Information literacy and school libraries

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What is information literacy? The word 'literacy' has many meanings, each capable of sparking controversy. Jamie McKenzie suggests information literacy is 'the ability to access information, evaluate it, synthesise it, report findings to a given audience and to store it for later retrieval.'

The internet: asset or liability?

The internet is a global resource of information, but it is not without serious drawbacks for the user. Because it is computerised access to information, librarians find that many students are drawn to it automatically, without necessarily having the skills to use it effectively. All too frequently students access the internet without considering whether there could be more effective resources close at hand — like a book! A book? Aghast! Books went out with hansom cabs and hobble skirts.

The key principle to impart to users for successful research using the internet is very simple: *planning*. It doesn't hurt to keep these points in mind yourself...

- Define the information you need.
- Design specific questions which, when answered, satisfy your needs.
- Identify possible resources, both electronic and written. Prioritise them.
- Gather information, and make notes, cut and paste into a temporary file. Keep a bibliography.
- Evaluate your findings. Does the information meet your needs?
- Synthesise and organise into a suitable format.
- Store your information in an easily accessible and secure intranet database.

Markus Feitz has discussed the changes taking place in learning, teaching methods and resourcing. More learning is taking place outside the classroom and the methods of finding information are changing. Libraries and librarians need to become part of the new learning environment, and be at the forefront of developing information literacy skills in students.

People find the amount of information available through the internet difficult to cope with. All too frequently they experience it as a catastrophic flood because they do not have the skills to handle it. Table 1 illustrates the information flood resulting from words students typically use to search Google.

Table 1: Student search results

Student Search Word(s)	Hits found by Google
Ancient Egypt	17 300 000
Ancient Greece	14 800 000
Ancient Rome	16 700 000
Animals	208 000 000
Castles	11 700 000
Weather	611 000 000
Whales	13 600 000

Accessed December 2005

Clearly students must be taught better skills to search for information on the internet, or have access to a secure intranet database of suitable sites available to them. There is not enough class time for unco-ordinated searches.

The intranet database

An important tool that libraries can provide is a secure intranet database of selected internet sites that can be linked to student assignments. Teaching staff should able to contribute sites and student assignments. Students should only be able to access their set work and linked sites and **cannot** add to or delete items from the database. To add to security, teaching staff should be able to add items to the database, edit work they have added, but **not** delete any items; this privilege reserved for library staff acting in accord with teachers. This protects other teacher's items from accidental deletion or mischievous acts. Table 2 suggests a workable security hierarchy.

Table 2: Sample security hierarchy for an intranet database

Head librarian, webmaster systems manager (Level 1)	Teaching staff and other library staff (Level 2)	Students (Level 3)
All phases of the system including cataloguing written resources and audiovisual materials, insertion of catalogued internet site addresses, assignments, curriculum documents and report accession. Editing the intranet and item deletion	Querying database, contribution of internet sites and assignments, curriculum viewing and printing of reports	Viewing of the database contents, and accession of set assignments. No report or curriculum accession, editing or deletion privileges

In selecting the intranet software, it is critical to involve representatives of all parts of the learning community, with a very strong representation from the library. It is unsatisfactory to leave the selection to a single group or individual, or be left at the mercies of members of the IT Department who may have had no formal library training. The greater the representation from the learning community, the likely they will 'own' and *use* the solution. The learning community must have a clear idea of what the intranet system is to do and commit ideas to paper. This should include curriculum support requirements, assignment accession needs, administration needs like timetable access, security safeguards, etc. The system must be linked to the library catalogue, and use the same subject headings. The intranet and the catalogue must be searchable either simultaneously (with the results simultaneously displayed) or as separate entities. Access to internet sites should be from icon links displayed on the screen.

To be effective, an intranet database should be scanned at least every 48 hours to ensure all catalogued sites are active. There is no quicker way to put teaching staff off using your intranet database than for them to find inactive sites while they are in the middle of giving a lesson. This scanning must be done by built-in software; it cannot effectively be done manually. Table 3 gives a typical result of scanning an active school intranet database.

Table 3: A sample activity scan of a school intranet database

40.81%	These sites are active.
34.28%	These sites are suspect, but because of the presence of a firewall, the scanning software cannot check.
17.54%	These are returned for further checking. If still unavailable after three checks, delete and replace.
6.65%	These sites no longer available and are deleted and replaced.

Implementing a new system

Once a decision is made to adopt an intranet database approach to storing and accessing internet sites, student's assignments etc, an education campaign must be launched to educate staff and students: on not only how to access it, but the *benefits* of doing so. Changing teacher and student habits is not easy and requires patience, commitment and willingness on the part of the library staff to move out of their comfort zone and take risks by moving into the classroom and the staff room. Leadership must come from the top; commitment to using the new system must be clearly spelt out. Library staff must see the new system as enhancing their roles in the learning community, utilising their traditional skills in finding information and teaching literacy skills and making them available in the new information search media. Librarians must be in the forefront of teaching information literacy skills or become irrelevant to the generation of students now in the learning communities.

Sources

Feitz, Markus. 'Successful Schools Conference' (1997) http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/lt/pguide/vision/viscurric.htm. Accessed December 2004.

McKenzie, Jamie. *The Research Cycle* (1995) http://www.fno.org/oakharbor.html. Accessed November 2004.

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Libraries Australia launched

The National Library of Australia is delighted to announce the culmination of a two-year project to redevelop the Kinetica service. The Libraries Australia service, launched on 30 November 2005, offers innovation in resource discovery, co-operative cataloguing and resource sharing to Australian libraries and the communities they serve.

The new service delivers an improved Cataloguing Client, which replaces the existing Kinetica Cataloguing Client, enabling libraries to catalogue online and add their holdings. Batch*Link is replaced by the Libraries Australia Record Import Service; libraries can catalogue in local systems and add records and holdings to the Australian National Bibliographic Database. The Libraries Australia Record Export Service replaces Marc*Link, providing the facility for libraries to access and download bibliographic records from the national database to include in their local catalogues. A web cataloguing form is also available and there is a new products service.

Libraries Australia Administration facilitates access by libraries to their profile, account details and billing information. It also enables libraries to register for services, manage their own library's information, and make changes to their library's profile as needed.

For the first time, bibliographic records in Chinese, Japanese and Korean scripts have been integrated into the Australian National Bibliographic Database.

In a message to Australian libraries Jan Fullerton, director-general of the National Library congratulated all of the staff concerned: 'their skill, commitment and professionalism over the more than two years of this project has been outstanding.'

Take a look at the new, re-branded Libraries Australia web site, providing information on all services, release notes, updated documentation, events and training at: http://www.nla.gov.au/librariesaustralia/index.html.

To subscribe to the librariesaustralia-l mailing list go to: http://www.nla.gov.au/librariesaustralia/discussionlists.html#libausl.

For enquiries specific to your library's needs contact the Libraries Australia Help Desk on 1800 026 155 or e-mail librariesaustralia@nla.gov.au. ∎