

## **Editorial**

### **Perspectives on Information Literacy**

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My interest in the topic of information literacy comes from nearly 30 years working with students as a classroom teacher, as a teacher-librarian, and as a university instructor. Although the ages of the students that I work with have changed and the topics they are interested in have changed, there seem to be some common themes related to information literacy—how learners decide they have a need for information, how learners experience the process of inquiry, and how library instruction can best support learners. My own views on the topic of information literacy have changed in the course of those 30 years. Here I try to outline one aspect of my current understanding of this complex topic, and then I highlight the contributions of the authors writing about information literacy in this issue of *School Libraries Worldwide*.

#### *Information in Abundance*

Information of all types in all kinds of media—picture books, science textbooks, television news broadcasts, video games, websites—are available to teachers and students today in their schools and their homes in the much of the Western world. Being literate in this eclectic resource environment involves two interrelated concepts: being "media literate" (savvy to the processes and protocols of the media) as well as being "literate through the media" (using the media as conduits through which the basic literacy skills of reading, writing, and comprehension are achieved). The Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out in the 1960s that "the medium is the message"—that content is inseparable from and shaped by the medium through which it is carried or presented. I wonder if, in our use of the term information literacy, we have forgotten the importance of the media through which the information is presented.

#### *Defining Information Literacy*

The definition of literacy has changed and continues to change. Teachers and teacher-librarians today need to rethink the nature of literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to think about literacy in terms not of particular media or symbol systems, but in terms of helping learners understand and deal with the world of media and information. Media and information are interrelated phenomena. It is hard to think of a media form or "text" without thinking about the information it conveys; it is hard to think of information without thinking of

the form in which it is conveyed. Literacy is often defined in terms of reading and writing; it is less often defined in terms of listening and viewing or speaking and image-making. In schools that I am familiar with in Canada, we spend a lot of time addressing the meaning of printed texts, particularly literary texts, but little time addressing the meaning of other media texts that are much more pervasive in young people's lives.

As we know, different media have different characteristics. Picture books, textbooks, video, graphic formats, models, CD-ROM, and the World Wide Web bring different kinds of information, and they present information in varying levels of abstraction. Seeing television images of the conflicts between Jews and Palestinians in Israel gives a very different message from traveling through Israel as a visitor to historic sites and green agricultural areas.

We also know that different media demand different "reading" strategies: reading a trade information book is different from viewing a video on the same topic. Browsing the WWW is different from browsing a textbook. The WWW holds challenges for evaluating information for accuracy and objectivity that are different from those for a newspaper or magazine. A particular media resource might be selected by a teacher or student because it provides a new perspective on a topic, because it provides more depth of information on a topic, or because it accommodates a preferred learning style.

### *Importance of Understanding Media*

Why is developing our understanding of media an important part of information literacy? First, the purpose of information literacy education, like other forms of literacy education, is to build essential skills for success in complex, information-rich environment. Second, the school must address students' cultural experiences as a totality if it is to be relevant to students' lives. Including those media that are part of their world beyond the school recognizes and validates young people's experiences. Third, expanding students' encounters with a wide range of media texts and involving students in making their own texts extends their creative capabilities. Students need to be and to see themselves as creators as well as consumers of information if they are to be the independent learners and decision-makers we say we are educating them to be.

### *Developing an Integrated Approach to Education for Information Literacy*

We have tended in school library programs to think in terms of two separate process-related focuses: use of information and appreciation of information. For example, in the school library program model developed in my part of Canada, these themes are presented as (a) Information Retrieval, Processing and Sharing, and as (b) Appreciation of Knowledge and Culture.

The first focus, use of information, looks at information from a utilitarian point of view. The students use information in order to gain knowledge about a topic, to answer a question, or to solve a problem. The students are engaged in learning how to use information for a purpose. This is often developed through library research projects. Students are taught a systematic approach for planning their research, for finding and evaluating resources, for extracting relevant information from resources, for organizing that information, for creating a new information resource, and for sharing the information with an audience. Use of information involves locating, creating, organizing, and sharing information for learning about a topic, for answering a question, or for solving a problem that is outside the process of using information.

The second focus, appreciation of information, involves the understanding of information itself as something that is created, organized, and shared and as something that affects and is affected by both creators and consumers. This theme has often been narrowly interpreted in school library programs to mean literature appreciation and/or reading promotion. A broader view of appreciation of information would encompass the exploration of all information media, whether that medium be a picture book, a television news broadcast, an encyclopedia, or an Elizabethan drama. In the school library program and in other curricular programs, students should develop an understanding of a diverse range of media through learning of, learning about, and learning through media. In learning of a particular medium, students are exposed to and immersed in experiencing that medium. In learning about a particular medium, students learn how that medium is created and how that medium affects and is affected by its creators and consumers. In learning through a particular medium, students develop an understanding of that medium by creating and sharing ideas through that medium.

The two focuses of the school library program, use of information and appreciation of information, have often been developed as two independent but complementary focuses of the program. However, the two are strongly intertwined. In library research projects, where use of information is paramount, often questions of accuracy, purpose, and bias that touch on the appreciation of information must be addressed. In the study of the medium of the picture book or the television news broadcast, where appreciation of information is paramount, use of information activities such as research into the work of the illustrator or into the history of television may be required.

The separation of information use and information appreciation in the school library program mirrors its separation in other parts of the school curriculum. Rarely do we look at literary works in terms of social and economic significance; rarely do we look at television or magazines in terms of genre or in terms of codes and conventions. Perhaps we can examine our own practice by thinking about how we involve our students in using and appreciating media and information.

The focus of a program of media and information education should be on developing students' understanding and appreciation of and participation in the world of information. The content of the program centers on how information is created, organized, and shared, on how the creators and consumers of information affect its meaning, and on how to create, organize, and share information. These key ideas should be explored through topics and activities selected from the curriculum and from the personal interests of students and teachers.

Education for media and information literacy can and should be integrated into the school's curriculum programs. Most teachers incorporate some of the basic features of education for media and information literacy especially in terms of print-based media, into their language learning and other curriculum programs. Students' understanding of the world of media and information can be enhanced when their teachers engage them in exploration, understanding, and creation of an expanded range of information and media. There is no one best model or approach to education media and information literacy. Each school's approach will be shaped by the school's curriculum, the needs of the students, and the resources available for its implementation. The effective approach is identified in the end by the extent to which students are confident and competent learners, able to understand the world of information, and willing to use and to create information within and beyond their school environment.

### *Looking at the Information Literacy Theme Articles*

In the article, "Information Literacy Planning for Educators: The ILPO Approach," Jenny Ryan and Steph Capra describe their award-winning project which was developed to support teachers and teacher-librarians in planning information literacy programs. They emphasize the importance of a school-wide approach to using the framework and to adapting the framework to suit local school circumstances. In the research report, "Information-Seeking Processes of Junior High Students: A Case Study of CD-ROM Encyclopedia Use," Jennifer L. Branch points out that young adolescents need both instruction and practice to develop the skills and strategies needed for full-text searching of CD-ROM encyclopedias. In investigating what motivated old students to complete research assignments, Lois Barranoik found that access to information, task perception and understanding, the research purpose and time were factors that appeared to encourage students to complete their research and develop confidence in their ability to create meaning. In the article, "The Cultured Word: Cultural Background, Bilingualism and the School Library," Denise E. Agosto argues that cultural background create a framework through which people view, interpret, and assign meaning texts. She outlines why these issues are important to school librarians and offers suggestions for making multicultural materials central aspects of school library collections and curricula.

### *Research "Of Special Interest" from Around the World*

In the article, "Evaluating the Impact of the School Library Resource Centre on Learning," Dorothy Williams and Caroline Wavell report on research in the United Kingdom that investigated the impact on learning of the school library resource center. They offer some recommendations for those seeking to evaluate the impact of their own SLRC on learning. Cherrell Shelley-Robinson reports on a nationwide study of "The Voluntary Reading Interests of Jamaican Sixth Graders." The author points out that, in general, as in previous research in developed countries, gender played a strong role in the students' reading interests, but geography played a stronger than expected role. These and other interesting differences in the students' responses suggest that librarians need to consider local culture and other conditions in collection development. In the article, "School Libraries in The Netherlands," Albert K. Boekhorst and Maarten J.P. van Veen report research conducted to gain insight into the position of school libraries in secondary education in their country. They suggest that the person of the school librarian seemed to be the most important factor in the success of a school library. However, few school libraries were staffed by persons with library training. This lack of professional staff often led to the exclusion of the school library from policy-making decisions and from integration into the educational system.

### *Changing Our Views of Information Literacy*

The articles in this issue of *School Libraries Worldwide* suggest some of the complexities involved in developing programs of information literacy instruction in schools. I want to express my appreciation to the authors who have contributed their ideas to our ongoing consideration of this topic. It is my hope that the articles in this issue will challenge you to think about how information literacy programs that meet our students needs might be implemented or enhanced. Certainly, the authors have each given me pause for thought and reflection on my own work!