

Are National Information Literacy Policies Possible?

John Crawford

Glasgow, Scotland, UK

johncrawford705@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract. Policymaking for information literacy is still relatively underdeveloped with a limited number of documents being exclusively devoted to the subject. Some give insufficient attention to non-educational issues such as the workplace, health issues and skills development. Reviewing the work of some key commentators, the paper identifies the issues involved in developing national information literacy policies and suggests how they could be addressed at different levels of resource.

Keywords: Information literacy, information literacy policies, national information literacy policies lifelong learning, information society, informal learning.

1 Issues

As Stephen Town has pointed out, the road to information literacy activity takes place in three stages: a nation perceives a need for competitive reasons to be a player in the global knowledge economy. This, in turn, suggests a need for the upskilling of its population to work effectively in this sort of economy, resulting in a national 'learning agenda'. The 'learning agenda' also tends to become explicitly associated with the skills of citizens, the development of these skills within educational programmes and their subsequent application in the workplace. Thirdly the growth of digital media and communications results in widespread information overload, leading to the need for both individuals and corporations to have effective information and knowledge management [1, p. 86].

To understand information literacy today we have to include not only the evaluation and use of traditional 'library' sources but also social policy issues, relating to the relief of inequality and disadvantage, skills development for a post-industrial society, critical thinking and lifelong learning, an activity which information literacy informs and supports. There are also the issues of digital literacy, school and higher education curricula, early years learning, health issues, the dynamics of the workplace, learning and teaching skills and strategies with an increasing emphasis on teaching and learning in informal situations [2].

Concise definitions of what an information literacy policy actually is seem difficult to come by but it could involve three stages: gathering of information, identification of root causes and analysis of their connections and the making of policy decisions. There are also questions:

- Should information policy documents include those which are partly or largely concerned with ICT or educational issues or should they be strictly limited to information literacy?
- Should policies have a level of state recognition and, if so, at what level?
- Is endorsement by a professional body sufficient?
- Should they be simply prescriptive skills based documents or should they encourage independent critical thinking and problem solving skills? Who should be responsible for information literacy?

Clearly they must take account of the numerous policy documents and definitions which have appeared over the years and link objectives and outcomes to them. According to Basili [3], in most countries information literacy has not entered the policy agenda and it is still necessary to promote policy awareness about the information literacy issue. She identifies a total of 54 policy initiatives although most of them do not focus specifically on information literacy. Although she finds that most policy measures are initiated by Ministries of Education, the idea of information literacy appears mostly in ICT policy documents. Some of the policies are, in fact, higher education course materials. Whitworth [4] offers an analysis of the policy documents which are available in English and are in some sense, at least, national documents. Three of the states or parts of states are small: Finland, Hong Kong and Scotland (two other smaller states, Norway and Taiwan were not included) which raises the question of whether information literacy policies are easier to implement in small states. There are perhaps two factors which favour this view. In small countries educational policies are not just about education. They can help to define the values of the state and identify what factors differentiate it from other, larger countries nearby. It is easier to form networks of interested partners and meet and influence decision-makers, politicians, civil servants and staff of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) who share some of the values of the information literacy activist.

Finland's policy is one of the few to have full state recognition. However the policy is only concerned with higher education, does not mention social impact, and information literacy is not seen as a holistic concept. The *Australian and New Zealand information literacy Framework* is the product of a professional body and the emphasis is on higher education. The Hong Kong policy is like the Finnish example, state sponsored. It is the most comprehensive of all the documents examined and the only one to pay real attention to the affective dimension, that is, the idea of pleasure being a motivator of information searching, a filter for information and a support for informational interaction. What is missing is the impact of information literacy on democracy and active citizenship. Most information literacy policy documents reflect the thinking of Western liberal democracies and this cannot be taken for granted. Both Whitworth and Basili examine the situation in some detail and offer evaluative criteria, but from the evidence available, five elementary criteria emerge which are not generally being met:

1. Information literacy policy documents should be about information literacy and not something else
2. They should have some form of government endorsement and support
3. They should be genuinely cross-sectoral, covering all education levels from early years to PhD level, the workplace, health, lifelong learning, employability and skills development, and citizenship and civil rights
4. They should be at least informed and preferably, led by the professional bodies of the countries concerned
5. They should be collaborative with input from all organisations in the countries concerned, such as skills development bodies, employers' organizations, trades unions, teaching and learning organizations, and relevant NGOs.

Some sort of standardized template for information literacy policies seems desirable. In the meantime some basic questions might be:

- What is an information literacy policy?
- What are information literacy policies for?
- What is the role of an information literacy policy within the wider world of information policy making?
- How can information literacy be defined to distinguish it from ICT infrastructural issues?
- Who should make information literacy policy?
- How can the information professional exert influence outside the information sector?
- What sort of agendas should information literacy policymaking identify/collaborate with, for example, educational and social policy, lifelong learning and health awareness?
- Is information literacy recognised in policy agendas worldwide?
- Can information literacy exploit digital inclusion agendas?
- What kind of state is receptive to information literacy policies?
- Have information literacy policies been systematically tested and evaluated?

2 Addressing the Issues

Policymaking for information literacy is best seen as an evolving, collaborative work in progress rather than an exercise in completeness. When Paul Zurkowski originated the concept in 1974, his aim was to achieve universal information literacy in the United States by 1984 [5]. This should act as a warning to us all. Policymaking is not about generating a product but a process. Evidence derived from the cited authorities and my work on the Scottish Information Literacy Project suggests that the following points are useful in what should be an ongoing process:

Advocacy and policymaking

- Advocacy strategies are essential to policymaking but this raises the issue of at what level case making should be made. Horton recommends aiming for the top, and the best example of this is probably Barack Obama's Presidential

proclamation of Information Literacy awareness month in the United States. Such coups are difficult to achieve and require a lot of planning and lobbying. In small states, access to decision makers is easier, but it is also important to tackle the issue at a practitioner level and encourage partners and supporters to make the case in their own organisations

- The process of advocacy, collaboration and networking is slow and time consuming, so plan for the long term. As Horton says [6, p. 272] it might take years or even decades
- Develop strategies and advocacy from existing national and international social and educational policies, or as Horton [6, p. 273] puts it: ‘Link information literacy to important and long-standing, intractable national or institutional or organizational goals and reforms’. These might, for example, include linking health education policies to information literacy
- Policymaking must address Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) issues and these must include ‘popular’ as well as more traditional issues deriving from the academic experience, such as downloading of music and videos and issues to do with the sale of illegal copies to the public
- Include Internet safety in the policy agenda. It is both an important issue in itself and is a matter of public concern

Working relationships

- Partnerships and networking are crucial using both personal and professional contacts
- Work cross-sectorally and not just with librarians and information specialists
- Develop a community of practice. This may be web based but could also involve face to face meetings. It should not be restricted to the library and information science profession
- Identify organisations to work with – Skills development agencies and other organizations involved in workplace training, organisations concerned with promoting digital inclusion, curriculum development bodies in education, teachers and university lecturers’ organisations, professional organisations which have an education and training role, job centres and career advisors, community learning and development organisations, telecommunications regulators such as Ofcom in the UK, chambers of commerce, employers’ organizations and trade union representative bodies. All these have an interest in information literacy outcomes.
- Offer support to practitioners. Support at policy levels informs the development of good practice at institutional levels which can be fed back to further policy development, thus creating a virtuous circle. This is particularly helpful to small organisations or solo operators like school librarians
- Have meetings and involve people. Encourage reporting on activities by activists. Thus gives activists an opportunity to present their ideas and receive comments and constructive criticism. Outcomes can then be fed into policymaking
- Develop a common vocabulary with which all stakeholders and partners can engage. Avoid ‘librarian’ speak.

Research and development

- Much of the information literacy agenda has a utilitarian content, education and specifically, education for employment, but there is a need to balance the utilitarian educational agenda against what has been called the affective dimension, personal social development and self fulfillment, outcomes which are difficult to measure, but for the people involved, are the most important of all.
- The development of learning material content should be an outcome of policy thinking but must be cross-sectoral and should not simply be higher education material 'bolted' on to another context such as workplace information literacy skills development. The role of project partners is essential in developing materials and exemplars of good practice
- Do your homework in the widest sense. Be aware of relevant research and engage in market oriented action research, preferably with other partners and including those out with the information sector. Exemplars of good practice and case studies can add value as local, in-house initiatives can inform wider practice.
- Funding: policymaking, especially if viewed as long term, is expensive and requires dedicated staff. Developing strategy strands which are likely to attract funding from governments and NGOs are worth pursuing.
- Encourage writing and reporting so that others both within the country and abroad can be aware of your work, learn from it and comment on it.
- Evaluate activity, preferably with partners.
- Link relevant information literacy skills levels to the school curriculum. The literacies curriculum outcomes are the most obvious but other areas are also relevant.
- Recognise and work with innovative learning and teaching agendas which recognise independent learning, as they are likely to be sympathetic to information literacy.

3 Strategies

While considerable progress has been made in moving information literacy from a 'library centric' model to one which is more society and community based, not enough has been done to integrate information literacy policymaking into public advocacy, and indeed, information literacy policymaking as a distinctive, systematic activity scarcely exists. ICT infrastructural and digital participation issues have achieved a much higher profile. It is difficult to see how much progress can be made without well funded, centrally led strategies which can co-ordinate and support the many disparate initiatives which take place. There has been much debate as to whether information literacy activity should be a top down activity or a bottom up one in which it is hoped that numerous, local and disparate activities will somehow coalesce into a coherent whole. However well intentioned the latter approach might be, it has not achieved high profile results, and Woody Horton, an expert in information literacy advocacy, champions the top down approach [6]. A national agency of some sort, in all countries, is needed to develop initiatives and support those who are already making them at a regional or local level. The American

National Forum on Information Literacy is a possible model for all, but expert national organisations need to be staffed and funded, although much can be achieved by a small number of people as the Welsh Information Literacy Project has shown. Such an agency might be led by the country's principal information organisation or at least have strong links with it. The primary motivation for setting up such an agency would almost certainly have to come from the country's principal information organisation as it is unlikely that any other body would have the expertise or will to do it. What would such an agency do?

Its first task would be to raise funding to support its activities and this must be an ongoing concern. Collaborative working with other bodies is essential and this applies to fundraising which should be sought in co-operation with universities and research bodies, charities, including those concerned with deprivation issues, educational organisations and curriculum development agencies, relevant professional bodies, employers and employee organisations, chambers of commerce, and skills and training agencies. It should have the support of the relevant government department which would probably be a ministry of education or lifelong learning. Collaborative working brings problems with it. Every organisation has its own distinctive aims and objectives and while these may overlap with information literacy they will not be the same, and it is important to respect other's aims and objectives and show how information literacy can inform and support them. Its first and principal task should be the development of an information literacy policy in co-operation with the above bodies. Policymaking must be realistic and should develop strands which will have appeal outside the information sector and are likely to attract funding. Particular attention should be paid to countries' social and educational policies, and policy and action should be mapped against them, with topics included which appeal to government and the public. Internet safety and IPR issues are obvious examples. Policymaking should recognise and work with innovative learning and teaching agendas which recognise independent learning and those who promote them, as they are likely to be sympathetic to information literacy. An information literacy policy is, however, a process, not an event and it needs to be modified and developed as new needs emerge. As an Irish study points out the information literacy landscape is constantly changing [7]. For this reason documentation should be web based and evolving, rather than a fixed printed document. Advocacy and lobbying, carried out in partnership with other agencies, should draw on and enhance existing policies [6, p. 273]. It is important to bring together all information sectors to achieve a process of cross-fertilisation so that the different sectors can learn from one another. Librarians working in higher education probably have the best developed skills in learning and teaching, thanks to links with academic departments and educational development units, and they are well placed to support other sectors. They could pass on their skills to other sectors. It is important that a national information literacy agency should support regional and local initiatives within the state by giving advice and guidance, acting as a link to relevant agencies, and behaving as a critical friend. It could well undertake evaluation work and one of its tasks might be to devise evaluation strategies. Cross-sectoral and collaborative working implies a community of practice. This might be web based, or consist of face to face meetings or, more probably, a combination of both. It should be a forum for the exchange of ideas and discussion of possible developments. Research projects, relevant to the agency's policies, should be

undertaken, preferably in conjunction with relevant partners, both within and beyond the information sector. These will build up the agency's expertise and provide a base of knowledge to further develop policy and activity. The Scottish Information Literacy Project, for example, was founded with the sole time limited aim of developing an information literacy framework linking secondary and tertiary education, but soon found, through a process of action research, that its remit needed to be widened to include the workplace, lifelong and informal learning.

Through collaboration with partners, exemplars of good practice and case studies should be collected and placed on the agency's website. These will both encourage and give status to those who have contributed them and will provide material which other partners can learn from and use and develop themselves. It can also provide data to inform policy development and future action points.

Communication is important and the agency should write up and publish by whatever means are appropriate the results of its work. These might include a blog and other forms of social media, reporting at conferences and publication in appropriate journals. It should also organise conferences itself where its staff and partners can present. Outside experts should also be invited to contribute.

It should also undertake evaluation activity and develop evaluative criteria. As these are currently underdeveloped, this is an important function.

If a national information literacy programme is impossible then activity by a professional body is another possibility and this is probably the most favoured option. However information literacy then has to take its place with a multiplicity of other information concerns. Time and resources are always constraints and information literacy has to compete with other priorities. A third and probably the cheapest option is to form a community of practice. Most of its work will probably be online but face to face meetings are also possible. An existing example is 'Information Skills for a 21st Century Scotland' [8]. It is an online community of practice which is open to everyone both within and outside the information profession, primarily in Scotland but also elsewhere. The community is open to everyone who is interested in information literacy and associated skills and competencies and wants to share practice, contribute to the community's knowledge of information literacy activities, and contribute case studies and news, reports of conferences and events and information about new research. One of the community of practice's key tasks is to further develop the Information literacy Framework Scotland by enriching it in the areas where it is still underdeveloped. Another area requiring attention is the identification and addressing of training needs, preferably in conjunction with the relevant professional body.

A recent report from the Republic of Ireland recommends a similar approach [9]. Its results derived from data collected from 26 information literacy experts including seven from outside Ireland. There are two principal recommendations:

- The setting up of a high level advocacy committee, composed of leading figures within the profession in Ireland (high level strategists and managers)
- A practitioner led community of practice, composed of innovative practitioners, who manage and implement information literacy programmes throughout Irish libraries

'The high level advocacy committee would operate both within and outside the profession: Within the library profession, a high-level advocacy committee would provide a framework that supports and facilitates the work of the community of practice'. 'Outside the library profession, a high-level advocacy committee would liaise with other national library organisations, collaborate with non-library groups whose information literacy goals are aligned with those of libraries, and lobby local and national government agencies to support information literacy initiatives across public life.' The information literacy community of practice would have both online and offline components and would provide one online centralised resource for information literacy practice in Ireland. An online community would be a repository for information literacy literature, an opportunity for networking and sharing knowledge, an opportunity to communicate with peers and a greater sense of inclusion for practitioners in small or remote organisations. Research, collaboration and continuing professional development are also recommended. This model is, in part, derived, from the Scottish and Welsh experience and could be applied much more widely. While formal education is not central to this paper there are relevant issues. Lifelong learning means just that but little work has been done on the earlier years in primary schools or nursery education, and this is also an age group with whom librarians have little engagement. Information literacy skills can be taught at nursery and early years in primary schools. However it is difficult to make progress if teachers are not trained in information literacy skills, and there is, as yet, little interest in information literacy in departments of education. Vigorous advocacy campaigns directed at departments of education and senior teachers are needed. The Welsh Information Literacy Project is addressing this issue. Meetings have been held with head teachers and deputy heads in different parts of Wales and, at the time of writing, two case studies are to take place in two secondary schools. Contact has also been made with two teacher training colleges to highlight the importance of information literacy to student teachers before going out on school placements [9]. It is also desirable that information literacy outcomes should be written into national school curricula.

As with all information literacy activities we need to share, report at conferences and write about them more as sometimes great initiatives and projects go unnoticed.

Information literacy is an information ideology with huge potential but also many challenges to face.

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