Information literacy and public libraries

Information literacy (IL) is considered to be an essential skill for lifelong learning in the information age. Bruce (1997) took a holistic approach to IL and described it as an individual's experience encountering the complex information environment, where they recognise that information is needed and use information technology to find, evaluate information, to synthesise and use information wisely for resolving personal problems and for the benefit of others. Skov (2004) articulated that an information literate person not only possesses a set of information communication skills, but also they reflect on the various IL experiences, engage in independent learning through critical thinking and construct new meaning and knowledge of their situation. Information literate people are those who have learned how to learn and they are people prepared for lifelong learning (ALA, 1989). In general, the term 'Information Literacy' is associated with education from primary to university. But some people missed out during formal education. Can IL programs in public libraries support these people to continue their learning?

The Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 *Adult literacy and life skills survey* shows that around 46% of the entire adult population are not sufficiently literate to function without difficulty in our modern society. This means more than 5 million Australians would have difficulty reading and understanding a newspaper or magazine[1]. These people may be socially isolated and may have difficulty finding meaningful employment (Bundy, 2008). The primary challenge of Australian public libraries is to encourage and enable people to not only read, but to read well (Bundy, 2008). IL education would be a means to increase these people's overall literacy and self-directed learning.

Public libraries can play a vital role in promoting IL and supporting lifelong learning in our society. But in the absence of an IL framework and guidelines for public libraries, they work twice as hard to develop IL education program for the communities they serve (Harding, 2008). Most public libraries spend most of their effort providing access to information and ICT training, rather than teaching the IL process as a whole (Harding, 2008). So, an appropriate framework for developing IL programs in public libraries is needed.

Recently, a possible IL framework for public libraries, Prague's Frame, drew the attention of scholars who are interested in developing community information literacy (CIL) in public libraries. This framework was developed for the general public who approaches and experiences information for everyday life (Seneviratne, 2007). Therefore, identifying the nature of a community's information needs is a prerequisite to developing an appropriate IL program for that community (Seneviratne, 2007). Consistent with Partridge, Bruce and Tilley (2008), they found that understanding the different IL experiences of people in rural or urban areas can help to identify the nature of knowledge in different contexts.

Prague's Frame identified three base skills and five components to indicate the ordinary thinking level and realisation level of any individual in any ordinary community. (See Table 1).

The terms used by Prague's Frame are designed to make sense to the adult learners we need to reach. Based on Prague's Frame, individual community groups can identify their information needs within their own contexts, find the information source, and use them to fill their information gap. They may then teach their community how they approach the information to answer their everyday questions. The CIL may facilitate adult learners in our community to helping themselves and others to learn.

Table 1. Variables considered by Prague Frame (Seneviratne, 2007)

Base Skills	Components
Prior knowledge about information need	• awareness and knowledge about information needs has arisen • awareness of information gaps • awareness that gaps can be closed through information
Effective use of information	• understanding usability/ practicality of information once obtained
Communication	• communicate or guide others on the same question

Although Prague's Framework sounds promising for CIL, Partridge, Bruce and Tilley (2008) suggests that little research has been conducted on the subject on CIL. Future research direction of CIL should extend to these areas in multi- and inter-disciplinary manner:

- the nature of knowledge, information and IL in different cultures;
- IL experiences of individual and groups;
- motivators of people to walk the IL paths;
- strategies to help people to become IL;
- different IL experiences of people in rural and urban communities;
- experience of IL in oral-learning communities to enable the development of digital information skills;
- and experience of IL in different community contexts. (Partridge, Bruce & Tilley, 2008)

In conclusion, once public libraries develop a suitable framework for understanding IL needs in their communities, we will be able to deliver more appropriate IL programs that accommodate the needs of adult learners in the community and have better outcomes for the public.

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1. Measures of Literacy have been classified into 5 skill levels. Level 1 means the lowest measured level of literacy. Level 3 is regarded as the 'minimum required for individuals to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work in the emerging knowledge-based economy. The relatively small proportion of population reaches level 4/5.

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Parents and children learn about the internet together

21st C. Connections – Schools & Community Libraries

Parents and children adopt and adapt to technology at differing stages and this disjunction in techno-literacy exacerbates the 'digital divide'. This divide is not only in actual access to technology, nor the use of the technology, but in understanding the potential and the threats that technology brings.

It was this divide that Blacktown City Libraries addressed in developing an innovative program to enhance the internet literacy of parents and children. This program, "21st C. Connections – Schools & Community Libraries" was developed in partnership with Hebersham Public School and was trialed at Mount Druitt Branch Library over August-September 2008 with ten parents and children from Hebersham Public School participating.

The two main aims of the program were to assist in bridging the digital divide by:

1. Addressing issues of techno-literacy and information literacy in a socioeconomically disadvantaged area by focusing on both students and their parents;

2. Assisting parents to help their children with homework and study support after school hours.

The program bought parents and their children together to learn about the internet, focusing on cybersafety, how to strategically find and evaluate information, how to use search engines, an introduction to web 2.0, including social networking sites such as Bebo, blogs and Flickr, as well as how to use library resources on the web.

Students and parents from Hebersham Public School with the Mayor of Blacktown City, Councillor Charlie Lowles (back right) and Councillor Leo Kelly, OAM (back left).

The excellent news, as evaluations showed, was that the parents and the children were delighted in the library resources, and in learning how to use the online catalogue, how to place reserves, how to find our online resources such as Encyclopedia Britannica, and how to use our free resources to their benefit. One parent wrote, "I am elated to know when my children get stuck now I feel less threatened in knowing there is help, if I can't explain."

The school identified 10 families with children in the combined Year 3 & 4 classes at Hebersham Public School. In order to ensure the participants had a reasonably similar level of familiarity with computers, all families self-identified as internet-connected at home. Each child brought their school laptop to the sessions and used the Library's wireless internet connection. Parents used public access PCs.

The success of this trial and partnership between Blacktown City Libraries and Hebersham Public School has ensured that the program will continue in the future, but in a slightly different structure. In 2009 the Library will continue to partner with Hebersham Public School but will target every child in Year 6. The students will come to Mount Druitt Library with their parent for two one-hour sessions to learn about the internet, the wonders of the library, and how our resources will help them with their homework and study support.

There will be another course offered on cybersafety, aimed at parents. These courses are seen as an extension to the courses already successfully offered at Blacktown City Libraries on using the internet, common software packages and family history research.

Blacktown City Libraries are looking forward to maximising the full range of opportunities these courses offer, both to our customers and to our staff. Skill development and library-community partnerships to increase techno-literacy will continue to address the 'digital divide' in Blacktown.

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