

The Information Literacy class at Strathclyde University

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This paper gives background on our one semester, credit bearing Information Literacy class. This class is offered to second and third year undergraduates in Strathclyde Business School, and first ran in 1998/9.

The University setting

The University of Strathclyde, based in central Glasgow, has approximately 14,000 students. Those enrolled in the Business School are admitted to a faculty, rather than a particular course of study. At the end of third year, successful students may graduate with an ordinary degree, but the majority go on to the fourth, Honours, year. This four year programme is typical of Scottish universities.

The one-semester credit-bearing Information Literacy class is run jointly by the Department of Information Science (part of the Business School) and the Centre for Academic Practice. The Centre for Academic Practice is a university-wide central academic service with a remit to promote effective teaching and learning, conduct research into teaching and learning, and deliver training and professional development to both faculty and students.

The Information Literacy class runs in semester one (i.e. from late September to mid-December) giving twelve weeks of teaching and assessment time. It is an elective class, not associated with any principal subject of study (Information Science is not offered at the undergraduate level). There have been approximately 50 students in each year of the class.

Our working definition of information literacy

To put the class in context, this currently is:

- competency in selecting and interacting with the most appropriate source of information, whether that be print, electronic or another person;
- feeling comfortable with the tools needed for that interaction;
- communicating information effectively and appropriately;
- taking an intelligently critical approach to information in whatever form (e.g. paper, electronic, other people), and appreciating the changes in the information economy that affect what is presented;
- using and managing information effectively in a personal and work context;
- developing a sense of oneself as an information literate person.

The last point seems vital, since in order to **remain** information literate it is not enough to know a few techniques (e.g. how the basics of search engine X work). You also have to be able to adapt to changes in forms and types of information available, and to your own changing information needs as you go through different stages of life.

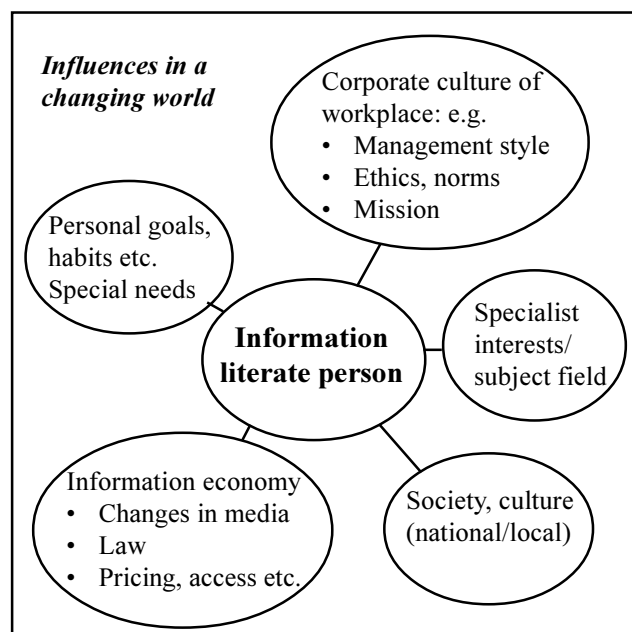
Aims and objectives of the class

The aim of the class is to provide students with a foundation in information seeking and communication skills;

- to enable more confident and competent performance during degree studies,
- to enhance employability, and
- to contribute to their capacity for lifelong learning and continuing professional development.

By the end of the class, students should be able to:

- Translate their information need into an information search strategy that is adaptable to the wide variety of information sources available;
- Make effective and efficient use of specific information tools and sources; and have a basic understanding the concept of the information economy.
- Analyse information, particularly in the context of an uncertain or arguable setting, and be able to clarify, define, identify assumptions or bias, challenge, judge credibility, make deductions, integrate, generalise, explain and otherwise display a critical approach to information use; and adopt appropriate professional values in the use of information;
- Work in a coherent and organised manner, possibly using a particular method, monitoring own performance, being sensitive to others, and being able to change and devise new approaches to activity;
- Communicate more effectively to a variety of audiences, orally and in writing.
- Apply information literacy concepts, strategies and techniques to specific areas of the curriculum for other credit bearing classes within their degree studies.
- Produce their own definition of information literacy, applied to themselves.



Mode of teaching and learning

The course links reading of selected research papers to lectures, computer labs. and tutorials. It uses the worldwide web and email both as topics of study and as modes of communication and assessment. The class has been taught by us collaboratively, with a few guest lectures from inside and outside the university.

The emphasis during lecture, tutorial and laboratory meetings is on collaboration, brainstorming, discussion, and reflection on the learning process, in addition to presentation of subject matter. Concepts of learning and their implications for course design and information management form an important strand in the literature on Information Literacy. Therefore, students are involved in relating educational ideas to their on course experiences and to their prior educational experiences.

Assessment

The teaching and learning strategy is reinforced and integrated by the nature of the assessed assignments. The first assignment is an individual assignment, and the second a group assignment. Between them, they require students to:

- select disciplinary topics and business organisations for investigation and evaluation;
- negotiate topics with tutors and with other students for the team assignment;
- work individually and as team members;
- apply concepts and techniques critically; and
- include reflective accounts of their learning processes in all written reports.

In addition, they students to make a contribution to the class email discussion list.

Topics

The key topic areas are:

- 1 Information literacy as a concept; - - - - - *Revisited in different ways throughout the semester.*
- 2 Communicating with people and organisations; - - - - -
- 3 Searching and browsing; - - - - - *Frontloaded into the first half of the semester.*
- 4 Selecting and evaluating information; - - - - -
- 5 Team skills; - - - - - *Mainly considered in the context of assignments*
- 6 Writing appropriately and effectively; - - - - -
- 7 The information economy - - - - - *Covered in the second half of the semester.*

Student comments

“Whereas before I perceived being information literate as simply knowing how to search for information, I now see it as a deeper, more psychological outlook. Becoming a critical thinker and adopting a learned approach when it comes to searching, organising and evaluating information is part of it. It also entails changing one’s mindset as to how to approach the world around them. Information literacy, in my opinion, is as much about the way we think as the things we do.” (3rd year Marketing and Business Law, student).

“In the context of lifelong learning I feel this project has allowed me to build a solid foundation for my future data gathering technique. Economics is very much a research based profession, moreover, the more efficiently and effectively you gather your data the better you do your job and the quicker you gain promotion - or so the theory goes.” (3rd year Finance and Economics student)

“Knowing about IT and information literacy are key skills nowadays, they are the next skills to be required by employers, just like Maths, English etc. ...” (3rd year, Tourism and Marketing student).

The time for information literacy has come!

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education’s new *Programme specifications* [1] emphasise abilities such as “Evaluate research and a variety of types of information and evidence critically.” and “Synthesise information from a number of sources in order to gain a coherent understanding of theory and practice.” (BSc in diagnostic radiography; example programme specification 3.)

1. Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. *Guides for preparing programme specifications*. Gloucester: The Agency, 2000. <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/progspec/progspec0600.pdf>

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See also <http://www.dis.strath.ac.uk/literacy/>