GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON INFORMATION LITERACY

Fostering a Dialogue for International Understanding

Edited by the ACRL Student Learning and Information Literacy Committee
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Global Perspectives on Information Literacy

Fostering a Dialogue for International Understanding

Edited by the ACRL Student Learning and Information Literacy Committee, Global Perspectives on Information Literacy Working Group

With a Foreword by Emma Coonan

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We would like to thank Mikkel Skinner, graphic designer at Utah State University Merrill-Cazier Library, for designing the cover of the white paper.

978-0-8389-8964-7

[Corrections made June 9, 2017]

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Foreword by Emma Coonan
Introduction

Saskatchewan is a sparsely populated Canadian prairie province, and it is where I live and first developed my interest in information literacy. My first Saskatchewan library job was as a medical librarian for the local health region, where I conducted a lot of literature searches. The importance of facilitating the development of information literacy skills in health care professionals became increasingly clear to me; medical emergencies, drug interactions, and rare health conditions don’t keep the same nine to five hours as the medical librarian! I worked to help health professionals in many roles (physicians, pharmacists, nurses, paramedics, therapists, residents, and interns) become confident in their information use. Health professionals in rural areas of the region also sought to incorporate evidence into their practice, so I travelled to towns across the southern part of the province and delivered instruction using telehealth technology during prairie blizzards to help these rural professions hone their information literacy skills.

This interest in information literacy among rural and remote populations led to a position as the distance education librarian at the local university, the University of Regina. This shifted my focus to helping students develop information literacy competencies to support not only their studies, but also their broader lives. I taught by telephone, e-mail, online videoconferencing, televised lecture, and travelling to students’ communities. My position covered the whole of the vast province, so I had the added thrill of small airplanes to reach remote northern communities. Many of the northern students were First Nations’ people and mature students who, unlike on-campus students, had never participated in information literacy programs or encountered the scholarly communication system. This was a particularly beneficial time in my career, as there was a lot of opportunity to introduce students to academic research and writing, but also a chance for me to learn from my students, thinking about academic discourse from those new to and, in many cases, “outside” its bounds.

Distance education library services have subsequently been restructured to fall within the purview of subject liaison librarians, and I have moved to the role of teaching and learning librarian, which coordinates the instructional efforts of liaison librarians and support staff. My research has primarily focused on disciplinary differences in conceptions and expressions of information literacy, including in accreditation standards for professional programs and in the pedagogical literature of academic disciplines. I also wrote a book on teaching about plagiarism in disciplinary contexts, where I provided examples of high-profile plagiarism cases that can be used as teaching tools to situate plagiarism education in disciplinary contexts. Echoes of my earlier experiences with information literacy development in rural and remote populations have not been forgotten, though, and have merged with my experience of an increasingly diverse on-
campus population, leading me to wonder if Canada would be well-served by information literacy policy development. I explored the issue, and its many challenges, in a recent article and continue to believe that this is a topic deserving further research and action in Canada.

**Research Trends**

Most academic librarians in Canada are tenured academic staff, and research is an expected part of their role (though institutions vary widely in what they include as “research,” with some including only peer-reviewed journal articles, and others including a much broader range of outputs, including reports, classroom innovations, and others). The combination of these research efforts and the significant number of librarians engaged in information literacy work has resulted in an increase in both the quantity and the quality of IL research in Canada in recent years. It is impossible to summarize this diverse body of research, so three broad influences will be discussed instead: evidence-based library and information practice, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and indigenization of the academy.

Saskatchewan is fortunate to be the home of the Centre for Evidence Based Library and Information Practice (C-EBLIP), which is based at the University of Saskatchewan, in Saskatoon. C-EBLIP is “devoted to the idea that practitioner-researchers make a vital contribution to . . . the field and discipline of librarianship.” C-EBLIP has increased librarian awareness about evidence-based librarianship (EBL) and led to its application in both information literacy practice and research. EBL, with its origins in evidence-based medicine, challenges librarians to formulate precise, researchable questions arising from their practice, identify and critically appraise relevant research, apply the evidence to their practice, and evaluate the process. Librarians in the region are turning to the literature when making information literacy–related teaching decisions and incorporating the research of others into their daily practice. Many of these same librarians are taking on the challenge of conducting their own research when they can’t find the evidence that they need to answer their questions. Examples of regional research on information literacy topics undertaken include Kumaran and Chipanshi’s work on the information-seeking behaviour of internationally educated nurses in Saskatchewan, and Maddison, Beneteau, and Sokoloski on flipped teaching of literature searching to undergraduate engineering students. In these and other instances, librarians are starting with a practice-based question and then conducting the research needed to answer this question and improve their practice. The result is a growing body of literature that produces high-quality pragmatic research in response to questions arising in information literacy work.

Another major influence on information literacy research in (particularly western) Canada has been the scholarship of teaching and research (SoTL). SoTL is an international movement in wider academia that encourages teachers to “examine their own classroom practice, record their successes and failures, and ultimately share their experiences so that others may reflect on their findings and building upon teaching and learning processes.” Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta, is home to the Institute for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and this body has been very encouraging to librarians interested in conducting SoTL research. SoTL is a good fit for librarians interested in conducting information literacy research; it blends practice and research in a way that mirrors the working lives of most instruction librarians. Librarians
are teaching and trying to help students develop information literacy skills, and they want to try new things and assess the effectiveness of their efforts, and this is exactly the work that SoTL encourages and values. Margy Macmillan’s research on how students read and engage with scholarly articles is an example of how the scholarship of teaching and learning provides a framework for exploring and reporting on information literacy topics in such a way that the findings can inform the practice of others. SoTL has also provided an avenue for librarians interested in conducting information literacy research with faculty. It is an approach with wider validity outside of the library and information studies field, so other academics are more comfortable partnering in this kind of research, knowing that it will be recognized and valued in their discipline.

Indigenization of the academy is a movement that is just starting to have an impact on information literacy practice and research, but it is poised to have a profound impact on Canadian practice in the future. Canada’s aboriginal population has suffered from years of systemic injustice and racism. The legacy of residential school abuse has been exposed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s (TRC) reports and Calls to Action. The TRC made it clear that postsecondary institutions have a critical role to play in education for aboriginal people and also in educating other Canadians about aboriginal people, cultures, and ways of knowing. Every major Canadian university in Canada’s four western provinces has indigenization as a core component of its institutional strategic plan or a separate indigenous strategy. Librarians are beginning to consider the implications of this for their practice, and especially their information literacy efforts.

Research on indigenization with respect to information literacy is in its early days, as is evidenced by the fact that it has primarily been reported at conferences, with little published as yet. Most of this early work is quite pragmatic in nature, such as a panel of aboriginal librarians discussing “Indigenizing Instruction: Transformative Practices from Western Canada” at the Workshop for Instruction in Library Use (WILU), Canada’s national information literacy conference. More theoretical work is also starting to emerge; one example is Barbara McNeil, who argues “that while operating under the guise of neutrality, information literacy in Canada has acted primarily in the interest of neo-liberal education and has tended to subjugate and exclude information and knowledge about the realities of colonialism and its impact on indigenous peoples.” The librarians at the University of British Columbia’s Xwi7xwa Library are early leaders in efforts to impact how Canadians think about information and highlighting the Euro-centric frames through which knowledge has been organized. Their library is a case study of “indigenization of knowledge organization,” rather than the traditional “colonial classification.” While this initially seems a project about collection and classification, Xwi7xwa librarians are quick to point out that it is an important first step in “Indigenous information literacy,” teaching students “to be aware of, and to be critical of, the processes of knowledge organization itself in Indigenous contexts.” Much work lies ahead, but indigenization of information literacy will be essential to helping all Canadian recognize their biases and open their minds to multiple sources of knowledge and ways of knowing. It is an important step in responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s Calls to Action and realizing indigenization goals of Canada’s universities.
Models of Information Literacy

Canada does not have its own standards or frameworks around information literacy, instead relying quite heavily on the Association of College and Research Libraries in the United States for guidance. Like US librarians, Canadian librarians are in the early stages of determining the implications of the shift from the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education to the Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education. There are undoubtedly those who lament the change, but most Canadian librarians believe that the Framework does, in fact, align more closely with what they are trying to achieve with their information literacy efforts. The frames are simultaneously more challenging to teach with and assess from, but at the same time better reflect the depth of understanding needed by Canadian students in the twenty-first century.

Canada has had a small but growing group of librarians interested in critical theory but, with the exception of work by Heidi Jacobs, there has been little intersection between critical theorists and information literacy (particularly as defined by the Standards). The Framework seems to be a model which could bring these two solitudes together towards a richer understanding and implementation of information literacy practice.

Canada as a whole is a challenging arena in which to develop shared information literacy resources, practices, assessment, and policies. Education (both K–12 and postsecondary) is under provincial jurisdiction, which means that all directions are set and decisions made independently by thirteen provincial or territorial governments, rather than federally. This is in many ways beneficial, as it allows for customization to meet the distinct needs of different regions of a very large country, but also poses a challenge in coordinating effort. It goes some way to explaining the lack of national information literacy efforts in Canada, though a look at the United Kingdom reveals ways to move information literacy forward in this environment. The Scottish Information Literacy Project (SILP) in seeking to develop an information literacy framework for Scottish residents from early school age through higher education and onto lifelong learning, built the higher education portion of its work on the Society of College, National, and University Libraries’ (SCONUL) seven pillars of information literacy. Wales built upon the Scottish project in order to build its own Information Literacy Framework for Wales, customizing it to the Welsh education system and culture. The United Kingdom could serve as a model for Canada, not only in the content already developed, but also in the iterative nature of the projects, in which each jurisdiction built upon and customized the work of others in order to advance information literacy in terms that work for its own location.

Future Visioning and Reflection

Many individual Canadian academic librarians are doing valuable information literacy work, both in their practice and in their research. That work is all the more outstanding because it takes place in the absence of any national (and limited provincial) structure or support. There is no association or organization with information literacy as a major part of its mandate, no listserv or communications vehicle for these librarians, no guidelines or standards, and in fact not really a good way to identify those involved in information literacy work across the country. The fact that individual librarians persevere in this work is testament to their belief in
the importance of information literacy for students and for society at large.

It is difficult to pinpoint the cause of this lack of coordination, but it likely arises from a combination of factors, including a large, sparsely populated country, academic librarians stretched thinner and thinner as university budgets stagnate, and a national library association that faltered in recent years and has been disbanded. It is clear, however, that information literacy will not assume a higher profile, garner more support, or be valued by decision makers until something changes. It is also clear that, after years of relative inaction by existing associations, it will have to be a grassroots effort by information literacy librarians that turns the tide. The one exception to the relative lack of coordination of information literacy activities in Canada is the Workshop for Instruction in Library Use (WILU), a stand-alone conference that moves around the country each year and is attended by the subset of IL librarians who find funding to attend in a given year. The librarians involved in and inspired by WILU over the years are perhaps the most likely to start a year-round conversation about information literacy and spark some collaborative projects. It seems daunting to build something like this, but with small steps, it might just work.

Longer term goals (likely five to ten years) involve reaching out beyond the academic library sector to develop and implement a “cradle-to-grave” information strategy and action plan. Canada’s school librarians have historically been active in information literacy program planning and development, but they too have been impacted by the demise of the national library association and cuts to teacher-librarian positions. Canadian public librarians have not typically been involved in information literacy efforts (at least under that term), but they have an important role to play in helping all Canadians develop and maintain sufficient information literacy to meet their own needs and constitute an informed citizenry. There is a long way to go, but plans like the Scottish Information Literacy Project and the Information Literacy Framework for Wales are inspiring models of what information literacy in Canada could look like. It is time to harness all the information work underway in Canada, coordinate efforts, raise awareness, and develop and implement an information literacy strategy that will help Canada and its citizens move forward.

Notes


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