
NATIONAL FORUM ON INFORMATION LITERACY: *ADVOCACY IN ACTION*

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ABSTRACT

Dedicated to building diverse and integrated coalitions and collaborations at the national and international level, the National Forum on Information Literacy has made tremendous progress serving as a “beacon” for information literacy and lifelong learning. Globalization, technological advances, and demographic changes worldwide, however, continue to reflect that more is needed.

OVERVIEW

in-for-ma-tion lit-er-a-cy -n. 1. The core foundation for effective lifelong learning practice. -n. 2. A habit of mind and skill set essential for empowering individual growth and achievement in the Age of Information. -v. 3. To use the wealth of available information resources today to enrich the quality of academic, personal, and professional life.

Promoting the development of lifelong learners who are information literate is the fundamental *raison d'être* for the existence of the National Forum on Information Literacy. The unprecedented, societal transformation brought on by the Information Age has, in fact, redefined the traditional concept of literacy. Indeed, the historical reign of the 3 R's – reading, writing, and arithmetic – has morphed into a new 21st century umbrella literacy, incorporating the technology and information seeking skills that are currently dictating new competitive landscapes in the world marketplace today. Globalization, technological advances, and demographic changes worldwide present us with a new baseline for literacy in terms of how we teach, how we learn, how we interact, and how we train and retrain. Whether people are seeking to learn, make decisions, and/or solve problems in the workplace, in education or in everyday life, they need to understand and have access to the intellectual as well as technical tools necessary to utilize the full range of print and electronic resources available to them today.

The National Forum on Information Literacy is dedicated to building diverse and integrated coalitions and collaborations, at the local, national, and international level, that will insure its ultimate objective i.e. – mainstreaming information literacy philosophy and practices throughout every level of the modern world, from the complex spheres of the digital divide, across the spectrum of non-profit organizations and NGOs, governmental agencies, and corporate enterprises. Through its coalition

efforts, the Forum has made surprisingly significant progress in advancing the principles of information literacy and lifelong learning. Taking a closer look at its historical evolution provides insight into the unusual development of a volunteer organization dedicated to the systemic integration of information literacy and lifelong learning world wide.

BACKGROUND - THE NATIONAL FORUM ON INFORMATION LITERACY

The 1980's were watershed years in terms of educational reform and the evolution of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the United States as well as around the world. The roots of the Internet were firmly planted with the establishment of ARPANET in the late 1960's and by the end of the 1980's, the Information Superhighway was leading the way in building a global ICT infrastructure. (Williams, 1991)

During this period of explosive growth in the coalescence of computing and telecommunications, the United States was facing a daunting dilemma. In 1983, the publication of America's first “report card” - *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, heralded the failure of the American educational system in producing “a nation of learners”. (United States Department of Education [USDE], 1983)

According to this seminal report, the very educational foundations of American society were in a downward spiral, drowning in a sea of growing mediocrity, and challenging the maintenance of America's pre-eminent status worldwide in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation. Many academic and governmental leaders firmly believed that without educational reform, the United States was on an irreversible course of third rate status. Most predicted a bleak future for the continued educational growth of American manpower, and the ability of the United States to compete effectively in the global marketplace. Those same sentiments continue to echo the halls of the

U.S. Congress today as evidenced by President Bush's 2001 *No Child Left Behind* legislation, intending to secure America's competitive advantage through well intentioned, but poorly funded educational reform propositions. (USDE, 2002)

Interestingly enough, missing from that groundbreaking report was the relationship of the academic library to teaching and learning in support of educational reform. In spite of their traditional role as the premier gatekeepers to the world's repositories of knowledge and information, librarians and the academic library were barely mentioned in the report. As the chief architects of information organization and knowledge management, this glaring oversight by educational and government leaders underscored their lack of understanding of the critical teaching and learning role played by library professionals in this new, evolving Age of Information. Many within the profession itself, not necessarily trained in the art of teaching and learning, were also challenged by the prospect of this new responsibility.

As early as 1983, Dr. F. Woody Horton, Jr., an information management consultant, recognized that an intellectual acumen and certain cognitive abilities would be required to engage effectively the complexities of working and living in an ICT universe.

"There is an emerging new dimension to computer use that hasn't yet found its way into the headlines because all of the pieces are not yet in place...If we really want to magnify the individual's productivity, [then] we must make him or her information efficient." (Horton, 1983)

And, ironically today, we are still wrestling with that very issue – the recognition of the intellectual skills required to become effective users of information and communication technologies in the 21st century. The educational reform movement of the 1980's saw information literacy emerge as an intellectual skill, a *habit of mind* reflecting the teaching and learning challenges associated with successfully navigating the channels of Alvin Toffler's prophetic *Third Wave*. (Toffler & Toffler, 1994)

AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION – PRESIDENTIAL COMMITTEE ON INFORMATION LITERACY: FINAL REPORT- 1989

In 1987, as result of the unfortunate oversight made by U.S. educational and governmental leaders, the American Library Association (ALA) took it upon itself to establish a blue ribbon panel, the Presidential Committee on

Information Literacy. (American Library Association [ALA], 1989) The charge to this group was to examine the role of information literacy and its impact on individuals, business, and the concept of citizenship. They did so by:

1. Defining information literacy within the higher literacies and its importance to student performance, lifelong learning, and active citizenship;
2. Identifying and/or designing models of information literacy development that seem appropriate for formal and informal learning environments; and
3. Determining the implications for continuing education and teacher development.

"How our country deals with the realities of the Information Age will have enormous impact on our democratic way of life and on our nation's ability to compete internationally." (ALA, 1989)

In 1989, the Committee produced its final report, in essence, stating that

information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to learn because they know how information is organized, how to find information and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for lifelong learning because they can always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand.

The Committee went on to say:

In terms of individual lives - the role of information literacy as a source of personal empowerment, allowing people to refute expert opinion and to become independent seekers of truth...preparing them to engage in the practice of lifelong learning...it is unfortunate that the very people who most need the empowerment inherent in being information literate are the least likely to have learning experiences [and/or opportunities] which will promote those abilities.

In the world of business - the need for people in business who are competent managers of information is important at all levels and the realities of the Information Age require serious rethinking of how businesses should be conducted, "...and those who learn now to achieve access of knowledge that already envelops the world will be the future's aristocrats of achievement, and they will be far more numerous than any aristocracy in history."

As for the status of citizenship - in a modern democracy, citizenship involves more than knowledge of how to access vital information. It also involves a capacity to recognize propaganda, distortion, and other misuses and abuses of information...Any society committed to individual freedom and democratic government must ensure the free flow of information to all its citizens in order to protect personal liberties and to guard its future and [sustain its economic prosperity]. (ALA, 1989)

The Final Report laid out a very thoughtful treatise on the importance of mainstreaming the philosophy of information literacy throughout American society, concluding with the following recommendations:

1. We all must reconsider the ways we have organized information institutionally, structured information access, and defined information's role in our lives at home, in the community, and in the workplace.
2. A Coalition for Information Literacy [National Forum on Information Literacy] should be formed under the leadership of the American Library Association, in coordination with other national organizations and agencies, to promote information literacy.
3. Research and demonstration projects related to information and its use need to be undertaken.
4. State Departments of Education, Commissions on Higher Education, and Academic Governing Boards should be responsible to ensure that a climate conducive to students' becoming information literate exists in their states on their campuses.
5. Teacher education and performance expectations should be modified to include information literacy concerns.
6. An understanding of the relationship of information literacy to the themes of the White House Conference on Library and Information Services should be promoted. (ALA, 1989)

The ALA Presidential Committee's Final Report provided American policy makers with an insightful blueprint for transformative systemic change, one capable of meeting successfully the challenges inherent in a dynamically evolving Information Society. Unfortunately, their combined preoccupation with educational reform and unconscious resistance to change short-sighted their vision and, as a result, burdened

tremendously those impacted by the reality of the digital divide. All was not lost, however. U.S. Congressman Major R. Owens observed that information literacy was, in fact, needed to guarantee the survival of democratic institutions. Congressman Owens stressed that all men were created equal but voters with information resources were in the position to make more intelligent decisions than citizens who were information illiterate. The application of information resources to the process of decision making to fulfil civic responsibilities was a vital necessity. (ALA, 1989)

It was against this backdrop that the National Forum on Information Literacy was formed. The road ahead would prove challenging for the Forum, particularly with convincing governmental, business, social, and educational policy leaders about the inextricable connections between information literacy, the digital divide, and future economic growth and prosperity.

THE PROGRESS REPORT ON INFORMATION LITERACY: AN UPDATE ON THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION PRESIDENTIAL COMMITTEE ON INFORMATION LITERACY: FINAL REPORT-1998

In 1998, the Forum published its first report assessing the progress made on the six recommendations articulated in 1989 by the ALA Presidential Committee. (ALA, 1998) In five of the six recommendations, significant progress had been accomplished on various levels in terms of the original tasks as outlined by the ALA Presidential Committee. The fifth recommendation, however - *Teacher education and performance expectations should be modified to include information literacy concerns* – was the only recommendation in which no progress had been made. Clearly, it required more strategic vigilance in persuading teacher accreditation organizations, by that time overwhelmed by the demands of educational reform, on the values and opportunities associated with integrating information literacy philosophy and practices within their professional development programs. The tenor of the times, the psychosocial cultural shift, and the rapid ICT transformation impacted every level of American society, often producing unanticipated social and economic consequences that challenged even the most prepared.

Building upon the accomplishments of the last 10 years and setting the tone for the Forum in the new millennium, the Progress Report concluded with recommending several action steps i.e., identifying *challenges yet to be met*:

1. Forum members should encourage and champion the growing support of accrediting agencies;
2. Teacher education and performance expectations need to include information literacy skills;
3. Librarian education and performance expectations need to include information literacy.
4. Forum members need to identify ways to illustrate to business leaders the benefits of fostering an information literate workforce.
5. There needs to be more research and demonstration projects related to information literacy and its use. (ALA, 1998)

The last two recommendations set the stage for the Forum in recognizing the need for the expanse of its influence beyond the realm of education and library and information science as the dawning of the new millennium and its associated challenges began to dominate national discourse in 1998.

PRAGUE DECLARATION – TOWARDS AN INFORMATION LITERATE SOCIETY - 2003

As the Forum marched into the 21st century, it became clear that U.S. acceptance of information literacy as a key indicator of America's ability to sustain its competitive advantage worldwide had yet to take root within the mindset of national policy leaders. Although, by this time, several national organizations had included information literacy as a benchmark within their professional standards, information literacy as a commonplace practice had yet to permeate the social, economic, and educational fabric of American culture. Raising the visibility of information literacy philosophy and practices nationally became an even more intense endeavour for the National Forum than had been originally envisioned by the ALA Presidential Committee in 1989.

The perspective internationally, however, was much more receptive to the need for dialogue and the mobilization of grass root level activities inclusive of information literacy efforts as evidenced by UNESCO's *Information for All Program* initiatives. (UNESCO, 2008) After several years of planning with representatives from the U.S. National Commission on Library and Information Science (NCLIS) and UNESCO, the National Forum convened on September 20-23, 2003, the first experts' meeting on information literacy in Prague, the Czech Republic. This invitation only conference was

designed specifically to bring together 40 information literacy experts from around the world to discuss the global impact of information literacy. This group of eclectic individuals represented 23 different countries, 7 geographic regions, and had interests in one or more of the following domains: economic development, education, human services, library and information science, and policymaking. The goals of the meeting and the overall objectives were as follows:

Goals

- To raise the general awareness of the strategic importance of Information Literacy worldwide, but especially to senior and middle level policy-makers and executives in the both the private and public sectors;
- To identify enlightened public policies and other effective tools, approaches, strategies, and recommendations needed to promote Information Literacy at all levels, international, regional, national, and sub-national, and in all sectors; and
- To help close the gap between the information literacy haves and have-nots, and in so doing help close the digital divide.

Objectives

- To develop a clearer and more comprehensive vision of the role of Information Literacy in support of individual, organizational, institutional, and national goals in all sectors of society, and in all segments of the economy, as well as in governance;
- To affirm or strengthen a working definition of Information Literacy: "People are information literate who know when they need information, and are then able to identify, locate, evaluate, organize, and effectively use the information to address and help resolve personal, job-related, or broader social issues to problems;" and
- To make preliminary recommendations as to the possible goals, themes, and invited participant audiences for a Global Congress on Information Literacy perhaps a year from the Meeting of Experts. (National Forum on Information Literacy [NFIL], 2003)

Over the course of the three day meeting, the Prague group vigorously debated the goals and objectives of the conference. After much discussion, the participants unanimously agreed that in order to mobilize an effective civil society

and create a competitive workforce in a world dominated by information and communication technologies, the following three, critical elements were essential: 1) ready access to information and communication technologies; 2) unrestricted availability of needed information; and 3) an information literate citizenry. (NFIL, 2003) Perhaps, the most significant take away experienced by all of the participants was the binding connection of information literacy in spite of their diverse perspectives and the fundamental recognition that in an information society, information literacy was, in fact, the lifeblood of any nation aspiring to achieve social justice, educational opportunity, and economic self sufficiency.

Shortly thereafter, the proceedings from this historic, international conference of information literacy were published, "*The Prague Declaration: Towards an Information Literacy Society*", basically defining the challenges associated with mainstreaming information literacy philosophy and practices and offering prescriptive next steps relating to economic development, education, health and human services, library and information science, and governmental policymaking. (NFIL, 2003)

ALEXANDRIA PROCLAMATION - HIGH LEVEL COLLOQUIUM ON INFORMATION LITERACY AND LIFELONG LEARNING – 2005

Following up on the terrific momentum established by the Prague meeting, a subsequent gathering was held in Alexandria, Egypt on November 6-9, 2005. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), UNESCO, and the National Forum on Information Literacy (NFIL) jointly convened another high level experts' meeting, a colloquium on information literacy and lifelong learning at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. The Prague planning team coordinated the follow-up meeting, inviting a new group of approximately 30 interdisciplinary participants from 17 countries, representing six major geographic regions, to assess the progress and opportunities for implementation of the Prague report's recommendations. Building upon the recommendations of the Prague group and on the Colloquium goal of empowering citizens across the globe to be information literate, the Alexandria experts' enthusiastically reaffirmed the investment in information literacy and lifelong learning and designated them both as the "*beacons*" of the Information Society:

Information Literacy lies at the core of lifelong learning. It 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 of all nations.

Lifelong learning enables individuals, communities and nations to attain their goals and to take advantage of emerging opportunities in the evolving global environment for shared benefit. It assists them and their institutions to meet technological, economic and social challenges, to redress disadvantage and to advance the well being of all. (NFIL, 2005)

Participants at the Alexandria meeting laid out an international dissemination strategy, sponsored primarily by UNESCO. In addition, they developed the framework to host a world congress on information literacy and lifelong learning that would undergird the impressive outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society held in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005. The Colloquium planners hoped to convene the proposed world congress, if not by the end of 2008, then certainly before the end of the U.N Literacy Decade in 2012.

INFORMATION LITERACY SUMMIT - AMERICAN COMPETITIVENESS IN THE INTERNET AGE - 2006

Meanwhile, back on the U.S. home front, articulation and adoption of information literacy practices nationwide continued to evolve slowly, with limited progress documented primarily within the library science and K-16 education domains. Concerns about America's ability to sustain its competitive advantage against a resurgence of educational mediocrity were again sweeping the country. Recent reports and studies underscored the harmful impact of a confluence of economic, social, and political factors undermining America's stature in the global marketplace. (America's Promise Alliance, 2008; USOST, 2006; Uhalde et al, 2006)

As a result of these concerns and those expressed at the Prague 2003 and Alexandria 2005 meetings, the National Forum on Information Literacy in partnership with the several U.S. organizations - Committee for Economic Development, the Educational Testing Service, the Institute for a Competitive Workforce (an affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce), and the National Education Association - convened on October 16, 2006 an invitational summit on information literacy, the first of its kind held in the United States. The overarching theme of the Summit was: "How do we adequately prepare individuals – students and workers - to be

lifelong learners with the skills necessary to compete in a rapidly changing world?" Over 100 U.S. representatives from education, business, and government attended the day long affair. (NFIL, 2006)

The Summit planners were hopeful that this was the beginning of a critical realization on behalf of U.S. policy makers from the various sectors that the acceptance of information literacy as core to any effort to insure America's competitive advantage in the global economy was crucial if we were to retain our leadership status worldwide. Although the goals for the Summit were ambitious, it did underscore the irrevocable, symbiotic link between information literacy and the dynamically changing world of ICTs.

Summit Goals:

- (1) Raise awareness among policy makers and the media about the importance of an information-literate society in the 21st century;
- (2) Develop a comprehensive strategy to increase the number of highly-skilled information literate people in the United States; and
- (3) Establish information literacy standards and assessments nationwide. (NFIL, 2006)

At the conclusion of the Summit, the National Forum on Information Literacy announced the establishment of the National ICT Literacy Policy Council, charged with providing leadership in creating national standards for ICT literacy inclusive of information literacy philosophy and practice. Working with the Educational Testing Service's iSkills team, the Policy Council established a set of national ICT literacy standards that provided ETS with the information literacy/ICT philosophical foundation for the refinement of their iSkills assessment tool. (National ICT Literacy Policy council, 2007) Measuring how successful the Summit was in achieving its other goals i.e., raising awareness and developing a comprehensive strategy to increase the number of highly-skilled information literate people in the U.S. remains to be seen.

THE NATIONAL FORUM ON INFORMATION LITERACY - 2008

Today, the National Forum has a membership of 93+ national and international organizations, representing the interests of education, government, business, NGOs, and non-profit organizations, all pledging allegiance to the principles and practices of information literacy within their given domains. The Forum hold

meetings three times a year in Washington, D.C., inviting experts from a variety of fields to share their perspectives on information literacy and engage in collaborative activities with the Forum. For first 17 years, this loose confederation of diverse organizations, under the expert leadership of Dr. Patricia Senn Breivik, has made tremendous progress in its efforts to mainstream information literacy worldwide in spite of its unique standing as a voluntary member organization with no formal organizational structure.

The primary challenge today for the National Forum is to formulate a strategic plan that will dispel the thin veil of illegitimacy that still haunts information literacy. Although highly respected within the library and information science fields - not without its detractors, of course - the concept of information literacy is most often perceived outside of that domain as just one more "*fad*" literacy to be dealt with in the spheres of teaching and learning and educational reform.

Unfortunately, evidence based research on information literacy practices outside of the library and information science fields is still very limited which, no doubt, intensifies its vulnerability in terms of its acceptance as a viable, 21st century educational and workforce development strategy. As a coherent, teachable, asset based skill set approach to lifelong learning practice, information literacy does represent an amalgam of educational philosophies, principles, and techniques. In fact, evidence based research is, ironically, a relatively new phenomenon in the field of education, according to Dr. Robert E. Slavin, renowned educational researcher and Director of the Centre for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University and at the Institute for Effective Education at the University of York, in York, United Kingdom. (Slavin, 2002) This, no doubt, would account for the level of scepticism information literacy often receives whenever it is discussed outside of the library and information science disciplines.

An advocate for the use of the medical model of evidence based research in education, Dr. Slavin believes that using the successful medical research model as a template will generate efficacious, evidence based educational practices that will enhance student performance...*ay, there's the rub*...although successful in finding clinical solutions for acute and chronic medical conditions, the medical community is still challenged by the conundrum of how to take knowledge from clinical research environments and successfully apply or adapt the research

findings to actually changing patient behaviour in real-world environments. In the end, whatever methodology is used, it is clear that without documented evidence of the empowering nature of information literacy on individual skill building, recognition of it as central to sustaining a nation's competitive advantage and economic viability in the 21st century will remain moot.

MORE IS NEEDED...

In 2009, the National Forum on Information Literacy will be celebrating its 20th anniversary. As it moves forward on its mission to mainstream information literacy on the local, national, and international level, the National Forum, in doing so, intends to retain its underlying commitment to inclusiveness and coalition building while expanding its sphere of influence in other domains. The U.N. International Labour Organization offers this unique perspective "...there is every indication that learning needs to become a lifelong function. If knowledge, skills and learning abilities are not renewed, the capacity of individuals – and by extension, of communities or nations – to adapt to a new environment will be considerably reduced, if not cut off entirely." (U.N. International Labour Organization, 2000). More involvement by like minded lifelong learning champions is highly desired if the ubiquitous application of information literacy principles and practices is to be achieved across educational and workplace spectrums.

World events today dictate that within established and fledgling democracies, the fundamental ability to think critically, communicate effectively, solve problems, make informed decisions, and have access to ICT tools and resources are, in fact, the key intellectual skills needed by every capable individual not only to compete in a global economy, but also to exercise the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship. U.S. President James Madison admonished in the early 19th century:

A "democracy" without access to information or the intellectual skills to interpret information is, in essence, a totalitarian state, where diversity of any form is non-existent," ..., "A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives." (Madison, 1822)

Fundamentally speaking, information literacy, as a basic human right, is not only an agent for social change, but, more importantly, a bridge to

social justice, economic self sufficiency, and educational opportunity both at home and abroad.

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