Young people and Information Literacy

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Today’s high-school students have never known a world without the Internet. New communication media have great potential and have paved the way for a type of knowledge made of collective writing and global distribution of information, where everyone can publish opinions and give their contribution. Thanks to these media, young people have become the creators and distributors of information they have generated and are no longer passive consumers of pre-packaged information.

Technology is an integral part of the lives of this generation. The web is used to make purchases, keep in touch with friends and study. It is a means of creating, commenting and collaborating on content, and no longer just a place to retrieve information.

However, beyond the simple access to technology, are young people really capable of using these instruments appropriately? In a world where technology is so pervasive, being able to use digital media correctly and critically interpreting retrieved information is an important success factor for young people who want to make a name for themselves (Alvermann, 2004).

However, we should not take young people’s ability for granted. A recent survey of the Council of Europe on the information needs of young people (Selwyn, 2007), which analysed the literature produced in the various European countries on this topic, highlighted some critical points, thus summarised: young people are easily capable of finding information on sports and entertainments but much less on science; they find information easily but
lack confidence in the use of search engines (Buckingam, 2005); young people are missing much of the richness of an environment saturated with information because of poorly developed information seeking skills or a propensity to take the easiest path possible (Dresang, 2005); they seek specific answers rather than developing an understanding of the information found (Bilal, 2004); young Europeans find it difficult to locate high quality information and develop the critical skills needed to interpret it.

On the basis of the Council of Europe’s analysis and our direct experience, we see that young people know how to functionally locate and acquire information but do not have the necessary instruments to interpret, discard or manage it. However, since they find using technology easy, the next step should be to try to introduce them to a real information culture, helping them to become ‘information literate’ as soon as possible.

The American Library Association (ALA), Presidential Committee, defined, since 1989, ‘Information Literacy’ (IL) as follows: «the ability to know when information is needed, and to be able to identify, locate, and effectively use that information for lifelong learning and problem solving» (ALA, 1989).

In the Anglo-American world, as opposed to Italy where it is as yet scarcely considered, IL is considered a discipline in itself, so much so that a series of models and standards have been developed, starting from the 1970s, to try to explain its goals and characteristics1. For them, information seeking is a constructive process

that develops through a series of stages or levels, from the lowest to the highest, involving the individual as a whole from his emotions to his intellect (Kuhlthau, 1991).

These models and standards, although different from one another, have one feature in common: the understanding that IL is a dynamic learning ‘process’ characterised by a sum of connected activities that include a certain way of thinking and using information.

Information Literacy is not just that group of skills/prerequisites and knowledge that enables us to find, assess and use the information we need: first and foremost it must teach us to filter and discard what we do not need.

Becoming ‘information literate’ is certainly not something one can learn from a textbook. It is a long process, which should begin in high school. At this stage students should be made aware of some of its basic principles, drawn from the most qualified models or standards. As aforementioned, they begin with the lower levels, such as for example the «ability to recognise an information need» finally reaching the higher ones in a crescendo, such as the «ability to summarise and build upon existing information, contributing to the creation of a new knowledge» (Oblinger, 2007).

The first step will entail becoming familiar with the lowest levels of the scale, such as acknowledging the need for information; improving the quality of the questions to find pertinent information; comparing and evaluating sources, in order to be able to identify the most reliable ones.

The activity of comparing and evaluating sources is considered one of the most important basic principles to teach students. Thanks to his longstanding experience with young people, Godwin, the author of a popular blog and a university librarian, has stated that the best way to work with students is to change their Internet habits and teach them to «valuate, valuate, valuate», which is the new imperative in a world in which greater importance is

on Information Skills in Higher Education, Standing Conference of National and University Libraries, London, 1999. For this model, the activity of comparing and evaluating is considered a key point of the information process.
given to the container/network than to the content/information (Godwin, 2008).

Until not very long ago, education was based on a single information source, the textbook. Today, with the new information technologies and with the explosion of information available on the net the perspective has changed and it has become necessary to consider these other means too (Eisenberg, 2008). However, as stated, in order to be able to use digital information efficiently and usefully it is necessary to acquire a certain number of new skills that go well beyond simple technological ones: «no longer is it enough to be able to read the printed world; [...] youth [...] need the ability to both critically interpret the powerful images of a multimedia culture and express themselves in multiple media forms» (Thoman, Jolls, 2005).

Guiding young people in acquiring the right skills also requires some thought, especially on behalf of those who have to help them most in this process: teachers, as subject experts, and school librarians, as experts in information accessing techniques:
- the information culture should become a mental habit;
- it is necessary to ensure that young people develop a critical sense in order to be able to cope in an environment, such as the Internet, where all kinds of information can be found, both true and false;
- it is important to teach young people to use information ethically and be respectful of copyright in an environment where it is very easy to cut and paste information.

On the basis of the previous reflections and of experience gained in the Science Communication and Education Project, we believe students today need to acquire abilities that go well beyond the traditional ones such as reading, rote learning and communication. They will need to learn to give more importance to content rather than to the container, and to express themselves in new ways and forms, to become accustomed to the tools that can span the entire range of available information sources, and to know how to evaluate them, developing that critical sense that will help them in their future working lives. By acquiring these competencies they will also be able to understand the many financial, legal and social implications connected to the use of information, and will learn to access and use them ethically and legally.
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