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Notes and Queries

eLiteracy versus information literacy at eLit2005: what's the difference, which should we prefer?

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Having successfully migrated to St. John's University, New York the previous year as eLit2004, this year's eLit conference, eLit2005[1], was held at the University of Strathclyde in June and addressed a range of challenging concepts from the electronic information environment. I have to own up to being on the local organising committee for eLit2005, so any comments about the conference on my part may lack a certain objectivity. However, the event did prove to be a success and I hope left a number of stimulating ideas to resonate with the conference delegates.

A number of noteworthy features of the conference could be commented on – for example, the remarkably successful last minute appearance of Dan Madigan as a keynote speaker, stepping in for an original presenter who was sadly indisposed, and giving a brilliant and certainly spontaneous presentation in his place. Or the witty welcome speech at the Civic Reception in the Glasgow City Chambers delivered by Bailie Christopher Mason, the standard of which was particularly hard for the following speaker to match (I should know – I was the following speaker).

Nevertheless, in terms of academic content it is worth picking out the willingness of many of the delegates who delivered papers to question the underlying concepts of eLiteracy and Information Literacy. Titles such as “Current issues in Information Literacy: are we making all the wrong assumptions?”[2] and “Is the Information Literacy Movement Dead?”[3] spring to mind, while another paper singled out the focus on ‘e’ in ‘eliteracy’ and by extension in eLit2005 itself: “e-Literacy and Lifelong Learning: the important is “Literacy” not the “e”.” [4]

This awareness of the significance of the conference name raises one of the most regularly discussed topics amongst conference delegates at each year's eLit conference which is the distinction between eLiteracy and information literacy and whether one concept is more valid than the other. So while the discussions of this year's conference are still fresh in the mind, it is worthwhile using this brief discussion paper to provide a summary reflection on this debate.

And to confront the difficult issues head on, it is fair to say that, although the concept of eLiteracy is quite well defined now[5], it is viewed with suspicion by many library and information professionals who are committed to the philosophy of information literacy. There are a number of reasons for this, but in particular the substitution of the ‘e’-word

electronic for the ‘i’-word *information* before the term literacy is problematic. It seems to downgrade the concept of the intelligent use of information-gathering tools by moving our focus onto the electronic medium through which the information is gathered and away from the information itself. At its worst, the implication is that, if it is not electronic it is not interesting, not capable of generating valuable information.

Which is nonsensical of course. But it is one rather negative interpretation of the ‘e’ in eLiteracy. This line of argument continues by saying that Information literacy is, in contrast to eLiteracy, a medium-independent concept. To be information literate implies a higher level understanding of the fact that information exists in its own right as intellectual content, regardless of the vehicle which carries it (paper or electronic), and also implies the ability to work in a discriminating and intelligent way across these media as appropriate.

The ruthless coup de grace from this school comes with the assertion that because eLiteracy does not encompass this ability to cross over discriminatingly between such media (rather it is the ability to use a certain information format well and only that), eLiteracy is fundamentally a contradiction in terms. If we know that “the notion of literacy has a deeper meaning, that of the learned person” [5] (Martin, 2004), what sort of learned person would only use one medium of thought and communication (the ‘e’ medium) rather than any medium in which wisdom, intelligence and enlightenment can be found? You can be e-Skilled or e-Adept maybe, but e-Literate? Never.

However, in case you think I am trying to destroy the market for eLit2006 (see the announcement later in this issue), let me now go on to put the argument for eLiteracy.

All of the above criticisms of eLiteracy do have validity as descriptions of a debased, ill-formed version of eLiteracy. But above all, the case for the defence of eLiteracy rests on the undeniable fact that there have accrued hitherto unachievable educational, informational and intellectual benefits due to the electronic innovations of recent decades. Some (such as those involved in the promulgation of eLiteracy) believe that there are generic abilities needed by the users of any and all electronic tools in order to deepen and enhance such benefits, that these abilities are applicable across the electronic environment, and that they can be abstracted and studied on their own terms (these are “the eLiteracies”).

This is not to deny that eLiteracy is in a sense a circumscribed concept. It focuses, not on the world, but specifically the eWorld. But although the eWorld is pervasive these days, no-one is saying that it *is* the World, the all-defining limit of our awareness. In looking at one particular medium of human intellectual activity, the eLiteracy movement does not deny the reality or the importance of other forms of communication and information-sharing, it just chooses to examine a particular phenomenon which is unusually important at this moment in time.

To borrow the metaphor behind the European computer driver licence, when you learn to drive a car, you learn to drive a car not to fly a plane. These are different skills, and in learning to drive a car, no-one is saying that what you are doing is more important than learning how to pilot a plane, sail a yacht or ride a bike. In each case, a different skill is being cultivated in different contexts. If you try and drive a car across a lake, you clearly do not know how to drive a car properly. Similarly, if you try and find a nineteenth century physics paper in the INSPEC database, what you are doing is both e-ilLiterate and also shows a lack of Information Literacy (the database coverage starts in the late 1960s). You may need to leave the comfort of the e-World and use a hard copy periodicals index instead.

Thus, being eLiterate means knowing the limitations as well as the potential of the skills of the e-World: with your ECDL, you should know better than to drive your car into water, that is, you should not use an electronic tool for a purpose for which is inappropriate. Cultivating eLiteracy does not mean that there is no longer any validity in becoming information literate in the context of the hybrid digital/hardcopy library. It just means that we also should cultivate skills synergistically across electronic contexts which were quite separate in the pre-electronic age. To deny that the skills of using the electronic library and a whole host of other non-library electronic tools have much in common is simply to fly in the face of reality.

So why not examine this common ground and develop these common skills under the banner of eLiteracy?

To summarise, eLiteracy and Information Literacy are different but mutually compatible concepts with validity within specific contexts. Most librarians work within hybrid library environments, and may feel that eLiteracy is a single medium concept and as a practical tool for promoting the use of their mixed medium information service it is less useful than Information Literacy. However, many library users will bring skills to their library use which they have developed in non-library electronic contexts (for example, they may have gained some degree of information literacy by becoming eLiterate outside of the library environment – becoming good at ordering books on Amazon means you may use an OPAC quite well, never having used one before). So the reality of everyday LIS practice is that both eL and IL affect the working lives of today's LIS practitioners. Librarians can accept both without contradiction, but privileging either over the other is to fall prey to a misunderstanding – one that I trust this brief discussion has gone some way towards offsetting.

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Notes

1. Available at: <http://www.elit-conf.org/ELIT2005/index.html> (accessed 29th September 2005).
2. Secker., J. et al (2005) "Current issues in Information Literacy: are we making all the wrong assumptions?" Abstract available at: <http://apps.iteu.gla.ac.uk/ELIT/presentations.jsp?confID=4&proposalNo=13> (accessed 15th November 2005).
3. Cardwell, C. et al. (2005) "Is the Information Literacy Movement Dead? A Critical and Comparative Look at Information Literacy in Higher Education." Abstract available at: <http://apps.iteu.gla.ac.uk/ELIT/presentations.jsp?confID=4&proposalNo=34> (accessed 15th November 2005).
4. Dagdilelis, V. (2005) "e-Literacy and Lifelong Learning: the important is "Literacy" not the "e"." Abstract available at: <http://apps.iteu.gla.ac.uk/ELIT/presentations.jsp?confID=4&proposalNo=40> (accessed 15th November 2005).
5. Martin, A. (2004), available at: <http://www.iteu.gla.ac.uk/eliteracy/whatiseliteracy.html> (accessed 29th September 2005).

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