ALISS article

Developing a new curriculum for information literacy: reflections on our Arcadia fellowship research

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From May until July 2011 we were seconded to the Arcadia Programme at Cambridge University as research fellows, with a remit to create a new and innovative curriculum for teaching information literacy in higher education. We had ten weeks in which to research and develop a practical structure that would comprehensively meet the ongoing information needs of students entering universities over the next five years - whilst retaining enough flexibility to be implementable in any higher education establishment. It was quite a tall order, but we hope that what we produced is going to be useful for the library and education community. The feedback to date has certainly been extremely positive. We also proved that having time away from your day job is invaluable as a professional and you really can achieve something quite significant in a relatively short space of time.

To ensure that the curriculum would be grounded in relevant and current research and informed by existing best practice, we undertook both a wide-ranging review of published literature and a modified Delphi study, consulting experts in the information and education communities. From the outset, we were keen to situate the research within the wider academic context, rather than identifying it exclusively as a 'library' initiative. This approach is in line with the recent movement to integrate various facets of training and support provided by lecturers, learning or educational developers, libraries, careers services and other academic support services. Whilst each of these departments may offer excellent provision, if each one works in isolation then a fragmented approach results, leading to confusion or conflict in students' understanding of how and where to find information and what to do with it once found. Unless provision is joined up across an institution, students will not receive the support required to master each step of their academic development.

We also found it necessary to clarify (and to some extent rehabilitate) the definition of our basic term. Information literacy is not a skill, or a knack. It is not 'something the library teaches', nor merely knowing how to create complex searches in a specific database. Nor indeed is it solely a matter of being able to cope with 'information overload'. It is a complex, high-level set of abilities that resides within the individual learner, enabling him or her not only to *seek out* information but also to *assess* it for bias; to *evaluate* its worth and relevance to the learner's own needs, as defined by the task in hand; to *analyse* its argument and the grounds on which the argument is made; and finally to be able to *assimilate* new information, even if that conflicts with previously held beliefs or convictions.

As such, it is the hallmark of the discerning scholar and also of the informed citizen. Therefore in our research the definition of information literacy we took was UNESCO's Alexandria Proclamation of 2005, which defines it thus:

> Information literacy empowers people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals. It is a basic human right in a digital world and promotes social inclusion in all nations.

Being information literate goes far beyond the academic context, towards an understanding of 'lifelong learning' which is closely associated with the emergence and development of our social and personal identities. As independent, lifelong learners, we can generate strategies for dealing with new information contexts: for assessing, analysing and assimilating new knowledge, or for reappraising our existing beliefs in the light of new data.

Within HE institutions, however, the term 'information literacy' is prey to misunderstanding. The historic tendency to situate its teaching within the library has led to a confusion - in the minds of some library staff as well as academic colleagues - between information literacy and bibliographic instruction. Knowing when and how to use library resources is a part of being information literate in the academic context, but only a part: the information landscape of higher education, especially in a digital age, encompasses more than the library.

Our findings from both the review of published literature and the Delphi consultation strongly suggest that a conceptual fracture has occurred in HE between what is thought of as 'library skills' - functional skills such as catalogue use or database searching - and the 'academic' competencies such as critical evaluation, synthesis, and writing appropriately for a given audience. Yet *all* these capabilities, dealing as they do with information seeking, handling and management, reside within the greater field of information literacy in a complex assembly of abilities that underpins all learning activity.

Fundamental to the new curriculum, therefore, is a vision of information literacy as a continuum that encompasses this broad range of abilities, from functional skills through to high-level cognitive processes, culminating in the individual's capacity to manage his or her own learning. This vision informed the 10 strands into which the curriculum is divided, each of which reflects an aspect of this continuum and contains multiple levels of development. Our ten strands are outlined in more detail in the diagram below (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: The New Curriculum for Information Literacy: circular model
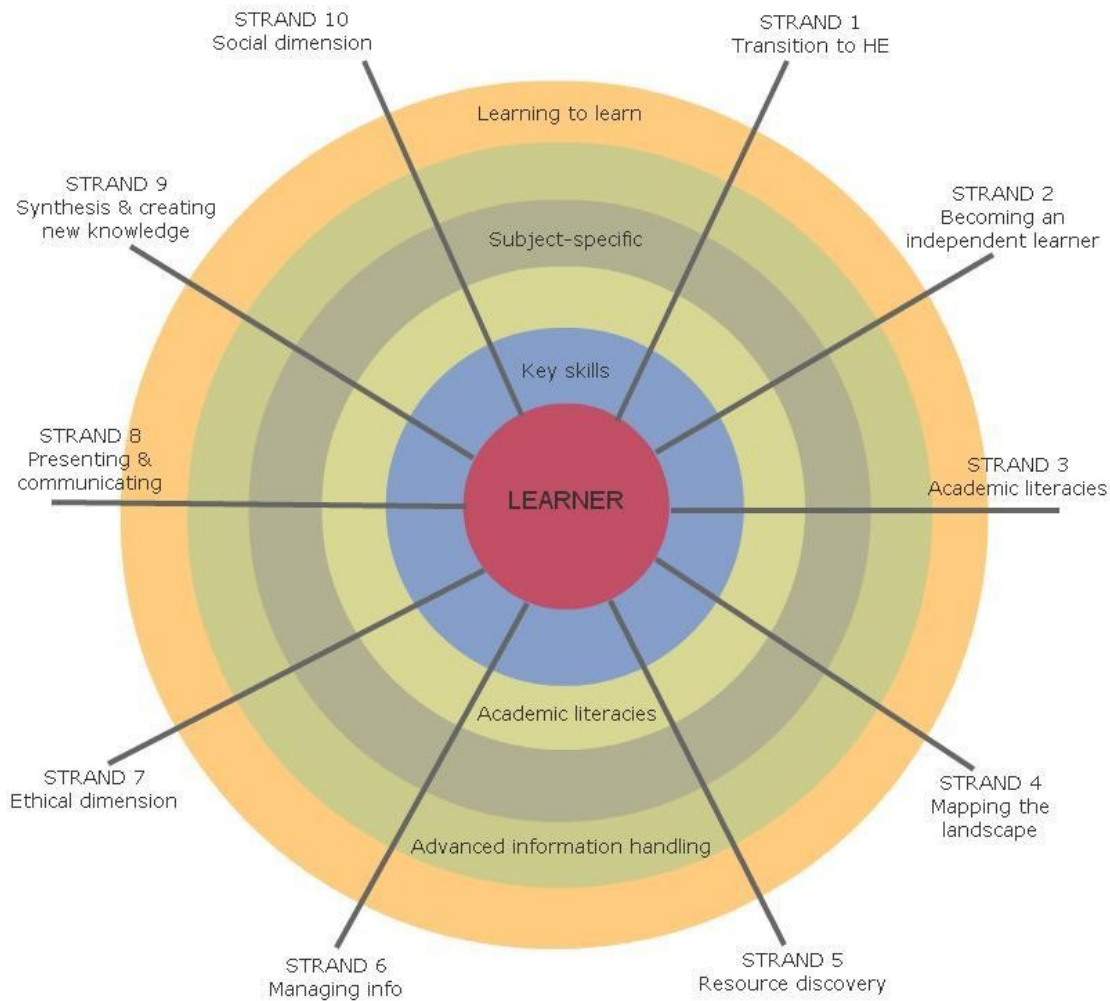
The strands fall into five broad learning categories:

Key skills such as storing information, note-making, reference management, using alert services

Academic literacies including academic writing and rhetoric, critical analysis and textual interrogation

Subject-specific competencies - mapping a discipline-contextual information landscape, including identifying key resources for a particular subject

Advanced information handling including ethical aspects of obtaining and using information, presenting and communicating findings appropriately, and formulating research questions

Learning to learn which focuses on developing reflective awareness and becoming an independent learner; also includes the transition from school to higher education, and the social dimension of information

The full curriculum includes detailed learning outcomes and sample activities and assessments for the elements within each strand. The curriculum, together with supporting

documentation, can be found at http://newcurriculum.wordpress.com/project-reports-and-outputs/. Also available are separate reports on the expert consultation process and the theoretical background to the research, together with an executive summary.

In ten weeks we were able only to delineate the need for a new approach to information literacy in higher education and to create a curriculum which we hope offers a holistic, modular and practical structure for implementing that approach. The next step will be to explore ways in which the curriculum can actually be put in place in Cambridge and in other institutions. We are therefore delighted that two further Arcadia Fellows, Dr Helen Webster and Katy Wrathall, are currently doing just that during the Michaelmas Term 2011-12. You can read more about how Helen and Katey will be taking the New Curriculum forward at http://arcadiaproject.lib.cam.ac.uk/projects/strategies-for-implementation.html. In addition, we are keeping our website at http://newcurriculum.wordpress.com up to date with reports from the various workshops and conferences we are attending.