Electronic Dialogue on Information Literacy

The article presents the transcript of the electronic dialogue on information literacy between the speakers from the Centers of Academic Resources, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, and the speakers from Simmons College, Boston, and Ohio University Library, Ohio, U.S.A. The speakers discuss the definition, the importance and the promotion of information literacy. The next part contains questions and comments from the audience on the new role of reference librarian, the changes in the library information curriculum and the changes of information technology. The final part discusses the status of library school in the age of information technology.

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Electronic Dialogue on Information Literacy

On the Occasion of the 12th Anniversary of the Centers of Academic Resources June 1, 1990.

Honorary Speakers : Dr. Robert D. Stueart, Dean of Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Simmons College, Boston, U.S.A.

Dr. Hwa-wei Lee, Director of Libraries, Ohio University Library, Athens, Ohio, U.S.A.

Host : Dr. Prachak Poomvises, Director of the Centers of Academic Resources, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok

Coordinator : Ms. Yupin Chancharoensin, Librarian of Chulalongkorn University Language Institute, Bangkok

Dr. Prachak : Could you please inform our audience, what is the definition and importance of information literacy which later we will call it IL?

Dr. Stueart : I will try to give you my idea of what I think information literacy is. I think it really becomes a key concept for libraries particularly since the information explosion. To me, it's the art of making intelligent, independent decisions that affect all of our lives, in school, at work as professionals or in our own personal life. For the library, this means informing users about the card catalogue or reference sources or computer terminal, to retrieve information on a given topic all the way to making the users recognize that libraries use classification systems to simply organize the materials that are in them. It means, really, the exploitation of all the information sources at hand, I think, and in the university learning environment, the information literacy contributes to the students' understanding of the nature of learning and scholarship, directly to support their coursework and to prepare for their own self directed lifelong learning. In addition, for faculty, it means being able to do a better job of teaching & research for which they are hired. And the library can be effective only if its users know how to find, evaluate, and use the information found there, whether in books, journals, microforms, on-line databases, CD-ROMs or optical discs or in a number of other resources; it is a basic skill which all must acquire to function responsibly in a society where more and more information is generated daily. I think information literacy is the most clear cut, philosophical statement of service that a library has to support the educational trends we have seen developing in this century... I think that basic assumption which governed the continued development of academic libraries is that they play a role of central and critical importance in the instructional and scholarly life of the university. We are on integral part of that learning system and our collections, of course, are developments to meet that need. But, just as important are the services which are designed to meet those instructional goals. Information literacy activities enhance the library's role as an effective instrument in the learning process.

Dictation : Chawadee Duangnet

Edited by Pimrumpai Premsmit

Dr. Lee : I think that information literacy is the basic ability held by a person who can effectively, or efficiently, or also critically find all the information he or she needs in making decisions, or for solving problems. I think that libraries have a major role in helping people to acquire information seeking literacy because this is the way that we help people acquire, to prepare people for lifelong learning which is very important and necessary; truly, an information aid.

Dr. Prachak : Thank you very much. In your environment, are you satisfied with your use of IL and do you have any program to promote it if you are not satisfied with it? And what is the result? And how do you assess the IL program, if you have the program?

Dr. Stueart : I will only address the issue of promotion of information literacy because you know, in my particular situation, since I'm in a library school as opposed to a library, our focus is rather different. We teach about information literacy and hopefully, our students who are going out of our school know the importance of that. But I think, in the whole area of promotion of IL, we certainly have to recognize that educating potential users and advocates to available resources and services is really an integral part of the library's instructional program... In the whole area of promotion of literacy is that there are a number of critical components to accomplishing the mission of information literacy and I like to classify those into brief categories: a category of conviction, a category of commitment, and a category of cooperation. It seems to me that there has to be on alliance between librarians, faculty, and administrators, for any kind of programs to be successful, and how do we promote that? How we sell it to the university's administration, how we convince faculty that this is an important part of the learning process for students, is very important to the continued development of universities, I think, and certainly, the role of libraries in those universities. We have to really identify who uses the library and how they use them as well as those people who don't use the libraries and why they don't use them.

Dr. Lee : We have placed a major emphasis on IL. But if yon ask that if we are satisfied with what we are doing, I think realy we are satisfied with the things we have offered to our students or users or faculty. But I think because of the nature of the change in information and information technology, I think we play a catching up game. I think we have to develop programs in a variety of ways and also on many different levels. We have programs for freshmen classes, and we have programs for upperclassmen or graduate students and also we use a variety of means to help them to acquire information literacy so they can go on even after school to continue to finish using information effectively.

Dr. Stueart : Regarding the idea of promoting information literacy. I think that we have to ask ourselves a number of questions. First of all, if we are going to take on the role of information literacy which most libraries are trying to do to one extent or another right now, whether its a very basic kind of instruction or whether its fairly advanced, using some sort of technology, I think we have to, first of all, try to identify what we have to advertise. What is going to be a focus of the program we are going to develop? And then how are we going to advertise it, who are we going to sell it to and what kinds of selling techniques are we going to use? And then I think one of the most important things in the whole process that often times is ignored is that being able to evaluate the programs that we

have developed to see how successful they have been and to adjust them as the need arises. I think those are real questions that we do have to ask ourselves as we begin to undertake this more sophisticated kind of information literacy project.

Dr. Prachak : Would you mind if there are any questions or comments from the audience?

Dr. Stueart : Please do ask.

Ms. Yupin : The first question from our participant – Dr. Pimrampai Premsmit

Dr. Pimrumpai : You mentioned about the cooperation for the information literacy program between three groups within the university setting which are: the faculty, library administrators, and the university administration. Can you elaborate that issue – how can we cooperate? And how can this program be initiated?

Dr. Stueart : I think that the issue of information literacy cannot be taken on simply as a library issue. I think that it has to be recognized by the total university that this is an important part of the learning process with in a university. And, in order to do that, I think we have a lot of convincing to do: first of all, to administrators, in the area of funding those kinds of services, and certainly, with the faculty in convincing them of the need. I think that there has been, in the United States and the experience we've had initially in introducing information literacy programs, is the resistance on the part of faculty because they, first of all, see a threat to their own authority and then secondly, when they do begin to realize the importance the question becomes: how do you integrate it into the instructional process of the university? Do you create separate courses taught on information literacy, do you try to integrate it into courses, who teaches those components, is it, just librarians, is it a combination of the faculty with subject expertise and librarians with the knowledge of how to get at subject information? I think that the issues of introducing a program of information literacy has to be recognized, first of all, and then supported, and that was the reason that I used the 3C's for Conviction, Commitment, and Cooperation, because if we don't have those, then we're going to find ourselves simply trying to do a piecemeal kind of approach to a very important problem. And its going to be perceived as the library trying to build the rest.

Dr. Lee : We find out the cooperation of faculty and also university administration, are crucial for the success of any program for promotion information literacy. I can give one very good example: we tried to integrate or teach library skills in the curriculum. One thing we found quite effective is to work with the English department, so that we are teaching our freshmen composition: we ask them to give us a week of their time so that we can go into a classroom and help students go through the workbook we prepare for the students, which give their appropriate assignments for students who come to the library to try on using the library to do bibliographic or other research for their class. We find out this has been very useful. If not for the cooperation of the English department, we would not be able to do it, so it's quite essential for the faculty member to understand its importance and to give us support so that we can do a better job.

Dr. Stueart : In one way I think too, that you have identified your priorities and the kind of information literacy program that you have introduced, and you focused on the beginning students with the idea that they will learn how to access information in whatever form. I think that, that's one of the things that we really have to keep in mind when we're introducing a program. I think our tendency is to try to do everything at one time and we have to be sure that we're clearly focused on one small part of it will what the appetite of the faculty to ask for more. When the faculty begins to ask for more, when the students begin to ask for more, then the pressure really comes to expanding that kind of activity. But if you say that the intent of the information literacy program is to introduce beginning students to the knowledge & skills that they need to function, that's an important area. But, probably at the same time, it wouldn't be able to address the specific needs of graduate students, or even faculty in that process.

Dr. Pimrumpai : Both of you talked about the idea of initiating the IL to the users. One question that popped up out of this is that, I think this is the current issue even discussed in the United States: who will do the bibliographic instruction for users – faculty or librarians?

Dr. Lee : The librarian really has to play a major role in terms of bibliographic instruction. To make those things more effective, we need to support the cooperation of faculty members. I mentioned earlier that we did that kind of support from our English department, so they allowed us to go to their classes for a week, to teach library skills.

Dr. Stueart : I think a lot of it depends on what kinds of methods you choose, too, to introduce the process for the students. As we know, there are so many different kinds of methods being used now, everything from providing tours and orientation to teaching basic library skills to instructing on higher research levels with in a discipline. There are such things as independent learning programs, and self-instructional package, and workbooks, and slide–tape material and computer assistance instruction – all of those are techniques that are being used, and it really depends on which of those and how deeply you are going into information literacy as to who is going to teach it or who is going to cooperate. You know, there are courses that would be simply course – related, as I indicated before, where you would have a librarian coming into a freshmen orientation and talking about the resources. From that extreme, to a course integration where you would have the whole issue of information literacy becoming an important part, or maybe the only part, of a separate course that might be taught jointly by faculty with subject expertise and by the librarians. So that, I think it really depends on, again, what the goals are – what kinds of methods are used as to who is really involved in an instructional part of the program.

Ms. Yupin : Any more questions, comments? I have one question from the audience. If the IL is very successful, that means the users will know how to help themselves effectively in finding information they need. The question is: will the role of reference librarian change, and in what aspect?

Dr. Stueart : I think that one of the things that we have seen is a shift in the emphasis, recently, from a structured approach that we librarians have been using toward more educating users for more on-line searching, for instance. That's one example, of how it shifted, but I think when you begin to think about the total responsibility, there's no doubt that we have moved away from the concept of a library as a physical building, to the idea of librarians as resource people to enhance the educational process. And I think that we have identified a number of roles that librarians are performing, and I don't see that really disappearing. For instance, I think if you tried to identify some of our roles, certainly we were negotiators, because in the interview process we tried to identify by need. We're facilitators, because we tried to provide those effective search strategies, and I think that the key component, that being an effective search strategy, because we know from experience and from research that users can't yet effectively search on-line because they haven't been educated to ask the right kinds of questions to get the exact materials they want. We certainly performed the role of educator, because we are familiar with the literature & its formats. And to an extent you mentioned an information broker being in the audience, we're information brokers because we're providing a current awareness service, not only to students but certainly, more importantly to faculty. So that, I think librarians really do integrate the information environment, and facilitate access to information, which produces knowledge.

Dr. Lee : I think we all have to be involved in constantly renewing and learning, new tricks. The user needs to learn, needs to update knowledge skills, the library staff, too. We need to update to learn new things as well. I think the technology may be changing very rapidly, but I think that the role the library staff plays, particularly I should say reference, probably will continue to be very much the same.

Dr. Prachak : What you are saying is that you still need doctors, even our population health are improved; doctors are still indispensable. In this case, in library's case, librarians are still, indispensable. But it needs a new role. Is that so?

Dr. Lee : I think the base alone has not changed much but the content does change because the technology changed, so we have to be able to cope with the new technology. We have to find new ways to serve our clients better, but the service function of the library remains the same.

Dr. Stueart : I see the librarian performing a number of different roles as seen over the last few years, and that is due, partly, to the technology that has developed. But we have become less obsessed with the more technical aspects of acquiring & organizing information to providing that information to the users that we serve. And so this has caused a shift, I think, in our emphasis and it has caused us to rethink the library, and as they said, I think we really moved away from the concept of the library being a physical building, in which every thing is found, to the idea of the librarian being able to facilitate access to the information that the patron needs. The patron may not necessarily come to the library to do that. I mean, if you looked, for instance, at what has happened with on-line catalogs, and the workstations that are developing, now, it's possible for faculty to access the catalog from their office. So that, I think their direct use of the physical building the library may be changing. But the intent of the role of the librarian has not.

Dr. Prachak : The information technology has been changing so rapidly, how do you prepare your library staff or your course members to be competent as a good consultant for information literacy? To cope with the future changes?

Dr. Lee : We encouraged our staff to take short courses, many in the library school of course, in the summer, or some workshop seminar in a much shorter term which we encourage our staff to attend. But also we have an in-house program we invite consultants or speakers coming in to talk about the ways of improving library instruction, and also the ways to operate new technology for the benefit of library operation.

Dr. Stueart : Technology is making its impact in this area, and it certainly is an important tool both in the learning process and in the internal process of the library. But I think that in the whole area of information literacy, and talking about staffing needs, I think that there are several guideline that we can look at, and some of those guidelines don't relate to the technology at all. I think, for instance, if we talk about instruction and the use, the people that are instructing should be people oriented, that is, it should begin with the people's need and concentrate on that process and search strategies. that are needed, rather than focusing on library's tools or even library resources.

Ms. Praditta : I just have some further questions from Dr. Prachak. He just mentioned about the changes in the library information curriculum, in order to cope with the changes in information technology. So, what I'm interested in, in spite of successful development in curriculum, what kind of competition that we librarians & information professionals are faced with professionals from other information related fields like computer scientists or the engineers.

Dr. Stueart : I think there is no doubt there is competition in the information marketplace, and that we as librarians, have an important piece of the information environment, if you will. I think it's obvious that we can't do everything and we have to focus our attention, more clearly, on what our priorities are. When you look, for instance, at Management Information Systems – MIS, that have developed in business schools, for instance, with graduates going out into the whole area of management information systems, and you'll talk with people who are using graduates of both library schools & business schools, you will find that people are satisfied with the graduates of library schools. And I think the reason is that we do have the change in curriculum, and certainly our curriculae are very rich in the information technology area, right now. But the reason that our students are more successful I think, is because of our service orientation. That is something that the other schools do not give. Business schools don't give that, computer science schools are concentrating on the equipment, the machinery itself and really not on the concept of information service. And I think that is a clear distination that we have to make. I think at the same time, though, that there are many other courses & progroms with in a university structure that we as library & information sciences schools, have to align ourselves with and cooperate with.

Dr. Lee : I think that now we're starting to see the competition from many directions. I think for our future survival, we have to realize that we have to keep up with the changes. In my own experience, I felt that the cooperation with other related fields like computer science and with other telecommunications kinds of people – I think that helped to provide some kind of call for federalization in our field.

Dr. Stueart : You know, another thing that's happened in the United States: you may have read about this. Here's been a lot of discussion about this competition as what we said, particularly between academic libraries and computer centers on campuses. It's been perceived by many as a competition for the resources of the university. But I think when you really analyze, you'll see that both of us are involved in the information process. Fortunately I think that many universities are headed in the direction of recognizing that and assigning an important place in the university structure to that: for instance, as you may know, Pat Batton, when she was at Columbia University, and Elaine Sloane, who is now the director, actually, her title is vice president, for Information Resources at Columbia University, one of the largest, most prestigious private university in the United States. I think that you see that same kind of pattern beginning to develop at other places where it's recognized that its important to bring the technology that makes access to that information together with the sources and with the people that know how to use that. So there has been developing a greater cooperation between the computer science department, not the teaching department but the computer center, I should say, of the university and the university library.

Ms. Praditta : From my experience, I'm with the information broker, the first one in this country – the Technical Information Access Center under the Science & Technology Development Board, and we are concerned with what kind of organization should be responsible for the national information system for our country, because information is known as having costs, and we really need to put a large amount of money in investment in this area, and we in this country are facing problems of not having enough money to run and in order to give effective service to the users for the whole country. And we have been discussing about what would be an important organization to take care of business – should it be run by the government or should it be run by the private sector or some organization like communications authority or something like that?

Dr. Stueart : If I had an answer to that question then I think I could probably make a million dollars tonight. You probably know that the United States doesn't have an information policy. I think that certainly is an issue that most countries are struggling with right now. It's an important issue that we haven't really been able to address effectively yet in this country. And I'm not sure what kind of advice I could give. One of the things that I found fascinating reading recently was the new book, called *Megatrends 2000*. And the author is talking about Asia. One of the things that he says in that book is that Thailand may be able to be one of the first countries to skip the whole process of focus on the information technology part and develop straight into an economic service industry. So that kind of speculation would certainly have an impact on the kinds of policies that your government would develop, particularly in science & technology. I would certainly think that right now in Thailand, that the time is really rich for information brokers. Because the kinds of information that is needed to move the industry in the direction that you're going and in a fairly fast pace, is tremendous. I would think the opportunity is there. When I think of information brokers in this country and how they've gotten started in the kinds of things they're doing, and then compare that to Thailand, the potential is just wonderful.

Dr. Prachak : I would like to invite one of our distinguished audience to come over to ask you both the questions. I would like to invite Dr. Tassana Hanpol from Ramkhamhaeng University, please.

Dr. Tassana : At present, I don't think I have really a question, but I would like to tell both of you that for information, we're crazy right now in the academic library. We can do just like you have mentioned to two ways: direct & indireet. Direct means that the cooperation between three groups of people: faculty, librarians, and the administrator – and for indirect ways, librarians would take this duty, in an academic library. Can you clarify about the programs for this; Dr. Lee has mentioned the after class service for students. Usually the students, we can contact between helping the instructor to teach library skills and besides that, what kinds of program a library can prepare for after class students in case of open university we have different kinds of users both students and, I mean students from other schools in that area can come and prefer to use our library even though our status is not school library but the students in that area usually come to use our services. So, would you please advise for some kind of service that you have mentioned about after class services and how can you relate it between information literacy to the lifelong learning, again please? Thank you.

Dr. Lee : We have a very similar situation as you do, I know that you have a lot of users who are not university students. We are very much in the same situation – all our libraries are open to, not just to the community users, but also we have two technical colleges near by and also several high schools in the area. And they are treated very much the same as our own students. They can come to use our library for researching, they can borrow material from us. One of the things we try : to help the students to learn appropriating library skills by working with their librarians. It's very simple; we work very closely with several college librarians so that she will help us to teach their students how to use our library before they enter our center or are allowed to come in to use our facilities.

Dr. Prachak : Do you have any comments, Bob?

Dr. Stueart : I think there's another special audience in American libraries that requires special kind of programs and that is our international students. Often times, what we find is that international students from some countries come with a different view and different expectation of what is and is not in a library. I think it's very important to introduce international students to resources of the library so that I think you would find in most academic libraries in the United States; there's a very important focus on introducing international students to the kinds of resources that are available through academic libraries.

Ms. Yupin : I still have a question from the audience. As our training programs progress, employees and managers often experience changing role's. How do managers cope with specialists whose technical knowledge is greater than the manager? Do you expect automation specialists to become library managers of the future?

Dr. Lee : I think there is some change already taking place. For example, in the past, in the States. And we required master degrees in library science as a basic requirement in the professional librarian. In recent years, I think we have sort of relaxed this rule now. We now have people with management business degrees who are

working in the accounting area. We have people with computer science degrees who work with library assistants. But we still encourage them to acquire a library degree in order to be more knowledgeable if they want at all in their job; also, if they are interested in promotional opportunities they can eventually become director.

Dr. Stueart :   I think too, that, if you are talking about managers now who are librarians but are not able to keep up with the technology for one reason or another, that's certainly an important issue that's facing us all. The whole question of obsolescence is a threat to any organization and certainly libraries are not an exception. And that's one of the reasons that you find the number of continuing education programs that are developing, not only to enable the individual, whether that person is a manager or not. Not only to unable that person to do a better job of their current assignment but to be able to develop themselves professionally so that they can move up in an organization. As far as understanding the technology is concerned, I don't think that it's neceesary for a librarian to know how to program a computer.

Ms. Yupin :   I have another question from an instructor in the Department of Library Science. She asked : the case of Chulalongkorn University, the library school has been in the Faculty of Arts for years. But now, in the age of information technology, do you think it should be run by other faculty ?

Dr. Stueart :   I recently looked at all the library schools in Thailand and where they are located, and all of them, it seems, are in the Faculty of Arts or the Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences. I would rather see it a separate school completely, because I think the kinds of programs that are facing us now, the kind of excitement that is generated by technology, really wants a separate school and I think that's what you would find has developed in the United States. Not that you should take the United States model, but certainly I think to that extent, universities in the country have recognized the importance of those schools and have created them in separate schools or colleges or whatever you want to call it.

Ms. Yupin :   Now the time has really run out. I would like to thank you, Dr. Stueart and Dr. Lee, for your very invaluable and worthwhile ideas.