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Navigating tomorrow's classroom: The future of information literacy and inquiry-based learning in the age of AI

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Abstract

This article explores the transformative impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on information literacy (IL) in schools, advocating for a paradigm shift. It emphasises the role of school librarians in leveraging AI, especially through the Framework Of Skills for Inquiry Learning (FOSIL), to seamlessly integrate IL into the curriculum. Addressing librarian hesitancy towards AI, the article stresses the urgency for librarians to embrace the technology and position themselves as essential guides in navigating ethical considerations. The discussion underscores the importance of inquiry-based learning, aligning with IL goals and preparing students for an AI-driven future. It envisions a collaborative future where librarians, armed with clear roles and frameworks like FOSIL, actively contribute to shaping education. The article calls for collective exploration by educators, librarians, and policymakers to ensure a holistic approach in preparing students for the challenges and opportunities of the future.

Keywords

artificial intelligence; information literacy; inquiry based learning

Introduction

When I was asked to write an article about how technological or educational developments challenged the future of information literacy (IL) back in November 2022, who could have foreseen that Artificial intelligence (AI) was about to explode into our mainstream world? Over the last year, the online landscape has changed dramatically pushing our thinking and opening a world of opportunities for the future.

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The way we access, evaluate, and utilise information has always evolved. This has made IL, an individual's ability to locate, evaluate and effectively use information, an indispensable skill in the modern world. As AI continues to make inroads into education, it offers a unique opportunity to reimagine IL instruction and look at ways it will work in the wider context of education. This article delves into the future of IL within a school setting, highlighting the importance of inquiry-based learning within the potential changes in education and explores why focusing on the Framework Of Skills for Inquiry Learning (FOSIL) is a promising idea.

IL now

Before delving into the future, it's essential to understand how IL is commonly taught in schools within the UK today. I would not be the first to suggest that there is very little focus on IL within our schools. Even if there is a school librarian in post, they are often not the go-to person to teach it. Streatfield et al. state that:

IL work in UK schools cannot be said to be in a good state. The survey results suggest that there is a wide and growing gap between the best practice and the rest, with many libraries relatively under-resourced and senior management support ranging from visionary and enthusiastic through to neglect (2011).

The 'visionary and enthusiastic' tend to be senior leaders who know that a school library is important but often do not understand the full potential of a school librarian. A lot of focus is put on Reading for Pleasure but talk about information literacy is another thing altogether. We do know that there is always slightly more focus on IL within the sixth form where courses like the Extended Essay or Extended Project Question (EPQ) are encouraged for extra points to get into university, but other than that the extent of embedding IL across the curriculum is minimal. We know there are several models of IL, such as SCONUL Seven Pillars and the National information literacy frameworks for Scotland and Wales to name a few, but even with a framework there is still a barrier to them getting a foothold into the curriculum. Trying to work alongside teachers and talking about IL often feels like a thankless task as the opportunities to teach IL regularly are few and far between.

Today, students face an overwhelming amount of information, often of varying quality and credibility. The rise of social media, online platforms and now AI has made the dissemination of misinformation easier than ever. Critical thinking, source evaluation and digital citizenship skills have become paramount. In response to these challenges, educators and school librarians need a more adaptable framework and one that fits inside the curriculum rather than outside it, which IL often does.

Alongside IL we can see lots of other literacies emerging such as digital, media, health and now AI literacy. If our current predicament is one of 'neglect', is it not time to look at a different way of teaching IL and has AI opened the door school librarians need?

The Promise of AI in education

Is the introduction of AI in our world going to open the door school librarians need and are they ready for it? It is easy to see the impact that Artificial intelligence is already having on teaching. From its ability to give teachers some of their time back, through doing many of the admin tasks,

such as lesson planning and report writing to helping with small creative tasks like creating quizzes etc. AI will push the boundaries further with its ability to analyse vast amounts of data and create questions for analysing texts to much bigger and more personal support by creating personalised learning experiences for individual students and providing real-time feedback, making it a potentially powerful tool.

Many school librarians on the other hand are not yet sure what to do with it. What they don't seem to have realised is that there is work to be done as a librarian. Whilst teachers talk about plagiarism and how to catch it, school librarians should be talking about ethics and learning. It is a very scary time, but school librarians need to realise that everyone has had a standing start with AI and their skill set will set them apart. AI is all so new that even if they start to learn about it now, they will still be ahead of many. We can already see vast swathes of educators jumping in to use it and it is just as important for school librarians to do the same. It is difficult to have an opinion on something if you don't even know and understand the basics. School librarians need to start playing with what is available, not only to have an idea of how it can quicken up some of their admin tasks but also that they can talk about its uses from a librarian's perspective. This is going to be different from a teacher's and school's perspective as they are the information experts, and they need to understand that this is just an extension of what they already do. AI is just another tool that needs to be investigated and navigated.

Whilst educators and governments discuss and try and work out how to use AI within an education setting, it has been interesting to listen to these conversations. There is real fear but also excitement that at last there is an opportunity for change from teaching to the test to something more substantial and useful for today's world. It is these conversations that make me understand that this is a particularly important time for school librarians. A time to raise their voices and talk about their expertise within the changes that are coming.

The importance of inquiry-based learning

Inquiry-based learning is not a new concept, but its importance going forward cannot be overstated. This pedagogical approach encourages students to ask questions, investigate topics, and engage in critical thinking and discussion. It fosters self-directed learning, problem-solving skills, and a deeper understanding of the material. There has always been a worry that there is little time to teach knowledge through inquiry-based learning within a GCSE and A-Level school setting when there is a specific need to teach to the test, but this is not about either or, it is about both. Furze puts it well in a LinkedIn Post:

Where any of these fall down is not in the theory, it's in the implementation. Explicit instruction falls down when it becomes the arbitrary dissemination of dry, unnecessary information that can be accessed in other ways. Inquiry learning breaks down when it becomes a "choose your own adventure" story with too little guidance and structure (2022).

Furthermore, there is a train of thought that IL skills are more important or more useful than inquiry-based learning, however, Gaskque (2016) highlights that "Reed and Straveva (2006) argue that IL teaching without a reflective thinking approach makes it a mere set of abilities" which is why the combination of IL within inquiry-based learning is so essential.

There seems to be far more discussion now about the need for inquiry-based learning within the AI world. It is also the case that with the dawn of AI our students are going to need the skills of learning how to learn more than ever and this is the starting point right here.

Incorporating inquiry-based learning into the curriculum allows students to become active participants in their education, making connections between different subjects and applying their knowledge to real-world problems. This approach aligns closely with the goals of IL, as it empowers students to seek, evaluate and use information in meaningful ways.

Does this mean the end of teaching IL?

Having said that inquiry-based learning is going to be the way forward, I am not saying that the teaching of IL skills is no longer important. IL skills are essential within inquiry-based learning. I just feel that there is a wider picture than the teaching of IL skills on their own or as an add on to the curriculum. Looking at teaching IL within inquiry allows school librarians to work alongside teachers more effectively and in a way that helps teachers understand that these skills are part of the educational process. If the introduction of AI does impact teaching to a more skills-based curriculum, school librarians must be able to move quickly to explain what they are about and the expertise they can bring.

To do this, school librarians will need two things. Firstly, clear guidance on what a school librarian is and does. For now, the best resource, in my opinion, are the IFLA School Library Guidelines, based on nearly 60 years of research, which have just been assessed for relevance and found they are still as relevant today as they were when they were revised in 2015. They provide a concrete platform for building a school library around. These aspirational and inspirational guidelines give a clear vision for schools and school librarians going forward. Giving all school librarians, whatever their background, a focus to move forward, at a pace that suits them and their school.

The second is a framework for inquiry-based learning which I feel will be an important tool for school librarians. FOSIL is the only free inquiry framework with a skills framework from reception to year 13. It includes an increasing number of resources which are ready to use and a forum of support enabling school librarians to work together. In my opinion, this makes it an essential resource for all school librarians.

What will IL look like in the future?

I do believe that IL is going to be needed more than ever in the future, from learning how to access, navigate and use quality information to learning how to use information ethically. So why do I say that inquiry-based learning is also going to be the way forward? I can see that our students not only need IL skills, but they also need to be encouraged to think more deeply, they need to be encouraged to ask questions and they need to be encouraged to talk about how they feel about the information that they find. It needs to be more about what they have learnt than what they have found, and these skills are found within inquiry.

Going forward AI is certainly going to play a big part in the education of our students in the future. This will inevitably include inquiry-based learning focusing on real world learning. This, without question, will need to include IL through inquiry-based learning. We need to find a way

forward together and engage our students and teachers in the role the school librarian can play within the educational process of their schools.

Declarations

Ethics approval

As this is a conceptual article without direct data collection or interaction with human subjects, ethical review was not considered necessary.

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AI-generated content

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