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In Agreement with George and Frank

Introduction

Does information literacy provide scaffolding in support of open and distance learning (ODL) or is information literacy a "nice to have" in a "need to know" environment? George & Frank (2004) assert that information literacy is a need to know and that information literacy competencies scaffold the learning experience. In their chapter, Beyond Books – Library Services to Distance Education Students in Learner Support in Open, Distance and Online Learning Environments, a book in the Series of the Arbeitsstelle Fernstudienforschung (ASF, the center for research in distance education) at Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, the authors discuss three crucial elements of information literacy competencies that will be addressed by this paper.

The connection between information literacy and critical thinking, the relationship between technical proficiency and information literacy competencies, and the importance of library services educational opportunities are the important areas that provide a foundation for ODL students who "need the ability to define an information need, locate, evaluate and analyze information, and use it appropriately" (George & Frank, 2004, p. 141). This paper supports the authors' premise that libraries and librarians occupy a necessary role in supporting, growing, sustaining and sometimes initiating information literacy competencies in a distance education context.

Information Literacy and Critical Thinking

George & Frank (2004) define information literacy as " the ability to identify an information need and the ability to locate, evaluate and effectively use the information" (p. 135). This is an important definition because it connects the use of information to both locating that information and evaluating the same. Thus, information literacy is not limited to recognizing that using Google to search for

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constructivism or using Wikipedia to find an article on Jean Piaget may not provide the depth of

information required for a graduate level research paper. Instead, information literacy is expanded to

include distinguishing amongst valid, supported, documented and examined information. Critical

thinking is therefore a fundamental component of information literacy. Peer-reviewed journal articles

are not automatically true, but without the essential connection between locating information and

evaluating information, students will be unable to determine veracity or validity. In other words, the

best case scenario involves uniting the two where "critical thinking logic is taught in conjunction with

information literacy in order for students to be able to define facts, establish information needs, evaluate

information and identify what is true" (George & Frank, 2004, p. 135).

Thus, information literacy is not limited to critical thinking nor does it come naturally even to those

ODL students who are technically proficient. Information literacy is a skill or a process that can and

should be taught. This concept leads to the next discussion topic.

Technical Proficiency and Information Literacy

The methods used to locate information have changed. ODL, as a discipline, "is in the middle of a

Copernican revolution as it becomes ever more apparent that the learner constitutes the center of the

universe, and that teaching no longer drives learning; instead, teaching responds to and supports

learning" (Moore & Kearsley, p. 20). ODL students are typically not able to use paper card catalogs to

find information nor are they able in many instances to go in person to check out material from a brick

and mortar library. The change that is happening in the educational arena and the proliferation of

information requires adaptability and technical proficiency is a means of adapting to new ways of

locating information. Thus, technical proficiency addresses the electronic nature of the information

explosion.

Online databases hold much of the information that is relevant for today's student and many research

journals are only available online. The search for information is further complicated by the lack of

consistency in electronic resource interfaces and the amount of information available (George & Frank,

2004). Librarians understand that information literacy includes both improving research skills and

understanding how to search the Internet and how to identify relevant electronic material (George &

Frank, 2004). However, information literacy and technical proficiency do not automatically go hand-in-

hand and because many students believe that being a savvy Internet user is the same as technical

proficiency, information literacy with a technical proficiency component becomes essential for the

information literacy toolbox. This movement toward educating the ODL student is further described in

the next topic.

Library Services and Educating the ODL Student

Librarians and libraries are looking at new ways of being. From architecture to learning opportunities,

librarians and libraries are creating learning spaces and learning opportunities. "The emerging library is

no longer simply a monastery full of books and journals for scholars but marketplaces competing for

clients offering different arrays of services" (Boone, 2003, p. 358). Because ODL students are typically

geographically dispersed adults pursuing continuing education opportunities with various personal,

social, and familial responsibilities vying with their educational goals, finding new ways to meet the

needs of the ODL student is a priority for librarians, faculty and administrations (Moore & Kearsley,

2005; George & Frank, 2004; Albitz, 2007). In addition, libraries and librarians are moving to meet the

needs of ODL students by providing online tutorials, web-based instruction and online guides (George

& Frank, 2004).

To address the specific needs of ODL students, librarians are identifying and providing various

accessible methods to scaffold both the critical thinking and technical proficiency components of

information literacy for students. George & Frank (2004) highlight a few resources that currently

support information literacy education, namely the Texas Information Literacy Tutorial (TILT) and the

instructional resources available from the University of Maryland University College (UMUC). George

& Frank (2004) explain that the technically literate student may "feel that they are finding good

information sources because they can find something about their topic on the Internet. They are

unaware of library-related resources that might be more relevant, more authoritative, or better represent

various points of view on a topic" (p. 136). With respect to critical thinking, George & Frank (2004)

paraphrase Whitmire's conclusion that "while routine library use did not influence a student's

development of critical thinking skills, focused library activities did have a significant impact on a

student's ability to think analytically and put ideas together" (p.140). This statement emphasizes the

additional focus that George & Frank (2004) place on providing information literacy competency

educational resources.

Conclusion

"Information literacy is a phrase that has emerged during the past 25 years as a way to describe how one

manages the exponential increase in information, now available instantaneously, in this age of

computerized access" (Albitz, 2007, p. 99). Both critical thinking and technical proficiency are the

crucial ingredients of information literacy that deal with the "exponential increase in information" and

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with information that is "now available instantaneously." Accordingly, we return to our original

question, "Does information literacy provide scaffolding in support of open and distance learning (ODL)

or is information literacy a nice to have in a need to know environment?"

Information literacy competencies provide the necessary scaffolding that supports all learners and ODL

learners in particular. Spend a day at Starbucks or Panera Bakery & Café and inevitably, various

Internet sources including Google and Wikipedia will be used to support an argument or to provide the

answer to a question as soon as it is asked. Information literacy has the potential to mitigate this trend

toward viewing the Internet as an automatic authoritative source by encouraging critical thinking and

supporting learning how to both locate relevant, authoritative information and how to evaluate the

information found.

Information literacy is a critical skill in the current changing academic and workplace environments and

information literacy supports not only students, but also adults learning in a world where continuing

education is becoming the norm. As Bush states in her change focused article, "Today, our information

choices increase as each nanosecond passes, and we no longer can rely on the expertise of a few

gatekeepers." The information literacy skills of evaluating authority, accuracy, and credibility of

sources become necessary in our personal lives when we choose a news source, a phone system, or a

Medicare card" (Bush, 2009, p. 446). Information literacy competencies, therefore, prepare students for

both academic environments and their external world and the assertion made by George and Frank

(2004) that information literacy competencies should be provided in many forms and address critical

thinking skills and technical proficiency for the ODL student is a valid and supported conclusion in their

chapter.

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