What does Information Literacy mean? Some examples from different disciplines

Outline
• What is IL?
• Findings about disciplinary differences
• Implications of findings

Information literacy: what does it mean?

It means to me:
“It means to me:
“Information literacy is the adoption of appropriate information behaviour to identify, through whatever channel or medium, information well fitted to information needs, leading to wise and ethical use of information in society.”

It means in different languages?
• Informationskompetenz Competency?
• la maîtrise de l’information Literacy?
• Informaatiolukutaito Fluency?
• Informationskompetens
• Las competencias en información
• La alfabetización informacional

(With apologies for any linguistic errors!)
It means:
Information Literacy models and standards
(this is the British model for universities)

See http://www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/information_literacy/headline_skills.html for an explanation.

It means: a graduate attribute

Characteristics of a Sheffield Graduate
(University of Sheffield Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy)

"4. Demonstrate the core capabilities and skills of information literacy, interacting confidently with the nature and structure of information in their subject and handling information in a professional and ethical manner;

But what is information?

For someone who teaches marketing
- News Stories
- Journal & magazine articles
- Books
- Observation (e.g. observing how shoppers behave in a supermarket)
- Colleagues
- Business organisations
- Statistical data
- Market research data
- Google
- Article databases e.g. ABI/Inform
- Company websites
- Company accounts
- Librarians

For someone who teaches English
- Manuscripts
- Journal articles
- Books
- Video & sound recordings
- Performances
- Newspapers (including archives)
- Libraries, archives & museums
- Colleagues
- Websites (e.g. about a writer)
- Artefacts (e.g. rune stones)
For someone who teaches Civil Engineering

- Engineering journals
- Books
- Web of Science database
- Google
- Product information
- Manufacturers’ websites
- Photographs
- Data sheets
- Design manuals
- Codes of practice
- Colleagues
- Land surveys
- Geographic Information
- Librarians
- Standards and Regulations
- Log books

Even when sources are the same...

- The Marketing professor needs today’s news and articles to keep-up-to date with the business world: monitoring and searching are important
- The Chemistry professor needs detailed, regular, up-to-date searches on specialist subjects
- The English professor wants to connect her research to new developments: browsing and linking are important

Differences

- The information sources differ
- Information behaviour differs
- Information literacy differs
- …so what people want their students to do with information differs
- and then … also people are different
- so what motivates them to work with librarians differs

Results from our project: revealing some differences

Key research questions

1. What conceptions of information literacy are held by UK academics?
2. What are academics’ conceptions and reported practice in educating students for information literacy?
3. Do differences in conception correspond to differences in discipline?
Sheila Webber, May 2008

- 20 academics from each of 4 disciplines (varied sample, 26 different universities)
- Phenomenographic research approach, identifying variation in conception
- Phenomenography has been used to investigate approaches to teaching, approaches to study, conceptions of a subject etc.

“Phenomenography is the empirical study of the differing ways in which people experience, perceive, apprehend, understand, conceptualise various phenomena in and aspects of the world around us.”

Marton (1994)

Qualitative research aiming for insights

Insights

Us

Interviewee

What is key focus of Interviewee’s conception of IL?

Marketing: Information literacy as...

1. Accessing information quickly and easily to be aware of what’s going on (focus on providing links, reading lists, demonstrations – but perhaps not guidance on evaluation)
2. Using IT to work with information efficiently and effectively (e.g. using data mining software to create information out of data)
3. Possessing a set of information skills (e.g. “find, sift, sort, analyse and disseminate” (MKTG05)” and applying them to the task in hand (e.g. an assignment or article) but not concentrating on how the skills might be more broadly useful

Marketing: Information literacy as...

4. Using information literacy to solve real-world problems (so needing information literacy skills, but focusing them on problem solving)
5. Becoming critical thinkers “Always thinking, always questioning.” (MKTG11)
6. Becoming a confident, independent practitioner e.g. “It [information literacy] means I can do my job. Do it effectively. I can find the information I am looking for and I know what to do with it as well.” (MKTG15)
Example of conception1:
“So information is vital. And being up to date with the information you are gathering is vital—being on top of events. In business, nothing remains the same. One day the sky is blue, the next day it’s green or red. You’ve always got to be on top of the news and pulling in information from every angle.” (Marketing 09)

English: Information literacy as...
1. Accessing and retrieving textual information
2. Using IT to access and retrieve information
3. Possessing basic research skills and knowing how and when to use them
4. Becoming confident, autonomous learners and critical thinkers

English and Marketing
- Marketing: using IT to manipulate data (geographic, statistical etc.)
- English: using IT to access information – mostly text
- Marketing: problem solving, looking forward to using information as a professional in the workplace
- English: focus on personal development

Chemistry: Information literacy as...
1. Accessing and searching chemical information
   Traditional published sources: databases of articles and chemical structures
2. Mastering a chemist’s information skill set
   Includes handling data they have created e.g. in the lab
3. Communicating scientific information
4. An essential part of the constitution/ construction/ creation of knowledge the chemist in the information society!

English & Chemistry
- Personal (English) vs Professional (Chemistry)
  – cf. Personal vs. group mode of researching
  – Social/civic role vs. role of chemist in society
- Nature of information
  – Unified view of what chemistry information is (building blocks of knowledge) vs. in English focus on different media
  – Way in which information accessed/ used including role of IT

Civil Engineering: Information literacy as...
1. Accessing and retrieving data and information e.g. “the ability of students to find relevant information to the tasks at hand” (CENG15)
2. Applying and using information e.g. “the ability to recognise, sort, manipulate, or make use of the information” (CENG09)
3. Analysis and sense making e.g. “basically it is creative, analytical problem-solving” (CENG16)
4. Creating, and incorporating information into a professional knowledge base e.g. “get them to the point that they can be literate in their discipline and its wide, wider context…” (CENG19)
Focus for (and concerns about) information literacy also may depend on -

- Specialist field within a subject e.g. 18th century English vs. English popular culture
- Teaching context (e.g. what kind of university? Are academics encouraged to do more than “lecture”?)
- Level of student (progression in information literacy each year!)

Note that academics’ conceptions do not all focus on “traditional” search/find parts of information literacy

- Reflective thinking, being a practitioner, being creative ....
- Keywords from a seminar with academics and students at Sheffield earlier this year: confidence, curiosity, positive attitude, evaluation, synthesis

Creating relationships

- Understanding and empathy with potential partners – listening and learning e.g.
  - Don’t just be a “toolbox” person (relating a toolbox of IL skills to specific context, assuming academics are deficient in IL…)
- Using knowledge of potential partners for Relationship Marketing approach (tailoring product, promotion, place, process)

Creating relationships

- Different strategies likely to appeal to different categories e.g.
  - Toolbox and access approaches will not appeal to academics with “Engaging with students to show them the value of information and information literacy” conception (would want critical thinking & lifelong learning approach)
  - A critical thinking approach may not excite an academic who wants students to “find chemical data and structures for their assignments”

Opportunities

- Changing structure (e.g. Bologna Process)
- New head of university or department
- Teaching quality audits
- New or changed degree programmes
- New information systems, or educational technology
- New library or learning spaces
- New academic staff

Creating relationships

- Some academics like librarians’ models and frameworks
- Some will want to adapt the models
- Some academics will only be interested in pursuing their conception of information literacy: but perhaps they have good reasons!
Questions to ask

- What kinds of “information” is it important for students to be able to deal with?
- What information literacy skills will students need after they graduate?
- What conception of information literacy do you and colleagues have? If varied, they may be complementary!
- What kinds of study and information practice are valued e.g. problem solving; finding information; critical evaluation

Bibliography

http://dis.shef.ac.uk/sheila/webber-FORMIST.pdf]