

*Information literacy and the Curriculum*

*Case study: The Lebanese university*

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I would like to start my intervention by pointing out that the concept of information literacy does not exist in the Arabic language. This lack could be due to the fact that it is a relatively new concept, and that it doesn't seem related to a specific social need and practice in the Arabic world, and possibly by the fact that the concept itself is evolving.

The Americans were the first to discover the need to organize digitized information since they encouraged developing communication technology and produced information and data. Thus they felt the need for information literacy, which helps locating, finding, and evaluating information. The ALA and many other professional organizations have tried to extend the scope of Information literacy from a practical frame to a larger one. Information literacy is seen as a philosophy helping an inspiring new way of teaching (Hughes, 1996).

According to this philosophy, all students or educated people will be empowered while using, locating and evaluating information, they will gain many skills allowing them to learn and later solve their problems. Students will become lifelong learners, able to act in a more independent way.

Information literacy developed, and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) in 2000<sup>i</sup> and the Australian Library and Information Association<sup>ii</sup> set for it standards, programs and methods of evaluation. However, the Europeans, and mainly the French and British, considered information literacy merely from a practical point of view as information skills or competence in information.

#### A- PROBLEMATIC:

Most of the universities provide material for their students to help them use information and acquire information skills. Some of them provide courses in information competencies.

Are these courses efficient in reaching their goals? Is the mere inclusion of these courses in the curriculum sufficient for considering the students to have fully acquired the needed competencies? Are these competencies helping students achieving better academic results?

If the answer is negative, is it the methods of teaching that don't incorporate information into the information literacy in its wider aspect? What is the role of the teacher in creating positive change in this field? What is the role of the librarian? How are the tasks distributed between teacher and

librarian? What are the competencies that the students should acquire and that should be provided by the institution in order to consider them information literate?

#### B- CASE STUDY:

The Faculty of Information and Documentation chooses its students from young ones who got their baccalaureate and applied for an entrance exam to the faculty in order to obtain an undergraduate diploma in journalism, public relations or library sciences. The methods of teaching are mostly lectures. Since our university didn't formulate a philosophy or method of teaching, we can assert that the students rely on the teacher in preparing, exposing and explaining their work. Their role seems to be much more oriented toward digesting the material and retrieving it when needed.

Our students are supposed to deal with at least two languages and usually they are able to manipulate three languages (Arabic, French and English). They follow a course in information skills, so they are exposed to the sources of information, and they do a lot of applied work because the faculty of information is considered a faculty of applied sciences. They are computer literate before entering the faculty, which has its own computer lab, and the students use it extensively.

The students of this faculty are privileged in this particular area because their courses teach them how to search, they have the tools and they can access specialized databases. They also know how to evaluate the information they get and how to cite a bibliography according to the norms.

Our students have the information skills but are they information literate?

Many (10) teachers told us while asking them about their students' projects that these projects are feeble and badly structured. Students are unable to figure out the topics in a comprehensive manner.

Their work seems to be often:

1. Broken up and disconnected. The students are incapable of raising simplified problematic issues and tend to tackle very general subjects
2. They copy texts without citing their sources,
3. They are unable to distinguish between the commercial information and the scientific o
4. They use non-scientific information from blogs, forums and free information,
5. They rarely use specialized data bases and scientific articles,
6. They have difficulty with synthesis,
7. Students have difficulty citing specific sources and referring to them, instead they just copy them,
8. They tend to choose vague and/or very general topics for their research.

The main problem seems to be the relative difficulty students have with using information in a comprehensive way. They also face the difficulty of linking the different courses together and merging concepts in one topic. The result is an incomplete work unable to merge different competencies in one work. (Competencies of research, evaluation, citation and bibliographic work).

C- How can we explain these observations:

#### 1- OVER EXPOSURE TO INFORMATION :

We are living in a period where information is overwhelming. Most of the time we drown in the information the different media constantly produce.

So it is difficult to say that the students are suffering from a lack of information. On the contrary, they might be suffering from its constant presence and availability. They also have difficulty in distinguishing between its different kinds: journalistic, commercial, analytical and the relative lack of use of scientific information.

Before the digital age, students used to find all their bibliographical needs in the libraries whatever their specialty. Libraries used to conserve all material. They used to select the scientific material, evaluate books, journals and other materials according to specific norms and regulations, and offer them to the students. Libraries used to be the source of scientific information that students frequently used. Nowadays the situation has changed and the students tend to surf on the net instead, and for obvious reasons: the facility of getting the information and the rapidity in accessing it.

The digital age has also had its influence on the teaching process. Teachers have to deal with this intruder becoming an interesting and disturbing tool of learning. But information is also a tool to be taught and teachers cannot expect students to master it without a real intervention on their side. The teacher has to consider information to be a material to teach and evaluate in order to help students to use it correctly.

#### 2- READING PRACTICES:

Arab society suffers from a low level of reading. We are faced in this case by the difficulty of training students to long readings. The media reinforces zapping and internet the hyperlinks. The result seems to be the difficulty to concentrate.

The low level of reading influences the teaching process and enhances the need of giving the students the basics of functional reading. A study by Maria Pinto (Pinto, 2008) pointed out the necessity of teaching students how to write abstracts of the text they read. These exercises lead

the students to observe the structure of the texts and the fluency of the ideas, the analysis, synthesis and the production of the information. This reflects on the final results of the students.

Attending the university is no longer a tough passage from secondary school; the democratization allows 85% or more of an age to attend university instead of 12% in 1975. In Lebanon these young students aren't taking specific courses in information in schools, which forces the universities to tackle these needs with more seriousness. Learning Functional reading becomes a necessity for a large number of students.

### 3- FUNCTIONAL READING:

Ways of reading change according to its purposes, some readers seek pleasure, others are after the meaning. Readers sometimes are after the discovery of a text, some its comprehension and others are looking for another opinion.

What matters to us is the reading related to academic work. This kind of activity is in line with a process and is affected by a changing project shaped differently before, through and after reading. This reading supposes a dynamic participation of the reader. His position defines the intellectual activity needed, necessitates comprehension, time to digest and acquire the key concepts of the text (Brouillette, 1996)

The strategy in this particular type of active reading changes when the reader starts evaluating the text according its purpose, questioning the relations between concepts and the correctness of their use. This kind of active reading is closely connected to previous knowledge and readings. The reader interacts with the content according to the knowledge acquired. Previous knowledge determines to a certain extent the amount and the quality of information that a student can deal with in a text and which in turn affect the reconstruction of the meaning (Alexandre, 18-19-20mai 2006).

Readers try to reconcile different strategies in order to accept or refute information firmly established in the mind. This happens when the reader activates the affective, analytical, symbolic and intellectual processes. This activation constitutes the conceptual frame allowing transforming the act of reading into activity.

We believe that active reading is not an easy process mastered when the student knows how to read and comprehend. There are some strategies that the teacher and the librarian need to know in order to help students get inside a scientific text.

### 4- DIFFCULTY OF DISTINGUISHING THE TYPE OF INFORMATION

The low level of reading and the use of internet have an impact on differentiating between the different kinds of information. Readers are unable to distinguish between the scientific information, the commercial and the marketing one. So the students enter university, learn about information but cannot evaluate the information. Evaluating information even if it has its criteria is based mostly on the mental and cultural structure of the student. The information exists because of the possible communication with the reader; only because of his culture and experience is he able to evaluate the content of any document.

Arab readers have additional problems related to the use of a foreign language. Scientific production in Arabic is rare, and the net is mainly oriented toward non-scientific information like blogs and listservs and Arabic scientific e-journal are equally rare.

Readers know that information is a human product and could be false, incomplete or non scientific. They do know that the net is full of information that needs to be selected. But they believe in the legitimacy of the written text and forget to question the information. They tend to believe that what is written on the web seems to be an international truth as mentioned by Breivek (G.Breivek, 2006).

There are different types of information but the students tend to be lost in the web. They run away from the scientific specialized data bases that could relieve them from a difficult effort of evaluation.

##### 5- Role of information literacy:

How can we solve these problems? Are the competences in information science or information literacy a solution?

No doubt that the experiences of western universities can answer several questions because of their experience in the domain, yet we need more epistemological answers as well.

It seems that we are committing several mistakes. The course on information skills is taught outside its frame, students learn skills that they don't apply immediately, and it doesn't serve any direct learning goal.

The teachers don't participate at any level in finding, choosing and evaluating the sources; the student is on his own in that mission. The teachers don't evaluate the bibliography of the student. The information is not evaluated by the teachers. The librarian doesn't work with the teacher or the student unless he asks him to do so.

These deficiencies need analysis and solutions. The solutions lie in the hand of two partners: the teacher and the librarian. We will not mention the computer lab but we assume that it needs to be available.

What is the role of the teacher and that of the librarian in promoting and enhancing the use of the information, and acquiring the information skills in order to get better results?

D- Challenges facing the teacher:

1- Change in educational methods:

It's very obvious that traditional lecturing where a teacher says what he or she has to the students isn't anymore the best way to teach, even if it has been useful for the students. What is wanted is a method most likely to push the student to participate by stimulating his interest in a particular subject. This effort will help him increase and deepen his knowledge and thus become independent in acquiring future knowledge.

As current students may face different challenges when moving from one place of work to another or by working in other countries and societies, teaching them how to learn and to get used to find their information resources is a must in higher education.

At last, the Lebanese university has adopted the License-Master-Doctorate (LMD) system which has obliged many teachers to change their teaching techniques so as to meet the impact of this change. This was done by giving the practical work an important percentage of the grade. Imposing practical work in the new system will establish new practices and drive the students and teachers into different areas. However, we hope that mother institutions and faculties will be aware of these new practices in higher education.

This developing tendency will not last if the librarian does not consider his role to be a major element in applying this change, since required practical work on a particular research subject or more will definitely need mastering information resources and the ability to choose and find what we look for.

2- Collaboration with the librarian:

Information was consistently the essential tool the teacher was dealing with by organizing, analyzing, synthesizing, producing, re-producing and innovating. Yet this information was relatively little and available in libraries where the teacher benefits from it easily and presents it to the student, for this is his role.

Nowadays the students aren't using the university library as a main source of information. Breivek points out in her book that the percentage of academic information on the net does not go beyond 6 percent out of eight million WebPages Google is searching. This has brought up a new obligation for the teacher which is: dealing with information from an educational perspective with an intense cooperation with the librarian.

Besides, the communication technologies created different types of information. As a result, the teacher was asked to invest in these new types and expose the student to use, evaluate, analyze and produce information.

The librarian will accompany the teacher by playing his role in introducing, defining the information resources and how to evaluate the information for the students. Simultaneously, the evaluation process requires the participation of the teacher to fulfill this educational role by using this information.

During my last visit to many library directors in American Universities, it was very obvious that librarians are still unable to convince the students attending workshops about how to use information, unless the teacher instigates the students to do this. Usually the students respond without complaining to the teacher's requests asking for a specific type of information because of his potential to evaluate and his moral power.

We conclude that including an "Information skills" course in curriculums taught by an information specialist teacher may enable the students to be familiar, in theory, with many issues related to information, but it's an instruction that pertains definitely to the educational sphere. In fact, it's neither practically connected to specific research that a student is not preparing, nor is it evaluated by many teachers, but only by the teacher of the course.

#### E- Librarian's role

The librarian's role in academic institutions represents very important educational work along with its professional skills. It seems when traditional roles (bibliographic description) are declining the instructional educational role is being developed. Thus we can say that the current role for a librarian in an academic context is vital and profound. We mention the:

##### 1- Information specialist's role

It includes identifying the kinds of information, its specialized sources, evaluation, search methods and how to reformulate it in a bibliography. In addition to the traditional roles of librarians, new roles are being applied in the west, (but not in my institution) such as innovating tutorials and teaching materials ; preparing information resources, in both print and electronic formats for students ; preparing evaluations ; organizing workshops that would help our students to use search engines and specialized databases.

When types of documents were unstable because of technological development, the librarians' role is being oriented to help students to know and produce different types of documents.

The changing role of librarians into a new educational one imposes, according to regulations, that the librarian should be specialized in a scientific major. Since evaluation is a hard mission, the

librarian should master his subject to be able to confront the teacher and the student and persuade them of his competence.

## 2- Educational role:

Due to his studies and skills, the librarian can provide help, on the educational level, by finding texts varying in levels of competence and concepts, to support the students' education.

As already mentioned, the relation between our students and the text varies according to the knowledge they have stored. Hence, the effort in finding resources of various levels helps the student to master his major. The text doesn't exist until it's seen by the reader. So, the level of competence becomes an educational tool enabling the librarian to contribute to establishing the text according to the teacher's request.

In his profession, the librarian is used to abstracting. That is why he is able to help students understand the reading strategies and how to evaluate them. In addition, he is able to follow the students' scientific activity, accompany them and solve problems.

Besides which, the librarian who is specialized in a specific major helps the teacher innovate different types of tests that will gradually show interest in this particular information and its positive influence on education, and will point out to the teacher the importance of evaluating it.

## Conclusion

Obviously it is impossible to ignore information because it massively exists in our practical and professional life. We don't deny the weakness of information, especially scientific information, in our Arab societies where it is mainly concentrated in some social classes, or in those who can read and write.

But we know for example in Lebanon that knowledge may be hopefully oriented towards an economy of knowledge. Besides, in view of the interrelated economy, any opening to the other definitely requires the use of common tools. Economic, medical and other forms of information are needed since our economy is linked to the global one.

Our students are using communication tools and research mechanisms, studying about information resources and its types, etc. but they are not tightly connected to the educational process. Besides which, the librarian is hardly playing his role in this process. Our students are in great need of learning how to use information, and this is the main role of the librarian. However, in order to master, evaluate, criticize, and produce the information, students need the cooperation in a dynamic, advanced and critical way of both parties: teacher and librarian

(proposal attached on page 11). This cooperation gives the information skills value and puts them in a broader and surer framework with regard to the results of information.

<b>Standard 1:</b>	<b>Student determines the nature and the extent of the information needed</b>			
<b>Performance indicators</b>	defines and articulates the need for information			
<b>outcomes</b>		Responsible Partner		
		<i>Library</i>	<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Technician</i>
	discussions about topics	x	x	
	choosing of a topic		x	
	formulation or questions		x	
	finding key concepts	x		
<b>Performance indicators</b>	<b>understands the variety of IR and formats</b>	<i>Library</i>	<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Technician</i>
<b>outcomes</b>	organization of the knowledge in the libraries	x		
	use of raw material	x		
	organization of the knowledge in the libraries	x		

	different types of the information	x		
	different formats of the information	x		
	different audiences of the information	x		
	primary and secondary sources	<b>x</b>		
<b>Performance indicators</b>	<b>considers costs and benefits of acquiring the needed information</b>			
		Responsible Partner		
<b>outcomes</b>		<i>Library</i>	<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Technician</i>
	Realize the difficulty of getting information	x		
	the cost of information	x		
	the non-existence of Arabic scientific information	x		
<b>performance indicators</b>	<b>re-evaluates the nature and extent of the information needed</b>			
		Responsible Partner		
<b>outcomes</b>		<i>Library</i>	<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Technician</i>
	Evaluation of the work done	x	x	
	explanation of the bibliographical choices according to the objective	x	x	
<b>Standard 2:</b>	<b>Student accesses the needed information effectively and efficiently</b>			
<b>performance indicator</b>	<b>Accesses the needed information</b>			
		Responsible Partner		
<b>outcomes</b>		<i>Library</i>	<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Technician</i>
	use of key words and controlled vocabulary	x		
	Catalogs organization and accessioning	x		
	different types of documents	x	x	
	secondary and primary resources	x		
<b>performance indicator</b>	<b>constructs and implement designed search engines</b>			
		Responsible Partner		

<b>outcomes</b>		<i>Library</i>	<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Technician</i>
	use of different search engines	x		
	methods of searching	x		
	explanation of the results	x	x	
<b>performance indicator</b>	<b>retrieves information on line using other methods</b>			
		Responsible Partner		
<b>outcomes</b>		<i>Library</i>	<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Technician</i>
	open access information	x		
	use of data base	x		
	research methods	x		
<b>performance indicator</b>	<b>refines search strategy</b>			
		Responsible Partner		
<b>outcomes</b>		<i>Library</i>	<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Technician</i>
	discussion of results and findings		x	
	reformulation of questions related to the topic		x	
<b>Standard 3:</b>	<b>student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporate selected information.</b>			
<b>performance indicator</b>	<b>summarizes main ideas</b>			
		Responsible Partner		
<b>outcomes</b>		<i>Library</i>	<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Technician</i>
	exercises of abstracting		x	
	rephrasing		x	
	quoting		x	
<b>performance indicator</b>	<b>evaluates the information and its sources</b>			
		Responsible Partner		
<b>outcomes</b>		<i>Library</i>	<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Technician</i>
	criteria of evaluation	x	x	

<b>performance</b>	<b>synthesizes new ideas to construct new concepts</b>			
		Responsible Partner		
<b>outcomes</b>		<i>Library</i>	<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Technician</i>
	through research comparing different concepts and relating them		x	
<b>performance indicator</b>	<b>revises initial query</b>			
		Responsible Partner		
<b>outcomes</b>		<i>Library</i>	<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Technician</i>
	reformulation of questions		x	
<b>Standard 4:</b>	<b>student uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose</b>			
<b>performance indicator</b>	<b>applies new and prior information to the planning and creation of a particular purpose</b>			
		Responsible Partner		
<b>outcomes</b>		<i>Library</i>	<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Technician</i>
	writing a paper	x	x	
	defending the work		x	
	discussion		x	
<b>performance indicator</b>	<b>Revises the development for the product or performance</b>			
		Responsible Partner		
<b>outcomes</b>		<i>Library</i>	<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Technician</i>
	re-formulation of question to deepen research		x	



performance indicator	acknowledge the use of information sources in communicating the product of their work			
		Responsible Partner		
outcomes		Library	Faculty	Technician
	rules of writing a bibliography	x	x	
	citations	x	x	
	quotations	x	x	

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency.cfm>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.anziil.org/resources/Info%20lit%202nd%20edition.pdf>