Helping students deal with the Wild West world of information

Update's **Rob Green** asked Lilac Information Literacy Award winner **Jane Secker** to talk about the challenges of developing and implementing IL strategies for the 21st century, as students are becoming ever more unwilling to venture into independent reading.

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EARLIER this year Jane Secker, Copyright and Digital Literacy Advisor at the London School of Economics (LSE), won Lilac's Information Literacy Award for her professional efforts to spread digital literacy skills. As a researcher, writer (she is co-editor of Facet Publishing's 2012 book *Rethinking Information Literacy*) and practitioner she has helped shape the development of information and digital literacy strategies both within her institution and across the profession. So how does Dr Secker view the challenge of developing and implementing IL strategies for the 21st century?

'One of the things we are aware of at LSE is that teaching people how to find information is becoming less relevant. It's almost patronising to tell first year students that you are going to teach them how to find information,' says Jane. Google is the main reason for students new found confidence, which throws up more problems than it solves – something that is recognised by LSE and, to some extent, students.

Reluctant researchers

Despite having a tool to search for information, Jane says students are increasingly worried that they are not finding the right information.

Jane believes this is leading to an unwillingness to carry out independent reading, saying: '[Students are] increasingly nervous about finding good quality scholarly information to use in their studies. One of the things we found when talking to first year students was that they go firstly to Google for information, but when we ask about where do you find information for your course then the answer is "I go on the reading list" or "I look at what my lectures have told me to look at". We are seeing a reluctance to stray from that path.

'They know that out there is a wild west world of information – some of which might be trustworthy, lots of which isn't – and they are thinking "let's not even look at that".'

She adds: 'One of the things that is quite surprising is that even at Masters level, the knowledge of how to find good quality information is still lacking. It is something that students find quite worrying.

'They are not confident in knowing what tools they should be using or how to use them. A lot of them become aware of Google scholar, but there are other tools such as our library federated search tool and some of the specialist indexes and databases available that they are less aware of. They still feel they lack the ability to make a judgement on whether something is a good article or not.'

That reluctance to leave the safety of reading lists and make critical judgements for themselves at least demonstrates that students are aware that there is a problem. The issue for digital and information literacy professionals

Jane Secker

is how to overcome the problem and give students the skills and knowledge they need to be confident.

The issues should not come as a surprise to the profession, according to Jane who says. 'It's things that librarians have been talking about for a long time – teaching people to evaluate information. I think we are in a time when we need to be starting with that, rather than teaching them how to find things we need to be teaching people how to evaluate.'

Confusion about sources

Despite students' claims to know how to search, it is clear from work done at LSE that many do not have the more advanced skills required to help them draw useful conclusions about what they find. She says too often students are shunning sources because they do not fully understand where they have come from. PDFs are one source of confusion, with many students failing to understand that they can come from many different sources, including journals or government reports.

Online resources are also often misunderstood, with students shunning the likes of Wikipedia because of a reputation for poor quality information. Jane said: 'YouTube is another example where you can actually apply the principle of evaluation skills. If a video is coming from a reputable, large American university, then it is likely to be good quality. It is not about saying this is on YouTube therefore not good quality – you have to look at the source.'

IL as a transferable skill

Jane wants to see an approach to digital and information literacy that will equip students with more than the skills needed to get them through university. She said: 'We don't want to have IL taught in just one focused area, because when students then go off to do other things they will not be able to translate those skills. If all we do is teach in the context of their discipline it makes it harder for them to see IL as a transferable skill.

'There is a thing about IL becoming invisible and if you see it as linked just to the discipline, then that can become the case. If it is too closely linked to a subject then it can be hard to see how it can be applied elsewhere.'

Despite calling for a broad approach to the teaching of IL skills, Jane says this should not be a standalone strategy. Individual disciplines will benefit from tailored approaches to IL teaching, building on a general ability to develop more specific skills.

We need an IL framework

Jane advocates for IL skills to be part of any university education that should be taught in a joined up approach between the library and faculties, saying: 'I would like to see an IL framework based on graduate outcomes that are not just about the subject knowledge. If we want students to be able to be critical and we want them to have the evaluation skills; use information and put it together in new ways, then we need to have a framework that we can all get behind.'

Achieving buy-in for an overarching IL strategy from funders and decision-makers as well as colleagues from faculties may present the biggest problem to information professionals. 'There are issues to overcome because in universities and schools there is a tendency for people to think about their bit and not the bigger picture. It is a difficult thing to do because we all have our own jobs to be getting on with. In some cases it is the easy option to just do it yourself, rather than try to
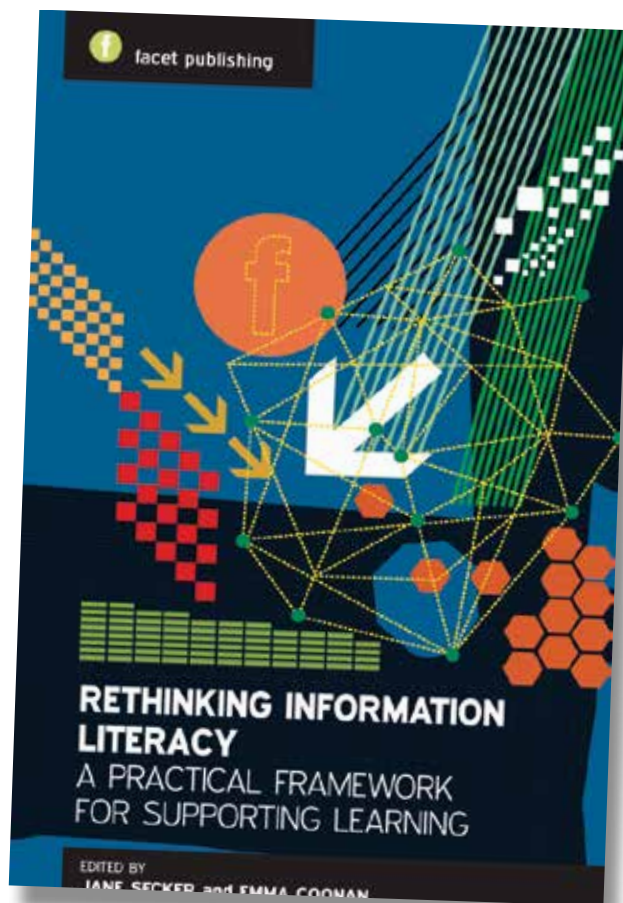
Jane is co-editor of Facet Publishing's *Rethinking Information Literacy: a practical framework for learning* (http://bit.ly/1tgAS3m).

negotiate with five or six departments and get people on board. But it needs to be something that is institution wide.'

Evidence and impact

A lack of evidence that an IL strategy will benefit students and the institution could prevent buy-in from other departments. If a strategy is to give students lifelong skills, then it may be almost impossible to produce the evidence, as people should still be reaping benefits years after they have left an institution.

'If we are looking at benefits to students five or 10 years down the line, how are we ever going to assess what the impact has been,' said Jane. 'I come up against academics from social sciences who take issue with methodology in educational research. It is still quite hard to say categorically that an intervention has an effect on human performance. We need to think about how you can effectively measure this.

She adds: 'What we need to do now is find the people who want to work with us and use them. But also talk to the people who don't want to work with us and find out why. If you frame information literacy in a language that they understand, there are very few lecturers who would say they do not want their students to have those skills. You won't hear anyone saying they don't want their students to be critical and able to evaluate sources.'

Time to be brave

Jane adds that librarians' confidence as teachers could be another stumbling block for improving IL skills teaching. She says: 'We have to be brave and say "actually this is an area where I have expertise and I can help". Often the only thing holding us back is ourselves.' **[U]**