



Conceptions of information literacy of UK Chemistry and English academics

Sheila Webber (DIS, University of Sheffield) and Bill Johnston (CAPLE, University of Strathclyde); March 2007



Johnston &
Webber



“Information literacy is the adoption of appropriate information behaviour to identify, through whatever channel or medium, information well fitted to information needs, leading to wise and ethical use of information in society.”



The project

- Three-year Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) - funded project (Nov 2002- Nov 2005)
To explore UK academics' conceptions of, and pedagogy for, information literacy
- Sheila; Bill; Stuart Boon (Research Assistant: now lecturing at Strathclyde)

Key research questions

1. What conceptions of information literacy are held by UK academics?
2. What are academics' conceptions and reported practice in educating students for information literacy?
3. Do differences in conception correspond to differences in discipline?

Disciplinarity: research has revealed

- Differences in information behaviour e.g.
 - Search/ browse/ link
 - Types of source used
- Differences in approaches to teaching, learning & assessment
- So wanted to find whether differences re. Information literacy

Pure

Applied

Hard

Contextual imperatives:
each new piece of
knowledge has its place in
the picture

"Discovery"

Chemistry

Draws on hard knowledge
domain, applied to practical
problems

Outcomes which are often
products, techniques

Civil Engineering

Soft

Contextual associations:
loosely knit clusters of ideas

"Interpretations"

English

Draws on soft pure knowledge
domain to interpret and
understand situations

Outcomes are often
protocols or procedures

Marketing



Marton (1994)

"Phenomenography is the empirical study of the differing ways in which people experience, perceive, apprehend, understand, conceptualise various phenomena in and aspects of the world around us."

Qualitative research aiming for

insights

Interviews



Stuart the interviewer

- Approx. 45 min. each
- 3 basic questions:
 - What is your conception of IL?
 - How do you engage your students in IL?
 - What is your conception of the Information Literate University?

Whole purposive sample

- 80 interviews, 20 per discipline
- 26 universities: 69% from pre-1992 universities
- 61% male, 39% female
- Ages in ranges 21-30 to 61+
- Years of teaching in ranges 0-5 to 31+
- All taught undergrads, 93% taught Masters, 54% PhDs
- 48% course/programme coordinators
- Research Assessment Exercise ratings from 2 - 5*
- Teaching quality grades from Satisfactory - Excellent



The discoveries



English academics: Information literacy as...

1. Accessing and retrieving textual information
2. Using IT to access and retrieve information
3. Possessing basic research skills and knowing how and when to use them
4. Becoming confident, autonomous learners and critical thinkers



English academics' conceptions of IL

- Key factors:
 1. Contextual focus (i.e. where IL should be used)
 2. Temporal focus (i.e. when IL should be used)
 3. Media focus (i.e. for what media is IL relevant)



Chemistry: Information literacy as...

1. Accessing and searching chemical information
2. Mastering a chemist's information skill set
3. Communicating scientific information
4. An essential part of the constitution/
construction/ creation of knowledge



Chemistry academics' conceptions of IL

- Key factors:
 1. Roles & activities
 2. Nature of information
 3. Area of application



Comparisons



- Personal (English) vs Professional (Chemistry)
 - cf. Personal vs. group mode of researching
 - Social/civic role vs. role of chemist in society
- Nature of information
 - Unified view of what chemistry information is (building blocks of knowledge) vs. in English focus on different media
 - Way in which information accessed/ used inc. role of IT
- In common
 - sense that there is a Discipline (tribe)
 - Variation!

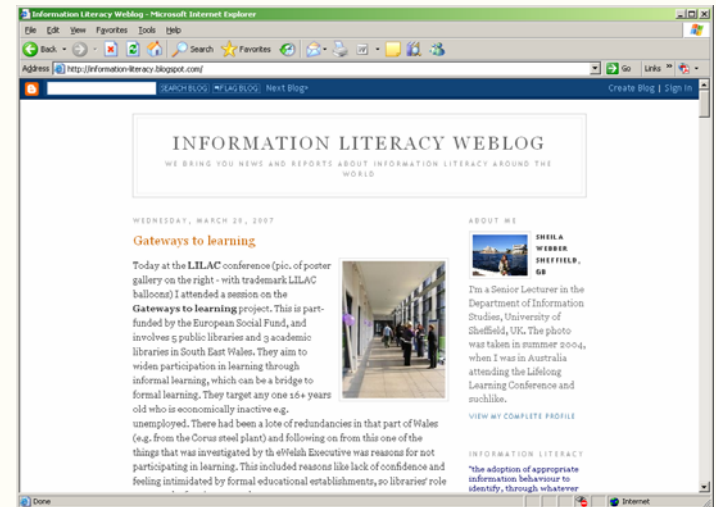
Sheila Webber

s.webber@shef.ac.uk

<http://information-literacy.blogspot.com/>

Bill Johnston

b.johnston@strath.ac.uk



References

- Boon, S., Johnston, B. and Webber, S. (2007) "A phenomenographic study of English faculty's conceptions of information literacy." *Journal of documentation*, 63 (2), 204-228.
- Johnston, B. and Webber, S. (2006) "As we may think: information literacy as a discipline for the information age." *Research strategies*, 20 (3), 108-121
- Webber, S., Boon, S. and Johnston, B. (2006) "Comparaison des conceptions pédagogiques de la maîtrise de l'information chez des universitaires britanniques de différentes disciplines." *Actes des 5èmes Rencontres Formist: Lyon: 2005*. Lyon: ENSSIB.
<http://babel.enssib.fr/document.php?id=315>
- Webber, S. and Johnston, B. (2005) "Information literacy in the curriculum: selected findings from a phenomenographic study of UK conceptions of, and pedagogy for, information literacy" In: Rust, C. (Ed) *Improving Student Learning: Diversity and Inclusivity: Proceedings of the 11th ISL symposium, Birmingham, 6-8 September 2004*. Oxford: Oxford Brookes University. pp212-224.