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Information literacy at the Service Desk: the role of circulations staff in promoting information literacy

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Abstract

The topic of information literacy seems dominated by themes at the formal end of the spectrum, such as academic collaboration and defining information literacy. In practice however, teaching and promoting information literacy happens at a number of levels. In particular, frontline paraprofessional staff often provide ad-hoc information literacy training within the context of functional interactions with library customers, although this aspect of information literacy is largely absent from the literature. Taking examples from the author's workplace experiences within a UK higher education library, it is argued that paraprofessionals can play a valuable role in promoting information literacy, bridging the gap between formal teaching sessions and the learning needs of individual students. Day-to-day encounters between customers and library staff can provide opportunities to embed information literacy within the library experience.

Keywords

Information literacy; paraprofessionals; issue desk; enquiries

1. Introduction: paraprofessionals¹ in the literature

Two main themes dominate the literature regarding information literacy practice in the higher education sector: academic collaboration and definitions of information literacy. The first, the process of working alongside academic colleagues to embed information literacy into the curriculum, is intended to ensure that the principles of information literacy are taught within the context of the subject area, rather than as abstract concepts which may seem unimportant or irrelevant to students: see, for example, Hearn (2005) and Owusu-Ansah (2004). The second, defining information literacy, is important for identifying the aims and objectives of an information literacy programme. There are several models of information literacy - including The *Seven Pillars* model (SCONUL 1999), the ACRL (2000) *Information Literacy Competency Standards*, and Bruce's (1997) *Seven Faces of Information Literacy* - although a precise and universally agreed definition of the term remains elusive (Webber and Johnston 2000). These models are helpful frameworks, and can be used, for example, to formulate the learning outcomes which are necessary to demonstrate the efficacy of a given information literacy programme (see, for example, ACRL 2003).

These two aspects represent formal methods for promoting information literacy. At the other end of the spectrum, the equally important role of frontline staff giving point-of-need information literacy training receives little attention in the literature. Even overviews of the literature, such as Johnston and Webber (2003) and Radar (2002), make little or no mention of this aspect of promoting information literacy. Similarly, documents such as the ACRL (2003) best practice guidelines tend to emphasise the formal aspects of information literacy and ignore the frontline perspective. Whilst there is some recognition of the need to supplement formal teaching – Patalong and Llewellyn (2007), for example, describe how drop-in help was offered alongside a series of online information

¹ In this paper, the term paraprofessional is used to denote someone working in a role for which a Library and Information (LIS) qualification is not required, according to the person specification for that post. Conversely, a professional is a person working in a role for which a LIS qualification is required. The terminology is problematic, but the author feels that "paraprofessional" is preferable to "non-professional".

skills tutorials – it is not always clear whether librarians, paraprofessionals, or both, are providing this support.

One of few examples in the literature which gives attention to the information literacy role and training needs of paraprofessional staff is the Pop-I/Lollipop project (Boden and O'Beirne 2007). Here, online training was used to enhance the information skills of frontline staff, in public and academic libraries, so that they were better equipped to help library customers with their information needs. A slightly different perspective on the potential of paraprofessionals is given by Turner and Grotzky (1995), who discuss the advantages of using paraprofessionals to teach library induction sessions, a practice which frees up time for professionals to do more specialist teaching. This does, however, refer mainly to the formal aspects of information literacy. Gardner (2006) reports a similarly strategic situation: she describes a tiered reference service in which paraprofessionals act as the first point of call, referring more complex enquiries on to a professional colleague. In the wider literature, there is some recognition of the changing nature of the paraprofessional role, notably the introduction of paraprofessional "Accreditation" (ACLIP) within CILIP's *Framework of Qualifications* (Hyams 2005).

While the themes of teaching and defining information literacy are important, they do tend to emphasise the formal elements, which would seem to imply that information literacy has little or nothing to do with paraprofessionals. In the author's experience, however, promoting information literacy is, or should be, something far more multi-dimensional. Frontline staff, including paraprofessionals, provide ad-hoc support for information skills when the need arises. Although the net results are similar, such activities often take place without being labelled as information literacy. Consequently, these functional interactions with students may be detached from the content of formal teaching sessions. For truly effective information literacy promotion, the two sides need to become connected.

2. A Multi-dimensional approach to information literacy

2.1 Thought experiment

The following thought experiment could be used as an ice-breaker at the start of a discussion session about the different roles played by a variety of staff in promoting information literacy.

Imagine that the world is made up of three kinds of people:

- Nouns ("object words")
- Adjectives ("describing words")
- △ Verbs ("doing words")

What kind of person are you: a noun, an adjective, or a verb? Don't think about it too much, just go with your first impression.

For your chosen personality type:

- Think of a well-known person as an example of this type.
- Describe what the world would be like if everyone was this personality type.

On the surface, this exercise illustrates that society works effectively because different people take on different tasks and responsibilities, usually based on their aptitudes. The thought experiment may be useful for stimulating a lively debate around the truism that the world wouldn't work very well if people were all the same, which is intended to encourage reflection about different roles and co-operation towards a common goal. It can then be used as a framework for considering the various aspects of information literacy promotion: defamiliarising information literacy and re-casting it as a multi-dimensional endeavour.

2.2 Team work: aspects of information literacy

Mullins (2008) describes organisations as being divided into several different levels: "institutional", "managerial" and "technical" (p. 566). The conceptual framework used in the thought experiment corresponds to this pattern of a typical hierarchical organisational or management structure, comprising a number of layers each performing different functions. A model for promoting information literacy can be derived from this, in which information literacy interventions are split into three levels of activity:

- Policy level (nouns): planning information literacy activities and defining the library service's aims and objectives for promoting information literacy. This might include academic liaison, reading strategies and service level agreements.
- Formal procedures (adjectives): implementations of the plans that are drawn up at the policy level. This includes formal teaching sessions, as well as the framework for day to day practice, such as providing staff training and giving support to frontline staff.
- △ Informal practice (verbs): interactions with customers that take place via service points. This could mean the reference work done by professionals staffing an enquiry desk, and also includes the work of frontline paraprofessionals.

It is important to appreciate that the three levels are interdependent : a useful analogy is the shape of a wedding cake, in which each tier forms an essential part of the whole structure. The literature's emphasis on formal activities, such as academic collaboration, measuring or testing information literacy, and finding new ways to teach it, reflects their significance. What is unhelpful is the notion that information literacy is something that only professional staff (see footnote on first page of article) do in formal teaching sessions. Much that paraprofessionals do instinctively when serving customers is, effectively, promoting information literacy.

Paraprofessional circulations staff can give basic help to individuals as and when required, with advice on how to use the library catalogue, completing an inter-library loan form, or tracking down a journal article. These information-seeking activities are the aspects of information literacy which students perceive as most immediately and materially relevant to their needs. Indeed, in the author's experience, this contextualised teaching, conveying information about resources at the point of need, may be more memorable and seem much more relevant to students than a formal training session. If you define information literacy as the skills involved in locating and using library resources, then information literacy support includes any intervention which helps customers to make effective use of library resources. In addition, this point-of-need training provides an opportunity to embed information literacy into the library service at this level, as the interaction can be used to engage the student in a deeper consideration of their information needs and choices. The following scenarios from the author's experience serve to illustrate these points.

3. Case study: interlibrary loans and demand management

3.1 Context

Working as a paraprofessional at a university library serving both higher and further education students, I interact with a wide range of students who have very diverse learning needs. The library has two service points: a service desk dealing mainly with circulations work, plus an enquiry desk offering more in-depth support. I have always worked on both service points, although traditionally the enquiry desk is staffed by professionals. I have been in this role, assisting customers with their use of the library on a daily basis for ten years, but only at library school did I discover the term “information literacy”.

Reflecting on my workplace experiences, I came to the conclusion that the frontline paraprofessional role is a vital part of the information literacy process. In particular, paraprofessionals often bridge the gap between formal information literacy teaching, such as induction sessions, and individual students’ needs. I might find myself reminding a student how to search the library catalogue, or talking someone through how to access an electronic journal. The professional who taught the library induction session may assume that the necessary information has been duly disseminated. In practice, some students need one-to-one help with assimilating this information and converting the content of such sessions into practical skills. These two areas of expertise - formal teaching and frontline support - complement each other, as illustrated by the following two examples. I also find that my administrative duties as a paraprofessional feed into my enquiry work, and vice versa.

3.2 Interlibrary loan requests: a context for teaching information literacy

My colleagues and I once spent an autumn term working under an avalanche of interlibrary loan requests; a rise in student numbers had led to a sharp increase in the number of requests being handled. However, what was noticeable, was that a large proportion of these requests were for items available within the library. Such request forms were returned to the student, along with information about how to access the required resource. When professional colleagues were alerted to the situation, the question of why this was happening was addressed at the appropriate level: the procedural (adjective) layer of the three tier model. Previously, all aspects of library use were covered in a single library induction session delivered during the first term of the degree. Students were not required to do independent literature searches until their second year, so it was no surprise that many of them had forgotten the finer details of locating resources. This practice was revised, so that library teaching was linked more closely to the demands of each course. Now the typical pattern for degree students is a general introduction to the library during their first year, followed by a more focused “database” session (covering literature searching and using electronic journals) in their second year, and, in some cases, an in-depth session about literature searching for the dissertation in the final year. Over time, this tailored approach to user education, combined with an increased availability of electronic journals, has led to a dramatic reduction in the demand for interlibrary loans.

Meanwhile, at the functional (verb) level, the immediate demands of the situation needed to be addressed. As well as checking and returning requests which were for “in stock” items, other methods of addressing the matter proactively were developed. Service Desk staff checked that the copyright declaration had been signed, so one common reason for returning forms to students was eliminated. More complex checking by all staff proved impractical, but interlibrary loans staff were able to filter requests at this point. Typically I would ask the student if they had checked the library catalogue, whilst quickly flicking through the requests. If I suspected that the journal article in question was held in the library, I would offer to show the student how to check the library catalogue, so that they became familiar with how the information about various kinds of resource is displayed on screen.

Through my routine work in administering interlibrary loans, I accumulated a considerable amount of knowledge. I thus gained confidence about giving other advice in context, such as referencing, assessing sources, trouble-shooting access to electronic journals and investigating incomplete references. These activities were not labelled as promoting information literacy; they were simply part of my efforts to provide a good service and to help students make effective use of library resources in support of their studies. In my experience, some students are much more receptive to learning information skills in this way, within the context of their immediate study needs. This example shows how frontline staff can give vital feedback to those responsible for planning formal information literacy teaching, and also how expertise gained through administrative tasks can be utilised in the promotion of information literacy at the point of need.

3.3 Demand management and academic liaison

Another opportunity for information literacy interventions arises from demand management (holds or reservations). In the past, I have witnessed periodic holds overload: it was not uncommon for there to be dozens of reservations on a single title, as a large cohort of students competed for access to key texts. Again, a way of dealing with the immediate effects was required, until the matter was resolved. Specifically, I often found myself trying to help customers who needed to access a text by the following week, when there was already an impractical level of holds on that title.

The solution was two-fold. Firstly: help the student to find other ways to meet their information need. In some cases, students think too rigidly about their recommended reading. I once had a very long conversation with a group of further education students, trying to persuade them to use any one of the A Level biology textbooks on the shelf, rather than not being able to do their assignment because all the copies of the title on the reading list were out on loan. They did not seem to believe me that the same information would be available in other textbooks! Secondly, the subject librarian's contribution was to find a long-term solution. In some cases, the matter has now been largely resolved by a review of reading strategies, along with the digitisation of key chapters and other core material: that is, addressed at the policy level of the three tier model. In other cases, such as the A level textbook scenario, closer communication between teaching staff and the library – academic collaboration – was needed to ensure that both sides were giving the same message to the students.

In my experience, many students do not assimilate the content of library induction sessions at the time, for whatever reasons. Frontline paraprofessionals step into the gap and help students to find information as and when they need it. Taking this a step further, such interactions can also be an opportunity to challenge students to think in more detail about their information use. For example, a student may ask to be shown how to place a hold on a popular title, when all the copies are out on loan. The technical skill of placing the hold is one element of the interaction, but it is also a prime opportunity to introduce ways of assessing and choosing texts, so that the student learns how to identify available alternatives.

3.4 Realistic expectations

It should be noted that in some ways I am not a typical paraprofessional, but came to the role with a high level of IT literacy which gave me the confidence to build up my skills in other areas. Also, as a graduate, I was familiar with academic conventions such as referencing. I have always felt comfortable with enquiry work, but I am aware that some of my paraprofessional colleagues are less happy at the prospect of expanding their role. When considering what paraprofessionals might do to promote information literacy, it is important to have realistic expectations of what can be achieved, as appropriate for the individuals involved. Library staff vary greatly in their level of academic achievement, life experiences and IT skills. The last of these in particular, is an area in which knowledge can be acquired through training sessions, but only experience over time can build up the confidence to apply that knowledge to support library users in an effective way.

The second point to consider is that I came to be promoting information literacy through an organic or “bottom up” process, rather than a “top down” one. I did not start by being told that there was something called information literacy and that I had to promote it. Rather, I built up my skills, knowledge and confidence over time, in my own way and at my own pace. Consequently, my motivation and self-esteem as a frontline paraprofessional doing enquiry work have remained intact! All organisations have their own dynamics and historical factors. Amongst other factors and possible constraints, there is a need to consider very carefully the workload implications; for example, frontline staff are unlikely to be positive about embedding information literacy if they see it as an impediment to serving a queue efficiently. If paraprofessionals are to expand their role in promoting information literacy, I would suggest that this needs to be developed in consultation with them, drawing on each individual’s strengths and particular areas of frontline expertise. Imposing information literacy as an additional duty is unlikely to be effective, and may even have detrimental effects.

Thirdly, the timing of my library career means that my knowledge has increased alongside the technological advances of the past ten years. I have learnt about new interfaces and innovative resources as and when they have been introduced into the library service. When I first worked in an academic library, the internet was relatively new, e-mail was a novelty and we had access to one on-line bibliographic database. Within a year I was learning to use different databases, and electronic journals were appearing on the horizon. More databases, a move to web-based products, new interfaces, Athens authentication, and the reality of electronic journals followed swiftly in the next few years. I was able to take this in my stride: my skills and confidence as a user of IT allowed me to generalise the principles of searching from one interface to another. This is very different from the situation of someone starting in libraries now, faced as they are with a vast plethora of electronic resources.

4. Embedding information literacy

Enquiry work involves an element of advising about information use and facilitating information skills; there is a tension in enquiry work between telling someone the answer and showing them how to find out. This is a delicate balance to maintain, which should be determined by the needs of the enquirer as far as possible. That said, library staff can still include a nugget of information literacy in the encounter. For example, showing someone how to use the photocopier is an opportunity to remind students about copyright and referencing; being asked how to place a hold on a popular textbook is an opportunity to challenge the student’s assumptions, as discussed above. Formal teaching sessions are not the only means of promoting information literacy. Information literacy can be embedded into the whole of the library experience for students by building information literacy training into their functional interactions with library staff, just as it is integrated into their curricula.

The term “customer-focused” is used to describe attempts to create a service which is more in tune with the mindset, needs and attitudes of the current student population. Staff at the “policy” (noun) level of the information literacy model may attempt to adjust the service to the needs of its customers, but this is often done retrospectively, for example on the basis of questionnaires completed by students at the end of their course. In the author’s experience, frontline staff tend to be more aware of students’ current needs and expectations, simply because they spend more time interacting with them. I do wonder if the notion of information literacy, at least in the information seeking aspect, is sometimes at odds with the aim of being customer-focused: are there times when information literacy becomes an attempt to make our customers fit the service we want to provide? Should there, instead, be mechanisms in place to ensure that the service provided is the one that customers actually want and need? How do we make sure we get the right information literacy messages to our customers, in a user-friendly way? I suspect that, in practice, a balance is needed somewhere between the two extremes of customer-led or didactic information literacy

training. In any case, frontline staff could be a useful source of feedback in addressing these issues.

The issue or service desk is central to the library experience for many library customers. Indeed, unlike formal teaching sessions, it is difficult for students to avoid the desk entirely. These encounters therefore, are an excellent opportunity to promote information literacy. This is not about training paraprofessionals to work on enquiry desks as mini-librarians. Rather, it is a suggestion that frontline paraprofessional staff are in a unique position to offer tailored, relevant snippets of information literacy training within the day-to-day business of the library.

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