Guest Editorial

Ahearn, A. (2007) "Guest Editorial on Teaching Information Literacy" *Journal of information literacy*, 1(2),
http://jil.lboro.ac.uk/ojs/index.php/JIL/article/view/GuestEditorial-V1-I2-2007.

Guest editorial on teaching information literacy.

From the view of an academic teaching in a research-driven department, the opportunity to see the change in librarians' work with students has been most rewarding. Originally librarians seemed to function only as an essential service provider but now they have added the role of essential teaching provider. But on being asked to quantify the difference that the librarians are making to the education of my civil engineering students and, in particular, how they are reducing plagiarism with their teaching initiative (OLIVIA – Online Virtual Information Assistant), I was baffled. This 'widget measurement' approach to education seems alien and misguided. My response is that the justification for teaching information literacy to students cannot depend on dubious statistics quantifying an impact on rates of student plagiarism. The justification comes from a 'first principles' approach where one arrives at the conclusion that 'it must be right'. My reasoning in arriving at that conclusion is as follows:

My vocation as a teacher of civil engineers is to help equip some of the smartest students in the world to make choices to the benefit of mankind: primarily, I aim to help them graduate as civil engineers steeped in the knowledge, skills and attitudes that befits the role of a professional person who will assume responsibility for making changes to our world that will outlast our lifetimes, improving the lives of thousands or millions. It is a serious and worthy undertaking. Part of the knowledge skills and attitudes that a right thinking modern engineer needs is knowledge of information management principles, the skills to apply those principles and the attitude that makes them willing to exercise self-discipline in using those skills ethically.

It is unlikely that anyone will oppose this as a statement of principle but they may question the means by which the principle is implemented. At Imperial, we have adopted OLIVIA, an information literacy course that covers, inter alia, plagiarism and referencing. It incorporates a short 'heart and minds' film on the rewards of being an honest researcher who cites sources. It is taught by a central service (the library) but via local, discipline-specific classes in departments using lectures, classroom activities and computer labs.

Has it instantly cured plagiarism? Of course not and no one was naïve enough to think it would. Will it eventually cure plagiarism? Unlikely – even in the 'good old days' before Google, plagiarism existed and was never cured. Is the teaching pointless? Assuredly not. But how can I say this without evidence, without proof in an age where measurement and evaluation are considered 'best practice'? I can say it because the same logic that applied before the creation of OLIVIA applies after her creation. The rationale for OLIVIA is this: it must be right, in an era of advanced computer technology readily available to all citizens in developed communities with oceans of information available at a desktop, to advocate an ethos of honourable usage of information and teach the knowledge and skills to support that ethos. Further, it must be right for the experts in information literacy and information management, namely librarians, to profess their expertise to the communities they serve. It must be right to expose students to the rigours of academic practice, just as we expose medical students to the rigours of hospital practice, music students to the rigours of performance and engineers to the rigours of construction or production.

From an institutional point of view, it must be right to provide all students in all departments with an equivalent grounding in information literacy whilst retaining the flexibility to inculcate in them the norms, culture and practices of information

management in their specific discipline. It must be right to remove from plagiarist students the defence of 'no one told me so I didn't know it was wrong'. As an academic who formerly practiced as a solicitor, it has long seemed to me that universities use entirely the wrong legal analogy when dealing with student plagiarism. Universities tend to ask questions about whether the student 'knew' it was wrong: I contend that this is pointless. The better question is whether the student 'ought to have known it was wrong'. Students should be held to the standard of academic integrity expected of the reasonable student of ordinary competence who has been taught the principles of information literacy and passed the assessment test on that learning. Once their 'qualification' in information literacy is established, we move away from emotive issues as to whether the student was 'honest or guilty' to an issue of whether the student applied the appropriate standard of care. But the key to all of this is whether the university has actually taught information literacy to the students and the key to that is the expert knowledge held by the university librarians and their role in teaching.

OLIVIA alone is no solution to plagiarism but OLIVIA is important as a part of a wider university culture that fosters student pride, ability and confidence in knowledge management. Asking me to quantify the impact of OLIVIA in reducing plagiarism will always defeat me: too many variables, too many disputed definitions, too much outside of my control to be able to measure longterm cause and effect. Such studies are pseudo-studies at best. Asking me whether OLIVIA inspires and encourages me to keep fighting the good fight to inculcate information literacy and norms of academic integrity in my students and the answer you get is, simply, 'yes'. Asking me whether OLIVIA will strengthen the university's position when it deals with plagiarist students and my answer is 'yes'. Asking me whether students say they like OLIVIA and the answer, collected by the library team, is 'yes'.

The work of librarians with students in an era of easy plagiarism ought not to be downplayed to the level of mere service providers whose work is measured by simplistic 'widget measurement'. From first principles we can derive the statement that knowledge, and thus knowledge management, is at the heart of the work of a university. Therefore universities owe a duty to inculcate in students the ethos and competencies suited to our information age. The modern librarian is the university specialist best qualified to lead on this work, which is work for the longterm benefit of the students and society: immeasurable but invaluable.

Guest Editor: *Alison Ahearn*
Senior Teaching Fellow (Civil Engineering) and Lecturer (Educational Development)
Imperial College London