, museum, publishing, media, public interest, information science, information content

and ICT communities; practising professions. It's an engaging and useful document that deserves wide dissemination.

- R. Catts and J. Lau (2008) *Towards information literacy indicators* (UNESCO) (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001587/158723e.pdf>)

This acknowledges the difficulty of trying to find a measure usable across all sectors and recommends that UNESCO find indicators of IL through use of data elements which could be valid indicators of IL within existing international surveys.

- L. Choovong and D. Singh (2005) *Development of Information Literacy through school libraries in South-east Asian countries* (UNESCO) (<http://www2.unescobkk.org/elib/publications/06INF/information.pdf>)

DATABASE

The information literacy section of IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) has created a huge database – the Information Literacy International Resources Directory (<http://www.infolitglobal.info/directory/en/home>) – on behalf of UNESCO. Librarians, educators and information professionals are invited to participate. If you have developed information literacy materials and would like to share them with the world community, you can submit them!

I suspect that this is an underused resource. There are examples of advocacy toolkits, assessment tools, credit courses, tests of competencies, tutorials, workshops, publications, organisations, 'Training the Trainers' and communication mechanisms, including blogs. In fact it can be a relevant and important site for all of us!

CONCLUSIONS

UNESCO have excelled at articulating the importance of IL. They have initiated meetings and conferences allowing the exchange of ideas. Other top-level meetings and initiatives should help to bridge the growing digital divide in the world, by the sharing of experience and expertise. The 'Training the Trainers' (TTT) initiative is a good idea, but the task is huge. (If 104 participants were trained in the TTT session in Wuhan they would each have to feed back to 12 million people ... using 2006 population figures!) The attempt to influence the teacher training curriculum is also

laudable, but UNESCO have had to acknowledge that this will be hard to achieve at an international level. There are some very useful publications, as seen above.

What more can be done? Here are some suggestions:

1 In Schools – The assisting of teachers in schools at primary and secondary levels to become information-literate and to be aware of IL's importance in the curriculum should be a priority. They are well placed to help the students that we meet in higher education. The CIBER report drew attention to this. John Crawford's work in Scotland shows what can be done (see www.gcal.ac.uk/ils). How can this be replicated in England and Wales? The UNESCO initiative should provide encouragement and their framework can provide some guidance

2 Advocacy of IL – This is critical. I am concerned that the IL message is clearly not getting into the (inter)national press. A quick search on NewsBank revealed very paltry mentions of IL. I acknowledge that IL is being reported under other names (such as 'critical thinking') but if IL is our brand it has been a dismal failure! UNESCO is therefore not succeeding. Use of the IL logo could help. IL needs more forceful advocacy and presence in the media. We need attractive, easily understood examples of where IL makes a difference in daily life (e.g. mini-case studies like that of the girl who saved lives in the tsunami), in business, in other professions, in government (e.g. a certain weapons of mass destruction document copied from the internet).

3 The SCONUL model – This is praised by Sayers, which should encourage us to raise its profile within UNESCO and internationally, but how? It has proved to be 'robust' and I guess we need to 'shout' about it more!

I trust some of you have found this interesting enough to go to the full version at http://www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/information_literacy/publications.html, so that you can pick up the web links to the documents and database!