

Using a Definition of *Information Literacy* to Engage Academics and Students: A UK Perspective

Emma Burnett and Rachel White

abstract: Following the publication of an updated definition of *information literacy* in 2018 by CILIP, the United Kingdom's library and information association, librarians at Royal Holloway, University of London, began to use the definition with both students and staff. Their aim was to foster a better understanding of information literacy and how it can benefit learners throughout their studies and beyond. The students were first-year English undergraduates, and the staff were working toward a postgraduate teaching certificate. Discussions during and after the sessions indicated that the updated definition was effective in introducing the concept of information literacy to both students and staff, highlighting its importance in academia and the wider world.

Introduction

In the United Kingdom (UK), a new definition of *information literacy* was launched at LILAC (Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference) in April 2018. This interpretation was developed by committee members of the Information Literacy Group, a special interest group of the UK's Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professions (CILIP). In this updated definition, *information literacy* is described as "the ability to think critically and make balanced judgements about any information we find and use. It empowers us as citizens to develop informed views and to engage fully with society."¹ One aim of the definition was to make the concept clear for those outside the library profession.²

In the United Kingdom (UK), a new definition of *information literacy* was launched at LILAC (Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference) in April 2018.

Royal Holloway is a public research university, part of the University of London, that has its main campus in Egham, a town near London. Royal Holloway has about 11,000 students from foundation year (a year that some students do before beginning an undergraduate degree) to postgraduate research.³ The information consultants in Royal Holloway's Academic Liaison team provide skills training to all levels of students across the university. The instruction covers such skills as searching, citing, evaluating, and disseminating information. The team regularly promotes its information literacy (IL) offerings to staff and students but with mixed results; some departments integrate significantly more IL teaching in courses than others do.

The previous CILIP definition, launched in 2004, stated, "Information literacy is knowing when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner."⁴ In 2018, this definition was 14 years old and did not lend itself to in-depth discussions around the concept of information literacy. The authors of this article were therefore interested in using the new definition from CILIP to engage with students and staff.

Literature Review

CILIP is the UK's association for library and information professionals. It provides accreditation for university programs and offers a range of professional registration options, such as chartership, a qualification awarded in recognition of a high level of professional skills and knowledge. CILIP has 21 special interest groups that focus on a sector or topic and are run by committees of volunteers. One of these is the Information Literacy Group, which is responsible for the *Journal of Information Literacy*, the LILAC conference, and a website about IL.

The updated CILIP definition of *information literacy* has gained recognition since its launch in 2018. Jane Secker, the chair of the Information Literacy Group, discussed the forthcoming definition in a 2017 Association of College and Research Libraries white paper titled *Global Perspectives on Information Literacy*.⁵ Secker's chapter explained the development of information literacy in the UK and ended by hinting what the new definition would encompass, taking the concept of information literacy beyond the narrower scope of the 2004 definition. In 2018, Secker introduced the updated definition in an article that explained the reasons behind the revision.⁶ The article also explained how Secker and her colleagues on the Information Literacy Group approached the task of writing a new definition that people could relate to and use in different contexts.

The new CILIP definition also appeared in a 2020 article by Saoirse De Paor and Bahareh Heravi discussing information literacy and fake news.⁷ They compared the new definition with the old and underscored that the new interpretation included the ability to check the reliability and credibility of a source. In an article about information literacy and mobile devices, Kamil Matula based the skills and competences of a mobile information literate individual on the new definition.⁸ In a 2021 piece, Verónica Parisi-Moreno, Nayra Llonch-Molina, and Moisés Selfa quoted the new definition's "Information Literacy and Citizenship" section. The three authors described using a school museum to introduce young children to information literacy.⁹ That they quoted a longer section instead of the shortened definition suggests that the full document plays a significant role in helping



people understand the applications of information literacy in different contexts. In another article, Antonia-María Fernández-Luque, María-Soledad Ramírez-Montoya, and José-Antonio Cordón-García talked about systemic mapping of digital competencies training for health professionals.¹⁰ They recognized that the new CILIP definition shows that IL skills are relevant beyond the field of education. Although only a few articles have referenced the new definition of *information literacy*, they have been broad in range, showing how versatile it is and useful in a variety of contexts.

Although only a few articles have referenced the new definition of information literacy, they have been broad in range, showing how versatile it is . . .

Using the Definition with Students

The Academic Liaison team at Royal Holloway has had many years of experience teaching students IL skills in a variety of formats. Wherever possible, the team tries to ensure that their teaching is embedded within the curriculum, whether in person or online via lectures and workshops. A big part of the team's role is to liaise with departments to promote the benefits of information literacy and work with academic staff to provide meaningful instruction. The team strives to understand the desired assignment outcomes, and, where possible, includes assessment within its teaching.

Like many academic librarians, however, the Academic Liaison team faces challenges when trying to promote and deliver IL teaching. The challenges include a lack of awareness of the team's skills set, heavy demands on scheduling, the need to deliver course content in limited time, and academics who see it as their responsibility to teach students these skills. The instruction librarians often focus on developing key IL skills and practical knowledge of library services because their session might be the only interaction they have with students at the university. In departments where library staff are more fully embedded, instruction librarians can explore the concept of information literacy more thoroughly and explain the key components so students grasp the key skills involved.

In autumn 2018, an opportunity became available for the Academic Liaison team to collaborate with the Department of English on part of the Thinking as a Critic module for undergraduates.

This unit is a core module that all first-year students must take, and it runs throughout the autumn term. It consists of weekly lectures followed by seminars with smaller groups led by an academic who discusses and analyzes issues raised in the main lecture. The aim of this unit is to equip new students with key skills that they will implement throughout their university career, focusing on general academic competencies as well as critical abilities they will need as English literature students.

One of the authors of this article met with the course convenor, the academic who coordinated the Thinking as a Critic module, and discussed the approach they wanted

In departments where library staff are more fully embedded, instruction librarians can explore the concept of information literacy more thoroughly



to take with the session. As this module is designed around enabling students to think critically about literature and information, both the librarian and the academic wanted to introduce the subject of information literacy and source evaluation in a more holistic way to get students thinking deeply about the concepts. The focus of the library section of this session was to discuss the idea of information literacy, what it meant to be information literate, and the importance of these skills in academia and the wider world. The coauthor and the academic wanted to explain the abilities that students would develop throughout their university studies rather than focusing on purely practical skills, such as how to search for a book. As this module was based around critical thinking, they hoped to dedicate more time to explaining the CILIP definition and what it meant, which fitted with the ethos of the module. They gave time to practical skills as well but concentrated on information literacy and what it meant to the students.

. . . both the librarian and the academic wanted to introduce the subject of information literacy and source evaluation in a more holistic way to get students thinking deeply about the concepts.

which fitted with the ethos of the module. They gave time to practical skills as well but concentrated on information literacy and what it meant to the students.

The coauthor and the academic began with a definition of *information literacy*, employing the 2018 updated CILIP definition to start the conversation. They used this new definition because they felt it was simpler to understand and it focused on thinking critically and forming judgments about all types of information. They introduced it at the beginning of the lecture to frame the session, to let the class know what they would cover, and to put subsequent information into context. They broke the definition down into its key parts and explained it to the students. The presenters elaborated on and explored each part of the definition while giving examples of what it meant in an academic or real-life setting. Key skills, such as searching, evaluating sources, and referencing them, were also mentioned in relation to the CILIP definition and how students would need to develop these abilities over the coming years in partnership with the library and librarians. The course convenor also linked some of the main ideas of information literacy with literature and explored how research, literature searching, and evaluating information had been reflected in literary works. The convenor used examples of sources written during the British colonial period, from about the 1600s to the 1900s, and explained to students that these pieces should be evaluated and understood against the backdrop of the period, who wrote these accounts, and for what purpose.

The session on information literacy took place within one of the compulsory lectures for students in the Thinking as a Critic module. After the lecture, the class broke up into seminar groups. Each seminar was led by a member of the English Department. In these smaller sessions, students and seminar leaders had more in-depth discussions. The leaders challenged students to critique and evaluate different types of information. Positive feedback after the session included a comment from one participant who said, "The activity generated a lot of discussion, worked well . . . and was fun!"

Previous definitions of *information literacy* such as the CILIP version from 2004 were narrower in scope and less engaging to students. The new definition clearly outlined IL and its position in the twenty-first century. It is simpler, clearer, and easier for students



to relate to, and they can understand its importance for assignments and for issues in literature and the wider world. The presenters also explained the role of subject librarian and stressed why IL teaching was integral to the students' academic success.

The Department of English at Royal Holloway naturally gravitates to the physical library and its resources. This session differed from the typical IL training, which is skills-based and includes details on how to search library resources, how to evaluate information, and how to cite sources. Instead, the co-instructors explored the concept of IL more fully, using the CILIP definition as a base. By spending time introducing these concepts and stressing why it is important to be information literate, they gave students a better understanding of information and what information professionals do day-to-day. As a result, the students will be more aware of the importance of finding accurate sources and using information in an ethical way.

Using the Definition with Academics

The English session discussed in this article, although a success, was one of a kind, which highlights a major issue that librarians who teach information literacy face all too often. Library sessions depend on an engaged academic and can vanish if that person is no longer involved in the course. As a result, information consultants seek opportunities to promote the importance of information literacy to teaching staff, hoping to increase embedded library instruction.

Library sessions depend on an engaged academic and can vanish if that person is no longer involved in the course.

At Royal Holloway, teaching staff, both faculty and nonfaculty, can work toward a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice in Teaching and Learning (CAPITAL). The CAPITAL program leads to a Fellowship of Advance HE, a professional qualification awarded for excellence in higher education. One of the compulsory sessions deals with Employability and Skills. In this session, three services—the Careers Service, the Centre for the Development of Academic Skills, and the library—showcase the support they offer. The presentations provide an opportunity to engage with new academics and to encourage them to incorporate the support into their teaching, as well as make them aware of where to direct students who would benefit from these services. The session runs twice a year, and a representative from each service has about 30 minutes to talk. The portion of the talk focused on the library is delivered by an information consultant from the Academic Liaison team.

Although librarians are familiar and comfortable with the term *information literacy*, it may lack meaning to those outside the field. The Academic Liaison team would like to help academic faculty understand the importance of the skills the team can teach to their students and ensure that faculty appreciate that those skills go beyond academia. One of the coauthors of this article handled the CAPITAL Employability and Skills session in fall 2018 and used CILIP's new definition to introduce this concept to participants. She asked attendees to read the definition of *information literacy* and then posed the question: "How do you think this definition can be applied to higher education?" Attendees could add their answers anonymously to a Padlet. Some responses were:

The definition looks fairly central to what we are trying to get students doing in HE: critical thinking, evaluating resources, trying to apply their ideas more broadly . . .

Creation of informed, responsible, thinking citizens able to use their learning in the wider world.

Discriminating among various sources of information and review[ing] that information from other angles.

These comments suggest that the academics understood what *information literacy* meant after reading the definition.

This new approach engaged participants more effectively than that employed in previous sessions. The coauthor used it again in the next session, in spring 2019. One of the comments on the Padlet was: “Students need to be able to learn what are reliable information sources and to assess critically.”

The Academic Liaison team continues to use the CILIP definition of *information literacy* in the CAPITAL session, although they have changed the Padlet exercise. They ask academics to read the definition before the session and come up with their own explanation. This flipped approach allows the presenters to spend more time on their “Information Literacy Teaching Framework,” which the team developed in 2019.¹¹ The framework does not explicitly refer to the updated CILIP definition but does reflect the idea that IL skills are important beyond academia.

Conclusion

At Royal Holloway, the Academic Liaison team found the updated 2018 CILIP definition a useful way to introduce the concept of information literacy to those who may not be familiar with the term. The language and scope of the definition make it more universal

The language and scope of the definition make it more universal and easier to understand for those outside the information field.

and easier to understand for those outside the information field. Academics and students can apply it not only to their academic sphere but also to the wider world, which enables them to see the importance of information literacy for study and life more generally. By ensuring that students and academics clearly understand the

meaning of information literacy and its practical implications, the team also conveys a clearer knowledge of what library and information professionals can provide to them throughout their studies and careers.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge with thanks the contribution of Katie McGettigan to the Thinking as a Critic session. Katie is a senior lecturer in American literature within the Department of English at Royal Holloway, University of London. The authors would also like to thank their supportive colleagues in the Academic Liaison team, some of whom delivered the CAPITAL Employability and Skills session while Emma Burnett was on leave.



Emma Burnett is an information consultant at Royal Holloway, University of London; she may be reached by e-mail at: emma.burnett@rhul.ac.uk.

Rachel White is an information consultant at Royal Holloway, University of London; she may be reached by e-mail at: rachel.white@rhul.ac.uk.

Notes

1. CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals), "Definitions & Models: New Definition (2018)," 2018, <https://infolit.org.uk/definitions-models/>.
2. Emma Coonan, Jacqueline Geekie, Stéphane Goldstein, Lisa Jeskins, Rosie Jones, Rowena Macrae-Gibson, Jane Secker, and Geoff Walton, "CILIP Definition of Information Literacy 2018," 2018, <https://infolit.org.uk/ILdefinitionCILIP2018.pdf>.
3. Royal Holloway, University of London, "Facts and Figures," 2021, <https://www.royalholloway.ac.uk/about-us/more/facts-and-figures/>.
4. Chris Armstrong, Debbi Boden, Stephen Town, Marcus Woolley, Sheila Webber, and Angela Abell, "CILIP Defines Information Literacy for the UK," *Library & Information Update* 4, 1–2 (2005): 22–25, http://eprints.rclis.org/7459/1/Article_Update_25102004.pdf.
5. Jane Secker, "Chapter J" in *Global Perspectives on Information Literacy: Fostering a Dialogue for International Understanding* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2017), 99–109.
6. Jane Secker, "The Revised CILIP Definition of Information Literacy," *Journal of Information Literacy* 12, 1 (2018): 156–58, <https://doi.org/10.11645/12.1.2454>.
7. Saoirse De Paor and Bahareh Heravi, "Information Literacy and Fake News: How the Field of Librarianship Can Help Combat the Epidemic of Fake News," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 46, 5 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2020.102218>.
8. Kamil Matula, "Mobile Information Literacy: More Skills for Users of Information?" *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries* 9, 4 (2020): 601–9, <http://78.46.229.148/ojs/index.php/qqml/article/view/605>.
9. Verónica Parisi-Moreno, Nayra Lonch-Molina, and Moisés Selfa, "Information Literacy Instruction in Early Childhood Education: The School Museum," *Literacy* 55, 2 (2021): 83–90, <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12238>.
10. Antonia-María Fernández-Luque, María-Soledad Ramírez-Montoya, and José-Antonio Cerdón-García, "Training in Digital Competencies for Health Professionals: Systematic Mapping (2015–2019)," *Profesional de la Información [Information professional]* 30, 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2021.mar.13>.
11. Academic Liaison Team, Royal Holloway, University of London, "Library Services: Information Literacy Teaching Framework," 2019, <https://intranet.royalholloway.ac.uk/staff/assets/docs/pdf/library/information-literacy-teaching-framework-final.pdf>.

This mss. is peer reviewed, copy edited, and accepted for publication, portal 22.2.