
The Irish Working Group on Information Literacy: a cross-sectoral approach

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BACKGROUND

At its 2006 AGM, the Library Association of Ireland (LAI) passed the following motion:

'That this Annual General Meeting calls on the incoming Executive Board to work with other agencies to adopt a standard for Information Skills; lobby to ensure government is made aware of the need for, and value of Information Skills; lobby government to recognise and affirm the role of Libraries in the delivery and maintenance of Information Skills'

(proposed by the Executive Board of the LAI).

Following this, a call was sent to all library sectors seeking out members either working in or interested in the area of information skills / information literacy (IL). Members were asked whether they would be willing to contribute by participating in a working group on this topic. Membership of the working group was open to everyone, the sole stipulations being that any officers of the group must be members of the LAI, and have interest and enthusiasm!

The Working Group on Information Literacy (WGIL) was consequently established by the LAI in January 2006.

WORKING GROUP ON INFORMATION LITERACY (WGIL)

Subsequently, at a preliminary meeting between the LAI liaison and some initial members, it was agreed to establish a chairperson and secretary for the working group. Membership of the group was eventually completed and now comprises ten members from across the range of LIS (Library and Information Services) sectors in Ireland. These include academic, special, schools, public, health and university sectors, and also a representative from the Department of Library & Information Studies (DepLIS), University College Dublin (UCD).

From the outset, one of the key objectives established was that the work of the WGIL would be approached on a *cross-sectoral* basis. This was, and is, seen by the group as being central to our work. In order to ensure credibility and inclusiveness, the group considers it vital that all elements within the Irish library community are represented and have an opportunity to make contributions.

The group recognises the diversity of the different sectors in working to achieve the common goal of an information literate society. It also recognises that some areas are more evolved than others and that there is unlikely to be a 'one size fits all' model. The group acknowledges the work of practitioners throughout the library and information sectors and the many common issues and problems encountered. The group also agreed that it was vital that members look beyond their own (work) areas of interest – the remit of the group is grounded in the LAI, not the individual sectors in which we work. Certainly the experiences of our respective sectors should be brought to bear on the group, but in essence the group is an LAI group.

WHY THE NEED FOR A WGIL?

'... skills of critical thinking, research and evaluation are increasingly required to make sense of the world'.
(Horizon Report (UK), 2007¹)

In today's knowledge society, information is available in multiple formats and of varying quality; many of the Google generation believe that information = web. Therefore it is essential, more than ever, that our citizens have the ability to retrieve, evaluate and use information critically and effectively. The establishment of a WGIL and the recognition by the LAI of the need for standards

in IL is an acknowledgement of this. IL remains hugely topical in LIS sectors and, according to Webber, is 'receiving increasing attention worldwide'.² There is a significant body of work on IL in library literature. It has become a core feature of what libraries 'do'. In forming a national WGIL, the LAI recognises IL as:

- a recognisable skill
- a core competency
- a transferable skill
- an employable skill
- central to independent learning
- fundamental to critical thinking
- an essential element of lifelong learning.

ROLE

The aim of the group, as decided upon by the members from the outset, is:

'To recommend strategies for the development of information skills at both a theoretical and practical level in the Library and Information Services sector in Ireland'

In addition to this, the members agreed that the group should:

- generate recommendations for the LAI to take information literacy forward on a national basis
- examine international best practice and standards
- produce a sectoral-based report on the current status of information literacy
- raise awareness and heighten the profile of information literacy, potentially by hosting a national seminar.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

- To recommend appropriate guidelines for the practical development of information skills education across the Irish library and information services sector
- To recommend strategies for promoting and raising awareness of information skills in the library and information services sector in Ireland
- To suggest further development opportunities for research and action on information skills education in Ireland
- To recommend actions for the strategic positioning of information skills within the context of lifelong learning in a learning and

knowledge society, on the national governmental agenda.

SOME IL ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Over the course of the work of the group, a number of key issues and concerns emerged. Some of these could be described as local (in that they are unique to the Irish LIS sector) and others as perhaps universal, commonly recognisable to those working as IL practitioners. From a local perspective, there may be difficulties in relation to:

- the cross-sectoral nature of the project: notwithstanding the notable work of COLICO (the Committee on Library Co-operation in Ireland) and others, there isn't a major tradition of project-based multi-sectoral work in Irish libraries
- unevenness of the playing field – some library sectors are much more evolved than others in terms of IL activity
- schools libraries: this sector is chronically underdeveloped in Ireland
- language and terminology: use (or not) of the phrase 'information literacy' continues to be problematic. The LAI, in calling for standards and so on (AGM, 2005), used the term 'information skills'. Others, such as JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee), use 'i-Skills'. This lack of consistency continues to create confusion particularly outside academic library circles and the use of a phrase involving the word 'literacy' would still seem to carry some form of stigma or at least misunderstanding in certain circles. Although use of the term 'IL' is preferred by many practitioners, whether it has been fully embraced is somewhat questionable.
- the fact that Ireland has become increasingly multi-cultural in the last few years: the added difficulty of the delivery of IL initiatives to non-English speaking students should not be underestimated, and there are significant cultural and linguistic issues to consider
- the agreement of many commentators that basic literacy skills are relatively poor amongst many students leaving secondary education in Ireland, which makes selling the concept of IL even more difficult.

More generally, there are challenges associated with IL design and delivery in terms of the following:

- semesterisation and modularised models of education: these have further decreased the time available to librarians to deliver IL
- Web 2.0. (or Library 2.0 or Student 2.0 ...): we live in a world of user-created content, shared information, social networking, blogs, RSS, vlogs, podcasts, wikis, tags, mash-ups, instant messaging. This has major implications for IL. The ability of librarians to engage with users using these tools is becoming more critical and is presenting major relevancy challenges. Peter Godwin describes the Web 2.0 environment as one in which 'users ... create their own information landscapes individually or in groups'³
- technology: VLEs (Virtual Learning Environments) and MLEs (Managed Learning Environments) are the norm and many students now expect to find all their information requirements in these systems
- library staff – many are still concerned about their role as 'teachers': do they have the expertise, the confidence, the skills-sets? Other issues remain in relation to payment, job definition and demarcation, pedagogy, teaching skills, expectations and so on
- assessment, accreditation and evaluation of IL: should IL be compulsory, and how can we integrate it into already congested curricula?
- academic staff: are they (sufficiently) interested, do they see the need for academic champions, do they recognise the value of our role? Is IL the sole property of librarians?

ACTIVITY TO DATE

The group has:

- met quarterly (about 8 times) since its inception, in addition to working via e-mail and phone
- finalised membership of the WGIL and clarified objectives, role and terms of reference
- agreed the main deliverables of the group as being to:
 - o produce a set of recommendations to the LAI as per the terms of reference
 - o produce a cross-sectoral report
 - o arrange a national conference or seminar
- reviewed international definitions of IL and recommend adopting the CILIP (2004) definition of IL as a working definition: 'Information literacy is knowing when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner'.⁴

- reviewed existing international standards for developing IL programmes and recommend adoption of the Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy (ANZIIL) information literacy framework (2004). Following no little amount of debate, the group chose the ANZIIL model as the most suitable framework for developing information literacy education, finding it practical, user-friendly and flexible
- presented an update on the activities of the group to the executive board of the LAI⁵ and sought formal recognition from the LAI as a sub-group
- attended seminars: IL seminar in Dublin City University (2006) and LILAC conference (2007), Manchester, UK. It is hoped to present a conference paper at LILAC 2008.
- disseminated information through various LIS channels such as e-Leabharlann (LAI electronic newsletter) and posted information and contact details to the Health Science Libraries Group website⁶ and significant content to the national website of the LAI⁷
- in terms of advocacy, received a presentation from Ellen Breen (Dublin City University), Chair of the CONUL (Consortium of National and University Libraries) advisory committee on information literacy
- made a presentation to the academic and special libraries section of the LAI at its 2007 AGM
- submitted an article to *SCONUL Focus* for publication (accepted if you are reading this!)
- arranged to meet with the school library services (JSCP) group in September 2007 (junior certificate school programme demonstration library project).

ONGOING WORK

The WGIL has been in existence now since January 2006 and it is anticipated that the end of 2007 will complete the current work of the group. The completion of the final report and recommendations is seen very much by the group as the end of phase I of this project. What happens next is very much a matter for the group members themselves (phase II, anyone?) and for the LAI (national policy, anyone?). Without pre-empting the final conclusions of the group, it seems likely that more work is required. Research or quantitative study, beyond the scope of this small voluntary group, is most likely to be necessary.

In the meantime, and with an indicative date for the completion of group's report and recommen-

dations as the end of 2007, we continue to look at working towards:

- a set of recommendations on information literacy as per the terms of reference of the group
- further and ongoing dissemination of the work and scope of the group through library and sectoral channels
- facilitating or hosting a national cross-sectoral seminar on IL
- developing a database / comprehensive list of key stakeholders with an interest or involvement in information literacy
- exploring the possibility of the WGIL becoming a full sub-group within the LAI
- providing a forum for discussion and debate; clarifying the relationship with the CONUL IL Group; and looking to affiliate the group with other similar or like-minded groups in the UK and internationally, such as the CILIP CSG (Community Services Group) IL group (UK)
- supporting further IL research
- welcoming contributions from other groups or interested parties
- advocacy – continuing to highlight the role of IL, raising awareness and heightening the profile of IL in Irish library sectors
- developing a presence or 'community of practice' on the Irish National Digital Learning Repository (NDLR)⁸
- establishing guidelines and a broad template for writing a sectoral report: work on this is ongoing and it is hoped that the final report will be completed and formally presented to the LAI by early 2008.

FURTHER IL WEBLINKS

Library Association of Ireland:

<http://www.libraryassociation.ie>

Lifeskills Project:

<http://www.lifeskills.ie>

CILIP IL sub-group:

<http://www.cilip.org.uk/specialinterest-groups/bysubject/informationliteracy>

International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) IL resources directory:

<http://www.infolitglobal.info/>

The information literacy website (UK):

<http://www.informationliteracy.org.uk/>

Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy (ANZIIL):

<http://www.anziil.org/>

REFERENCES

- 1 http://www.nmc.org/pdf/2007_Horizon_Report.pdf
- 2 Sheila Webber, 'Editorial', *Journal of information literacy*, 1 (1), January 2007, p.ii, <http://ojs.lboro.ac.uk/ojs/index.php/JIL/article/view/Editorial-V1-I1-2007/1>
- 3 Quote from Peter Godwin in 'Information literacy and the internet generation', *Library + information update*, 6 (3), March 2007, pp 36-9
- 4 See Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, <http://www.cilip.org.uk/professionalguidance/informationliteracy/definition/>
- 5 The group was also invited to give a paper at the LAI/CILIP annual joint conference (April 2007) but due to unavailability we were unable to do so.
- 6 See <http://www.hslg.ie/infolit>
- 7 See <http://www.libraryassociation.ie/>
- 8 See <http://www.ndlr.ie/>

All Web sites accessed: 15/08/07