

Journal of Information Literacy

ISSN 1750-5968

Volume 2 Issue 1

August 2008

Article from practice

Crawford, J. (2008) "Making new friends: an information literacy trip to Washington DC " Journal of information literacy, 2(1), <http://jil.lboro.ac.uk/ojs/index.php/JIL/article/view/ART-V2-I1-2008-1>

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Making new friends: an information literacy trip to Washington DC

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Abstract

The article reviews a visit to Washington DC in October 2007 with the main initial purpose of presenting a PPT on the work of the Scottish Information Literacy Project to the (US) National Forum on Information Literacy. The scope of the visit was greatly extended to include meetings with leading US information literacy activists and a visit to the National Library of Medicine (NLM). The meetings and visits showed the US to be well in advance of the UK in the area of media literacy and yielded important information about the situation in higher education. NLM offered very advanced and informative perspectives on health literacy. These findings will be used to inform the work of the Scottish Information Literacy Project and develop new initiatives especially in health and media literacies

Keywords

Scottish Information Literacy Project; information literacy

1. Introduction

The Scottish Information Literacy Project which I direct is the Scottish 'Node' or contact point of the International Alliance for Information Literacy many of whose American members are also active in the US Umbrella body, the (US) National Forum on Information Literacy. I am extremely impressed by the pioneering work done in the US in so many areas of information literacy and the US National Forum brings most of them together. I had been looking for an opportunity, for some time, to visit the US to meet leading activists to learn at first hand about their work and how their experience could be applied to the UK and in particular the work of the Scottish Information Literacy Project. As a result of email contacts and discussions with the (US) National Forum I was invited to go to Washington in October 2007 to speak to a meeting of the National Forum which meets regularly in Washington. I decided to build on this and as a result of further email discussions and contacts the objectives of the trip were expanded to include the following:

- To give a presentation to the US National Forum on Information Literacy
- To meet leading US figures in information literacy activism
- To visit the National Library of Medicine to get innovative perspectives on health literacy

- Generally to raise the profile of and to promote the work of the Scottish Information Literacy Project which, despite its Scottish profile, seeks both UK wide and international comparisons with its work.

I was particularly keen to find out about media literacy, the study of which is more advanced in the US and the pioneering work on health literacy which the National Library of Medicine is doing as these are areas which I want the Scottish Information Literacy Project to expand into.

During the course of the week, I held previously arranged meetings with the following:

- Craig Gibson, Associate University Librarian for Research, Instructional, and Outreach Services, George Mason University Libraries, Fairfax, VA.
- Karen Zill, Executive Board Member, Association for a Media Literate America and an educational media consultant
- Staff at National Library of Medicine including Loren Frant and Lori Klein (MedlinePlus Go Local); Robert Logan (Health Literacy) and Angela Ruffin and Lisa Boyd (NLM Resources)
- An informal discussion took place with Lana Jackman, Co-chair National Forum on Information Literacy

2. The following issues arose from the meetings:

2.1 Meeting with Craig Gibson

The Scottish Information Literacy Project was undertaking an interview based, research project on information literacy in the workplace at the time of the meeting. We discussed this issue and Craig drew attention to the work of Tom Goad (2002). His book takes a wide-ranging and quite holistic view of literacies of various types and the various terminologies used to describe various facets of them. Library-defined or library-specific information literacy isn't the primary focus in this book. I reviewed with him briefly the Adult Literacies agenda and he drew attention to the Teach for America programme (Teach for America 2006) which undertakes work comparable to regeneration projects in the UK and is a domestic equivalent of the Peace Corps programme.

In discussing the move to blended literacies he drew attention to the move to information fluency and the report *Being Fluent with information technology* National Research Council (1999) also known as the FITNESS report which was published by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences and which described information fluency as a lifelong learning process and drew attention to ' **Intellectual capabilities** -- the application and interpretation of computer concepts and skills used in problem solving. Examples include the ability to define and clarify a problem and know when it is solved; to understand the advantages and disadvantages of apparent solutions to problems...'

This was the first report to move beyond a rather simplistic "computer literacy" paradigm (focused on skills training). Rather, the FITNESS Report asserts that those who are proficient with information technology will have capacities in these three areas: Foundational Knowledge (understanding of computer concepts, networks, etc); Contemporary skills (ability to use personal productivity software, other contemporary software); and Critical Thinking (ability to analyze the appropriateness of IT for varying situations, its advantages and limitations, its ethical dimensions). The FITNESS Report did mark an advance in the thinking of many in the U.S. about the abilities needed to be competent in a technological and networked society, and has encouraged librarians to expand their own conceptions of information literacy into a "blended" paradigm of information fluency.

This is replacing the old bibliographic instruction reductive paradigm. As with the UK Faculty attitudes are variable and subject is a factor. Like the UK curricula are still content obsessed.

The white paper by Henry Jenkins of MIT, "Confronting the Challenges of the Participatory Culture", addresses the sociocultural dimensions of online behaviour, particularly among younger students in the Web 2.0 environment. This report is also forcing the library community to expand its conception of static, consumer-based, text-based information literacy.

A new type of course appearing in the US is one which links informatics with a subject e.g. bioinformatics. "Informatics" courses and programmes are increasingly appearing in universities, in graduate and professional programmes especially, representing convergences of technology, research, data, and disciplinary expertise. No one has quite made the connection yet between traditional information literacy as the library community defines it, and these emerging disciplinary areas. There is considerable potential for the "blended" literacy or information fluency discussed above to prepare students to enter these new fields better equipped than with traditional "skills" training programmes focused just on library-sponsored sources.

Also discussed was the Information and Communications Technology Literacy Assessment Framework produced by the US Educational Testing Services which some American librarians have used in information literacy assessment (Somerville et al 2007) (The ETS ICT Literacy test is described on the ETS web site (2008).

This test is now known as "iSkills"). A number of U.S. colleges and universities have used this instrument to assess both information literacy and IT fluency concepts and skills--it is a performance-based test that shows the level at which students can perform certain representative tasks that they would find in academia or the workplace.

Employability as an information literacy issue was the final main issue and Craig drew attention to the Cornell University information literacy programme in the late 1980s which was an early example of work in this field (Olsen and Coons 1989)

2.2 Meeting with Karen Zill

The Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA) (2008) <http://www.amlainfo.org/history> has existed since 2001 although interest in the subject in the US dates back some thirty years. The organisation's membership includes a broad range of media literacy practitioners including K-12 teachers, academics, public health and health care professionals, community activists, and students. AMLA was formed to unite the media literacy field and lead the drive to include the teaching of media literacy in a wide range of formal and informal educational settings, including classrooms as well as after-school programmes and youth organisations like the Boy Scouts. Its mission is to expand and improve the practice of media literacy education in the United States. AMLA serves as a resource for the field of **media literacy education**, through a web site, monthly newsletter, biennial conference and other initiatives.

Note: AMLA draws distinctions between terms such as media literacy, media education and media literacy education, which are often used interchangeably by the general public. See www.amlainfo.org/what-is-media-literacy.

Media literacy is viewed, by some but not all, in the US as part of the wider issue of information literacy generally. AMLA sees media literacy as an essential life skill for the 21st century. According to AMLA, as communication technologies transform society, they affect our understanding of ourselves, our communities, and our diverse culture. By applying literacy skills to media and technology messages, by learning to skilfully interpret, analyse, and create messages, media literacy empowers people to be both critical thinkers and creative producers of messages using image, language, and sound. While the traditional approach—one that other media literacy organisations continue to follow—is to start from the premise that media use somehow presents a “problem”, AMLA now takes a different approach. Its recent policy document – *Core Principles of Media Literacy Education* (AMLA 2008a) explains the scope of media literacy, its characteristics, and what it seeks and does not seek to achieve, keeping a neutral stance with regard to media content and effects. The document represents a shift of focus from what is believed to be true about media to how people learn to think critically. It expands the field of media literacy education to encompass not only what is taught but also how it is taught. AMLA is now poised to take an advocacy role, targeting educational decision makers at the state level to incorporate media literacy education in the school curricula.

2.3 Visit to the National Library of Medicine

This began with a demonstration of Medline Plus Go Local by Loren Frant and Lori Klein (MedlinePlus Go Local). It was begun as a portal for the general public in 1998 as a result of the use of Medline by non specialists and is now the highest scoring US Government website. It contains information on 740 health topics on conditions, diseases and wellness. There is also information about drugs and supplements, a medical encyclopaedia and a dictionary, reports on clinical trials, interactive tutorials, health information for senior citizens and even videos of surgical procedures. To make the service more

user friendly successive redesigns have led to an increase in visuals over text which is compiled by medical writers and pitched at a reading age level of 11-13. The text is available in English or Spanish and the drawings are created by a medical illustrator. The principal users are students, health care providers and librarians.

The site is managed by a team of five supported by 25 contractors who supply content and add web links. The team is advised by a group consisting of representatives of institutions with a medical mission, Public Information Officers and 27 units within the National Library of Medicine. The website is now supplemented by an attractive glossy magazine *Medline Plus* with a current print run of some 70,000. Apart from its technical excellence the most impressive feature of the website is the organisational structure which lies behind it which brings together information and medical professionals in a co-operative working environment.

An all too brief meeting with the Stephen Greenberg from the History of Medicine Division was followed by a meeting with Robert Logan, the NLM's health literacy expert.

This included a discussion on examples of good practice in health literacy which are not rigorously evaluated or written up because the people who undertake them are not part of a research culture. A good example of health literacy promotion is the South Central Foundation in Anchorage, Alaska, a service to native Alaskans which includes the Indian Health Service. The Southcentral Foundation (2008?) Health Education Department provides education to patients and staff, and is integrated into the primary health care system

Its services include a centre where clients can get health information on topics of their choice. The Center offers access to reference books, newsletters, brochures, the Internet, and has staff available to help clients with their information needs. Its educational programme has resulted in an improvement in health indicators.

As an example of NLM's work Robert quoted a project in three counties in Florida which aimed to introduce medical professionals and the public to Medline Plus. This was poorly received by the County Medical Societies whose doctors felt that patients were visiting them after consulting Medline Plus and wasting their time. The best way to address this hostility is to emphasise the common basis of reliable information which medical professionals and the public can share. A policy of aggressive, comprehensive promotion of Medline Plus is needed. Hostility should always be expected from professional societies. The metrics now show that the more confident someone is with health literacy the more positive the health outcomes. This was a key finding of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) conducted in 2003 (National Center for Educational Statistics 2005). This included the first ever national assessment designed specifically to measure health literacy. Thus showed that there is a strong independent association between limited health literacy and poor health outcomes.

However the Health sector's expectations and demands exceed adults' literacy skills. To eliminate health disparities we must connect health literacy improvements to appropriate access to recommended health care. At an early age children have the ability to evaluate sources of information and grasp-cause effect explanations¹.

The findings from the First Health Information National Trends Survey indicated that 63.0% of the US adult population in 2003 reported ever going online, with 63.7% of the online population having looked for health information for themselves or others at least once in the previous 12 months. When asked where they actually went for information 48.6% reported going online first, with only 10.9% going to their doctors first. The Health Information National Trends Survey data portray a tectonic shift in the ways in which patients consume health and medical information, with more patients looking for information online before talking with their doctors. Use of the Internet for health or medical information was generally more common among persons who were younger than 65 years, women, those who were white or other race (e.g., Asian), and those who had higher levels of education and income. Use of the Internet for purposes besides health information seeking was much less common, with only 3.9% having participated in an online support group, 7.0% using e-mail to communicate with a physician or physician's office, 9.1% buying medicine or vitamins online, and 4.7% engaging in some other type of online activity (e.g., looking up a physician's address). Health information seeking was by far the most commonly reported online activity, with 63.7% of the online population indicating that they had searched for health or medical information for themselves or for others at least once in the previous 12 months. Those who searched online the most tended to be younger, women, and better educated, and tended to have higher incomes than those who searched the least. Clearly there are important implications for the health literacy agenda here in the UK (Hesse, *and others* 2005)

This was followed by overviews of the services provided by NLM by Angela Ruffin and Lisa Boyd, followed by a tour of the NLM and its current exhibition provided by Melanie Modlin, Shana Potash and colleagues.

Perhaps the most notable feature of the visit was the emphasis by all staff on their mission the general public, rather than medical professionals.

3. Presentation to the National Forum for Information Literacy

On Friday 19th October I gave a presentation to the National Forum for Information Literacy on the work of the Scottish Information Literacy Project. I was very much aware that I was coming from a small country to speak in a much larger one and I wanted to present my work for constructive comment and criticism as a number of experts, including Lana Jackman and Woody Horton were present. I emphasised Scotland's independent and distinctively inclusive educational culture and explained that the work of the Project had to include not only scholastic and higher education but also the use of information in the workplace, the lifelong learning agenda and access to information as a civil and political right. It is interesting to note that in Europe,

apart from England, small countries like Finland and Slovenia are taking the lead. Some points arising from the discussion were:

- The role of Information literacy in CPD was discussed and it was agreed that HR departments need to be targeted for guidance and training
- The use of information by Small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs). These are recognised at UNESCO level as being a disadvantaged population
- There is a need to make contact with the business community. It was suggested that chambers of commerce be targeted as this is a good way to gain acceptance from the private sector
- While there are valuable activities going on in countries all over the world these are uncoordinated and poorly documented and a valuable feature of the Scottish Information Literacy Project is that it coordinates area of excellence within Scotland and documents activity via its website and publishing record.
- The Alexandria declaration's four core principles: health, governance, business and education are a good basis for the Project to work around.

4. Other points

- Unesco is producing *Understanding information literacy: a primer*
- There was a report on the new National ICT Literacy Policy Council <http://melangeinfo.com/Doc/Press%20Release%20NatI%20ICT%20Literacy%20Policy%20Council.doc>

5. Over viewing the visit

I was greatly impressed by the energy and success of the American information literacy movement and I found out quite a lot of background about how information literacy relates to more general social policy issues especially in respect of America's increasing concern about its future economic competitiveness and the role of information in maintaining this. The US has been successful in involving a wider range of professions than just the information profession which tends to dominate in the UK. The higher profile of media literacy is noteworthy. This 'big picture' approach is certainly one we can learn from. In the UK information literacy is ghettoised within information and within that higher education tends to make the running. At the time of writing the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) is drafting an advocacy policy but the draft document is entirely innocent of the idea that there is an urgent need to propagate a 'gospel' of information within the British business, industrial and civil service/NGO community. Within the Scottish Information Literacy Project we can identify a number of action points emerging from the visit which we will pursue within the constraints of time and available funding. Our immediate priorities are the restructuring of the draft National Information Literacy Framework Scotland to make it a genuine lifelong learning document and also the pursuit of the workplace agenda. We are contacting Glasgow Chamber of Commerce and

other relevant bodies such as CBI Scotland. We have now completed a study of information literacy in the workplace and have compiled an executive summary consisting of the findings and recommendations to form a basis for discussion and action. We will also contact the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development to review the CPD issue. Health and media literacies are further down the line but we will review the literature of health literacy in Scotland and make contacts with interested people building on the contacts deriving from the information literacy in the workplace study and we will identify health literacy research activity UK more widely.

Media literacy is less of a priority because of the above priorities and constraints of time. We have previously had contacts with Ofcom Scotland which have lapsed. We must re-establish them and also make contact with the Association for Media Education in Scotland. However the overall picture is that health and media literacies must become priorities for the British information profession.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all mentioned above but especially to Lana Jackman and Sharon Weiner for making the visit possible, the Information Literacy Sub Group of the Information Services Group of CILIP for a grant of £400 towards the cost of the visit and to the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland for an award of £1300.

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¹ Additional points derived from PPT *Surgeon General's workshop on improving health literacy* presented to the Town Hall meeting New York, October 2007 by Rima E Rudd.