

Journal of Information Literacy

ISSN 1750-5968

Volume 7 Issue 2

December 2013

Article

Widdowson, J. and Smart, D. 2013. Information literacy in public libraries. *Journal of Information Literacy*, 7(2), pp.160-162.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.11645/7.2.1863>

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Information literacy in public libraries

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It must be acknowledged that the term information literacy (IL) is rarely used in public libraries as it does not mean much to the general public. One might encounter synonyms such as 'information skills' or 'research skills'. Generally, however, the prevalence of IL in public libraries goes unrecognised, both by the majority of staff and library users alike. Nevertheless, IL is a core activity in all public libraries, the impact of which should not be underestimated.

IL in your local library looks less like the dryly defined practice of locating and utilising information and more like the UNESCO (2005) style means of "empower[ing] people in all walks of life". Public libraries are the front line for the vast majority of the populace when it comes to satisfying their information needs – even the ones they did not know they had. If UNESCO (2005) is correct in asserting that, in the modern digital world, IL "is a basic human right", then public libraries are the civil rights activists: facilitating social inclusion and redressing the injustices of the information divide.

Providing free access to information sources (across multiple platforms) offers a framework for IL. The truly empowering feature of a public library, however, is its staff. Whether professionally qualified or library experienced, they support people's engagement with information: using local knowledge to facilitate access to, and often also the evaluation and interpretation of, the information source. Although public libraries do offer inductions and training courses, many of these IL enhancing activities happen on an informal basis. This appears to contravene the school of thought that IL requires formal training. However, intrinsic to IL is the notion of lifelong learning; different people require different forms and levels of IL support. Public libraries cater to all strata of society, and must therefore be versatile in the forms of IL enabling activities they provide, as the following case studies illustrate.

Case study 1

When Francis's daughter moved to Berlin she was devastated: she couldn't shake the feeling of isolation. To combat her negative emotions, Francis focused on her routines, including her monthly visit to the public library for the Ruby Tuesday Reading Group. On one such visit, Francis struck up a conversation with a library assistant, who was very sympathetic to her situation. It turned out that although Francis had an internet connected computer at home, she didn't know how to use it. The library assistant signed her up to a free computer course for the over 50s, where she learnt mouse and keyboard skills, how to access and evaluate web pages and how to do her shopping online. More importantly, Francis learnt how to email her daughter in Berlin. The library service had thrown Francis several lifelines; providing her not just with books, but with information skills that combated her isolation from her family and community.

The vast majority of public libraries offer free IT courses for their older users. Some do so in conjunction with Digital Unite, a digital literacy organisation that administers the nationally

recognised Level 2 Digital Champion Information Technology Qualification (ITQ) and offers free online resources for those wishing to teach IT skills to others. Digital Unite are also behind the award-winning Silver Surfer's Day campaign (launched 2002), now called Spring Online, that witnesses public libraries and other local organisations providing older people with a taste of what modern technology has to offer them. The latest statistics from Age UK (2013, p.4), suggest that "over two thirds of all digital exclusion is among those aged 65 and over". Public libraries are tackling this problem head on; giving older people the confidence to embrace the digital age.

Case study 2

A young girl walks up to the enquiry desk in the Children's Library:

Girl: "Have you got any Harry Potter books?"

Librarian: "Yes"

Girl: "Where?"

Librarian: "Do you know who wrote them?"

Girl: "Ruling...? Riddling...? Rowling!"

Librarian: "Well, that's where they will be. All our fiction books are arranged alphabetically by author's surname. We also have them as e-books"

Girl: "What's an e-book?"

Librarian: "Electronic books. You can download them to your computer or your smart phone (if you are lucky enough to have one)"

Girl: "I'm doing my homework on her"

Librarian: "Who? J.K. Rowling? Well you're in luck; we have a subscription to the Who's Who online database..."

The librarian goes on to explain to the girl how to access authoritative online information about her chosen subject, along with hard copies of the books. Starting with one simple question, the girl has moved leaps and bounds down the road to information literacy, and her guide was a public librarian.

In Wales, public libraries are attempting a more structured approach to IL. Since the launch of Phase 3 of the Welsh Information Literacy Project (WILP) in April 2012, public library Information Literacy Champions have been disseminating WILP training to library staff and users. These Champions have themselves undertaken formal qualifications, in accordance with the *Information Literacy Framework for Wales* (2011) – a scheme that goes right up to Level 8 CQFW, equivalent to PhD. Promoting various IL campaigns in their authority, Champions ensure local IL strategies and plans are consistent with the national policies developed by WILP. They operate as a virtual network and have a regular e-zine to promote good practice.

There is a strong focus on using 'hooks' such as local history or debt advice to embed IL amongst the public library staff and their customers. If you are interested to find out more, Siona Murray's article in the Summer 2013 issue of JIL goes into greater detail, but early indications are that this approach is addressing the pressing need to improve the IL skills of the general public.

Wales has certainly set an admirable precedent for formalising the public library IL offer. It must not be overlooked, however, that the daily contributions of all UK public libraries towards IL education have a significant impact. Public libraries facilitate social inclusion, they help people transcend the digital divide, engage people in political and community forums and generally offer guidance. Recognised or not, IL is what public libraries do.

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