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How do public librarians constitute information literacy?

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Abstract

To date, much work has been done to examine the ways in which information literacy – a way of thinking about, existing alongside and working with information- functions in an academic setting. However, its role in the non-academic library professions has been largely ignored. Given that the public librarian is responsible for designing and delivering services and programmes aimed at supporting the information literacy needs of the community-at-large there is great value to be had from examining the ways in which public libraries understand and experience IL. The research described in this paper investigates, through the use of phenomenography; the ways in which public librarians understand and experience the concept of Information Literacy.

Keywords

IL, Phenomenography, Community, Education, Literacy

INTRODUCTION

Information literacy has, since the term was first used by Zurkowski in 1974, become one of the cornerstones of modern day education. Indeed, it has been suggested that “the creation of an Information Society is key to social, cultural and economic development of nations and communities, institutions and individuals in the 21st century and beyond... it is a prerequisite for participating effectively in the Information Society, and is part of the basic human right of life long learning” (Horton & Keiser, 2008, p.6). Such a rise to prominence has not come unattended. Rather, it has coincided with the rapid advances made to those tools and technologies which are “used to generate, disseminate and access information” (Bruce, 1997, p.2). Indeed, while it would be true to say that information literacy has always existed, in some capacity, it has been the convergence of technology, tools, accessibility, need and societal mores which have made it indispensable. Given that the library remains, for many people, a first port-of-call when accessing information it was natural that, with the emergence of information literacy, it be “charged with taking an active role in fostering an information literate society” (Harding, 2008, p.274). However, despite the widespread acceptance of information literacy (IL) and the willingness of libraries to accept the challenge of implementing information literacy programmes for the general public there have been problems. Chief among them has been the “lack of understanding and knowledge of information literacy concepts by librarians and other stakeholders” (Harding, 2008, p.286). Bruce calls it a “lack of precision in use of the term” (Bruce, 1997, p.10) and that, perhaps, best sums up the reason for confusion. That lack of precision leads to uncertainty in regards to distinctions which exist “between information literacy, bibliographic instruction and library skills programs” (Bruce, 1997, p.10). In addition to uncertain application of the term there is also a degree of scepticism regarding the merits of the concept. Irrespective of their worth and/or accuracy, those doubts add to the confusion which accompanies information literacy and are, as Bruce quite rightly points out, “possibly symptomatic of the lack of a sufficiently deep understanding of it” (Bruce, 1997, p.11).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public libraries are considered to be perfectly situated for developing and promoting information literacy as well as for encouraging lifelong learning on a community-wide, state-wide, nation-wide and international level. (Bundy 1999; Harding 2008; Leininger 2005) Not only are they a living source of information, they provide a means by which economic barriers to learning and literacy can be overcome and through which information networks can be established and maintained. They, unlike private and academic libraries, can become an integral part in the life of each and every member of society because membership or patronage is unrestricted. Subsequently, they are the organizations best placed to bring information literacy - awareness and implementation - to the general public. Also, they occupy the unique position where they can provide the means by which a person's formal education, at any level, can be integrated with their social life - a form of information literacy cooperation which is currently being employed in several joint ventures, between public library and educational institution, in Denmark (Skov 2004). That view, of the public library as occupying a unique place where the worlds of lifelong learning and education can meet is not confined to any one country but is an opinion and attitude echoed on an international scale (Harding 2008; Poustie 1999). Those potentialities - to reach the widest possible (unrestricted) audience, to unite a person's educational and social worlds, to begin instruction at the earliest possible age or even at the latest stage of a person's life and to establish a life-long relationship with the individual - illustrate perfectly why the public library is, arguably, the most important player in the delivery of information literacy and lifelong learning.

Despite the public library's very obvious potential, as regards information literacy implementation, education and awareness as well as its capacity to champion lifelong learning within a community or even a nation, there appears to be a very real gap in research documenting the IL activities and attitudes to IL of public librarians (Harding 2008; Hart 2006; Jackson 1995; Walter 2007). Indeed, when examining the available literature it quickly becomes apparent that there is a very real scarcity of research material, basic pilot studies (such as this one) or even speculative essays, papers and reports. That situation is detailed by Harding in her thorough overview of the literature which has been published dealing with the public librarian's relationship and attitude to IL. Due to its currency and position as one of the few available works dealing with this particular area of inquiry and scholarly preeminence, this literature review makes extensive use of its findings. One of the most significant of its discoveries, based on research conducted by Radar, Johnson and Jent, is that, between the years 2000 and 2005, of all English language articles written with a library-specific focus, only an approximate 2% dealt with the issue of information literacy within the context of the public library (Johnson & Radar 2002; Johnson & Jent 2007). In comparison, 52-62% of articles focused on academic libraries while a further 20-35% focused on primary and secondary schools (Harding 2008, p. 277). While that figure is obscured, somewhat, by potential flaws in the classification of materials (Harding 2008, p.277) it does highlight the enormous bias which exists towards educational libraries.

In addition to the lack of research documentation dealing with public libraries and/or public librarians, there has also been a dearth of published books and manuals which deal with information literacy from the point-of-view of the public librarian (Harding 2008). Even in compilation titles, where chapters are provided by a variety of different authors and deal with information literacy across several different library positions (implementation, education, awareness) there is an almost complete absence of discussion regarding public libraries and public librarians. It should, however, be noted that if a search is conducted wherein the term 'lifelong learning' or 'user education' are substituted for 'information literacy' the results expand considerably. Yet, despite the increased number of returns, the materials typically present themselves as only reports, strategies, synopses or proposals (Harding 2008). That includes web-related searches which also include blogs written by librarians or those working within the field of library and information sciences. Harding's 2008 study uncovered only three formal studies and, two years later, that number has not changed (Harding's own study being an overview of the literature rather than an examination of public librarian's attitudes and opinions). That situation, in part, illustrates one of the key problems found when dealing with information literacy and the public library. That is, the issue of confusion regarding terminology. In regards to public librarians and information literacy, it has been proposed that public librarians may well be the least able spokespersons for the information literacy concept (Curren 1993). Indeed, "a lack of understanding and knowledge of information literacy concepts by librarians and other stakeholders was noted by Bruce & Lampson (2002, p102) in their study of librarians' attitudes towards information literacy" (Harding, 2008, p. 286). In turn, that lack of understanding is seen to manifest itself as inaccurate or very narrow application of the term (Bruce 1997; Skov 2004) which, ultimately, leads to further uncertainty in regards to the difference between information literacy and other terms and concepts such as library skills programs, bibliographic instruction and computer literacy (Bruce, 1997, p.10). That position, regarding the general confusion and uncertainty which exists in regards to application and unpacking of the term 'information literacy' seems to be borne out by the research conducted within this pilot study.

Adding to problems regarding the attitudes and opinions of public library staff are those of their customer base itself. The clientele for any public library is highly diverse, as are their needs and learning styles. That, in turn, makes it difficult to tailor and deliver an information literacy programme which will accommodate the needs of all potential (Burrell 1999; Harding 2008; Jackson 1995). Indeed, to create a programme that does reach all of the intended target publics requires a high degree of skill, particularly in the areas of teaching and management. While a degree course is certainly not necessary to understand the information literacy concept or to deliver IL training it will have made the librarian aware of its existence and provided them with strategies to use when implementing an IL programme. Without that training the onus will either be on them to keep up-to-date or on their library service. Given the large number of other jobs they need to perform it places additional pressure on what is, most surely, an already full schedule. Some library services (Poustie 1999) have been up to the task, however, it is an undertaking that requires cooperation between council, their library service and an education provider. One solution would be for the creation and implementation of a standardized, ALIA (Australian Library and Information Association) approved on-line training course that would provide public librarians with the necessary skills and awareness to effectively deliver IL programmes. That, however, would require an even greater degree of cooperation than simply between one council and an educational institution. Therefore, while the idealized expectation is that public libraries will function as centres of information literacy development and provide a link between a person's educational and social world that situation is entirely predicated on clients viewing and accepting the library in the way that it wants to be accepted and viewed. If that does not happen, libraries will be unable to fulfill the role they have envisioned for themselves (Curran 1993).

Methodology

Phenomenography is a way of "mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them" (Marton & Booth, 1997). Concerning itself with uncovering and charting the finite number of ways in which a phenomenon is experienced (Edwards, 2007, p.88), as well as illustrating the way/s in which each strand is inexorably connected to the others, it can be utilised as a means by which to examine approaches to learning and teaching, varying ways in which information is learned and as a means by which to explain societal issues not specifically related to education (Bowden, 2000; Bruce, Stoodley & Pham, 2009). Bruce (1997) describes that divergence as "qualitative variation in conception" (Bruce 1997, p. 83) but, in layman's terms, it is simply the range of experiential responses which are generated by people in relation to a particular phenomenon (Bowden, 2005; Partridge, Edwards and Thorpe 2010). Indeed, in terms of this project's central focus – 'how do public librarians constitute information literacy' - it is phenomenography's capacity to provide "a way of looking at collective human experience of phenomena holistically despite the fact that such phenomena may be perceived differently by different people and under different circumstances" (Akerlind, 2005, p.72), which is of most significance. The most usual way of conducting phenomenographic research is via interviews (Yates, Partridge & Bruce, 2009, p.272) which is the information gathering tool used in this project. To that end, a series of open-ended questions were devised to encourage, from participants, a real and comprehensive account of the way/s in which they constitute the phenomena in question.

Data Collection

In order to gather together the necessary data, a series of focused, semi-structured and one-on-one interviews were conducted. Interviews varied in length from 25 through to 45 minutes. Each interview was, with the consent of interviewees, audio recorded and subsequently transcribed for the purposes of close analysis.

Questions included in the final data-gathering tool included:

- Describe your experience of being an 'effective information user'
- Tell me what you think it means for your clients to be 'effective information users'
- Describe how you provide/design/deliver services to help your clients be 'effective information users'
- If you were to describe an ideal 'effective information user' what would they be like?
- What role do you think information literacy has in the work of a public librarian?

Lupton (2008) acknowledged the difficulty in asking an interviewee to construct meaning for an abstract concept such as 'information literacy'. While the interviewees taking part in this project may well be qualified members of a profession in which information literacy is a central tenet, it would have been unwise to assume that all, or any, of them are familiar with the concept of information literacy. The questions began by gauging the interviewee's understanding and experience of 'effective information use', a term used in place of the potentially

confusing 'information literacy', before examining their familiarity with the information literacy concept when explicitly stated as such.

Analysis

The primary goals of a phenomenographic study "is to describe and organize the various ways of experiencing a phenomenon by a group of people into a limited number of categories" (Partridge, Edwards and Thorpe 2010, p.280). In this project, four distinct categories and one sub-category emerged, each describing a unique way in which at least one of the participants experienced the phenomena in question. Due to the limited size of the sample, no firm conclusions can be drawn and the information can only be looked on as preliminary in nature. That said, each one represents the definite attitudes and opinions of the respondents measurable attitude expressed by the respondents. Resultantly, it can be said that the categories which emerge are potentially indicative of a wider trend. Further research, in particular expansion of the sample population, will be needed before any conclusive statement can be made.

The categories:

Category 1: Social

Meaning: In this category respondents saw information literacy as an integral part of every person's day-to-day life and a skill necessary in order to make their way in the world-at-large.

Focus: In this category the primary focus is on developing skills which will enable the person to successfully live their life in a world dominated by information.

Illustrative quotes:

(Interview. 4): "Information Literacy allows a person to navigate their day-to-day world. "It's a survival skill that allows you to interact with the world and not be totally confused by it or out of place in it."

(Interview. 3): "It is a life skill that will set them up to be more informed, more able to navigate the world and more of a critical thinker. Effective information users want to learn, ask questions that enable this, make deductions and above all else take responsibility in their lives."

In this category the stimulus for engaging with information is triggered by the individual's innate need to engage with the social world in which they live. Rather than being seen as simply the means by which a particular aim can be achieved or particular skills acquired information is viewed as a necessary function of life and, indeed, as an integral part of the living world. Whereas in other categories information is seen as an entity separate to the individual who uses it, in this category there isn't the same distinction or division. On the contrary, information is seen as existing side-by-side with the individual and as an intrinsic part of them. Due to its position as an intrinsic part of the social world there is a greater emphasis on the processes of decoding and contextualising whereas, in other categories, there is already an understanding of the context into which information is brought. In those instances, information becomes the means by which a particular goal, outcome or output is achieved. In this first category, however, information provides context. While it helps to achieve a goal - socialising - the outcome is far less material than in other categories.

Information engaged with in this category can be either new or old data. It may be information which exists in any format, even information which is perceived (on an instinctive, innate level) rather than being purely factual. The information process at this point is both active and passive. While the individual may not actively seek out the data and it may be presented to them in a relatively passive fashion their utilisation of it, as a way in which to decode societal signs and signifiers, is an active process. That is to say, it is active in the sense that gaining awareness is an active process; however, it is passive in the sense that there is no expectation that an awareness of information tools and sources will be translated into their utilisation. That duality distinguishes it from other categories wherein information forms part of a mechanically kinetic activity. In this instance, what activity takes place comes in the form of cerebral function - evaluation, understanding, awareness.

Category 2: Intellectual/Evaluative

Meaning: In this category information literacy is constituted as an intellectual process wherein people are not only aware of their information options - all of the possible ways in which information may be accessed, stored and retrieved - they are also able to assess their validity, reliability and currency.

Focus: In this category the primary focus is on being able to make an informed, reasoned choice as to the most appropriate and valid information source, tool or resource out of the many which are available.

Illustrative quotes:

(Interview. 1): “If you’re information literate it means you’ve got to be aware of all the information options and be able to evaluate which is the most appropriate for the question and which is also the most accessible.

(Interview. 3): “When you’re reliant on others for information you are at the mercy of what they want to tell you. They control the quantities, types and levels of information you receive. Become independent and you control those things. Subsequently you become an empowered person.”

In this category the stimulus for engaging with information is triggered not only by the need to know where information can be found, how it can be retrieved and how it can be used but also by the need to critically evaluate it. It is a cerebrally active process wherein information is weighed against set criteria – validity, reliability, practicality, etc- and, ultimately, selected or rejected based on the result of that evaluation. Unlike the first category, information exists in both an internal and external state. On the one hand, the skills which will enable the individual to evaluate the information they are presented with is already in their possession and, therefore, internal. The information they will be engaging with is, however, external. Subsequently, the information which is being engaged with will be both old and new as well as both internal and external. New, potential information will be evaluated via a process which is informed by old information (reason, evaluation skills). There is a very strong emphasis on the recipients of information and what emerges is a view of the IL concept being constituted not merely as a process but as a process with idealised users. It should be of little surprise to find that librarians, who spend a large part of their job dealing with the general public, are influenced by the customer service component of their work. Subsequently, when they constitute IL they are heavily influenced by the people they know they will be dealing with in a customer service capacity. However, that does not mean their conception of IL is tainted by any aggression towards their customer base. While that may be true in some cases there is ample evidence that they take a proprietary role towards their library’s patrons and see information literacy as the means by which those people can empower themselves as independent thinkers with a finely honed critical facility.

Category 3: Technical/Technological/Practical

Meaning: In this category information literacy is constituted as the capacity to use the tools of information technology in order to access information.

Focus: In this category the primary focus is on having the technical skills necessary to use the tools and technology which allow a person to access and utilise information.

Illustrative quotes:

(Interview. 1): “The information literate person, they’re not just aware of all the ways in which information can be accessed; they’re actually able to use the tools which will unlock that information”.

(Interview. 5): “They have the skills necessary to use a variety of different pieces of information technology, like the internet and catalogues and advanced searches and that sort of thing. They’re not just aware of their options; they’re able to put them into practise”.

In this category the stimulus for engaging with information is triggered by the need to know how to operate those tools which allow the individual to access and use information. Information literacy is, therefore, constituted as a mechanical process wherein, to be information literate, one must be capable of using the tools of information technology. What makes it a mechanical process is that information is being used to perform a specific external function. That takes awareness (of the tools) and understanding (of how to use them) to the next step which is putting them to use. Information gathered represents previously known data and the overall information process in this category is purely active. It outlines a process whereby knowledge is put into use to access and utilise those mechanisms which store information. The focus is not on acquisition of skills but the ability to use them. Therefore, the expectation is that information is already possessed by the individual. Information, therefore, has a specific purpose in this category. That is an active, not reflective, process.

Sub-category 3A: Outcome not Process

Meaning: In this category information literacy is constituted as a tool necessary to achieve a predetermined goal.

Focus: The primary focus is on achieving a desired result through use of information. It is result, not process, driven.

Illustrative quotes:

(Interview. 4): “Information literacy is really just a tool you use to achieve a goal or a result or an answer to a question. I think that has more to do with the result you get and not necessarily the process.”

(Interview. 1): “The way I see it is that the whole point of information literacy or anything like it is just so that me or you or anyone can get from point A to point B with the least possible fuss. It’s totally result orientated and result driven. Otherwise, it doesn’t have much point.”

The stimulus for engaging with information is triggered by the desire to achieve a particular result, goal or outcome. The focus is on achieving that result through the application of a tool – information literacy- , an approach that differs markedly from other categories where any result would be achieved through the acquisition and utilisation of information. Interestingly, rather than constitute information literacy as a process-driven entity comprised of several interconnected parts - evaluative, reflective, societal, mechanical, etc - in this category it is only constituted as an end product. Information literacy is, therefore, viewed as a singular unit which must be engaged (as opposed to ‘engaged with’) in order to achieve a particular outcome. Given that the ultimate aim is to achieve a specific goal it does not matter when information is chronologically acquired. Indeed, the only thing that matters is that the tool – information literacy- be applied.

Category 4: IL lacks meaning

Meaning: In this category information literacy is constituted as a process, concept or theory which carried no singular meaning. It could be said that it lacks constitution.

Focus: In this category the primary focus is on the respondent’s lack of engagement with or awareness of Information literacy

Illustrative quotes:

(Interview. 2): “Information Literacy doesn’t mean anything to me as a concept, although I might be aware of all the bits and pieces that comprise it”.

(Interview. 2): “I know it’s a term that’s bandied about these days but I really couldn’t tell you with any degree of certainty what it is. Intellectually, I could break it down and come up with a working definition but I couldn’t be certain that was what it really is”.

In this category the stimulus is, paradoxically, to disengage from information and is triggered by the respondent’s unwillingness to engage with the information literacy concept. There is no new information being processed in this category. On the contrary, there is an active rejection of any new data which might increase awareness or a reflective re-evaluation of pre-existing information and attitudes. The ‘shutting oneself off’ from information suggests an active process of avoidance and denial. While it might appear possible that there is a genuine absence of knowledge regarding IL the reality is that what is in evidence is an awareness of the concept but a refusal to constitute it. That, in turn, illustrates an active refusal to engage with information.

Discussion

The research outlined in this paper represents a preliminary investigation into the phenomena of how public librarians constitute the information literacy concept. Although lacking the sample size necessary to be definitive in its conclusions, outcomes and representative categories, it serves as a blueprint for the studies which will come after it. Those studies will, it is anticipated, address the deficiencies of scale which limit this study and either support or refute the preliminary findings suggested in this paper.

Analysis of the data contained within this report suggested the following conclusions:

- The stimuli for engaging with information can be divided into two distinct groups. The first is best described as ‘practical/business’ and the second as ‘social’. In the first group, IL is constituted as an entity which is purposely acquired in order to perform a certain task. In the second group, IL is constituted as an entity which is acquired by the process of socialisation. We could say that the first group is ‘mechanically’ (synthetically/artificially) acquired whereas the second is ‘organically’ acquired. To be ‘mechanically’ (synthetically/artificially) acquired means that information literacy has been engaged with in order to acquire certain skills or aptitudes which are deemed necessary in order to

undertake, understand or complete particular operations. To be 'organically' acquired means that information literacy has been engaged with as a natural part of another function (e.g. socialisation). In partaking of or engaging with that function, information literacy skills are unconsciously acquired.

- In each category, including the one designated 'social', information literacy is not seen as something which is acquired through a process of collaboration. While that might be because the interviewees are thinking purely as individuals, it is telling that at no time did they make mention of an exchange of IL skills between one person, or group, and another.
- The reasons for engaging with information literacy are result-driven and self-centred. Whether it is to acquire a particular piece of knowledge (to perform a specific task) or to successfully operate as a member of society the motivation is always to attain a certain state (knowledge, socialisation) which is considered necessary and not currently present or in the possession of the individual. Therefore, based on the data gained during this pilot study, information literacy was engaged with only when a personal 'lack' was recognised. While it is very probable that IL is engaged with for purely altruistic purposes, that was not a conclusion which could be drawn based on the data provided.

What is interesting, especially given the public librarian's position as a disseminator of information, is that information literacy appears to be constituted as a solitary and self-centred activity. Although it does not fit within the scope of this project to examine the implications of that statement it does present itself as an area worth examining more fully. If information literacy is seen to be an inherently solitary activity, a thesis rejected by earlier research such as Bruce's 'Seven Faces of Information Literacy' (1997), then it might be at odds with the highly socialised activity of the public librarian. That would suggest a change in current opinions and/or, far more likely, attitudes, is necessary before IL can become a truly organic part of the public library experience. McCrank (1992, p.486) is of the opinion that "information literacy is so relative to an individual, a particular need, and the situation that it seems to defy measurement". If that is the case and information literacy is indeed an individual concern it could very well affect the ability of public librarians to deliver IL training to customers. However, that they – public librarians – do currently deliver such training would suggest that it can be a socialised activity. Also, it has been suggested that it is difficult to assess information literacy (Catts, 2000, p. 271) and that "it is very difficult to assess the effectiveness of any library instruction" (Kaplowitz and Contini 1998, p.20). It could, however, be very convincingly argued that public libraries are able to measure and assess the effectiveness of information literacy instruction based on observation, borrowing habits, customer inquiries and self-driven library use among those patrons who attend some form of structured library instruction. While that sits outside the confines of this report it does also present itself as an area meriting future study.

Value of the Research Findings

Given the scarcity of studies dealing with public librarians and the information literacy concept, this paper, despite its preliminary nature, adds a notable contribution to the currently available literature. Indeed, given that the last of those studies was conducted four years ago, this pilot study represents a leap forward and, in terms of Australian-centric research, it represents a watershed. To date, the few formal studies which have dealt with this particular phenomenon have been equally preliminary in nature and gathered their data via a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. However, their primary aims were focussed mainly on public librarian's readiness to deliver information literacy programmes, the factors affecting their readiness and their approach to delivering those programmes. This pilot study is the first to have as its sole focus the public librarian's experience of information literacy and the first to adopt a phenomenographic approach to uncovering that data.

It is anticipated that these research findings will prove most valuable to those working within the public library system, researchers with an interest in information literacy, those educators dealing with the training of librarians and the creation of librarian training courses as well as to the peak industry body (ALIA) which monitors the training of its constituent members. Those groups, in being provided with an understanding of the way in which public librarians actually relate to the information literacy concept, can either tailor their educational activities to address the imbalance suggested in this report, place greater emphasis on the need for information literacy awareness by its members, be proactive in providing training for its staff (in the area of IL) or find a blueprint for future research into a previously neglected area of the IL debate.

Limitations of the Research

The first and most significant limitation of the study relates to the overall size of the sample. In a typical phenomenographic study, "the number of participants should be sufficient to yield adequately rich descriptions of

the varying conceptions which, together, comprise the phenomenon” (Bruce, 1997, p.94). Sandberg (1994) suggests that approximately twenty participants will be enough to achieve that result. However, due to the time constraints imposed on this study, such a large sample size could not be attained and it bases its conclusions on the analysis of only five respondents. Resultantly, it should be viewed more as a preliminary study. The intention is not to lay claim to having produced a definitive study but, rather, to have taken the first step in what will be a much larger and more complex project. A third limitation came in the shape of geographic restrictions. This study elected to look at the responses of public librarians working within the South-East region of Queensland, an area consisting of several different library services. Taking one interviewee from each of the library services allowed for maximum representation and allayed any concerns that one might be targeted in particular. However, it ruled out the making of any statement regarding the attitudes or behaviours of public librarians within one region.

Aspects to consider for the future:

(i) Further development of the research questions.

Information Literacy is an abstract concept and, despite the expectation that public librarians will be familiar with it in a fairly typical form, there needs to be an appreciation that the way in which they interact with it can differ from person to person. Inclusion of the term ‘constitute’ was the first step in accommodating natural human variation. The second step will be to either formulate a new series of questions or edit the existing ones to ensure that the difficulties of dealing with an abstract concept are minimised and respondents are clearly guided towards the phenomena in question. It would also be interesting to include a question which asks respondents what they think the job of the public library is. As has been discussed, there is a possibility that the way in which librarians view their role and the role of the library is incommensurate with the teaching of information literacy. It would, therefore, be worthwhile gauging their response and seeing to what extent that situation exists. If it is found to be endemic then it would automatically suggest that, for information literacy programs to be effectively delivered in public libraries, re-education of the staff, as regards the library’s mission and its expectation of them, would be a top priority.

(ii) Increase of sample size and catchment area.

A key development will, naturally, be the inclusion of a much larger sample. That will allow more definitive statements to be made and will test the merits of those categories which have been proposed in this pilot study. However, as well as increasing the sample size there is potential for increasing the geographic region from which the sample is taken. The pilot study only dealt with public librarians currently working in the South-East region of Queensland. Further studies could not only increase the number of respondents from those areas – necessary for the purposes of a true phenomenographic study, as explained previously – but expand to include public librarians from other regions within Queensland then public librarians in other states around Australia. Given that the study deals with a nation-wide profession the scope is extremely broad. The ultimate aim would then be to make a definitive statement regarding the way in which Australian public librarians constitute information literacy.

(iii) Merits of the suggested categories.

As further research is conducted it may be decided that the categories proposed in this preliminary/pilot study need to be either modified or disposed of completely. It remains to be decided which path will be taken. That indecision has resulted in the inclusion of the fourth category in this pilot study. In that instance, the respondent was unwilling to engage with the concept of information literacy claiming that, as it did not carry any meaning for him conceptually, he could not engage with it in any capacity. While that does constitute a unique response it remains to be decided whether it can truly be said to represent a unique category.

Conclusion

Information literacy, as it is constituted and applied by public librarians has been, to date, a seriously underdeveloped topic within the field of library and information science. While emphasis has been placed on the way in which information literacy functions within academic libraries there is a paucity of research documentation dealing with its application in public libraries and by public librarians. As a result there has been an overall/general failure to address the way in which a pivotal educational tool – information literacy- operates within the largest disseminator of information and education in the public sector- the public library. Indeed, this paper, as limited and cursory as it is, represents one of the very few resources devoted solely to the way in which information literacy is experienced, understood, organised and arranged by public librarians. At the time of writing there is nothing to suggest that situation will change. While some work is being done in Sweden the primary aim of that research is to compare the way/s in which librarian’s perceptions of IL and their approach to IL concur with those of upper-secondary school students. While that will, no doubt, uncover useful information regarding the relationship of public librarians to information literacy it will, quite deliberately, lack specificity.

That is in no small part due to its focus being on 'librarians' in general rather than public librarians in particular. Resultantly, there remains no new research, outside of this very paper, which focuses solely on the way in which public librarians constitute the IL concept. Perhaps one potential reason for the neglect is that public libraries are seen as purely social services which lack any specific business application. Lacking that application it is possible that they are not considered to be less important (importance being measured in purely financial terms) than a similar entity operating within a more obviously fiscal or academic environment. It might also be that a query still remains regarding the educational role of public librarians and the willingness of patrons to be educated – something O'Beirne (2007, p.17) refers to when he mentions the highly transient nature of public library users and their highly flexible approach to learning. It may be supposed that within a controlled, academic, teaching environment there is a greater deal of teaching taking place whereas, in a 'public service' environment, the emphasis is on processing customer requests rather than empowering customers with the skills to fulfil those requests themselves. Or, it might simply be that no-one has managed to 'get around' to turning the research focus onto public librarians. Whatever the actual reasons for the current situation, the shortfall in research represents a knowledge gap which needs to be filled and, to that end, this paper represents one of the first attempts to redress that imbalance and provide a long overdue addition to the IL discussion.

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