

Information literacy and the role of libraries



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As I write my column this month, I am in Germany, enjoying the opportunity to visit a number of public and academic libraries and to discuss with my German academic colleagues some of the recent and emerging issues affecting education for librarianship.

At every stop along the way, in Darmstadt, Mainz, Stuttgart, Hanover and Bremen, the conversation has turned to Pisa. Not the Italian city of Pisa, of course, but the Pisa 2000 study undertaken by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to compare the literacy levels of the different member countries of the OECD. The central article in the current issue of *BuB*, the journal of the professional association Berufsverband Information Bibliothek (BiB), also addresses the role libraries need to play in the rapidly and dramatically changing environment of German education.

Pisa (interestingly, always written as a proper noun rather than as an acronym) stands for the Programme for International Student Assessment. The study has had a significant impact within the European Union (EU) countries. The EU has as a goal the introduction of a flexible and modular education system for all member countries, under what is known as the Bologna Agreement. German universities are introducing Bachelor and Master degrees that will enable students to move between different universities across the EU and progressively collect assessment credits that can be amalgamated to result in a single qualification. Food for thought for Australian and New Zealand universities...

This ambitious goal has direct implications in determining the standards of education within individual institutions. The Pisa 2000 study examined a range of different literacy competencies amongst 15-year-old school students: reading literacy, mathematical literacy, scientific literacy and general transferable skills. In the context of reading literacy, Germany was ranked 21st in the list of 31 countries, six countries below the OECD average. This result was a huge wake-up call, with Pisa subsequently epitomising the state of education in Germany. Pisa has become the impetus for immense reform of the entire education system.

The OECD highlights the importance of 'reading literacy' as a critical dimension of the individual's capacity to succeed in life, incorporating the economic, social, cultural and political aspects of 21st century living. Reading is seen as an increasingly important life skill, due to the rapid developments in all forms of media, the growing importance of the written word in many occupations that used to be manual trades, and the essential need for lifelong learning. Literacy is regarded as a core competency that enables the individual to cope with the 'jungle of life'. Literacy has

therefore become an important ingredient in learning and, by extension, education, with considerable emphasis placed on lifelong learning.

Libraries and librarians in Germany have responded quickly to the challenge of being part of this world of learning, jumping into the fray to introduce programs to encourage reading and literacy in the community, and working with politicians to seek increased funding to support this new role in the education process. The libraries I visited, particularly the public libraries, were keen to present the innovative programs they have introduced, with some highly stimulating programs promoting literature, culture and philosophy.

Detlef Gaus' article in the professional journal *BuB* warns, however, that 'literacy' should not necessarily be translated as 'literature', that being literate does not equate with being able to quote writers like Goethe or Schiller, or to write one's own poetry or novel. Gaus is concerned that many librarians have misinterpreted the call to arms, returning to the 19th century goal of improving the lot of the lower classes through books and learning. He draws the library and information professional back into the realm of information literacy, saying that literacy is not about books and literature per se, but about one's ability to decipher, understand and reflect on the meaning of written texts, regardless of medium, in order to reach one's goals, as well as the ability to develop one's knowledge and potential in order to be an active participant in life.

This means that libraries need to clearly establish and articulate their role in information literacy at the macro level, to see themselves as partners in the education process to support ongoing, self-directed learning. The individual's information competencies must be seen as a central element in the development, delivery and evaluation of information services. This will require German universities to put the current highly traditional curricula of LIS courses under the microscope, to develop students' understanding of the broader field of information management within the discipline, and for German libraries to consider new management practices, especially in terms of recruitment and staff development.

In this issue of *inCite* Peter Kearns discusses how Australia rates in terms of adopting lifelong learning strategies, suggesting that libraries can be active partners, and even leaders, in building the necessary culture of learning and innovation in communities. One example, highlighted in this issue by Deb Best, is the Lithgow Learning City project where the library has played a central role in the community's adoption of a lifelong learning model.

PS In case you were wondering, in terms of the comparative results of the Pisa study, Australia was ranked 4th overall, after Finland, Canada and New Zealand. ■

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