



Literacy, not technology, is the issue

by Alan Bundy

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In developed countries worldwide, lifelong learning has become the policy icon of 21st-century education. The knowledge economy is also a focus for many organisations and nation states. Yet not one of the three levels of Australian formal education – primary, secondary, tertiary – has really grasped that lifelong learning and a knowledge economy depend on information literacy (IL). IL is the capacity to recognise that information is needed, and to identify, find and access, and then synthesise, evaluate and apply it. Librarians first used the concept in the early 1970s, but the term was coined by nonlibrarian Paul Zurkowski in 1974.

In promoting IL, librarians have largely stood alone, because what educational bureaucrats, politicians and governments have tended to grasp is the glittery but slippery straw of information technology (IT). This has been at great cost – around \$3 billion in Australian schools alone – but with little demonstrable return on investment. Pushed by technolust, technohucksters, ill-informed, gullible media and political perceptions of parental anxiety, governments have set (and in some states reached) targets of one computer for every five students in public schools. Even more wastefully, moves are afoot to provide all teachers with a laptop. Such initiatives reduce the digital divide but not the more fundamental information divide. Faith in technology in the classroom is misplaced. The real issue is IL, not IT.

In 1860 Victorian social commentators were lamenting the stress created by overabundant information. In 2000, the study ‘How much information?’ at <http://www.sims.berkeley.edu/how-much-info> found that the world’s total annual production of print, film, optical and magnetic content would require the equivalent of 250 megabytes per person for every person on earth. Print documents – a very small part of the total – include 65 million titles, and 2.75 billion book sales a year.

In these statistics can be sensed the reasons for the infoglut, infobog, infowhelm, information tsunami, information anxiety, information fatigue syndrome, information vertigo, data asphyxiation, datasmog – or just plain information overload – which is increasingly reported in the research or described by commentators.

We need a common awareness of the issue among politicians, governments, educators, health services, and communities, and we need to research, coordinate and fund the development of IL among all citizens, from an early age. We attend to IL, if at all, in an erratic fashion. Yet if one quarter of the \$3 billion or so currently spent on IT in schools were systematically invested in information literacy, Australia would be much better placed to be ‘the clever country’ or ‘the knowledge nation’. To the mantra about the return to the 3Rs must now be added IL – because without information literacy the 3Rs cannot empower in the 21st century ‘information age’.

As the new national information literacy standards demonstrate, IL has substance. It is not a passing fad. Rather, as Professor Candy has stated, it is the *zeitgeist* of the 21st century – a tangible, meaningful prerequisite for addressing its challenges. For WA educator, Margaret Butterworth, IL is a prerequisite for participative citizenship and social inclusion, and required for the production of new knowledge and to address global problems.

In his new book *What did you learn today?* Mark Latham asserts that: “Australia [could] rapidly catch up to the world’s leading nations. We should not be timid or incremental in our policy work. We need to set bold national targets for all aspects of lifelong learning.” Adult and other educators are needed to partner librarians in advancing the case that IL for all Australians is the most fundamental of those bold national targets.