Information literacy: skills for living and working

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What role do universities need to play in the development of an information literate society? Do libraries and librarians have the potential to contribute to and help shape the ways in which our educational institutions model information literacy within these communities?

Like many others working in similar roles, library-based information literacy staff at the University of Ballarat actively recognise that the work we do has the potential to influence not just our graduates but also the workplaces and social networks into which they move. Information no longer has physical boundaries and there are unlimited opportunities for librarians and others working in our sector to build on existing information literacy research and contribute in a meaningful way to the development of information literacy skills for individuals living and working in the new digital environment.

University of Ballarat information literacy

The University of Ballarat has a strong regional focus and is a leader in regional information technology programs through the courses it offers as well as major initiatives resulting in the implementation of information technology projects in regional centres.

Since 1998 there have been several positive initiatives undertaken by the small team of library staff engaged in information literacy teaching within the University of Ballarat libraries. The aim of these initiatives has been threefold: to improve the quality of student work through development of programs aimed at building information literacy skills; to establish teaching partnerships to improve student and staff information literacy perception and practice; and to encourage librarians to evaluate and refocus their own perceptions of information literacy and recognise their potential to influence information literacy outside the immediate teaching environment.

Central to these aims has been the completion by all information librarians, both TAFE and higher education, of a formal tertiary teaching skills program. The Graduate Certificate/Diploma of Education (Tertiary Education) program has provided librarians with an understanding of teaching and learning theory, challenged historical information skills practice, and enabled librarians to engage in dialogue with academic teaching staff in relation to teaching and learning outcomes for students.

Underpinning this has been the development of a solid understanding of the value of action-based research and how this can be used to establish an active program of individual and team-based learning. A young but growing culture of research innovation and support at the University of Ballarat has assisted library staff to identify gaps in current information literacy research. Staff have devised strategies for undertaking individual research to help develop improved programs for our students, with the ultimate aim of enabling those students to model and promote information literacy skills when they move out of the university and into their own workplace and social communities.

Perceptions of information literacy amongst first-year university students

This research project was undertaken during 2000 by Liz Hartmann, an information librarian within the Mt Helen higher education campus. Liz's aim was to gather qualitative data to determine how first-year undergraduate students perceive their information needs in terms of the skills required and the resources that need to be accessed. Do individual perceptions govern the extent to which students are prepared to undertake the acquisition of skills necessary to become information literate?

Three focus groups were formed and students were asked the same sets of questions. What resources did they expect to use at university? What skills did they think were necessary to use these resources?

The focus groups revealed a number of assumptions and have helped library staff clarify needs particular to students. Many of the perceptions identified have relevance across other teaching environments and an article outlining these in more detail will be published in a forthcoming issue of *AARL*.

Computer literacy, the prerequisite to information literacy

A four-month study undertaken by Vicki Rethus, information librarian at the Horsham TAFE campus, focused on mature-age students. The study aimed to identify the needs of these students in terms of technology-aided information retrieval. In particular, the project aimed to:

- identify current student–computer interaction in the context of information retrieval,

- highlight the importance of computer literacy, as a prerequisite to information literacy,

- gather the necessary data to aid in the design of information and computer literacy programs, and

- work collaboratively with teachers and learners, to enhance the current and future learning environment.

Vicki's research clearly identified misconceptions relating to student's computer skills on entry to their course.

Where to from here?

What relevance do these and other research projects undertaken by University of Ballarat library staff during 2000 have for the development of information literacy skills outside the teaching and learning environment?

As indicated above, the assumptions we make concerning prior learning at university are just as valid for continued workplace learning and professional development. As information technology continues to pervade all aspects of life and work, recognition of information literacy and the acquisition of generic information skills will become critical aspects of social policy. Continued research from within the library sector has the potential to contribute much to both the debate and provision of practical information literacy outcomes across our communities. ∎

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