Start with the learner

Teaching information literacy is about empowering users, not following a sterile curriculum. To be effective, we need to provide a mixture of teaching and learning activities to accommodate diversity. **Jo Webb** and **Chris Powis** explain.

Wherever we work, one of the goals of library and information professionals should be to create an information- and knowledge-empowered community of users. How we try to do this has evolved through time and varies depending on the kinds of organisations in which we work. And yet, there are common trends which require major changes in our professional practice. Management values, resources, culture and technology have all contributed to a fundamental shift in power to the user, customer or learner.

But to what extent have we changed our values to recognise a move away from a dependency model of library and information use? Does a desire for, or expectation of, dependency still underpin many of our assumptions about how we engage in teaching, training and supporting learning and development activities among our users? And, just as the practice of empowerment within the workplace can seem threatening and risky, are we really ready to give control to our users?

Should we define a perfect library and information service as one in which its users have no need to ask for help because:

■ access to resources is effortless and seamless
■ all resources are available
■ users are equipped with the knowledge, skills and abilities to obtain exactly what they need, when they need it?

Empowering users is not about defining a framework or curriculum for information literacy. There is certainly a place for advocacy and content development. But in order to develop an information-literate community we need to build our learning and service infrastructure on what we understand of learning and motivation.

One of the most distinctive features of the teaching undertaken by information professionals is that we most often work with strangers, running one-off and impromptu sessions more frequently than assessed courses. It becomes even more important therefore that we have an understanding of some of the key educational and psychological theories about learners and learning.

Understanding learning

Squires[1] proposes that learning has five key elements:

■ learning involves change
■ this change may be permanent or temporary
■ behaviour and/or knowledge may be affected (and some people suggest we should talk about changing values as well)
■ learning may be in response to an internal stimulus (i.e. you learn by yourself)
■ learning may be in response to an external stimulus (i.e. shaped by a teacher or a learning experience).

In order to be effective learners we usually need teachers to shape our learning and help us to make sense of new material. The teacher is not just someone who lectures in a classroom, but rather a person who guides our way to new knowledge and understanding.

Race and Brown[2] describe five sources of motivation:

■ Wanting to learn (or intrinsic motivation). Not all learners demonstrate this. For every motivated family historian there is a disaffected student who falls asleep in class. It is possible to find ways of engaging most learners through effective planning and design
■ Needing to learn (or extrinsic motivation). The most obvious example here is