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What does Information Literacy mean?  
Some examples from different disciplines



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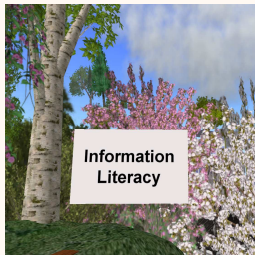
## What does Information Literacy mean? Some examples from different disciplines

Sheila Webber  
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Department of Information Studies  
May 2008

## Outline

- What is IL?
- Findings about disciplinary differences
- Implications of findings

Sheila Webber, May 2008



## Information literacy: what does it mean?

Sheila Webber, May 2008



Definition by:  
Johnston &  
Webber



### It means to me:

“Information literacy is the adoption of appropriate information behaviour to identify, through whatever channel or medium, information well fitted to information needs, leading to wise and ethical use of information in society.”

Sheila Webber, May 2008



Definition by:  
Johnston &  
Webber



### It means to me:

“Alfabetización informacional es la adopción de un comportamiento informativo apropiado para la identificación, a través de cualquier canal o medio, la información adecuada a las necesidades que nos permita alcanzar un uso inteligente y ético de la información en la sociedad” (translated JJ Álvarez Galán)

Sheila Webber, May 2008



## It means in different languages?

- Informationskompetenz Competency?
- la maîtrise de l'information
- Informaatiolukutaito Literacy?
- Informationskompetens Fluency?
- Las competencias en información
- La alfabetización informacional

(with apologies for any linguistic errors!)

Sheila Webber, May 2008

**It means:**  
**Information Literacy models and standards**  
 (this is the British model for universities)

See [http://www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/information\\_literacy/headline\\_skills.html](http://www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/information_literacy/headline_skills.html) for an explanation

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SCONUL Seven Pillars Model for Information Literacy  
 (Schools of College, Research and University Librarians)

<http://www.sconul.ac.uk>

Basic Library Skills and IT Skills

Recognise information need

Distinguish ways of addressing gap

Construct strategies for locating

Locate and access

Compare and evaluate

Organise, apply and communicate

Synthesise and create

Information Literacy

Novice Advanced beginner Competent Proficient Expert

**It means:** a graduate attribute

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**Characteristics of a Sheffield Graduate**  
 (University of Sheffield Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy)

“4. Demonstrate the core capabilities and skills of information literacy, interacting confidently with the nature and structure of information in their subject and handling information in a professional and ethical manner;”

See <http://www.shef.ac.uk/content/1/c6/04/83/65/lta-strategy2.pdf>

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**It means:** behaving with information in an information literate manner....

But what is **information**?

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**For someone who teaches marketing**

- News Stories
- Journal & magazine articles
- Books
- Observation (e.g. observing how shoppers behave in a supermarket)
- Colleagues
- Business organisations
- Statistical data
- Market research data
- Google
- Article databases e.g. ABI/Inform
- Company websites
- Company accounts
- Librarians

Sheila Webber, May 2008

**For someone who teaches English**

- Manuscripts
- Journal articles
- Books
- Video & sound recordings
- Performances
- Newspapers (including archives)
- Libraries, archives & museums
- Colleagues
- Websites (e.g. about a writer)
- Artefacts (e.g. rune stones)

Sheila Webber, May 2008

## For someone who teaches Civil Engineering

- Engineering journals
- Books
- Web of Science database
- Google
- Product information
- Manufacturers' websites
- Photographs
- Data sheets
- Design manuals
- Codes of practice
- Colleagues
- Land surveys
- Geographic Information
- Librarians
- Standards and Regulations
- Log books

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## Even when sources are the same...

- The Marketing professor needs today's news and articles to keep-up-to date with the business world: **monitoring and searching** are important
- The Chemistry professor needs **detailed, regular, up-to-date searches on specialist subjects**
- The English professor wants to connect her research to new developments: **browsing and linking** are important

Sheila Webber, May 2008



## Differences

- The information sources differ
- Information behaviour differs
- Information literacy differs
- ...so what people want their students to do with information differs
- and then ... also **people** are different
- so what motivates them to work with librarians differs

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Results from our project:  
revealing some differences

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- Three-year Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) - funded project (Nov 2002- Nov 2005)

*To explore UK academics' conceptions of, and pedagogy for, information literacy*

- Sheila Webber; Bill Johnston; Stuart Boon (Research Assistant: now lecturing at Strathclyde University)

Sheila Webber, May 2008



## Key research questions

1. **What conceptions of information literacy are held by UK academics?**
2. What are academics' conceptions and reported practice in educating students for information literacy?
3. **Do differences in conception correspond to differences in discipline?**





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- 20 academics from each of 4 disciplines (varied sample, 26 different universities)
- Phenomenographic research approach, identifying variation in conception
- Phenomenography has been used to investigate approaches to teaching, approaches to study, conceptions of a subject etc.

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	Pure	Applied
Hard	Contextual imperatives: each new piece of knowledge has its place in the picture "Discovery" <b>Chemistry</b> 	Draws on hard knowledge domain, applied to practical problems Outcomes which are often products, techniques <b>Civil Engineering</b> 
Soft	Contextual associations: loosely knit clusters of ideas "Interpretations" <b>English</b> 	Draws on soft pure knowledge domain to interpret and understand situations Outcomes are often protocols or procedures <b>Marketing</b> 

"Phenomenography is the empirical study of the differing ways in which people experience, perceive, apprehend, understand, conceptualise various phenomena in and aspects of the world around us."



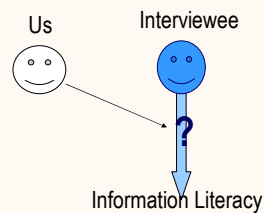
Marton (1994)

Qualitative research aiming for **insights**

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### Insights



What is key focus of Interviewee's conception of IL?

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### Marketing: Information literacy as...



1. **Accessing information quickly and easily** to be aware of what's going on (focus on providing links, reading lists, demonstrations – but perhaps not guidance on evaluation)
2. **Using IT to work with information** efficiently and effectively (e.g. using data mining software to create information out of data)
3. Possessing a **set of information skills** (e.g. "find, sift, sort, analyse and disseminate" (MKTG05)\* and applying them to the task in hand (e.g. an assignment or article) but not concentrating on how the skills might be more broadly useful

\*interviewee number

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### Marketing: Information literacy as...



4. Using information literacy to **solve real-world problems** (so needing information literacy skills, but focusing them on problem solving)
5. Becoming **critical thinkers** "Always thinking, always questioning." (MKTG11)
6. Becoming a **confident, independent practitioner** e.g. "It [information literacy] means I can do my job. Do it effectively. I can find the information I am looking for and I know what to do with it as well." (MKTG15)

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Example of conception1:

“So information is vital. And being up to date with the information you are gathering is vital—being on top of events. In business, nothing remains the same. One day the sky is blue, the next day it's green or red. You've always got to be on top of the news and pulling in information from every angle.” (Marketing 09)

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## English: Information literacy as...

1. Accessing and retrieving **textual information**
2. **Using IT to access and retrieve** information
3. Possessing **basic research skills** and knowing how and when to use them
4. Becoming **confident, autonomous learners and critical thinkers**

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## English and Marketing

- Marketing: using IT to **manipulate** data (geographic, statistical etc.)
- English: using IT to **access** information – mostly text
- Marketing: problem solving, looking forward to using information as a professional in the workplace
- English: focus on personal development

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## Chemistry: Information literacy as...

1. **Accessing and searching chemical information**  
Traditional published sources: databases of articles and chemical structures
2. Mastering a **chemist's information skill set**  
Includes handling data they have created e.g. in the lab
3. **Communicating** scientific information
4. An **essential part of the constitution/ construction/ creation of knowledge**  
the chemist in the information society!

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## English & Chemistry

- Personal (English) vs Professional (Chemistry)
  - cf. Personal vs. group mode of researching
  - Social/civic role vs. role of chemist in society
- Nature of information
  - Unified view of what chemistry information is (building blocks of knowledge) vs. in English focus on different media
  - Way in which information accessed/ used including role of IT

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## Civil Engineering: Information literacy as...

1. Accessing and retrieving data and information e.g. “the ability of students to find relevant information to the tasks at hand” (CENG15)
2. Applying and using information e.g. “the ability to recognise, sort, manipulate, or make use of the information” (CENG09)
3. Analysis and sense making e.g. “basically it is creative, analytical problem-solving” (CENG16)
4. Creating, and incorporating information into a professional knowledge base e.g. “get them to the point that they can be literate in their discipline and its wide, wider context....” (CENG19)

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## Focus for (and concerns about) information literacy also may depend on -

- Specialist field within a subject e.g. *18<sup>th</sup> century English* vs. *English popular culture*
- Teaching context (e.g. what kind of university? Are academics encouraged to do more than "lecture"?)
- Level of student (progression in information literacy each year!)

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## Note that academics' conceptions do not all focus on "traditional" search/ find parts of information literacy

- Reflective thinking, being a practitioner, being creative ....
- Keywords from a seminar with academics and students at Sheffield earlier this year: confidence, curiosity, positive attitude, evaluation, synthesis

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## Creating relationships

- Understanding and empathy with potential partners – listening and learning e.g.
  - Don't just be a "toolbox" person (relating a toolbox of IL skills to specific context, assuming academics are deficient in IL...)
- Using knowledge of potential partners for Relationship Marketing approach (tailoring product, promotion, place, process)

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## Creating relationships

- Different strategies likely to appeal to different categories e.g.
  - **Toolbox** and **access** approaches will not appeal to academics with "Engaging with students to show them the value of information and information literacy" conception (would want critical thinking & lifelong learning approach)
  - A critical thinking approach may not excite an academic who wants students to "find chemical data and structures for their assignments"

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## Opportunities

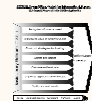
- Changing structure (e.g. Bologna Process)
- New head of university or department
- Teaching quality audits
- New or changed degree programmes
- New information systems, or educational technology
- New library or learning spaces
- New academic staff

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## Creating relationships

- Some academics like librarians' models and frameworks
- Some will want to adapt the models
- Some academics will only be interested in pursuing **their** conception of information literacy: but perhaps they have good reasons!



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## Questions to ask

- **What kinds of “information”** is it important for students to be able to deal with?
- What information literacy skills will students need **after they graduate?**
- What **conception of information literacy** do you and colleagues have? If varied, they may be complementary!
- **What kinds of study** and information practice are **valued** e.g. problem solving; finding information; critical evaluation

Sheila Webber, May 2008



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<http://information-literacy.blogspot.com/>

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