
Can information literacy motivate students to become global citizens?



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INTRODUCTION

Can information literacy (IL) help students to become global citizens? Contemporary citizenship encompasses a wide range of political, civil, social and cultural rights and responsibilities. Formal education is becoming more aware of this and of the need to equip students with the skills they need to exercise their rights and responsibilities in their workplace and beyond. This article will briefly reflect on the nature of these concepts and on their place in higher education. Higher education institutions are no longer producing 'graduates' and are instead expected to produce lifelong learning global citizens. Learning is not complete on graduation. Rather it is hoped and expected that learning is a lifelong practice related not only to a career but also to the wider experiences of life and living.

IL AND CITIZENSHIP

IL is a critical part of this process as it enables learners to take responsibility for their own continued learning in areas of personal or professional interest. The association between IL, learning how to learn and lifelong learning is not new. IL and its association with education have been around since the 1980s and it is now recognised from curriculum statements (CAUL (Council of Australian University Librarians), ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries), ANZIL (Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy) and SCONUL) around the world that students need to be information-literate. Educators are recognising that learners

need to understand and engage to some degree with the information environment as part of the learning and research process. Yet a consensus on what this engagement and understanding is and how it is achieved is not universally accepted or even understood.

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

IL is now intrinsically associated with information practice and critical thinking. As information and communication technologies evolve at such a rapid pace the need for learners to have IL skills is becoming more critical than ever. In many ways IL is an extension of the traditional notion of literacy. Christine Bruce, associate professor and assistant dean of teaching and learning at Queensland University of Technology, argues that 'IL education is the catalyst required to transform the information society of today into the learning society of tomorrow'¹ It is such thinking that has placed Australian researchers at the forefront of the IL discourse.

ECONOMIC RIVERS

The evolution of Western economies has moved from requiring skilled craftsmen through industrial manufacturing to an information- and knowledge-based society where information replaces land and capital as a source of wealth². In recent times this argument has been further developed with the argument that citizenship is more than a local concept and is now cosmopolitan³ An active and effective citizenship in these times requires citizens to be empowered to exercise their rights. Precisely what is meant by citizenship is historically significant and it does vary from one national context to the next⁴. However, I believe it is fair to say that citizenship is increasingly becoming a more global concept due to technology, media and mass communication.

GLOBAL LEARNERS

In order to participate, citizens need to have the right skills. IL, literacy and information technology skills are all part of the skills set required for twenty-first-century citizens. We are living in a global age in which our understanding of the words 'student', 'learner' and 'citizen' is changing. The relationship between the state, education and the individual is being transformed. Learners and citizens are exposed to more influences, resources and choices than ever before. This has huge implications for learners and opens up the possibilities of global learners and global citizens. We are now learners and citizens of the world community.

While the concept of citizenship is changing so also are the citizens. When considering the traditional undergraduate student we must concede that for the most part a new breed of citizen has arrived. Their sense of belonging is mobile, global and virtual. This citizenship is built through networks and spaces that do not fall into geographical or political regions. Molz describes them as being 'children of blurred boundaries and global mobility'⁵, calling them 'Netizen'. They are citizens who grew up with the internet and while they physically live in one country they are in contact with the world via the global computer network. While physically not actually, virtually they are neighbours, living next door to one another⁶. Thinking about information and information technology in contemporary society requires us to think about our culture as well as our economy. These are trends that call for a critical approach to learning. The concept of a global citizen is intrinsically connected to the concept of a lifelong learner as a result of this constant flux.

DIGITAL DIVIDE

It is impossible to consider concepts of citizenship, information and learning without mentioning the divide between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. It is still held that accessibility of the internet would enhance participation in cyberspace, thus creating opportunities for the active participation of all citizens. It is widely assumed that the digital divide is created by inequalities in access. Within educational institutions efforts to address this seem focused on getting everyone online as quickly as possible. The focus is on providing information technology to access information. It is not on providing IL education. Those who do not engage are seen as inactive citizens and problematic. Issues such as inclusion and exclusion are at the heart of citizenship. An immediate concern for higher education is the 'non-traditional students' who for whatever reason – and there are numerous valid reasons – may not have access to a PC, have never used a PC and are terrified at the thought of engaging with web-based resources. By not engaging they are immediately at a disadvantage as learners as well as citizens.

One obvious concern is that the info-poor may become marginalised when basic computer and IL skills become essential for personal advancement. Serious questions must be asked about how higher education will address those who do not have the skills to engage.

IL is usually described as the ability to locate, manage and use information effectively for a range of purposes. As such it is usually seen as a generic skill. Australian research into this field indicates that IL is more than a generic skill but is rather a complex phenomenon. IL is a way of understanding the vast experiences expressed by learners in relation to engaging with information for decision-making, problem-solving and research. This picture of IL is very different from the lists of skills and attributes usually found in the literature. Education is increasingly seen as a global commodity and our learners are fast becoming global citizens. While education was once a national affair, now, thanks to improved communication and global pressures, it is becoming global as well as national. Not only are graduates emerging into a more 'global' environment but they are also under increasing pressure to continue learning throughout their professional life. National and international strategies are calling for graduates who can work flexibly and successfully in this environment. They must not only have specialist knowledge of their field but also a range of competencies to participate in a workplace subject to constant change throughout a professional lifetime.

CONCLUSION

IL is a concept that can bridge the gap for students to help them move from the status of graduate to the status of lifelong learner and global citizen. IL is complex in nature and is perceived in many different ways. The same can be said for the concepts of lifelong learning and of the global citizen. IL has the potential to motivate students to become lifelong learners and global citizens. It can bring about educational change and present real learning opportunities that can motivate students to become lifelong learners and more active citizens. To some this may seem an idealistic aspiration. However, there are many drivers – economical, political, social and cultural – affecting the course of teaching and learning. I believe that it is in all our interests to equip our graduates with the skills they need to continue their learning and to participate actively in society. This is not simply an idealistic aspiration. It is a challenge for us all.

NOTES

- 1 Christine Bruce, 'Information literacy as a catalyst for educational change: a background

- paper', white paper prepared for UNESCO, the U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science and the National Forum on Information Literacy for use at the information literacy meeting of experts at Prague, Czech Republic, 2002, p 1
- 2 Ana Maria Ramalho Correira, 'Information literacy for an active and effective citizenship', white paper prepared for UNESCO, the U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science and the National Forum on Information Literacy for use at the information literacy meeting of experts, Prague, Czech Republic, 2002, p 5
 - 3 See Gerard Delanty, *Citizenship in a global age: society, culture and politics*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 2000.
 - 4 Nick Stevenson, *Cultural citizenship, cosmopolitan questions*, Open University Press, Maidenhead, 2003, p xi
 - 5 Jennie Germann Molz, 'Getting a flexible eye, round the world travel and scales of cosmopolitan citizenship', in *Citizenship studies*, 9 (5), 2005, pp 517–31, p 520
 - 6 *Ibid.*, p 525