

TMI

TODAY'S YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE INSTANT ACCESS TO MORE INFORMATION THAN EVER BEFORE – BUT IF WE DON'T TEACH THEM THE SKILLS NEEDED TO MAKE SENSE OF IT, WE RISK LEAVING THEM IN THE DARK, WARNS DR. ANDREW K. SHENTON...

I recently overheard a revealing conversation take place among a group of Y9 boys. Waiting for a modern languages lesson to begin, the lads were discussing the relevance of studying French at school. Sadly, their attitudes were uniformly negative. Doubting its long term value to his life, one boy was convinced that, within months of finishing the course, he would have forgotten all the French vocabulary he had been taught. His friends responded with similar comments. Since there is no way of knowing whether these particular teenagers are representative of Britain's pupil population as a whole, it is unwise to assume that the views of the observed individuals are typical, or even widespread, but we can still conclude that, as far as some youngsters are concerned, the extent to which they feel it is important to study a subject purposefully is proportional to that subject's perceived utility.

Few areas taught in schools are as relevant to the lives of young people as information literacy (IL) – that body of knowledge, skills and



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Andrew K. Shenton is a curriculum and resource support officer at Monkseaton High School, Whitley Bay. He has taught primary and secondary aged students, and lectured to undergraduate and postgraduate students at Northumbria University.

understanding required by a person to find sound information effectively and use it appropriately to resolve the situation that prompted its acquisition. Even the most apathetic of young people must surely concede that we all need and indeed pursue information. In addition, we frequently hear teenagers express lively views about the value of certain kinds of resources and individual materials, like, for example, particular web sites, and how information can best be found. It is often said that, since virtually every adult in Britain has attended school, the majority feel sufficiently

well informed to be able to give an opinion on education; we may reach a similar conclusion with regard to people's perspectives on information.

The challenge for an educator intent on promoting IL does not, then, lie in establishing the importance of information in the learner's life. Rather, since information is now so easy to access and transfer from a source document to one's own work, the key issue is that of justifying to pupils and, on occasion, the senior leadership team within a school, why whole lessons should be devoted to IL. The case is not helped by the fact that, in the current educational climate, youngsters with limited information skills can still gain a reasonable degree of academic success at school. Even if it were possible to make a firm connection between scholarly achievement and the need for IL, however, by secondary age some pupils are so turned off by education and all it involves that these messages would be unlikely to motivate everyone. There are, of course, other cards that can be played. These can be summarised as follows:

In introducing IL to students emphasise...

- that it is essential if we are to comprehend properly local and global issues;
- its importance if we are to make appropriate and informed decisions as a consumer and citizen;
- that it helps us in our efforts to retrain in order to ensure continued employability in a changing workplace;
- that it gives us the tools we need for lifelong learning;

★ SPOTTING THE SIGNS OF INFORMATION OVERLOAD

BE ESPECIALLY VIGILANT TO SITUATIONS WHERE STUDENTS...

- ★ ...go automatically to Google when faced with an information need pertaining to a school assignment;
- ★ ...enter the most obvious search terms conceivable;
- ★ ...settle for the first website listed that

- seems at all suitable for their requirements
- ★ ...after the most cursory of examinations; unthinkingly copy and paste material from it;
- ★ ...give very little attention to editing/processing the reproduced matter.

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■ that it provides the means for us to find out more about matters of personal interest.

The final option may provide the most fruitful avenue for the teacher. If learners can understand the various principles of IL in terms that are relevant to their own interests and come to realise that effective information behaviour can aid them in their quests to find out more about matters that are important to them personally, the teacher's arguments in favour of good practice are more likely to be accepted. We should not dismiss, either, the educational value of allowing youngsters to conduct a detailed study of an area that interests them. According to Junco and Cotten, even when information-seeking is not prompted by school work, “the behavior of and motivations for searching for information online relate to academic pursuits. Indeed, having the curiosity to search for information is a beginning stage in the academic research process”. Carmichael takes a similar stance, arguing that “serious study” can include the investigation of a matter of personal interest.

Given that information is pivotal to independent learning and this is a process which is, of course, central to education itself, it

is surprising that the discipline of IL is not more widely recognised in schools. In fact, even the phrase “information literacy” itself may be unfamiliar to some readers. Crucially, however, IL teaching can help tackle problems that are all too common. Anyone who has watched pupils pursue a heavily formulaic approach to finding and using information will be aware that such a simplistic method is far from ideal. IL can help remedy this inadequacy, lead to the eradication of other process deficiencies and contribute to improved assignment outcomes; for example, the information literate learner will submit work that is genuinely his or her own (rather than plagiarised) and it will be the product of an understanding that has been gained from a pool of high quality resources (not a few chosen simply because they would seem at first glance to be relevant). And of course, since so much dubious material is available via the web, for some commentators the greatest attraction of IL is that it promotes a more critical mindset.

An emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge is fundamental to the information use phase of information behaviour and this thrust bears strong similarities to the aim

underpinning much learning in schools. Thus many of the research papers on information behaviour may well be of interest to a wide range of teachers. They may have great practical value, too – teachers providing IL instruction can advise pupils on methods of avoiding the pitfalls that have been noted in research, and effective strategies, as revealed by systematic investigation, may be brought to the attention of learners.

Research into information behaviour is likely to hold special appeal to teachers if it relates to information-seeking/use within the context of the teacher's own subject and if the young people who have been sampled are comparable to those attending the school in which the teacher is employed. Furthermore, it is not just the phenomena themselves that may strike a chord with the concerns of teachers – often the findings of research into information behaviour have clear implications for teaching more widely.

The importance of IL instruction tends to go unacknowledged in schools. Whilst the major role of information in our lives is undeniable, the creation and delivery of teaching programmes specifically devoted to finding and using it effectively are frequently deemed unnecessary by senior leaders and learners alike. In terms of selling to pupils the relevance of such instruction, the value of tapping into their particular matters of interest is not to be underestimated, whilst even school managers who remain sceptical of the need for formal IL teaching will struggle to divorce the IL concept from the whole basis of independent learning – an area that, for many professionals in schools, forms a key strand within modern concepts of education.