

Guest Editorial

Information Literacy

Our future depends on new knowledge and highly trained people. Colleges and universities are important sources for these ingredients, and libraries have an especially important role to play. An increasing number of information tools provides new and effective options for those seeking information to develop new knowledge.

Paul Saffo, a research fellow at the Institute for the Future, speaks about information as a wave about to engulf us and about the need to learn to surf for information. He says that more important than the ability to recall specific information is the knack of making connections between seemingly unrelated pieces of information. Information surfers, who can develop knowledge and understanding out of large information flows, will be the pattern finders, applying new intellectual skills and working with more powerful information tools.¹

Today, most of us have too much information; this overload is one of the challenges we should address. In an information-rich environment, consumers must learn to overcome information anxiety and to digest and utilize information in decision making. New computer tools help us manage information, but also bring us more of it. The changes in formats and organization of information mean that users need guidance and may have unrealistic expectations because computers can create the mistaken impression that library research can now be accomplished quickly and effectively.

Information literacy is a concept that describes the task ahead. While the concept is not new, its current meaning and use were developed in response to na-

tional education reform reports that ignored the role of libraries in an information society. *The Final Report of the American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy* was issued in January 1989 and recommends educational reforms and new roles for librarians. It discusses the importance of information literacy for an informed citizenry and effective businesses, and it has been well received by nonlibrary groups.

An information literate person is able to recognize when information is needed and has the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information. Ultimately, information literate people learn how to learn. They understand how information is organized, how to find it, and how to use it in a way that can teach others.

Information literacy is an important and challenging concept in addressing a changing and varied library clientele with differing preparations for library use. With a pluralistic society and a global economy, there will continue to be changing user needs with respect to libraries.

When we plan information literacy programs, we should attempt to serve effectively the needs of users from a wide range of backgrounds. Information literacy must be couched in the context of the learner's language and culture. We need to prepare students to live in a multicultural, interdependent world. Academic libraries need to evaluate the relevance of collections and services and plan information literacy activities in the context of international issues.

Enhancing awareness of the role of academic and research libraries among

nonlibrary professionals and organizations and developing effective working relationships with them are ongoing priorities. Information literacy programs have provided an expanded context in which to work with a variety of organizations.

Information technology is changing our environment at an ever increasing rate. While such technology provides improved opportunities for accessing information, we must realize that these opportunities require knowledge and skills that may not be acquired easily and may be even more difficult to keep up to date. As the concept and definition of information literacy continue to emerge, related issues will have to be explored at greater depth.

As we build on the concept of information literacy for ourselves and for library and information users, we must become what Rosabeth Moss Kanter describes as "change masters," adept at the art of anticipating the need for, and of leading, productive change.² The future direction of academic libraries and library services depends not just on technological inno-

vations, but on human creativity and ingenuity. We need to help people formulate the right questions and develop the skills to address these questions, using the various tools and methods available to us. Here is where the concept and ideas of information literacy must be applied.

Our challenge is to welcome these changes and question our assumptions as we continue to expand and improve library services. This year, ACRL has taken a leadership role in promoting information literacy by publishing articles about it, developing posters and pamphlets, presenting programs at ACRL chapter meetings and at the ALA conference, and joining fifty other educational organizations in promoting this concept through affiliation with the National Forum on Information Literacy. The issues associated with information literacy provide a framework for thinking about the future of academic and research libraries.

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REFERENCES

1. Paul Saffo, "Surfing for Information," *Personal Computing* 13:213-14 (July 1989).
2. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *The Change Masters* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983).