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Book review

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Horton, F. W. (2007) *Understanding Information Literacy: A Primer*. Paris: UNESCO. 103 pp. CI-2007/WS/18-CLD3008.7 Free.

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001570/157020e.pdf>

Book review by Dr Mark Hepworth, Senior Lecturer, Loughborough University

Horton describes the publication as 'an easy to read, non-technical overview of what 'information literacy means'. He achieves his objective and provides a useful explanation of Information Literacy. Moreover he successfully takes Information Literacy out of the traditional library user domain and shows how it is relevant globally (the knowledge based economy), nationally (in terms of information society and development, prosperity and freedom), from the perspective of the individual (the life long learner achieving personal goals), and the commercial domain (in terms of improved decision making and competitive advantage). He demonstrates the relevance of Information Literacy to government, civil society administrators, human resource managers, the media, commercial enterprises and international intergovernmental organisations.

He starts by placing Information Literacy in the context of 21st century literacies and what he terms "survival literacies" i.e. functional literacy; computer literacy and media literacy and also 'distance education' by which he means knowledge of the telecommunication technologies that enable learning and also cultural literacy (how cultural norms, beliefs, ways of seeing the world) may influence information management. He then provides a relatively simple view of Information Literacy. This is the one aspect of the publication that I felt to be a little weak. The Information Literacies were described in a staged fashion i.e. first realise the need for information finishing with knowledge of how to dispose of or safeguard information. This rather classical notion of Information Literacy does not encompass the now more widely held view that the staged view of Information Literacy may relate to the individual conducting an independent piece of research but may not relate to how Information Literacy may be experienced in the workplace. For example in the workplace a person may only be concerned with one of the activities due to the collaborative, segmented and often delegated nature of work. In addition stage 2, 'know how to accurately identify and define the information needed to meet the need, solve the problem, or make the decision', underplays the complexity of the cognitive processes associated with conceptualising the subject domain and information that a person may need. His definition could also be criticised for its lack of emphasis on the social nature of Information Literacy and how it is linked to the ability to participate in and contribute to a community (of practice) and the collective process of constructing and agreeing meanings, causal connections, strategies (ontologies and epistemologies) that people use to solve problems and collaboratively develop agreed knowledge. However, on a more positive note

it was good that the author paid attention to the importance of people as a source of information rather than only published material. Furthermore it was interesting and valuable that he included the ability to preserve, store, reuse, record and archive information for future use as well as the knowledge of how to dispose of or alternatively safeguard information aspects of Information Literacy. This knowledge tends to get less attention in information literacy frameworks that stem from the educational environment. This probably reflects Horton's experience in public and private organisational information management. These topics are, of course, highly relevant bearing in mind the spate of information accidents in the U.K. Horton also makes the useful distinction between conceptual skills (cognitive skills) and practical skills (behavioural).

Horton has made an excellent job of relating his understanding of Information Literacy to practical recommendations for key sector or domains. These include:

- policy makers;
- health and human services;
- workforce development and human capital;
- empowering people to vote and participate in governing.

With regard to policy makers he emphasises the need for programmes for educators (teachers, mentors, parents etc.) to help them understand the importance of Information Literacy and the need to develop Information Literacy learning outcomes. He argues for the use of and the need for research in Information Literacy to underpin pedagogy and the importance of developing learning environments where Information Literacy is fostered.

In the health domain he highlights the need for and, in fact, the right for people to access and use information that has a bearing on their good health. Strategies are suggested that relate to the general public and access to health related information, emphasising in particular their importance to vulnerable groups but also to the regional, governmental and non-governmental organisations who have a responsibility for capacity building.

Under the heading of 'workforce development and human capital' and business and economic development, he points out, as many authors have before him, that the information and learning skills of the workforce are increasingly fundamental to economic development. He reinforces his earlier statements indicating the need for business, government and educational organisations to have strategic plans that relate to encouraging Information Literacy. An information literate business enterprise would be defined 'as those which have learned how to organize and manage their information'. He argues that such activities should be framed in the wider context 'of a country's Global Information Society national agenda'.

He then goes on to make suggestions for advocacy; collaboration and partnership and finally an 'action agenda'. First he makes a case for an 'Information Literacy baseline survey' that could be used in a variety of contexts such as a company or geographic region to determine levels of

Information Literacy practice. Horton poses questions that draw attention to what is being done to promote Information Literacy in business and industry, the academic community; library, archives, museums, publishing, public interest, Information Science, information content and ICT communities.

Finally he proposes that there is a need for a unified strategy, a National Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning Strategy and Vision for every country. He proposes that knowledge about information literacy needs to be tapped, used and harmonised with international trends and standards. He argues that Information Literacy and life-long learning should be evident in e-policies and e-programmes such as e-learning, distance education and workforce development. He notes that content and infrastructure needs to be developed to support these activities and that these need to be supported by Information Literacy institutional organisational frameworks. However, fundamental to this is educational reform. He also argues for the strengthening of information institutions such as libraries and other public and private information infrastructure institutions. He suggests that a new professional and occupational category, the 'Information Literacy counsellor', should evolve whose role would be to 'provide Information Literacy and lifelong learning advice and assistance'.

The report is also accompanied by an extensive appendix. One section outlines the need for a government department dedicated to '(National) Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning Policy'. Personally I feel this is one of the most powerful suggestions. For over twenty years information professionals and academics in Departments of Information Science have been putting forward the views expressed by Horton. Information Literacy has been on the agenda of information professionals for many years. In the corporate arena strategies that focus on information and knowledge management have become more apparent; although there has been a tendency to confuse Information Literacy and information management with ICT literacy and ICT management and to think that solutions are technical rather than skill, knowledge and policy based. These trends have led to bottom up activities that have had a positive impact on specific groups of people and individual organisations. But until, as Horton points out, Information Literacy is on the national agenda and driven by central government it is likely that change will take place slowly and in a piecemeal fashion.

I therefore welcome this publication. It places Information Literacy in its appropriate, wider context and develops practical strategies to foster Information Literacy on a national basis. It also may lead to the realisation that information and knowledge needs to be managed and, more importantly, that people need to be educated, trained and paid to do so. Only then will we see information literate individuals, organisations and governments that are empowered through the conscious and systematic use of information and knowledge.