

Information Literacy and TAFE: challenging librarian and teacher collaboration in the VET sector in a TAFE Institute

Kathryn Leong Box Hill Institute

Abstract

This research investigated the understanding of Information Literacy held by Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers, the impact of that understanding on their relationship with library staff and their ability to develop Information Literacy programs in collaboration. It found that teachers and librarians do not speak the same language when they talk about Information Literacy. TAFE Librarians concentrate on the 'Information Literacy process' while TAFE Teachers do recognise the term Information Literacy but understand what being information literate means. The study also found that the library was identified more with a service than an educational role and that this perception inhibits the development of collaborative relationships.

Introduction

With TAFE Institutes within the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector now offering applied degrees, a new emphasis has been placed on the acquisition of Information Literacy attributes by students. Investigations on the topic have been primarily conducted by librarians, in libraries and published in the library field. This narrow perspective may have contributed to a lack of understanding of Information Literacy in the wider world. Only a few studies have investigated the understanding of Information Literacy from other perspectives and none have been conducted in the TAFE environment (Bruce 1997; Christiansen, Stomblor and Thaxton 2004; Ivey 2003; Weber, Boon and Johnston 2005). The difficulty that librarians experience in promoting Information Literacy and establishing Information Literacy programs suggests that there may be underlying issues between teachers and librarians.

While there is broad agreement on the characteristics of an information literate person, there is no definitive explanation of what constitutes Information Literacy. The literature demonstrates that despite the various definitions of Information Literacy, themes common to all have emerged which cover information seeking, informed choice of information sources, evaluation and selection of information to meet the user's needs. The importance of Information Literacy across disciplines is acknowledged by the Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework which places it in all disciplines, all learning environments and at all levels of education. Information Literacy enables learners to engage critically with content and extend their investigations, become more self-directed and assume greater control over their own learning (Bundy 2004, p.5).

Because Information Literacy has not been conclusively defined, development of programs to teach the skills embodied in the literacy have not been universally accepted nor has responsibility for that teaching been ascribed to any particular group, be it teachers or librarians. This lack of clarity has meant many students, particularly TAFE students, have had little systematic instruction or support for acquiring the attributes. The purpose of this research is to identify what teachers understand by information literacy and how that understanding impacts on their teaching and the development of collaborative relationships with library staff.

Literature Review

The issue of Information Literacy is still library driven, and despite the body of literature in the library field that supports the need for Information Literacy integration, librarians have usually taught Information Literacy as an adjunct to students' courses.

The practice of Information Literacy involves not only the development of digital skills but also includes higher level analytical and evaluative skills needed to engage effectively with the formulations of complex ideas (Andretta 2005, p.7; Debowski 2001). The responsibility for teaching Information Literacy in higher education is not clearly delineated as the role of teachers or librarians, and the merging of content analysis, technological skills and resource location has blurred the lines of responsibility for teaching the associated skills. As librarians do not usually have direct access to teaching programs or the course work of students, integration of Information Literacy rests on the establishment of collaborative relationships with teachers.

Research (Leckie 1996; Weber, Boon and Johnson 2005) suggests that a significant obstacle could be that teachers and academics assume students have the skills required for researching topics and negotiating the different resources that are available. Differences in perception have only recently become the focus of investigation as a factor in the lack of collaboration between teachers and librarians in the teaching of Information Literacy (Ivey 2004; Doskatsch 2003; Scales, Matthews and Johnson, 2005).

The rigid timetables of many schools conspire to inhibit cooperation in the school environment and may be a factor in Higher Education. Interpersonal contact was a significant contributor to improved academic staff attitudes to the library according to Kotter (1999).

The perception of librarians and the role of libraries held by teachers and academics may be another obstacle. Faculty perceives librarians as a resource for gaining access to materials, not as experts who can play a central role in faculty teaching or research (Christenson, Stombler and Thaxton 2004). TAFE teachers alternatively appear to associate librarians with customer service,

circulation duties and administration. Teachers lack knowledge about the work of librarians and TAFE librarians have not promoted their expertise or differentiated the varying roles in the library (Green 1994). This low professional image may be perceived as inequality of status and may be an obstacle to the building of cooperative relationships needed to integrate Information Literacy into learning programs.

Ivey (2003) investigated what elements constituted successful collaborative teaching partnerships. Her study is the first to grasp the implicit values and beliefs underlying a partnership. She found that a common understanding of how Information Literacy is developed and effective communication were essential for a successful collaboration. Other aspects for building partnerships were 'mutual respect, tolerance and trust and competence for the task at hand' (Ivey, 2003 p.2). However her study also indicated that the role of librarians in the faculty partnership was mainly to develop and sustain the partnership rather than initiate. This was attributed to the fact that academics control the teaching programs (Ivey 2003, p.103). Her study also identified mismatches in the perception of academics and librarians, of responsibility for differing aspects of teaching Information Literacy, and other tensions concerned with understandings of Information Literacy amongst teachers and librarians, and teaching styles.

An 'outsiders' perspective was provided by social scientists Christiansen, Stomblor and Thaxton (2004), who referred to the 'asymmetrical disconnection' between librarians and faculty:

'Despite being mutually dependent and necessary to the functioning of the institutions to which they belong, they operate separately' (Christiansen, Stomblor and Thaxton 2004, p. 117).

They pose several reasons stemming from this asymmetry that inhibit the development of collaborative arrangements such as, not having a clear understanding of librarian's work, different perceptions of the library's function in the institutions, and different work cultures. Librarians are used to working in a sharing, collaborative environment while academics and teachers are more isolated and solitary and used to having complete control over their teaching and projects (Christiansen, Stomblor and Thaxton, 2004, p.118).

Christiansen et al suggested that collaboration is inhibited by the differing conceptions, language, and assumptions about Information Literacy and the roles that teachers and librarians take in teaching the concept and skills associated with it. Also the development of collaborative partnerships is made difficult by the lack of understanding of what constitutes successful collaboration.

The project undertaken by Scales, Matthews and Johnson (2005) identified the elements required to establish effective collaborative partnerships centred on

shared assumptions based on commonly understood and shared knowledge, agreed responsibility and authority, effective group composition and sharing common language (Scales, Matthews and Johnson 2005, p. 233-4). This study also identified that teachers used different language to describe their goals, objectives and units of learning. This created problems for the librarians in developing a common understanding about their shared objectives. The study identifies the role of language and labels in creating mutual understanding of an issue. Different expressions of the same issue can impede understanding and relationship building.

A constant theme emerging from the studies is the need to 'be on the same page', that is to have a common and agreed understanding of the goals and the language used to describe those goals. Without those elements, the development of collaborative partnerships is doomed.

Methodology

A phenomenographic stance was taken for the research because of its ability to make explicit the different ways in which the thoughts, feelings and perceptions about Information Literacy, are experienced by people (Marton 1994). This approach allowed the identification of categories describing the experience of the phenomena.

The data was gathered through interviews which had the advantage of gaining an immediate response and allowing the people involved to explore the meaning of the question and to overcome any ambiguity or confusion surrounding either the question or the answer. A disadvantage was the amount of information collected and the difficulty in categorising and identifying themes.

In an attempt to contain the size of the project the volunteers were limited to those teaching centres whose students were the greatest users of the library as judged by the statistics collected by the Library management system. The reasoning behind this was that students in TAFE who use the library frequently or are frequent borrowers are motivated by the requirements of their courses. Their teachers encourage them to use the library and potentially have an understanding of the need for Information Literacy skills.

As the research was focusing in detail on a small group the number of volunteers accepted was limited to four. The results from such a specific group cannot be generalized but can be seen as suggestive of perceptions held by teaching staff.

Results

Conception of Information Literacy

None of the interviewees recognized the term 'Information Literacy' which is commonly used by librarians. Teachers were very aware of the components of Information Literacy and saw their roles as teaching these skills.

It did not seem apparent to the teachers that they were teaching a complete concept but rather individual skills necessary to negotiate the new and increasingly complex environment in which we live.

The following summaries describe the main focus and key elements of each conception as expressed by the teachers:

Skills to use technology: Information Literacy was understood as accessing information and accessing different varieties of information using the internet, and electronic sources. This concept focused on finding and retrieving information that was electronically mediated.

Knowledge of information resources: Information Literacy was understood as knowing what information is available and knowing how to get and use it. This concept focused on knowing that information existed in a variety of formats.

Remedial training in information technology usage: Information Literacy was understood as being linked with basic literacy (reading and writing) but included using computers and learning to use electronic resources. The focus was on remedial training for students who had missed acquiring these skills at school.

These concepts illustrate the lack of understanding of the breadth of Information Literacy, and that retrieval of information includes aspects of critical thinking and analysis in order for retrieval to be effective (MacPherson 2004, p.229). The teachers' perception of the library did not include teaching the skills of analysis, or evaluation. They saw the library as primarily technical, emphasizing its role as one of training in using the technology for access to information, or as the mediator of access.

Even with this concept of the library, teachers did not always think of the library as a resource they could use to lighten their teaching load. They often said it was easier to just do what they always did. This attitude was a response to the lack of time teachers regularly experienced. They felt that they were expected to be '*jack of all trades*' and that there was enormous pressure from extra regulation that impacted on their ability to make time to change the way they did things. They found finding information and weeding the good from the rubbish a challenge, but felt competent in doing this. They acknowledged the library staff were excellent in this area but expressed a wish for the access to the catalogues or databases to be made easier rather than take the time to improve skills. Teachers' main perception of the library was as a service centre gathering and distributing resources.

The third view of Information Literacy expressed by the teachers was more directly related to the traditional concept of literacy training. It has a remedial perspective which places the use of technology alongside the traditional meaning: to gain competence in reading and writing. Many of the apprentices and mature students returning to study lack competence and confidence in these media and teachers saw the library having a role in helping these students to 'catch up'. Students were identified not as having learning problems but rather as having missed critical aspects while at school (in the case of the apprentices) or as not having the opportunity prior to this (mature age students). Teacher felt that they did not have the time to teach these technical skills as well.

Conception of an information literate person

Two conceptions of an information literate person were described.

Conception 1: An information literate person was described as having the knowledge of information sources, and the ability to access those resources using technology to retrieve relevant information that could be analyzed and applied. The focus was on competence in finding information using technology.

Conception 2: An information literate person was identified as someone who doesn't know everything but knows where to find out or who to ask. This focuses on being an information 'hub', knowledgeable, rather than connected to technology in particular.

The teachers' concept of an information literate person was reasonably consistent with the library perspective quoted in the literature. This is one area of commonality that could be used as a bridge between librarians and teachers in the understanding and communication of Information Literacy.

The most difficult aspect of the information explosion and using technology was perceived to be sorting and selecting the best information and finding the best resource for locating information. These are aspects in which the library staff has particular expertise, but only one of the teachers acknowledged that they would prefer the library to take on the training in this aspect or even participate in some professional development led by librarians.

The teachers indicated that a significant number of younger students and mature age students had difficulty with either basic literacy or computer literacy and this was seen as an area where the library could be and had been very useful. While teachers did not expect all students to be computer literate they did expect them to want to become computer literate. This was seen as an essential skill for functioning in the world.

This perception of the libraries' readiness to assist students was not carried through to the possible conclusion of training groups of students in information skills. Group training seemed to indicate a boundary between library staff and some teachers. The patience library staff displayed on a one to one basis was highly praised and appreciated. It seemed to be perceived as a particular niche

equal to, but not the same as, the literacy support function provided by the Centre for Student Support, which provides a range of assistance covering study support, both for learning and physically disabled students, as well as offering, career guidance, psychological and financial assistance to students.

The perception of the library in a remedial role was quite revealing and one that has not been mentioned in the literature in particular. Perhaps this is more relevant to TAFE because of the extensive range of courses offered for all educational levels and the range of abilities that they bring into TAFE, as well as the accessibility of the library to students at TAFE. The emphasis on the personal one on one encounter may also be a reflection of the smaller numbers of students at TAFE than at universities.

The impact of information technology on teachers and their teaching

Teachers described the impact of technology as positive. They described feeling comfortable using a variety of technologies in their teaching and were confident of their ability to use it to advantage. They reported that they had become reliant on technology being available for accessing information and that it raised their expectations of student work. The negative aspects of technology on their teaching primarily concerned the pressure of the volume of information and the difficulty of finding only what they needed from the mass of information.

'Knowing what we should be looking at. There is a lot of rubbish out there' (Teacher, interview)

Another aspect was that not all their students were comfortable with technology so that teachers felt obliged to teach information skills as well as subject content but that it added to their workload. They also were more specific about the instruction they delivered because students were able to easily access information and challenge their authority on the subject.

The comments above reinforce the studies that suggest teachers underestimate the complexity of the information environment (Debowski 2003; Leckie 1996). Despite their own acknowledged difficulty sorting through excessive information they still expected students to find quality material.

The reliance of teachers and students on the Internet is a challenge to a relationship with librarians. Librarians have access to and familiarity with a wider variety of resources such as databases, of which teachers are not so aware, yet librarians do not seem to promote this expertise in a way that catches the teachers' attention and presents the library in a positive light. Even though the teachers expressed some concern about their ability to find the best information, the convenience of the Internet on their desktop was irresistible.

The fact that teachers did not expect librarians to have more expertise in searching the Internet highlighted the perception of the librarian's role as primarily process and administratively focused.

'Teachers are the subject expert, librarians the gatherers of information' (Teacher, interview).

This perception is consistent with several studies in the literature that suggested a limited view of librarian's skills (Green 1994; Doskatsch 2003).

The role of teachers in teaching Information Literacy

While teachers did not recognize the terminology of Information Literacy or use the concept to describe their activities, they talked about information skills and saw their role as teaching the skills to their students. They described the skills they taught as knowing where to find information, how to present information, how to be focused in an information enquiry, how to discriminate for relevance amongst the mass of information, how to analyze the found information and how to apply the information to problem solve. They were very concerned with teaching students how to learn independently as well as teaching subject content.

'[I would] like to see the library more heavily involved in developing these

skills in the students rather than putting it onto the teachers to develop these skills'

I see it as both the library and the teacher. I am not enough.

Don't have the time to do the teaching' (Teachers, interview).

These comments express ambivalence to their perceived role as teachers of Information Literacy. There are some statements that imply they would like help from the library but see it as something out of the ordinary. Such comments support the view that librarians and teachers do not share a common language for, or understanding of, Information Literacy. Neither party is aware of the common goals that they share which is a component of successful collaborative relationships (Scales, Matthews and Johnson 2005; Ivey 2003).

The role of Libraries in TAFE

Teachers saw the library as very important particularly for training students to use technology and as central to accessing resources but they were not aware of the extent of the resources or programs that the library was able to offer.

'[Library] has important role in teaching students to use technology'

'Offers add-on skills like English as a Second Language (ESL)'

'Demonstrations of using the Internet, Google and databases'

'Help with [student] assignments' (Teachers, interview).

Getting the attention of busy teachers was acknowledged as extremely difficult by the teachers. Unless there was a perceived need or benefit to them they would ignore any advertising or promotions. Yet they still expected the library to be the driver of any relationship. *'Libraries need to keep pushing their services'*. These statements are echoed in Ivey's work which emphasizes the need for shared goals and proactive marketing by librarians of their teaching and academic qualifications and how they can assist academics and teachers.

Teachers viewed librarians very positively for their customer service attitude and their patience with helping students. Librarians were perceived as being

very busy and continually 'running' to keep up with the increasing demands from students and the need to keep up to date with technology. They also suggested that there was an image problem for librarians because they were seen as rather reticent or introverted and linked with books rather than technology, yet at the same time they were acknowledged as experts in finding information.

Teachers viewed all roles in the library as the same, but not all library staff were perceived to be of equal skill. Those who dealt with finding information and training were seen as highly skilled. These statements about TAFE librarians reflect the confusion about who in the library had the expertise teachers needed for assistance. Unlike university libraries where roles and expertise are more clearly defined, TAFE librarians work across all aspects of the library at various times. In TAFE there are no subject-specialist librarians as such, and while librarians are allocated to particular teaching centres the development of close relationships is frustrated by the sheer number of teachers with whom the librarians need to interact.

One of the critical complaints was that library staff lacked the knowledge of the courses being taught, and without that understanding, they would not be able to 'talk the talk' or understand what teachers really needed. Common understanding of the educational objectives would go a long way towards developing relationships with teachers in TAFE. This accord with the study by Scales, Matthews and Johnson (2005) who found that collaborative partnerships needed common understandings and shared assumptions for them to be successful. In the interviews it became clear that there was a crossover point at which teachers and librarians operate that is concerned with the teaching of basic question analysis for research. To define the research question some analysis needs to be undertaken. While this would normally be the province of the teacher there was an opportunity for library staff to participate. In order to search the resources effectively some analysis needs to be undertaken to define search terms and concepts. This was an area acknowledged as also being the province of the library staff because of their expertise in interrogating databases, electronic resources and the Internet etc. The recognition of competence is a factor in the success of collaborative relationships according to Ivey's research.

Conclusion

This research has shown that TAFE teachers and librarians do not speak the same language when they talk about Information Literacy. The concept and terminology are unrecognized by teachers even though they are conversant with the attributes of an information literate person and have awareness of the need for Information Literacy skills. Teachers felt obligated to teach the skills that they perceived as Information Literacy and did not link them with the Information Literacy expounded by librarians. This explanation goes some way to explaining the persistent difficulties experienced by librarians in establishing

Information Literacy programs. The focus on ‘information as a process’ perspective displayed by librarians and the view of the ‘Library as a place for training in the use of technology’ by teachers has limited the development of a common understanding and dialogue around Information Literacy.

Librarians need to develop a deeper understanding of the subjects and training packages being taught so that they can target teachers’ needs more specifically and find the appropriate opportunities for integrating Information Literacy into programs in collaboration with teachers.

Finally the ‘*what’s in it for me*’ factor was the single most persuasive argument teachers expressed for collaboration. Teachers are too busy to take advantage of a service unless it is offered at the ‘point of need’. The time needed for regular communication is difficult to schedule around teaching timetables but it is vital for the establishment of ongoing relationships and collaboration. Establishing relationships based on mutual goals, shared understandings and recognized competence for the task, as well as ongoing communication are the essential elements of collaboration and will need to be in place before the integration of Information Literacy programs can be achieved.

Bibliography

Andretti, S. 2005, *Information Literacy: a practitioner’s guide*, Chandos Publishing, Oxford.

Bruce, C. 1997, *The Seven Faces of Information Literacy*, Auslib Press, Adelaide.

Bundy, A (ed.) 2004, *Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework: principles, standards and practice*, 2nd ed., Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy, Adelaide.

Christiansen, L., Stompler, M., and Thaxton, L.2004, ‘A report on librarian-faculty relations from a sociological perspective’, *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, vol. 30, no.2, pp. 116-121.

Debowski, S. 2001, ‘Wrong way: go back! An exploration of novice search behaviour while conducting an information search’, *The Electronic Library*, vol.19, no.6, pp.371-382.

Doskatsch, I. 2003, ‘Perceptions and perplexities of the faculty-librarian partnership: an Australian perspective’, *Reference Services Review*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 111-121.

Green, T. 1994, *Images and perceptions as barriers to the use of library staff and services*, *New Library World*, vol.95, no.7, pp. 19-24, Retrieved: December 16, 2005, from Emerald Fulltext.

Ivey, R. 2003, ‘Information Literacy: how do librarians and academics work in partnership to deliver effective learning programs?’ *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, vol. 34, no. 2, June 2003. pp. 1-10, Retrieved: July 18, 2006 from <http://alia.org.au/publishing/aarl/34.2/full.text/ivey.html>

- Kotter, W. R. 1999, 'Bridging the great divide: improving relations between librarians and classroom faculty', *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, vol.25, no.4, pp. 294-303.
- Leckie, G. J. 1996, 'Desperately seeking citations: uncovering faculty assumptions about the undergraduate research process', *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, May, pp. 201-208.
- Macpherson, K. 2004 'Undergraduate Information Literacy: a teaching framework', *Australian Academic and Research Libraries*, vol.35, no 3, September, pp.226-241.
- Marton, F. 1994, 'Phenomenography and "the art of teaching all things to all men"', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol.5, no. 3, pp. 253-267, Retrieved: July 18, 2006, from <http://www.ped.gu.se/biorn/jour.abstr/marton/marton94.html>
- Scales, J., Matthews, G. and Johnson, C. M. 2005, 'Compliance, cooperation, collaboration and Information Literacy', *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 229-235.
- Weber, S., Boon, S. & Johnston, B. 2005, 'British academics from different disciplines: comparing their conceptions of pedagogy for Information Literacy', in *Annual Information Literacy Seminar*, Caval Reference Interest Group, RMIT, Melbourne, 23rd November, 2005.