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Information literacy for lifelong learning

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Information literacy is concerned with teaching and learning about the whole range of information sources and formats. To be "information literate" you need to know why, when, and how to use all of these tools and think **critically** about the information they provide.

Information literacy aims to develop *both* critical understanding *and* active participation. It enables people to interpret and make informed judgments as users of information sources; but it also enables them to become producers of information in their own right, and thereby to become more powerful participants in society. Information literacy is about developing people's critical *and* creative abilities. Digital media – and particularly the Internet – significantly increase the potential for active participation; but they also create an environment of bewildering choices.

Information literacy is part of the basic entitlement of every citizen, in every country in the world, to freedom of expression and the right to information and is instrumental in building and sustaining democracy.

Information literacy forms the basis for lifelong learning. It is common to all disciplines, to all learning environments and to all levels of education, while recognizing the disparities in learning styles and in the nature and development of literacy in different countries. It enables learners to master content and extend their investigations, become more self-directed, and assume greater control over their own learning, information literacy should be introduced wherever possible within national curricula as well as in tertiary, non-formal and lifelong education.

An effective information literacy programme for the whole society should be developed and delivered in two parts: one as part of the formal education, and another as part of an informal education, in course of, and as part of, the day-to-day activities and life of people. The target audience should not only be the teachers or students, but also professionals, decision makers, etc. who need to acquire the necessary information skills to make informed decisions.

You will not become information literate overnight. Just as with speaking skills and writing skills, your abilities will improve over time as you gain expertise in the topics you choose to investigate and as you practice searching for, selecting, and evaluating the information and ideas you encounter. Information literacy classes can take place in a range of institutional settings, both 'formal' and 'informal'; and they can be provided by bodies from both public and private sectors.

As information is increasingly codified in digital forms, new skills are needed to operate the technology to search for, organize, manage information and use it to solve problems and create new knowledge and cultural products. Since the Internet is a common information and communication tool, information literacy is often understood as digital literacy. Computer literacy is an essential component of information literacy, media education forms another important part of information literacy, but there are differences between computer literacy, media education and information literacy.

Community Technology Centres, Telecentres and Community Learning Centres provide in many countries training related to the use of hardware, software and the Internet, as well as other services. Information literacy is closely related to information technology skills, but has broader implications. Information technology skills enable a student for example to use computers, software applications, databases, and other technologies to achieve a wide variety of academic, work-related, and personal goals. Computer literacy is a first essential, but beyond that there remains the huge black hole of information literacy, that is the awareness that information can be of help, that the resources exist if you know where to look, that the skills to use the resources can be learned, and that once the information has been acquired that there is still some critical evaluation yet to be done.

Information literacy is an intellectual framework and a social process for understanding, finding, evaluating, communicating and using information—activities which may be accomplished in part by fluency with information technology, in part by sound investigative methods, but most important, through critical discernment and reasoning. Information literacy initiates, sustains, and extends lifelong learning through abilities which may use technologies but are ultimately independent of them.

Introducing new media technology – let alone the kinds of 'critical thinking' and the new pedagogies associated with information literacy– is almost bound to meet with considerable inertia, if not overt resistance. A vigorous information literacy campaign may result in the long run in the emergence of an 'information culture'. In the new information environment information is not only used in an effective and ethical way, but also people understand the economic, legal and social issues surrounding the use and sharing of information.

General objectives:

Within the framework of the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012), the new Information Literacy Programme of UNESCO will be launched during the 2004-2005

biennium. The initial budget amounts to US\$300 000. This programme will be supervised by the Information Society Division (Communication and Information Sector) in close co-operation with the Education Sector and the Field offices. The general objectives are to:

- Foster the development of an information literate citizenry with the technical and critical thinking skills and abilities needed to identify, acquire, manage and use information to enrich all aspects of their work and personal lives.
- To identify and encourage effective practices in information literacy around the world.
- Promote information literacy through regional approaches and to facilitate exchanges
- Propose innovative curricula about information literacy
- Improve co-operation between government officials, researchers, educators, librarians and media practitioners

The recently concluded World Summit on the Information Society held in Geneva highlighted the empowering element of information as a tool for development. In its Declaration of Principles, the participants declared their “common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life”.

Proposed strategy

- There is an ongoing need for clear, coherent and authoritative documents that define information literacy and provide a rationale for its implementation. If it is to be effective, any international document or **policy statement** of this kind will also need to be followed up with an ongoing process of monitoring at a national level.
- In addition to broad statements of purpose, there is a need for more specific documentation outlining frameworks for **curriculum** development and practice. A document of this kind would need to include: a clear model of learning progression, details of specific learning outcomes, expressed in terms of competencies; and criteria and procedures for evaluation and assessment.
- Well-intended documents and frameworks are worthless without trained staff to implement them. Elements of training in information literacy should be included in initial and in-service training programmes, and be available as part of **teachers’** ongoing professional development. **Distance learning** may be appropriate in many circumstances, but this should be complemented by sustained opportunities for face-to-face tuition.
- Despite the changing and sometimes ephemeral nature of the content of media education, teaching materials can have a long shelf-life if they are carefully and professionally produced. Information literacy does not by any means have to be a ‘high tech’ enterprise, but it should at least reflect the levels of access that students and teachers have to technology outside the school environment.
- Information literacy practice should obviously reflect current theoretical advances in our understanding of people’s relationships with media, and of pedagogy. In terms of pedagogy, issues that are in need of more systematic and sustained research might

include: the nature of student learning about the media; the relations between 'conceptual' and 'affective' dimensions of media education; and the relations between 'theory' and 'practice'.

- There is a need for international dialogues and exchanges to be sustained, rather than merely in the form of one-off conferences taking place every few years. International exchange will be much less superficial if practitioners have more sustained opportunities to visit each other's countries, for example through a system of longer-term internships.
- All the above elements are inter-related. If any one of these is absent or weakened, it puts the entire construction at risk. For instance, policy documentation or curriculum frameworks in the absence of professional development can be merely a matter of empty rhetoric. Professional development and self-organisation by teachers is fairly meaningless if there are no clear curriculum frameworks for them to work within. Policy, teaching and research should be interconnected: development in each area should support development in the others.

Proposed activities

- Launching of an international awareness-raising campaign and an international alliance for information literacy.
- The convening of a high-level international colloquium of experts in the field, leading to the agreement of a declaration re-stating and re-defining the case for information literacy in the 'Digital Age', for circulation to national education ministries and other relevant bodies. Support would need to be provided for delegates from developing countries.
- Drafting of a publication aimed at teachers and policy makers. This is intended to provide an introductory guide to information literacy, covering the following key questions: why (rationales for information literacy); what (definitions); where (curricular and institutional locations); and how (issues of pedagogy and practice).
- Preparing a modular curriculum for information literacy, targeting teacher education programmes
- Regional institutes in information literacy, aimed at national experts in the field, who will be encouraged to spread their expertise via 'cascade' training.
- Empowering communities through information literacy pilot projects. Information literacy enhances the pursuit of knowledge by equipping individuals with the skills and abilities for critical reception, assessment, use and production of information in their professional and personal lives.
- The establishment of a website which will facilitate the sharing of resources by teachers. Support would need to be given here for translation, since existing web resources on information literacy are heavily English-language-dominated.

- The development of an accessible international collection of teaching and learning resources in information literacy; and support for those involved in translating or adapting existing resources to specific national contexts.

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