

## **“Understanding the World”: How Australian Teacher Librarians Define Information Literacy**

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## **Introduction**

A central mandate of the teacher librarian (TL) is the development of information literate students who can locate and use information responsibly and ethically as learners and citizens (Australian Library and Information Association, 2016; International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2021). Therefore, it is vital that TLs are supported in their endeavours to deliver high quality information literacy instruction, which reflects the changing nature of information and the information landscape.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

The information landscape is rapidly evolving and Australian youth need the opportunity to develop the capabilities to navigate our contemporary and changing society (Department of Education and Training, 2018). Building students' information literacy is important to ensure they can effectively participate in formal education but also to manage everyday life contexts

that require seeking, evaluating and using information (Polizzi, 2020; Shuhidan et al., 2021; Taala et al., 2019).

Despite research investigating information literacy teaching strategies and the information literacy needs of students in higher education, there has been no recent study which investigates how currently practicing TLs in Australian high schools perceive the information literacy needs of teachers and students. This research will update understandings about information literacy teaching in Australian high schools given the everchanging nature of how we access, evaluate and use information. The study seeks to inform the education of future TLs and to develop ways to improve current practice in Australia and beyond. The impact will meet demands for the development of these important 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills that are also embodied within the Australian Curriculum General Capabilities (Department of Education and Training, 2018).

This project uses a phenomenological design to investigate the information literacy needs of students and teachers, as they are perceived by practicing TLs in Australian high schools. In order to set a strong foundation for this research, we first explored the following question:

- How do Australian TLs define information literacy?

## **Literature Review**

Changes in the information landscape are driven by the changing nature of information itself; from physical to digital. Digital information can be easily duplicated, compressed, and transmitted through networks, thereby freeing it from the library shelves to be accessed anywhere and anytime a network connection is available (Hofer et al., 2019). Digital information has persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability (boyd, 2011), characteristics that transform information experience and behaviour.

A body of research is emerging that discusses the need to rethink how information literacy is taught. Recent investigations of how college students conceptualize the online information landscape has found that information literacy approaches relying upon a 'static' presentation of information, which is sought by the student, do not reflect the current

environment where algorithms and information platforms push information directly to users (Head et al., 2020). Hofer et al. (2019) echo this sentiment, presenting a practical example that pushes university students to consider greater nuance in their evaluation of online information. The need for strategies teaching proactive rather than reactive evaluation of information further reflects how the changing nature of information, and the information ecosystem is influencing the type of information literacy skills needed to become an effective information user (Bull et al., 2021).

## **Methodology**

This project uses a phenomenological design as it is most appropriate for investigating the lived experience of TLs as they engage with students and teachers in the development of information literacy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This methodological approach seeks to gather participants' perspectives and understand the contexts or situations that have influenced their experiences through first a survey and then open-ended interview questions which are non-directive and allow inherent themes to emerge naturally throughout the data collection process (Butler-Kisber, 2018; Patton, 2015).

Using purposive sampling (Given, 2008), the online survey was disseminated to Australian TLs in November and December 2022 using social media, list serves, and newsletters for Australian TL associations and organisations. A total of 150 participants responded to the survey with a diverse range of experiences geographically and across school type and level. The final paper will go into more detail on demographics, but an exemplary respondent includes the following characteristics:

- Holds the title of 'Teacher Librarian';
- Qualification of Master of Education (Teacher Librarianship);
- 20+ years of experience working as a TL; and
- Currently works in a Private/Independent school with Years 7-12 in the state of New South Wales.

The survey included a variety of questions around perceptions and practice of information literacy in teaching and learning. The findings presented in this paper focus on the participants' definitions of information literacy.

### **Preliminary Findings & Discussion**

The first stage of this research provides new insights into how practicing TLs understand the concept of information literacy within our changing information landscape. Preliminary findings suggest deep and diverse understandings of information literacy from Australian TL respondents. Emerging themes focus on the necessary skills to support information literacy (e.g., “critical and creative thinking”), actions involved with information literacy (e.g., “locate, select, analyse, and utilise”), the nature of information literacy (e.g., “multifaceted”), and its value for individuals and society (e.g., “understanding the world”, “lifelong learning”). Further stages will also reveal current teaching strategies being implemented to develop students' information literacy and what practicing TLs believe might be needed to enhance these pedagogies.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

The next phase of the research is to further analyse the survey questions and choose a varied sample of 10-20 participants from the 73 who volunteered to be interviewed. The interviews will offer a deeper understanding of the remaining research questions:

- What are the information literacy understandings Australian Teacher Librarians think teachers and students need today to navigate the information landscape?
- To what extent are current methods of teaching information literacy developing transferable capabilities that students can apply across different information contexts and environments?

This research will provide a foundation for informing how TLs might collaborate with teachers to effectively support the development of information literacy across the curriculum. It will highlight the value of the TL to equip students in being connected and informed, navigating complex information environments, and “understanding the world.”

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