Media and Information Literacy as
A Priority

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School libraries have been essential components of UNESCO's strategy to improve access to information and knowledge, and enable people to become critical thinkers and effective users of information. By advocating the building of knowledge societies, UNESCO has continuously promoted the role of school libraries to equip students in the 21st with the abilities to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their full potential and develop life-long learning skills that are essential to effective and responsible citizenship.

The development of information and communication technologies (ICT), and in particular the Internet, has created a completely new environment in which the potential of networking and collaborating online, acquiring, storing and disseminating information has modified substantially the functions of schools and its libraries.

While the significant contributions of school libraries to student learning have been demonstrated over the years, in the rapidly changing and competitive environment of the 21st century, the mere provision of information is no longer enough. The skills and abilities to learn how to learn and constantly update and challenge existing knowledge have become increasingly important.

The School Library Manifesto launched by UNESCO and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) in 1999 defined and advanced the role of school libraries in enabling students to acquire the learning tools and content that allow them to develop their full capacities, to continue to learn throughout their lives and to make informed decisions. This declaration of principles laid the basis for media and information literacy as a new paradigm for UNESCO's knowledge society landscape.

By advocating for the building of knowledge societies, UNESCO promotes the empowering vision of societies where people access the information and knowledge they need and develop the skills and abilities for critical reception, assessment and use of information for specific decision-making and problem-solving purposes in their professional and personal lives.

Other synonyms such as 'information fluency', 'media culture' or 'information competency' are commonly used instead, but this differs from one nation, one culture or one linguistic group to another. Although UNESCO used to distinguish between 'information

literacy' and 'media literacy', it has become apparent that the two concepts are inextricably intertwined and it is thus more appropriate to consider the synergies between them by referring to 'media and information literacy' as a whole.

UNESCO's previous work in this field has been comprehensive and has covered a range of activities to raise awareness about the importance of media and information literacy in all walks of life. Activities have included publications, as well as the development of manuals and toolkits designed for a wide range of users. Examples of these activities include the primer "Understanding Information Literacy" designed for governmental officials and institutional decision makers, professional training for librarians, teachers, archivists and other information professionals, development of indicators, and the reinforcement of international cooperation.

However, given both the extensive interaction of young people with media and ICTs, and UNESCO's global mandate for education, a coherent global initiative in media and information literacy within educational institutions rapidly became necessary. As a consequence, UNESCO's strategy has progressively shifted from awareness-raising to introducing media and information literacy components in teacher-training at all levels of the education process - from basic education, to primary and secondary education, technical and vocational training and lifelong education.

In this context, school libraries will increasingly play a key role as catalysts for the introduction of media and information literacy policies in schools by engaging both students and teachers to acquire a combination of skills, competencies, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. Close collaboration between teachers, students and librarians will be required to change the personal and interpersonal interaction patterns in acquiring and sharing knowledge.

As an example, teachers must shift from classical professorial teaching modes to become facilitators, from knowledge providers to knowledge managers, from instructors to team leaders, guiding rather than lecturing, developing close relationships with their students, and promoting greater diversity of ideas and participation of students in the learning process. Learning modes must also shift from individual to group learning, students must become independent proactive participants in the learning process, rather than dependant, reactive and passive audiences, and the learning itself must be conceived of as a life-long process, rather than a temporary and intermittent activities. In such a conceptualisation of knowledge, the function of school librarians must shift from one of technical work to intermediation, from isolation to collaboration, from conservation to innovation, and from reactive user-trainer modes to proactive teacher-trainer modes.

Biographical Notes

Misako Ito joined UNESCO in 2005. She was initially in charge of UNESCO's programmes on multilingualism in cyberspace, and information literacy within the Information Society Division in Paris, France. In May 2009, she joined the UNESCO Cluster Office in Rabat, Morocco as Adviser for Communication and Information in the Maghreb. A graduate from the National Polytechnic Institute of Engineering in Toulouse, France, Ms Ito holds a Masters degree in information system management from HEC School of Management and Ecole des Mines in Paris. She worked for the French Development Agency and the Institute of Research for Development in Western African countries for the development of national information systems before joining UNESCO.