

Information Literacy Education in Italian Libraries: Evidence from an Italian University



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User instruction, bibliographic instruction and information literacy education traditionally has not represented a strategic function in the Italian university library. Nowadays, around 25% of Italian university libraries have set down some instruction programmes. Among the different Italian experiences, Cattaneo University LIUC information literacy programme for undergraduates is presented in this article. The core of this programme is information research process that a student conducts, both following IL courses and experiencing library counselling. A strong emphasis is put on the concept of “document versus information” in the learning experience. In addition, there is a description of possible application of LIS knowledge in helping a student to analyse an argument and focalise on a research question.

Keywords: Information literacy education; information research process; Italy, Cattaneo University LIUC; university library, business and managerial economics faculty, undergraduates

Schulung in Informationskompetenz an italienischen Bibliotheken: Erfahrungen einer italienischen Universität

Benutzerschulung, bibliographische Schulung und Unterweisung in Informationskompetenz war bisher keine strategische Funktion in italienischen Universitätsbibliotheken. Heutzutage haben etwa 25 % der italienischen Universitätsbibliotheken einige Schulungsprogramme erarbeitet. Von den verschiedenen italienischen Erfahrungen wird hier das Informationskompetenzprogramm für Studienanfänger der Cattaneo Universität LIUC vorgestellt. Der Kern dieses Programms ist der Informationsforschungsprozess, den ein Student ausführt, wenn er sowohl den Informationskompetenzkursen folgt und die Beratung durch die Bibliothek erfährt. Großer Nachdruck wird auf das Konzept „Dokumente gegen Information“ bei der Lernerfahrung gelegt. Außerdem gibt es eine Beschreibung von möglichen An-

wendungen des LIS Wissens als Hilfe für Studenten bei der Analyse eines Arguments und auf eine Recherchefrage zu zentrieren.

Schlüsselwörter: Informationskompetenz-Schulung; Informationssucheprozess; Italien; Cattaneo Universität LIUC; Universitätsbibliothek; Betriebswirtschafts-Fakultät; Studenten vor dem Diplom

1 The Context: Information Literacy in Italian Universities

User instruction, bibliographic instruction and information literacy education traditionally has not represented a strategic function in the Italian university library, as the main roles have been those of resource buyer, storage, and metadata producer. During the 21st century, more attention was paid on educating library users to become information literate, with reference to frameworks and models coming from other countries (ACRL, SCONUL ...).

Nowadays, around 25 % of Italian university libraries have set down instruction programmes, with different approaches that include bibliographic instruction, IL instruction, and user education. Most of the programmes are devoted to develop information skills in using OPACs, databases and other electronic resources and citation management programmes. In a few cases, more complex information literacy programmes, with the aim of helping a student develop a more profound vision of how experiencing information, are offered.

From the point of view of managing courses there is a variety of different solutions: some courses are part of the curriculum of a student, with or without credits, while others are not compulsory and may allow credits. All the possible collaboration between professors and librarians in teaching information literacy may be found, though sometimes there may be no collaboration at all.

An important point in understanding information literacy education in the Italian universities and schools is to be aware that the didactic model in Italy is a traditional one, based on frontal lessons and examinations. A student is not used to present research papers to be evaluated. In universities, the only research activity that is compulsory is that of the final dissertation. This didactic model affects negatively the perception of the importance of information literacy education as a means of learning (Ballestra, 2010).

Despite this situation, some positive evidence can be found concerning the university libraries effort in information literacy so that a new vision can take place. In this article we present the case study of a university library, that of Biblioteca Mario Rostoni in Cattaneo University LIUC.

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Since 2001, the library has offered courses to help each student develop independent research abilities. The aim of a course has always been that of making a student aware of the complexity of the information world and research process, in particular to gain competitiveness in a complex workplace.

After describing the general framework for all LIUC information literacy education experiences (courses for undergraduates, graduates, PhD students, master students ...), we show the recent evolution of the programme for “undergraduate students in Managerial Economics”.

2 Information Literacy Education: The LIUC Model

2.1 The Framework

The LIUC information literacy model is based on a relational vision of information literacy (Bruce, 1997) where the fundamental element is information search process as a learning process (Kuhlthau, 2004), though the SCONUL model of Seven Pillars was also a reference considered (SCONUL, 1999).

Another essential element is a specific understanding of information centred on documents and the experience of their use: this comes from LIS’s peculiar attention to document analysis and paratext description.

Starting from these statements, the aim of information literacy activities in LIUC model is that of helping a student to develop a new way of interacting with information. It is not enough that they know something more; at the end of the programme they should “see” the world of information in a more complex way.

Information literacy education is considered essential because, among all the research methods (quantitative, qualitative, enumerative...), the information and library research method is seen as a fundamental one, useful in itself, but also present also in research activities using different methods (George, 2008).

Based on these objectives, the library information literacy programme covers all the following aspects, in different combinations, according to the defined target:

- characteristics of documents (paper and electronic ones);
- evaluation of documents
- characteristics of the information contained in documents;
- use of proper documents for each phase of the information research process;
- choice of sources in research process;
- use of document retrieval tools;
- citing references;
- abstracting of documents;
- research process management;
- terminological analysis of the research argument
- focalisation of the argument
- research hypothesis identification
- question formulation
- search strategy and formulation for document retrieval.

These objectives, indeed, should be achieved gradually by a student, according to different levels of detail, according to the contexts and the time to be used.

The LIUC experience has always made sure that any experience, even the shortest one, does not hide the complexity of the entire process; that is the information research process.

In particular, a course should never be reduced to teaching a student some information skills or check-lists for document evaluation. On the contrary, the richness and abundance of sources, their differences and also their contradictions are at the heart of each information literacy course. Frequently, in information literacy literature, the concept of critical thinking is cited as the basis on which to develop good research work.

Critical thinking, in the LIUC experience, is nothing but making a student aware of documentary sources, the need to *interpret* them and not to *read* them, the inherent ambiguity of any information source.

Another priority has always been that of giving centrality to the documents in information literacy education:

- clarify that searching for information is, in fact, searching for documents, and that the relevant information to solve a problem does not exist in an immaterial world, but that information is only in texts carried by documents;
- make it clear that the sources may be considered as “acquired” not when an article is printed or a web-site is surfed, but when one is able to express what elements in them made it possible to modify one’s knowledge. It is important to understand that these changes generally do not coincide with what a student expects to learn when starting the research.

3 The three year programme for undergraduate students

In 2008, after 9 years of offering information literacy courses, the programme of information literacy courses for undergraduates in Managerial Economics Faculty was redesigned in order to put more emphasis on information research process teaching and practice.

For each year, one course was organised (15 hours of lesson time + 10 hours of personal work) that was curricular and for which the information literacy teachers and mediators were librarians. It is important to consider that business and managerial information resources are described and taught as an essential content in all courses, but this aspect is not described in this article.

3.1 The first year: Information Skills

The LIUC information literacy first year “beginner” course always starts with a questionnaire in order to understand the starting level point of a student concerning their comprehension of concepts such as information, documents, texts, knowledge and new knowledge creation in a specific subject

field; in this situation for problems related to management, business and economic information.

The aim is not to have an interview for getting data to analyse, but to induce a student to think about their relationship with information (on TV, in Internet, in the Library ...) and with documents (web sites, books, articles ... but also broadcast, statistical databases ...). The result is always discussed within the class.

Almost every student on a course in information literacy does not realise that when they look for information, in fact they are looking for documents that contain text from which any information comes and that document structure affects the meanings conveyed by the text.

In addition, they have a lot of false opinions such as how Google works, what “relevance” means, on what information is considered scholarly or not scholarly.

In high schools, an Italian student rarely experiences the information research process. As a result, when they start University, although they consider themselves to be expert Internet users, they often confuse the searching for information they do for entertainment (cinema, music, some simple definitions for school ...) with the research process and the function of “documentarsi”².

The questionnaire discussion is the first clarifying moment in which a student understands the difference between searching information for pleasure and for research in the disciplinary field.

As a school library is rarely present in an Italian high school, some students have never seen a library before starting University, even though Italian public libraries are now putting a lot of effort into reaching students and so substituting a school library. The questionnaire always contains some questions on a student’s previous experience with a library, if any – not on library skills – to make them understand that speaking about information and documents means speaking about many relevant actors, including a library.

IT skills are not present as a part of the questionnaire. A young, Italian student who starts University already has the ability to use IT tools in order to address any information literacy course.

A student is taught, concerning the content of the programme, how to use a search engine in a more sophisticated way (e.g.: Google advanced search) and to understand boolean logic in Google search, OPACs and databases.

Concerning the use of OPACs, the LIUC model is more involved in the problem of teaching a student the research process and subject research in OPACs and bibliographical databases with subjects headings, rather than searching through formal elements (authors, titles, publishers ...). Classification schemes, subject headings and thesauri are generally unknown and a student must become comfortable with their use.

Of course the main problem in the semantic research is not that of using appropriate list of subjects or a classification, but that of focalising and finding a research question. Two or three words to be put in an online catalogue do not solve a research problem, even if those words are subject headings properly formulated. At this point of the course it is not possible to go deep into these problems, because skills have to be developed, but is important for an information literacy teacher to be aware of them so that only the time necessary will be devoted to skill development in favour of more time for research problem analysis in the courses of the second and third year. It is important to underline the constant elements present in OPACs and databases. A student has to understand that different terminology in designing an online catalogue or graphic formats often have the same features.

Concerning the reasoning of web sites to be evaluated as documents that may be relevant for a specific discipline, it is important also to discuss the lists of elements for evaluation in order to show that there is no mechanism in a web site evaluation; it is always a process of interpretation and knowledge.

Finally, it is necessary to show a student where evaluation criteria works and where they do not work, and not to hide the complexity of every act of interpretation, otherwise the result will be that of a passive description of elements of web sites, without the capacity of critical approach.

3.2 The Second Year: Documents Not Only Information; Paratext, Not Only Text

The LIUC Information Literacy second year course starts with a different approach.

Information skills, in particular the use of semantic access through OPACs or databases, have to be considered part of a student’s knowledge; now, it is necessary to relate to documents and their characteristics in a more profound way.

The student is presented with reference books and materials more relevant for the discipline with particular emphasis, because of their essential role in the pre-research, in order to gain a complex and authoritative vision of an argument to then focalise on a question.

Choosing to use one document or the other, especially at the beginning of the research process, is relevant as it influences the whole process.

In order to make a student aware of the strategic value of this choice, considering the large amount of information and the impossibility of reading it all, the concept of cost-opportunity, of using a document, is introduced. This concept is of course very familiar for a student in a Faculty of Economics.

The concept of cost-opportunity shows that the real problem of any research process is not to find something that talks about the subject of their interest, but for them to choose the best documents and not omit any relevant ones. From this concept, a student may understand the importance of being able to recognise and assess the formal elements of paratext (Genette, 1989) to be identified before reading a document. The author, title, publisher, series, cover-page, price, review

² Italian language distinguishes from “informarsi”, getting information, and “documentarsi”, the result of an information research process. Our translation for “information literacy education” into Italian in our proposal is “educare a documentarsi”.

on the back cover, abstracts, keywords, indexes, and introduction are examples of how the paratext of documents and books in a specific field are presented to a student. Therefore, in the course a lot of exercises in document evaluation are assigned that are then corrected individually. Through different exercises a student may experience a great variety of documents in order to avoid a mechanical interpretation of evaluation criteria.

Evaluating a website or any other document involves a similar process: there are elements that allow an assessment before reading. The recognising and evaluating of these elements is part of the traditional LIS knowledge, necessary for cataloguing, in order to create lists of subject headings on a book subject or abstracts of documents.

Once the knowledge about the nature, types and structure of documents, in particular textual ones, are acquired by a student through exercises, the processes that have led to the production and diffusion of documents, scholarly or not, can be explained to them. With the knowledge of the reasons leading organisations, publishers and companies, government agencies, associations to produce and publish books, periodicals, reports, working papers in each discipline a student is able to distinguish the necessary documents on the basis of a fundamental parameter to give a preliminary assessment. There are publishers who have dedicated themselves to professional books, and others who are devoted to scholarly communication in the academy, just to give examples. All this knowledge, once again, is part of the traditional knowledge of LIS professions and is transferred to a student. An important point is to give a student the opportunity to discuss the mechanisms that regulate the information markets. It is important also that a student becomes aware of when their expectation of free information to be found is reasonable, in relation to the availability of information in a specific field, and why it would be unreasonable to suggest that other information may be found for free.

The need to produce reliable summaries of scientific documents that may be used by various communities of researchers and scholars means that more and more standardised methods in LIS discipline have been developed for the preparation of abstracts.

The ability for students to synthesise documents is crucial for an information research process in the literary review. Likewise, the ability to collate documents is indispensable because the research process is rarely linear and/or time limited. It is often long and recursive, so that only after some time a student may decide from good abstracts, from all that has been identified during the first reading of documents, which one to choose as more relevant.

Good abstraction is primary useful for students during the literary review. Secondly, as the author of any research work is often required to accompany articles or essays with a brief summary of them, written in a technical way. Abstracting documents will allow a student to practice the exercise of citations making, but the goal of abstracting is to gain knowledge through synthesis. The course has many exercises that allow a student to practise abstracting documents. Initially they have to abstract specific kind of publications suggested for high quality (e.g.: *Handbooks* chapters, specialistic encyclopedia entries...) as, in this way, they experience the use of these documents.

3.3 The third year: teaching the research process

The LIUC information literacy third year course consists of a student conducting, with mediators, a research process and contemporary reflection on it.

A student is asked to discuss with informal mediators (other students) a topic and then he have to use specific reference documents (subject encyclopedias, handbook...), to define a terminological map. This is done by indicating all the terms that emerge from documents considered relevant and organising the terms according to categories. For example, the fundamental terms for an argument that refer to all possible agents in that context must be identified and grouped together.

The identification of the most relevant terms for an argument it is essential in itself, to analyze the subject, but it may then be used in activities such as OPACs and bibliographic databases retrieval of documents.

Terminological map in the research process (pre-focalizing phase)

Argomento assegnato pre-focalizzazione:

Crisi finanziarie nell'analisi economica

Agenti

Organizzazioni

Autorità di controllo, Banche centrali, CONSOB, Borse valori, Governi, Banca d'Italia, Banca centrale europea, imprese, PMI, grandi imprese, assicurazioni, associazioni di categoria, famiglie ...

Persone

Imprenditori, operai, professionisti, risparmiatori, investitori, dirigenti, banchieri ...

Azioni

Politica economica, imposizione fiscale, prestito, indebitamento, finanziamento, licenziamento, fallimento, intervento statale, aumento di capitale, prestito, garanzia sui prestiti, garanzia dei depositi, consumo, risparmio, riorganizzazione, delocalizzazione, regolamentazione, investimento, investimento estero ...

Strumenti

Tasse, prestiti, prestiti subprime, mutui, Cassa integrazione, fondi di garanzia dei depositi, tassi di interesse, tasso di sconto, strumenti finanziari, strumenti finanziari derivati, strumenti finanziari strutturati, garanzie, garanzie collaterali, valute, prezzi ...

Oggetti

Immobili, materie prime, oro, terreni, energia ...

Processi

Crisi economiche, crisi finanziarie, crisi bancarie, crisi valutarie, crisi del debito, crisi immobiliari, inflazione, internazionalizzazione, cambiamento sociale, conflitto, occupazione, disoccupazione, potere di acquisto...

Qualità/Proprietà

Liquidità, solvibilità, elasticità, instabilità finanziaria, insolvenza ...

Relazioni

Crisi finanziarie / crisi bancarie

Crisi finanziarie / mancanza di liquidità

Crisi finanziarie / crisi immobiliari

Crisi finanziarie / regolamentazione dei mercati finanziari

Crisi finanziarie / intervento statale

Crisi finanziarie / occupazione

Crisi finanziarie / beni rifugio

Fallimento di grandi imprese / risparmio delle famiglie

Regolamentazione dei mercati finanziari / investimento nei mercati finanziari

Speculazione finanziaria sugli strumenti finanziari derivati / crisi finanziarie

Sovraproduzione / crisi finanziarie

Discipline

Politica economica, Macroeconomia, Microeconomia, Economia aziendale, Statistica economica, Matematica finanziaria, Storia, Psicologia, Sociologia, Scienze politiche, Letteratura, Filosofia morale ...

Spazio

Italia, Europa, Mondo, Paesi in via di sviluppo ...

Tempo

Oggi, nel Seicento ...

After the first steps of analysing the argument, a student has to define an area of the map of their interest and try to find a problem, a hypothesis, on which to focalise the argument.

This activity must be guided by the documents, and so a student has to justify the reason why they decided to focalise on a problem, and argue the relevance of that problem from one point of view (that of the discipline, that of the context...). The most important thing to say is that the question cannot be a result of something a student decided to go deeper with because "they liked it".

Reference documents should give the basic ideas with which to start with an hypothesis of research. In this phase it is expected for a student to go to the librarian in order to speak about the research question.

The LIUC experience has revealed difficulties for a student to focalise arguments and to define hypotheses from which, rationally, they may start to research.

As an Italian student in high school is free to choose to do a research paper, and many choose not, they often start with argument that is very general (e.g. "family business"), and a research question that is always very general

(e.g. "succession in Italian family business"), with a lot of difficulties in finding relations and/or problems to get to a real research question (e.g.: "is there a gender problem in family business succession in Italy?"). In this situation, the role of mediators is very important. A student has feedback from mediators and so they understand if they have found the proper documents and are dealing, or not, with a proper research question.

Central to the training experience is to create an environment in which the research process appears to be a real personal experience of 360 degrees. To have a network of counsellors, teachers, tutors, and librarians may contribute to the success of the research process.

During a LIUC information literacy course the role of librarians as mediators is explained, but also the role of peers may be introduced as part of the method of the research process, though not as a generic "get advice from a friend".

It is evident that the research process is specific in content. This is the reason why mediators and IL teachers should be librarians, who are expert both in the subject field and subject documentation.

3.4 The final results

The logical conclusion of any process of research is a document. Conducting a search for documents leads to the production of new documents.

The ability to conduct a research process can only be proven when one sees the final document in which the analytical work, identification of research question, and choice of initial documents transformed into a real demonstration, positive or negative, of the hypothesis contained in the research question.

As a consequence of this objective, information literacy education has its limitations and should accept to be part of a much broader process and of being a small cog in the education system with all its ramifications.

Being able to write a paper, perhaps with the aid of graphs and mathematical calculations obtained from documents, may not be the result of an educational activity in information literacy, but of the entire process of education.

The library information literacy course may be offered to a student as being one able to change the relationship they have with the universe of documents, but it should also be able to establish profitable relationships with other actors in the education system, primarily with teachers.

However, the ability to “write to communicate, to show” should not be an aim of the course and refusing to intervene directly on this issue should not be considered a decrease in the value of information literacy education, but only the recognition of its limits. This means that the end of the course activities never take the form of a paper, though it could be a list of references that would enable a student to demonstrate the hypothesis of the research question and, of course, to justify of the choices of single documents.

Therefore “writing to understand”, to go deeply into a problem comprehensively, is the aim of information literacy courses.

4 The conclusion

Teaching the research process is, in our experience, the only way of creating a sufficient experience with information for students to become information literate.

This learning may be achieved only when documents structures and especially information landscape in a specific subject context has become part of a student’s knowledge. It happens when information literacy skills are present with a general comprehension of how the information landscape, in particular documents, is characterised within a specific discipline. At present, a first year university student does not have basic library and information skills, therefore these competences must be part of the information literacy programme for undergraduates.

This kind of teaching and counselling we have described has made available to students librarian competences of different nature: thesauri, subject headings and abstracting knowledge, information analysis in a specific sector, document analysis (metadata, paratext ...).

This shows that librarians are able to play an important role in the field of IL.

Nowadays, it is essential for a student to be aware of the complexity of information and documents. Competences and knowledge of LIS have, as a result, therefore become essential components of courses in information literacy.

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