Collaboration between Academics and Librarians: the case of the Durban University of Technology

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by David Thomas & Mousin Omar Saib

Abstract

The concept of information literacy is not a new one but it has attracted increased attention as a result of the digital information explosion. At the Durban University of Technology Library, Information literacy (IL) is offered in various forms by librarians. Unfortunately it has not enjoyed the accreditation or value that it deserves across all academic disciplines. There have however been a few success stories that have proven that IL contributes productively to the holistic development of learners. One such success story is the collaboration between the Library and the Industrial Engineering Department in embedding Information literacy into the curriculum.

What started off as a pilot study between the library and the department, gained momentum to the point that is has successfully been integrated into the formal academic offering of the department.

A major contributor to the success of this initiative was the relationships that were forged between the librarians and the academics. Ivey (2003) identified behaviours that contribute to successful collaborative teaching partnerships, which were prevalent at DUT and this provided the assurance of a winning formula.

Librarians and academics designed learning events and material that brought together discipline specific content that integrated information literacy skills as part of the learning process. This then ensured that learners benefitted from the synergy between these 2 departments. This paper will talk to that particular partnership and outcomes of this initiative.

Introduction:

"The information literacy agenda extends beyond the library into the classroom" (Iannuzzi, 1998). This statement encapsulates the essence of this paper.

Information literacy(IL) does not necessarily belong to the library albeit that in various settings the library has taken ownership of it. This is largely due to the strong emphasis that has been placed on finding information. IL is much more than finding information as it involves building other competencies as well, particular that of critical thinking, a skill that is vital in an environment that has to contend with an explosion of information.

Changing the way in which IL is perceived involves a change in organisational culture which Iannuzzi (1998) confirms is a gradual and often slow process.
In embedding IL as part of the organisation's culture, there are various key players/sectors that can influence the change and its adoption. These are the library, the faculty (academic department) and university administration. This paper will explore briefly, each of these sectors at DUT and consider how they have advanced or could advance the IL agenda.

**Background:**

The Durban University of Technology, South Africa is a six faculty wide institution, distributed across 6 campuses. Subject librarians are based in the library but service the needs of the respective faculties. Subject Librarians also teach Information literacy to their respective contingent.

IL is not a compulsory module at the DUT and so the adoption of IL varies across academic departments. There are departments that engage the library for once off “library orientation sessions” whilst others may include IL as a scheduled session in the departmental timetable and then there are other departments that don’t participate in any IL programme.

The library has developed a structured IL program that is presented to departments with the intention of having it embedded into the respective curriculum. There have been a few success stories, one of which was with the Industrial Engineering Department. This paper will take a closer look at this case study.

**Information Literacy**

Underwood (2002) summarises that IL in South Africa initially came under the spotlight as a possible solution to addressing issues relating to access to information and the management of information resources, as captured in the Senn Breivik report. Related projects like the INFOLIT project highlighted that the focus on IL initiatives should extend beyond the technological aspects of locating and access to information but must extend to consider print based carriers of information and the cognitive and analytical capacity associated with information location and use (Underwood, 2002).

Amidst the numerous definitions of IL, a set of competencies emerge that describes an information literate person. These are the abilities to:

- Recognise the need for information
- Access needed information effectively and efficiently
- Evaluate information critically
- Incorporating relevant information into one's knowledge base
- Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose
- Access and use information ethically and legally

(de Jager and Nassimbeni, 2003)

According to Wurman in Bruce (2001), IL potentially can foster deep learning and the capacity to become "independent, self-directed, lifelong learners"

Developments in ICT’s and the subsequent increase in the availability and production of information have highlighted the importance of information literacy. There have been various interventions across the world that focus on developing information practices across different levels (Bruce, 2001). Many of the issues experienced are common to what is experience at the DUT Library. A central theme that has emerged from the literature is the importance of partnerships or collaboration between various stakeholders, in ensuring the success of embedding IL into the curriculum.

**IL and partnerships:**

It is necessary to raise the profile of IL and this according to Bruce (2001) is achieved through fostering stronger partnerships with the academic departments. The quality of such relationships will determine the degree of success of embedding IL.

“We have reached a point at which neither librarians nor instructional faculty can adequately teach the research process in isolation of each other.” (Raspa and Ward in Meulemans and Carr, 2013:82). Clearly there are various stakeholders who need to share the responsibility of ensuring that IL is successfully embedded. Such strategic alliances require the contribution of all stakeholders at various levels. The information specialist (librarian), the teacher /lecturer and even the student is core in this partnership. It is essential that these respective groups adjust their perspectives and mind sets from the traditional approaches to understand and accept the value that IL offers toward the holistic development of the learner (Bruce, 2001).

Bruce (2001) identifies 5 five types of partnerships adopted by the Australian higher education sector, against which we will map DUT’s initiatives:
• **Policy partnerships:** the information literacy framework, guidelines, study guides and other such documentation have been developed in conjunction and consultation with Academic departments, Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching and the Library. At policy level, the benefits of IL in developing the student are clearly outlined. IL is also on the agenda of various University structures eg. Library Committee. These structures have representation from University Management, academic departments and other stakeholders.

• **Research partnership:** In conjunction with the Research office at the University, the library has established a Research Commons with a Postgraduate Librarian providing research assistance and instruction thus embedding IL into their offering.

• **Curriculum partnerships:** Academic departments are engaged in curriculum renewal wherein the curriculum is interrogated to ensure that it complies with the standards and benchmarks determined in terms of its coverage. The library has been involved in this process and is actively pushing for the IL agenda to be incorporated. The library is engaged in developing web based instruction and training material and has employed information tools that would facilitate independent learning and discovery eg. Summon Discovery Tool.

• **Higher degree supervision partnerships:** The library is not involved in supervision activities as per the 'Macauley and Knight model' (Bruce, 2001). It does however offer instruction and assistance with related tools eg. EndNote and Turnitin.

• **Academic development:** In developing awareness amongst academics as to the value that IL could offer in terms of the development of the student, the researcher and the research output, an ‘Academic Roadshow’ was developed. The initiative would inform and market IL as well as alert them to the tools and resources available. As many academics are involved in research, these initiatives trigger much interest and buy-in to the value of IL.

Despite these interventions mentioned above, the library still receives requests from Academics to conduct a “library orientation” or research session as a once off intervention. Meulemans and Carr (2013) suggest that librarians should reject such request and rather use the opportunity to negotiate a more productive approach for all concerned. Uninformed request of this nature are usually accommodated as it is perceived as a ‘partial win’ and that ultimately the students will benefit. Meulemans and Carr further argue that accommodating such requests constitute poor ‘pedagogical practices’.
Other issues that relate to poor collaboration from the academics are based on the relationship between the department and the library. Not all academics regard librarians as partners or they may not regard such partnerships as important. Librarians cannot be phazed by this but move from a mind-set of having a service centred orientation and embrace the academic dimension (Bruce, 2001)

True collaboration between librarians and academics sees both parties working toward a common goal which embodies respect, tolerance, trust, competence and ongoing communication (Ivey, 2003); (Meulemans and Carr, 2013).

Such key collaborative behaviours are further corroborated by Wang (2011: 5-6), who states that true integration of Information literacy relies on:

- Shared understanding: partners need to have a shared understanding of the purpose and importance of curricular integration of information literacy and the outcomes thereof;
- Shared knowledge: partners share specialised knowledge and provide support from different areas of expertise. These include subject knowledge, information resources, referencing etc.;
- Joint dialogue with respect and tolerance: partners need to interact, negotiate and communicate to achieve the same goals with mutual respect and tolerance;
- Joint efforts with trust and support: partners need to work together to complete the agreed tasks with a high level of trust and support. The curricular integration of information literacy can involve intensive tasks including, the designing of assignments, developing teaching resources and support material, developing assessment methods, and marking information literacy work. All partners need to make contributions and commitment to carry out the agreed tasks in the integration of information literacy.

This however is easier said than done. As in the case of University of Cape Town (Underwood, 2002), DUT also experienced resistance to the introduction of IL as an additional learning offering, as it would create a further addition to an already busy syllabus and so a more embedded approach became necessary.

**The case of the Industrial Engineering Department**

The turning point that marked the evolution of the relationship between the library and the Industrial Engineering Department was when a large contingent of students from the
discipline were identified as requiring an intervention that aimed at correcting academic behaviour related to instances of plagiarism. Whilst this was largely a reactive approach it did open the door to better communication, collaboration and partnership between these two departments.

Traditionally IL was more commonly known as library orientation and manifested an offering that included a once off ‘orientation to the library, its services and the library catalogue. Other interventions included customised sessions on database training or referencing. What was apparent was that these offerings were ‘stand alone’ once off offerings. This implies that librarians would be requested to run such sessions with students without any integration with the academic program or input from the Academic department in terms of how to ‘tailor make’ such lessons in order for it to have a greater impact in achieving the IL outcomes.

A pilot study that started with the Extended Curriculum program (ECP) - a hybrid bridging course, that was aimed at preparing ‘underprepared’ students for the mainstream academic program kicked off the new approach to the IL offering with the IE department. The ECP program saw the selected students register for an extended year of study during which time they would not only be exposed to the Academic discipline specific content but also other supportive offerings, of which IL featured as one. According to discussions with the Industrial Engineering Department (2010), the positive results of this intervention spurred the decision to extend this IL to the mainstream program. Currently IL is offered across the mainstream program up to the BTECH level.

**How is IL administered at DUT:**

IL at DUT has evolved from the original ‘once off’ orientation to being a structured program that addresses specific learning outcomes and adopting various learning and teaching strategies. The arrangement with the department is that IL forms part of the curriculum and is timetabled as such.

The IL framework and lesson plans are formulated such that a customised program may be devised to suit the needs and logistics relevant. The Subject Librarian in consultation with the academic department committed to transforming the delivery of the content from the traditional ‘sage on the stage’ approach to one that involved the learner engaging with the content and so employed strategies that encouraged independent learning, group work, group presentations, video and online tutorials in addition to face to face engagement. This blended approach appealed to the different learning styles that existed within the group.
As IL was offered to different levels of students namely Semester 1, 2, 3, 4 & BTech levels, a scaffolded approach was used in terms of the content and depth which graduated relative to the level.

**Developing the relationship:**

In order to build better relations with the academic department, the librarian had to employ various strategies which could position the library as a partner rather than a support service.

- It was necessary for the librarian to be flexible and accommodating in terms of offering a quality service. BTech students attended lectures outside of the normal working hours. This meant the librarians had to seize the opportunity to invest into the development of the students even if it meant stepping out of their comfort zones.
- Many of the academic staff in the department were engaged in their personal study and research. The librarian responded by offering one on one research assistance to the lecturers in the privacy and comfort of their offices.
- Acknowledging the efforts of academic staff in promoting, embedding and supporting the IL initiative encouraged greater participation. The library recognised and awarded such individuals and departments by publically recognising them as Information Literacy Champions.
- Responding proactively to the research needs of the lecturer. This is achieved by developing lecturer profiles wherein such information is captured.
- Using the evidence of the IL pilot study, which indicated an increased consultation of scholarly sources and the acknowledgment thereof by students, as a motivator that proved the success of the initiative

**Levels of integration:**

There were various levels of integration that were adopted:

- Integrated assignment: Assignments were set that tested subject content as well as the application of IL skills, this would include the use of various resources in a structured, responsible manner.
- Referencing assessment: the librarian was afforded the responsibility as teaching assistant and assessed the referencing aspect of assignment submissions whilst the lecturer looked at the subject content.
Team teaching: in order to demonstrate the interrelated nature of the discipline and IL, the approach to team teach was adopted where the librarian would share the lecture period with the lecturer and teach IL.

Embedded content: Lecturer embeds IL content into lecture. The lecturer demonstrates IL skills.

IL lessons were customised to feed directly into assignment in order to indicate relevance. The lecturer was also present at the IL lectures.

Synergy: Librarian ensured that he was aware of curriculum makeup as well as the assignment requirement and ensured that the appropriate resources were available or acquired.

Marks allocated: The IL program built in summative assessment which contributed a percentage toward the class mark.

Findings:

The relationship between the Library and the Industrial Engineering department at the DUT has strengthened in that the library has earned and been granted a ‘voice’ within the department. The librarian enjoys a fruitful relationship with the lecturers and the students are demonstrating skills that are indicative of independent learners.

The approach adopted with this department is being used as a benchmark for other departments and by other subject librarians with the hope that similar success is realised.

It is acknowledged that there is a long way to go in getting IL fully integrated and although there may be resistance and there may always be those that are not fully convinced of the relevance to the discipline, the library is committed to investigating new possibilities, new forms of delivery and even establishing and building new relationships to further the cause of the information literacy initiative in developing an information literate society.

References:


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