Towards an Integrated Approach to Information Literacy Instruction in Schools

Introduction
Traditionally, parallels between the behaviour of people reading books for leisure purposes and elements within models of information seeking have seldom been drawn. Reuter (2007), in fact, identifies a fundamental difference between the two domains. Whereas the need to solve problems is often considered an integral dimension within the latter, the motivation driving the selection of books for recreational reading cannot so easily be explained in these terms. It is striking, too, that, although studies of young people’s use of library catalogues form a significant component of research on young people’s information behaviour, very often projects in this category scrutinize the pursuit of non-fiction volumes, rather than fiction.

Nevertheless, Reuter maintains that the browsing of a library collection for recreational material can be considered a form of information behaviour if the concept of an information need is expanded from the conventional definitions so that it is conceived as “a kind of gratification” (p. 139). The presence within a book on young people’s information-seeking behaviour of an essay on teenagers and pleasure reading (Howard and Jin, 2007) would appear to support this line of thought and, indeed, in the preface of the volume, McKechnie asserts unequivocally that studies of reading practices “are now regarded as part of the literature” on everyday life information seeking (p. vii).

It has been argued in some quarters that fiction is itself simply a particular type of information. Bates (1996), in addition to regarding information as sensory stimuli, believes that the word embraces virtually anything that is sought in a library, including novels. Chen and Herron, too, view information as encompassing “imaginative works of mind” (1982, p. 5). It is unlikely, however, that such a stance will meet with universal agreement. Whilst conceding that information is possibly “the most nebulous concept of all,” Irving writes that, in education, it tends to be perceived as what is required for cerebral processes like “learning,” “studying” and “understanding” (1982, p. 15). This position may go some way towards explaining the fact that, in many schools, non-fiction volumes are often labelled “information books” and works of fiction “story books,” as if the two forms of content are entirely separate and mutually exclusive. The work of Sapp emphasizes the validity of making such a division. Whereas probably few readers would dispute the viability of arranging works of non-fiction under a particular subject heading, Sapp argues that the substance of any novel is “much more likely to be expressed collectively, rather than singularly” (1986, p. 495), and goes on to isolate a range of further characteristics that effectively distinguish books of this sort from non-fiction.

Reading behaviour, information literacy and information seeking
If it is accepted that the essentials of, on the one hand, information seeking in its traditional sense and, on the other, behaviour associated with leisure reading are not altogether different, the possibility arises that arguments which have been expressed in relation to the promotion of reading for recreation are equally pertinent when applied to teaching information literacy, thus leading to the prospect of a more “integrated” approach to instruction in the two areas. A well-received book on reader development by Van Riel and Fowler (1996) provides informed comment on individual aspects of the reading of fiction that may well strike a chord with youngsters pursuing non-fiction, practitioners supporting these efforts and academics studying the phenomena involved. In a contemporary review, Sproston (1997) hailed the authors’ work as “fascinating and original,” highlighting its “insight” and “wisdom.”

Van Riel and Fowler open their discussion of the risks associated with selecting a book for leisure reading by recognizing the time-consuming and frustrating nature of the task. In terms of the electronic environment, no doubt many young people who have been faced with a list of countless websites after entering a term during a Google search will have similar feelings when looking for information. More broadly, in his commentary accompanying his own model of information seeking, Choo (2000) emphasizes that time and various forms of effort are involved in locating, contacting and interacting with sources. Van Riel and Fowler...
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raise the issue of making “wrong choices” when selecting fiction (p. 26), which, while again frustrating, can be valuable, they suggest, in introducing the reader to books that would otherwise go unnoticed by them. In a situation that has comparable positive and negative angles, a youngster searching the Web to complete a school assignment may well go initially to a site that offers information which, although irrelevant to the needs of the moment, may still be of value at some stage in the future, possibly when the individual’s studies have reached a more advanced stage.

Resemblances may be detected, too, in the manner in which the range of information that can be accessed may be restricted. Van Riel and Fowler note how some individuals tend to confine their reading to particular writers or series, only to “come unstuck when they get to the end” (p. 27). Similarly, many youngsters are inclined to go whenever possible to favourite websites for information they require and may feel uncomfortable when they have to look further afield. Van Riel and Fowler also appreciate how some readers may welcome the opportunity to choose from a range whose titles have been filtered by another party, via a book club, for example. This can be likened to how, in many schools, a safety net is afforded when teachers stipulate certain websites that pupils should visit for relevant information on a topic and further direction is provided through intranets and virtual learning environments (VLEs). Other teachers may ask pupils to concentrate their efforts on extracts from books and other appropriate paper sources that they have photocopied for them.

According to Van Riel and Fowler, a reader who has started a book is faced with “a continuous process of choice” as to whether to go on with the work or abandon it (p. 23). They write of the “investment” that the individual makes when a “sustained involvement” is required and this may be terminated at any point (p. 27). In the same vein, if difficulties become apparent when a particular course of information-seeking action is taken, the youngster must decide whether the likely outcome of the search is sufficient to justify the time and effort that has been spent or whether another information-seeking option should be adopted instead.

Van Riel and Fowler remind us that readers of fiction constantly determine how far they wish to engage with the material. Again, a similar observation can be made in relation to non-fiction. At one extreme in the spectrum of engagement, the user may look to explore the accuracy of the information, in the first case probably by testing it against what they already know, and read with the definite purpose of enhancing their knowledge. At the other end of the spectrum, they may, with little thought, copy and paste content into a document that is being prepared to meet assignment obligations. In this case, the user is merely a passive and unquestioning recipient of what is accessed.

Implications for information literacy instruction

Several of the issues raised by Van Riel and Fowler and discussed above involve difficulties that emerge for the reader and are clearly reminiscent of some of the more problematic aspects of information seeking. The possibility arises, then, that the information specialist can develop, for consideration by the user, broad principles for facilitation that may apply equally to leisure reading and to finding information so as to satisfy clear information needs. As a first priority, the attention of pupils should, from the outset, be drawn to the fact that the selection of fiction books and other information sources may be arduous, and problems in either situation do not necessarily result from inadequacy on the part of the individual. Given that, as Pickard notes, much of the “hype” surrounding the Internet presents an image of the computer as “a gateway to all knowledge” (2004, p. 33), and this resource plays a key role in the information-seeking endeavours of many young people, it is important to inculcate a realistic attitude.

A fundamental challenge for librarians lies in broadening the horizons of youngsters with respect to different types of literature and the various kinds of information sources available, without overwhelming users. One approach is that of phased extension, in which their existing knowledge and appreciation are progressively extended outwards from the familiar and what has already been recommended. Thus, what is offered through book clubs, VLEs, intranets and handouts dealing in pre-packaged information is gradually increased.

In a recent piece (Shenton and Hay-Gibson, in press), a colleague and I have highlighted how some consideration of the basic principles of cost-benefit analysis can help youngsters make informed decisions as to

- whether the end result of an information search is likely to justify any delays that arise;
- if it will be profitable to take another particular approach in the event of the original information-seeking action failing; and
- when it is worth redefining the information need if material on the desired subject proves difficult to locate.
Care must be taken, of course, to ensure that this line of thinking does not lead to youngsters prematurely abandoning a particular course of information-seeking action in the event of minor difficulties. There is also the risk that pupils who believe that the process of finding information is very straightforward will fail to be convinced that any cost-benefit analysis is necessary. Nevertheless, where youngsters are made to realize that poor decisions made in the course of such an ostensibly simple task as choosing a book for recreational reading can lead to a considerable degree of frustration and wasted time at a later stage, they are more apt to accept the need for such thought.

Conclusions

In a previous article (Shenton, 2009), I demonstrated how information literacy, research and scientific inquiry are effectively underpinned by common axioms, and the teaching of these general principles can facilitate the development of skills and understanding in relation to all three areas. A similar approach can be taken with regard to guidance on the selection of books for recreational reading and instruction to facilitate information literacy, since the two areas share several major similarities. Whilst this piece has concentrated on the work of Van Riel and Fowler (1996) to illuminate areas of congruence, the ideas of other writers on reader development may be equally productive.

The extent to which such an integrated approach is considered desirable, however, is heavily dependent on the culture within the school. It may well be that it is established practice for information literacy to be taught within a framework that is firmly rooted in an educational context. This would be consistent with the way in which Derr, in exploring the notion of an information need, argues that a legitimate “information purpose” is integral to the concept (1983, p. 274). In contrast, recreational reading may be perceived as much more frivolous in comparison and thus less deserving of formal teaching. The danger may also arise that, if the information professional emphasizes that particular approaches may be used when interacting with both fiction and non-fiction, the essential characteristics of the two forms of literature become lost and the differences in the library practices that are applied to them become obscured.

Bibliography


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