Information Literacy — Revisited
By Lance Query

Nearly three years ago, I stated: “We must educate our students and faculty in the use of the powerful tools that enable them to obtain the information they need not only for today, but also—and equally important, for their future roles as productive and fulfilled members of our society.” Today, I have to ask a key question in response to that ambitious intention: “You can surf the Net, but are you information literate?” Some three decades ago, students would often say, “I searched and searched, but I couldn’t find anything on this subject.” Not believing that answer, I would take them to the available indices and catalogs and, after applying all of my skill, had to admit that they were right—not much that was relevant was there. How the information universe has changed! Contemporary students seldom complain that nothing is available. A combination of an exponential increase in the amount of data “created” and the enhanced electronic searching tools has brought information overload.

Today’s problem is far more difficult to resolve. The extensive coverage found in a variety of electronic databases coupled with new search mechanisms produce multiple responses to research queries. Moreover, rational retrieval structures have not been incorporated in the Internet. The blessing and the curse of resources such as the World Wide Web is its lack of logic. The Web is a non-linear database that purposefully tries to take you to where you had never thought to go. Although one search engine after another has been created to respond to rational approaches, to date most users find that an information glut seriously hinders their identification and location of the “right answer at the right time.” When the number of hits to the key word(s) inserted in a search box numbers in the thousands and the resultant citations are unclear as to content and validity—must less reliability—the seeker of answers is overwhelmed.

A solution to this quandary may still be found if one returns to my original point, that is, students, faculty, all searchers must become literate in accessing information. However, not one but two key skills are involved. First, the information seeker must learn to search for information independent of an intermediary such as a librarian, teacher, or fellow student. A base level of competence in the common guidelines or principles that manage information retrieval is essential. This doesn’t mean that the experts are not needed; rather, each search needs a fundamental knowledge of general bibliographic/data sources and how information is cataloged, indexed, organized, and, in turn, retrieved in the different systems that are available.

My generation felt fortunate to use a general index such as the Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature. Eventually, we added a significant number of discipline-specific bibliographic tools—most of them in print format. Today, the primary tools include a number of computer data bases such as InfoTrac and an electronic Readers’ Guide that permit an introductory approach to a topic. Then, a world of electronic and other types of search tools becomes available through multiple-search sources such as FirstSearch with 60-plus differing data bases, as well as the almost infinite universe opened within the Internet. Among them are highly specialized, up to date electronic indices and abstracts, and full-text online as well as direct communications with researchers who are creating new knowledge even as one searches. Today’s users have so much more to access that they have, almost without thinking, stopped using more traditional tools that may be equally valuable. And, consequently, a significant and dangerous issue emerges, and adds a second component to information literacy.

The unbelievable wealth of potentially useful information is a serious and critical problem for society as a whole—not just students. All of us must be information literate because we know that the end result of our actions is to transform information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom so that we may continue to improve the quality of life in general. The process of transformation of information to knowledge begins with a selection between appropriate and inappropriate information sources. The “fast food” analogy is readily apparent; a diet built on quick and easy access to something basically non-nutritious will weaken rather than nourish the consumer. Similarly, we, and our students, have a current perception that data seen on a computer screen provide the correct and essential ingredients to a healthy wisdom. However, in many cases, judgment is missing; value is undetermined; knowledge is never obtained. Somehow, somewhere, but beginning now, we, and our students, must bring to bear not only our understanding of what exists and how it is organized, but we must make an informed and discerning selection from that vast, unregulated, inaccurate, untested information universe.

Librarians are justifiably proud of the success achieved in facilitating students’ access to and understanding of how information is organized in many different formats—traditional and electronic. But, if we and our students are really to become information literate, the faculty in all of the teaching disciplines and programs must also be a part of the process. They must partner librarians, if not lead, in order to develop the students’ sense of what is the “best” information in the midst of the almost infinite array that has been opened to them. No one else, alone, can bring about achievement of this unique goal.

Information literacy is a concept, I believe, on which our society’s future is built. If we do not bring it to each and every student, we will have been as ignorant as we were those many years when we did not advocate reading, quantification, writing, and computer skills. Western Michigan University became a leader among academic institutions when, in the 1980s, we made these competencies requirements for graduation. The University Libraries is committed to information literacy as essential to every graduate. As dean, I have explored the concept of an information literacy component of the curriculum with a number of deans, department heads, and administrators. While we acknowledge that the computer is a unique resource that has changed society forever, we now recognize that the computer is only the vehicle. We remind ourselves that computer literacy is not the answer; information literacy is. Information, knowledge, and wisdom are the goals. Only information literacy can bring us, and our students, to the attainment of those goals.