

Information Literacy: Essential Skills for the Information Age – 2nd Edition

Michael B. Eisenberg, Carrie A. Lowe & Kathleen L. Spitzer, Libraries Unlimited, USA, 2004, xviii + 408 pages, ISBN 1-59158-143-5, £26.99 (paperback)

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The current LIS ‘hot topic’ inventory is starting to get extremely unwieldy, encompassing a plethora of issues ranging from the role of Google within librarianship to the Open Access debate. Yet, in terms of topic temperature, information literacy ranks as one of the hottest and proudly resides atop this lengthy list. This reality is best reflected in the oppressive heat emanating from the LIS literature. According to Rader (2002), the years 1973 to 2002 witnessed the publication of more than 5000 publications relating to library user instruction and information literacy. Little scientific research is necessary, however, to deduce that in 2005 the issue of information literacy has successfully graduated from ‘hot topic’ to ‘burning topic’. If one dispenses with the meteorological metaphors and peruses the Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA), it is clear that there has been a near exponential increase in research and practitioner literature on information literacy since 2002. Such is the interest that international journals, such as *Library Review*, regularly devote entire issues to the topic.

Monographs have not been exempt from this publishing mania either. *Information Literacy: Essential Skills for the Information Age* constitutes one of many books aiming to be a definitive work on information literacy. Thus, in this significantly revised second edition, Eisenberg *et al* explore concept definitions, the history, the future, the research, the social and economic determinants, as well as guidance on embedding information literacy within curricula assuming a variety of pedagogical manifestations. Given the US nature of the publication, this latter strand (spanning chapters 5–7) focuses primarily on the US K-12 educational framework and aims to contextualise information literacy within current pedagogical practices and, ultimately, to demonstrate to the readership how information literacy fits into the ‘learning puzzle’.

A similar approach, albeit less meticulous, is used to address those practices within the US Higher Education sector. Here, insightful case studies surveying course integration techniques and instruction programmes are liberally deployed, as is guidance on how best to deal with those insidious academic departments or faculties that continue to oppose integrated information literacy. Numerous appendices, including relevant US reports and documentation, an exhaustive annotated bibliography, and a useful timeline detailing the development of information literacy are also included and add considerable value.

Yet, in reality, what adds most value and makes *Information Literacy* particularly unique is the authorship. As well being Dean and Professor at the University of Washington's Information School, principal author Eisenberg is arguably one of the most significant and influential international personalities within the realm of information literacy. As well as publishing widely and consulting for the US government on information policy, Eisenberg is best known internationally for his innovative approaches to information literacy and as the brainchild of the Big 6 Model (<http://www.big6.org/>); a model that has not just experienced spectacular success within the US, but has witnessed success around the globe. Naturally, the Big 6 Model features prominently and it is upon this model that many of the case studies, particularly those pertaining to the K-12 integrated information literacy, are based. And whilst not quite as distinguished, co-authors Lowe and Spitzer exhibit impressive credentials also. Both have disseminated extensively on information literacy, yet remain firmly rooted within practitioner circles. In short, few information literacy publications can claim to have gathered such a gaggle of truly au fait characters.

Quite unsurprisingly, such a gaggle will always deliver the goods in abundance. *Information Literacy* oozes authoritativeness, which is utterly essential for the practitioner who seeks trust in their handbook. It is well researched and heavily referenced, and the annotated bibliography - spanning an incredible 88 pages! - will satisfy even the most zealous practitioner. Spitzer's practitioner influence is also clear; the book is peppered with an authenticity that otherwise might have evaporated. All this makes *Information Literacy* truly indispensable. There is, however, one slight proviso; *Information Literacy* is only indispensable to the US librarian. It is, in essence, a book written for the US library community and, as such, great emphasis is given to the US education system. Very little space is devoted to practices out-with the US. A sub-chapter (circa p.32) detailing trends and practices around the world (in Namibia, South Africa, Australia, Canada and Finland) amounts to little more than a couple of paragraphs, for example.

That said, the US centricity of *Information Literacy* need not alarm librarians around the world; US government foreign policy, after all, performs this task admirably already. Rather, those librarians residing outside the US could do far worse than dipping into *Information Literacy*. The contexts might be poles apart, but many of the concepts and techniques remain constant and certainly deserve implementation elsewhere. Indeed, when it comes to equipping pupils and students with the competencies necessary to use the fourth resource effectively, efficiently and ethically, it is often felt that the UK lags behind the rest of the Anglophone world. This may be true. But it is also true that *Information Literacy* may very well provide part of the antidote.

References

Rader, H. B. (2002), Information Literacy 1973-2002: A Selected Literature Review, *Library Trends*, Vol.52 No.2, pp. 242-259.