

INFORMATION SKILLS FOR NEW ENTRY TERTIARY STUDENTS A METHODOLOGY FOR IDENTIFYING NEEDS

Merolyn Coombs and Jan Houghton

The arrival of the 'information age' has presented a challenging invitation to the educational community. The dramatic increase in amounts of information available and the arrival of new technology (available to both professionals as intermediaries and to end-users) to store, access and manage that information has meant a new response to academic programmes and their content is needed. At the same time within education there has been a transition from teaching to learning and with this change comes a concern with information literacy. Information literacy is seen as a survival skill in this information age. 'Instead of drowning in the abundance of information that floods their lives, information literate people know how to find, evaluate, and use information effectively to solve a particular problem or make a decision' (Breivik,c1989).

Students have in the past relied on their teachers for knowledge and on the skills of librarians for locating and retrieving needed information. When the volume of knowledge was relatively compact and the increase was slow they could manage with a basic level of information literacy. The information explosion has turned what was a minor problem into a crisis as content changes so fast in some fields that it is difficult for teachers to remain 'experts'. To address this crisis a new educational philosophy is needed that is based on a redefinition of literacy that includes information skills so that the student can take charge of their own immediate learning and develop skills for lifelong learning. As expressed by one researcher, 'The information literate are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to learn because they know how knowledge is organised, how to find information....' (Bruce,1990:226).

INFORMATION SKILLS

Information skills as a concept then has several facets. These include: library skills, study skills, cognitive skills and additional skills such as planning and presenting information. Information skills may be defined as skills in defining, locating, selecting, evaluating, organising and presenting information at the appropriate level for the task. (Based on NSW Department of Education's Information Skills in the School).

The Department of Information Studies at the University of Technology, Sydney has for several years presented a short introductory workshop in information skills for new students. As a result of the evaluations of this and needs arising in other

subjects, a semester length subject in which information skills are taught in depth is now included in the undergraduate programme (Bachelor of Applied Science in Information Studies). A research project was also undertaken to determine the validity of continuing with the pre-entry workshops and extending them to all new students to the University.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

Although there have been statements made by both educators and information professionals about the nature and extent of tertiary students need for information skills, there has been little testing of the assumptions underlying these statements. This paper describes an attempt at eliciting opinion from both new students and their teaching staff about the information skills

needed and whether skills training through formal instruction would be beneficial.

Separate surveys were administered to three groups: staff members who taught new entry students; a first year cohort in their first week of study; and a first year cohort in their second semester of study. The survey was intended to identify the information skills needed by beginning tertiary students as perceived by students and educators and how these skills compared with those presented in the literature as being important, and the most appropriate method for instructing new students in information skills. In particular, the survey contained questions about:

- * previous interactions with a library and instruction in information skills
- * perceptions of their ability to use various library services and resources when they entered university
- * perceptions of the level of ability needed in use of various library resources and services to be successful in their study programmes
- * preferences for the types of instruction in information skills

The result showed some interesting differences between the two student cohorts and also some similarities. There were also similarities within the staff member group especially in their expectations of what information skills they thought students 'should have' to succeed and what they 'would have' when they entered. They had some interesting comments about the levels of information skills needed by students and about how they must be integrated into all subjects, not just taught in isolation.

The students themselves were indecisive about whether they needed adequate information skills before they began study, but there was strong agreement that they should have instruction in these skills now they had begun and that they had to use them to carry out their study programme. There was quite strong agreement that workshops of one and two days in information skills would be beneficial but there was also quite a degree of indecision. Students generally strongly agreed that some sort of printed guide instructing on information skills would be useful, as they did for workshops in writing assignment and managing their own information. The comments also indicated that workshops in other student 'survival' skills were desired.

CONCLUSION

As a methodology for identifying information skills needs this survey was only partly successful. Students often were unable to relate to information skills where they were isolated from particular circumstances or learning situations. Their indecision as a group on what sort of instruction was beneficial may well be explained by its separation from particular subjects or learning tasks. The general agreement by students that they must have adequate information skills to succeed at study points to their recognition of and concern about their own ability to navigate through and use the vast quantities of information. We can also conclude that the focus on library use skills reflected in the literature needs to be changed to a broader focus which includes a wide range of information skills.

REFERENCES

BRUCE, C. (1990) Information skills coursework for postgraduate students: investigation and response at the Queensland University of Technology. *AARL*, 21(4):224-232

BREIVIK, P. & LEE, E.G. (c1989) *Information Literacy: Revolution in the Library*. New York, American Council on Education.