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The Role of the Public Library in Developing Canadians' Information Literacy Skills

Abstract: This paper reports on a national survey of information literacy (IL) instruction in urban and rural public libraries, and public librarians' attitudes towards these services. The survey is the first phase of a study exploring the actual and potential role of public libraries in Canada in developing the public's IL skills. Previous research demonstrates that despite an urgent need to develop such skills, and expectations that public libraries fulfill that role (specifically articulated by the federal government through its "Connecting Canadians" initiative), the real experiences of public librarians and of public library customers may not bear out this expectation (1). The survey analyzes the role of the public library, as a nonprofit institution and primary stakeholder, in advancing federal government information policy. In addition, the study gives voice to a community of professionals expected to fulfill an important federal policy function, but provided with few resources with which to do so.

The study draws on several theoretical frameworks: a standard information literacy framework, a phenomenological approach to understanding people's experiences of information literacy, and public policy literature. Primarily, the definitional framework of information literacy, articulated by the Association of College and Research Libraries, is used (3). It is increasingly clear that most people, even in a nation as networked as Canada, lack many of these skills. Additionally, the study draws on Bruce's (4) phenomenological approach to understanding people's personal experiences of information literacy. Third, a set of related literature informing this study is from the public policy arena (5), although currently there is no solid theoretical framework to characterize the type of policy relationship illustrated by the use of municipally-funded public libraries to implement federal information policy. This research will increase understanding of the dimensions of that relationship.

Among other findings, the survey found that although 36% of responding public libraries provide formal IL training, and 71% provide informal training, only half of respondents believe that public library staff is equipped to provide IL training. The next phase of this study will investigate the perspective of public library customers accessing the Internet from public libraries, to explore their experiences of information literacy in their lives.

The survey results are complemented by a content analysis of the web sites of the 22 largest Canadian urban public libraries. This analysis sought external evidence of commitment to the "Connecting Canadians" initiative, and updates one done two years ago (2). Results show significantly increased commitment by large urban libraries to the goals of "Connecting Canadians."

This paper focuses on all three areas of the conference theme: technologies, in terms of the centrality of new technology in information literacy skill development; skills, in terms of the pressing need to develop IL skills among all Canadian citizens; and socio-political context, in terms of the federal government policy environment which places expectations on the public library sector.

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