

Information Literacy and Employability

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Abstract

Information Literacy (IL) and its relationship to third level graduates' employability has gained more attention in recent years. This article examines how IL has evolved from skills initially associated with academic libraries into a key workplace skill set of the knowledge economy. It outlines the challenges interviewees encounter when selling IL to employers, how IL can be utilised when preparing for upcoming interviews and suggests a distinction between workplace IL and employability IL. It describes measures that Dublin Business School (DBS) and its Information Literacy Librarian have undertaken in order to enhance graduates employability, with a focus on the use and transferability of IL into the workplace.

Keywords: *Information Literacy, Employability, Ireland*



Introduction

In the four decades since it was first observed by Zurkowski, information literacy (IL) has fundamentally changed in relation to both its scope and necessity. During this time, IL has evolved from ‘techniques and skills for utilising...information tools’ (Zurkowski, 1974) to competencies that have been pronounced by UNESCO as a ‘basic human right in a digital world [that] promotes social inclusion’ (Garner, 2006, p. 3). This evolution has seen IL being reimagined to accommodate different scenarios, situations, and goals, including navigating the digital environment (digital information literacy), workplace skills (workplace information literacy) and promoting global economic development (information literacy and lifelong learning).

IL and employability or employability IL (author’s term) has become more topical in recent years, however it is but one IL offshoot. In order to provide context, this article will initially summarise IL’s evolution. Its primary focus will be on IL in relation to the workplace, employability and the measures a third level institution can undertake in order to enhance student employability; consequently its objectives are fourfold.

Firstly, it will describe the transition that IL has experienced in response to both the changing nature of information sources and the increase in circumstances and platforms in which people use these sources. This transition has taken IL from a concept initially and solely associated with academic libraries, to a necessary key workplace skill set and finally as a human right that all citizens are entitled to in order to practice lifelong learning. Employability IL has become more topical for librarians in recent years, accordingly the second part of this article will outline both the opportunities and challenges that IL can present to graduates when seeking employment in the knowledge economy. Thirdly, the concept of workplace IL will be discussed as a skill set of those currently in employment. An attempt will be made to distinguish it from employability IL. And finally, this article will outline how DBS, as the author’s employer, has responded to Irish employers’ demands for more skilled graduates. An initiative that the author has undertaken as DBS’s Information Literacy Librarian will also be described.

This article will present the author’s interpretation, citing the literature of IL’s evolution, IL and employability and IL as a workplace skill. The final section will be an account of both the rationale and measures that DBS and the author have undertaken in order to increase graduates’ employment prospects.

Library instruction to information literacy

Long before Zurkowski’s 1974 observation on information literates, considered a seminal moment, the role of librarians as teachers had long been established through library instruction (LI). This involved teaching library patrons how to access library collections via catalogues, abstracts and other reference sources. A gradual redefining of this concept occurred through the 1980s and early 1990s, resulting in LI evolving from teaching bibliographic instruction to ‘a programme to provide students bibliographic instruction, through a variety of techniques, enabling them to become information literate’ (Andretta, 2005, p. 6). This evolution transformed librarians’ teaching endeavours from a tutor-centred approach into a learner-centred independent learning approach, thus the concept of information literacy was established as a prescribed set of information handling competencies, which can be taught and learnt. Whereas LI was practiced in most libraries, in one manner or another, IL quickly became associated with academic libraries in particular. This is unsurprising, whereas LI focused on access and instruction; IL was about learning how to learn (ALA, 1989).

IL was first fully defined in 1989 by the American Library Association, and has subsequently been redefined and articulated by many other library associations worldwide, especially in the English speaking world. One of the more widespread IL definitions comes from CILIP:

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 (2013)

In order to teach IL to learners, various frameworks have been developed, including SCONUL’s 7 pillars and the ANZIL framework. All frameworks work on the basis of describing what behaviours (objectives) information literate individuals should

display, and consequently what actions (outcomes) learners should be able to complete after IL instruction (Grassian and Kaplowitz, 2009, p. 116).

Digital IL

From the 1990s, many academic libraries invested extensively in online sources, such as databases, to augment their collections. This measure, combined with the concurrent internet revolution, resulted in student success becoming increasingly dependent on the ability to navigate databases, retrieve information, and with the ensuing rise of Google, evaluate information. These developments required libraries to more fully embrace IL instruction.

The transition to online sources resulted in a necessary change in IL teaching methodologies, which could be described as digital IL instruction. When librarians talk of IL in the present time, more often than not, it is the competencies associated with information literacy in the digital environment that are being discussed. Digital IL should not be confused with digital literacy, an umbrella term encompassing an understanding of digital IL alongside social awareness, e-safety, collaboration and teamwork in a digital environment (Open University, 2015).

Information literacy beyond academia

The relationship between graduate success and independent lifelong learning is well established. However, it was not until 2000 that Breivik outlined the symbiotic relationship between IL and lifelong learning, maintaining that the former is an enabler of the latter. Concurrently, the concept of an IL umbrella, which has many 'spokes' such as computer, network and library literacies was introduced, thus establishing the metaliteracy concept. Fundamentally, critical thinking was prescribed as a prerequisite for IL in all its forms (2000, p. 1). Subsequently, other associated and offshoot literacies have been developed, depending on user need, including media literacy, health literacy (NIFL, no date) and workplace IL. Although Breivik presented IL and lifelong learning from graduates' perspective, the necessity of IL for all in a world beyond academia was duly established.

The aforementioned global digital environment, accessible via the internet, facilitates countless opportunities for users to participate in lifelong learning (MOOCs, distance learning, etc.), social connectivity, online working and much more. Conversely, it also presents dangers (phishing, pharming etc.) to society's more vulnerable members. In response, IL and its offshoots have been acknowledged as necessary tools for all stakeholders to both safely navigate and benefit from the information society's digital environment (IFLA, 2012). Consequently, although IL has evolved in both its scope and necessity, in direct response to the increase in availability, accessibility and abundance of information, Zurkowski's 1974 description of 'techniques and skills for utilising...information tools', remains accurate to this day.

Information literacy and employability for job seekers

Employability has been described as having the 'skills required not only to gain employment, but also to progress within an enterprise' (Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002, p.22). In order for stakeholders to see IL as one of these skills, more attention has been given to its role in employability, a concept (employability IL) which remains fluid and undefined. This is unsurprising; unemployment grew during the previous recession and the concept of employability gained more attention. This can be observed by examining the themes that were covered during the LILACs of recent years. During the preceding economic boom, the focus remained on student IL, while issues pertaining to IL and the academic institution as a whole were explored concurrently. Staff development and IL was a theme of the 2006 conference (Webber, 2005). However, by the 2012 conference, IL and employability had become established as a major theme, with this focus continuing at subsequent conferences. The papers presented at LILAC recently not only focused on the employability of graduates but also on how IL and employability related to various other cohorts including departing staff members (Kelly, 2013), social entrepreneurs (Walton, 2013), those currently in employment (Inskip, 2015) and librarians themselves (Slidell, 2015).

The aforementioned definition of employability is subjective, the decision as to whether or not a person gains employment and progresses rests solely with the

employer. When a 2009 CBI report of British employers queried what types of skills they seek in candidates they highlighted attributes such as problem solving, communication skills, positive attitude and numeracy among others (CBI, 2009). The ability to obtain and process information did not feature among responses. This lack of awareness of IL's primary competencies, by those who make hiring decisions presents challenges for both interviewees and organisations. For the former, if employers are unaware of IL as a skill set that is beneficial to an organisation they will not list it in job criteria, subsequently the topic will not arise at interview stage. Furthermore, for the latter, knowledge is now recognised as the 'primary driver of productivity and economic growth' for advanced economies (OECD, 1996), giving rise to information societies and the knowledge economy. High value economies require quantity, quality and accessibility of information; as a prerequisite, organisations operating in these environments need to recognise that they require information literate employees in order to fully participate in the knowledge economy.

Therefore, the primary barrier in transforming IL from something taught by librarians at college into an employer mandated skill set is employers' unawareness of IL as a collection of information management competencies, beneficial to both the individual organisation and wider economy. Importantly, this unawareness does not translate into employers not recognising IL as a valuable skill set, a 2014 survey of American employers found that when presented with a predefined list of candidates' skills and qualities, the 'ability to obtain and handle information' was ranked fifth by respondents, outranking technical knowledge and ICT proficiency (NACE, 2014).

With regard to graduates seeking employment, IL can benefit them in three ways. Firstly, it can be utilised when researching perspective employers in preparing for job interviews, a vital part of the process (Oakey, 2013, p. 25). Secondly, IL's value can be emphasised by candidates during the interview stage as something beneficial to an organisation, especially those in the knowledge economy. Lastly, IL can be presented as a set of acquired skills that candidates can contribute to an organisation. For these last two benefits to be realised, interviewees must be aware of IL's transferability from the

academic environment into the workplace, it is then that this skill set can be sold. Unfortunately, if they fail to do this, there is a high probability that these valuable skills will remain unmentioned during interviews.

Employability information literacy: a definition

As suggested, employability is not just about securing employment; it also relates to progression within social hierarchies (organisations). Consequently, employability IL, in the broadest sense, could be defined as:

Socially employing core IL skills (CILIP, 2013), while concurrently utilising related competencies such as critical thinking and digital literacy (Open University, 2015) for workplace endeavours

As effective and competent performance of duties is a prerequisite for progression, this article suggests that employability IL, using the aforementioned definition, can be employed to achieve these four workplace objectives (behaviours) listed in order of importance:

1. Secures employment
2. Advances within a working environment
3. Completes workplace duties
4. Improves workplace performance

Measurable actions (outcomes) that might be realised from these objectives could include improved workflow practices and completing group projects, to name but a few. For this to occur, it is important to acknowledge that workplaces, like all human environments, are primarily social places. Workplace outcomes are often dependent on social interactions, workplace IL acknowledges this relationship. The question then arises as to the distinction between workplace IL and employability IL, are they not one and the same?

Workplace information literacy

While there is no one definition of workplace IL; many interpretations exist (Williams, Cooper and Wavell, 2014, p. 3). This is unsurprising, the 'workplace' is not a general location where the needs of employees are uniform, instead

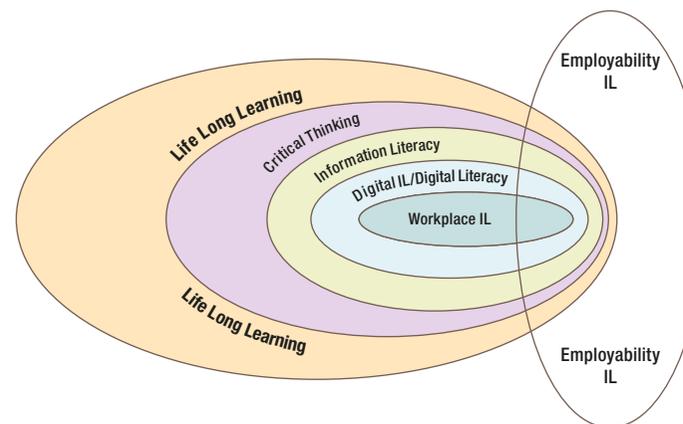
constituting a range of environments, professions, grades and tasks, each with their own requirements and duties. Owing to this, it seems unlikely that a consensus will be found in defining workplace IL; nevertheless, common features have emerged from the literature on this topic.

One characteristic of workplace IL is the emphasis it places on the social contextualised processing of information; the sources that workers require and utilise in professional contexts are often colleagues, as opposed to libraries and databases. The transformation of information into knowledge is another characteristic of workplace IL; again its social aspect is evident, as knowledge management focuses primarily on people and processes. Another feature of workplace IL is the emphasis it places on the creation of information, rather than the traditional IL competencies of finding, evaluating and using information (Williams, Cooper and Wavell, 2014). This is not to negate the fact that, for many professions these competencies remain fundamental, especially those in the knowledge economy. Furthermore, for certain professions, especially those encompassing the health, law and engineering sectors, these skills, or lack thereof, can literally mean the difference between life and death. So much so, that international accreditation bodies of these aforementioned sectors have stipulated that their graduates must possess certain information management competencies, including 'information retrieval skills' (engineering), 'being able to appraise research' (nursing) and 'distinguishing multiple sources of knowledge' (social work) as programme outcomes (Bradley, 2013, pp. 53-55).

To answer the question regarding the distinction between workplace IL and employability IL, this article suggests that the former (generally) delivers outcomes relating to improved workforce practices, knowledge management as well as overall organisational success, rendering workplace IL more organisational centric. In contrast, employability IL is more concerned with issues relating to securing employment, workplace advancement and the endeavours of employees, making it more employee centric. Similar to many other acknowledged literacies, there is much overlap between the two. Attempts to list specific differences between them would prove challenging

and futile. Nevertheless, using the aforementioned broad definition of employability IL, workplace IL could be viewed as a subset of it.

Figure 1: Employability IL and the IL 'onion', (O Keeffe, 2015)



Employability at Dublin Business School

DBS is a teaching college with a population of 9,000. Since its establishment in 1975, it has grown from an institution that prepared students for professional accountancy exams into a multi-disciplinary institution, offering over 100 accredited courses (levels 6-9) covering business, law, the humanities and IT (DBS, 2015).

From its foundation, DBS has maintained close ties with business whilst simultaneously responding to changes in the Irish economy and labour market by launching new courses when gaps arise. Since many of the courses offered by DBS are part-time professional courses, the concept of specific employability skills is integral to the institution.

However, with regard to the more traditional degree courses taught at DBS and the wider Irish third level sector, general employability skills of graduates, such as problem solving, critical thinking and people related skills were identified as lacking by a 2010 IBEC report (McGann, p. 30). DBS responded by launching employability modules across its full range of degree programmes, each year now contains a bespoke employability module. Notwithstanding

the fact that the IBEC report, like the aforementioned CBI report made no mention of IL, this new initiative presented a unique opportunity to provide embedded, accredited and assessed IL to all DBS students, with a focus on employability IL.

Information literacy and employability at Dublin Business School

IL has been taught at DBS since 2007, initially being delivered to small groups, before becoming more structured with the hiring of a full-time IL librarian. The sessions delivered were on a piecemeal basis, either by students attending classes (voluntary) or lecturers instigating sessions (integrated). Although the sessions delivered at the behest of lecturers could be bespoke, they relied on faculty engagement with the library, a challenge in many academic institutions.

Embedding IL into the curriculum addresses the low uptake scenario associated with the voluntary classes and low faculty engagement that can prevent integrated class uptake. It was decided to embed the IL sessions into the 'Learning to Learn' module, which is the first year undergraduate employability module. By mapping to the module's learning outcomes, an emphasis was placed on how IL can assist users in their academic endeavours and how it is also a transferable workplace skill. The module comprises 12 classes, of which 6 are dedicated to IL. Information sourcing, evaluation, application and acknowledgement are demonstrated and discussed in relation to college, work and the wider world. However, since these sessions occur in year one there is a possibility that the emphasis on the transferability of IL into the workplace will be forgotten by graduation.

A further opportunity arose in early 2014 when DBS secured state funding from Solas to provide back-to-work Momentum courses to the unemployed. During a mandatory two week induction, students received tailored IL instruction, not only were the core IL skills demonstrated but a new element, 'Information Skills for Job Seekers' was included. This was a theory/workshop session that allowed participants to use learnt IL skills to research employers from job listings found on LinkedIn. Since then, this class has been integrated

into the suite of voluntary classes, but the ongoing issue of low attendance remains. A future alternative approach is to target final year students by liaising with lecturers, with a view to having the class embedded shortly before graduation, this will allow students to realise its relevance to their upcoming job seeking pursuits.

Conclusion

Unemployment is on a downward trajectory, resulting in third level graduates' employment prospects improving. It remains to be seen if this development will result in librarians focusing less on IL and employability. Future employment growth and associated skills shortages will come from specific sectors including ICT, engineering, health, business and logistics (McGuire, 2015), sectors that most definitely require those who are able to obtain and process information. However, there is a high probability that when the future economy's skill sets are outlined, IL will again go unrecognised by employers, or if acknowledged, will be viewed as a 'poor cousin' to ICT proficiency and digital skills.

Librarians can respond by developing both micro and macro strategies. The micro, which occurs in individual institutions, could include tailored IL being delivered to final year students, before graduation, focusing on IL for interview preparation, IL and the knowledge economy and the transferability of IL into both the workplace and wider world. Students should be made aware that many employers require this unrecognised skill. Additionally, librarians in educational institutions that have partnerships with employers, such as the University of Limerick, could utilise these connections for IL advocacy. For the macro, Irish librarians could, as suggested by Russell et al (2015, p.25), liaise with employers, specifically groups such as IBEC, through the Library Association of Ireland Taskforce on Information Literacy, in order to have IL recognised and acknowledged as a learnt skill set of graduates, beneficial to both their organisations and the wider Irish economy. Advocating IL to Quality Qualifications Ireland, with a specific focus on its recently launched employer engagement strategy, is another possible

approach. As information grows exponentially, this skill set can only grow in importance, employers' obliviousness to it prevents both workplace and employability IL developing to their full potential, an avoidable scenario.

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