

On the Importance of Context in Media and Information Literacy Education

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Introduction

Discussions about media and information literacy (MIL) put great emphasis on its empowering nature. Media and information play an enormously significant role in people's lives, and when fully understood and practiced, being media and information literate enables people to develop informed decisions. In the current climate especially, where the internet's ubiquity has led people to easily become both creators and users of information, and the problems surrounding information disorder are prevalent, never has the importance of MIL ever been more pronounced. This essay looks at how MIL could be taught, and the innovative ways through which the concept can be incorporated in contextual and relatable activities, ensuring that learners would appreciate MIL as an empowering concept.

MIL History and Perspectives

As we now understand, media literacy and information literacy are related concepts that converge to form MIL, hence I will begin by briefly discussing the component of information literacy, as doing so gives a good framing of the relevance of MIL today. The history of information literacy shows three different perspectives in the study of the concept. Addison and Meyers (2013) discussed the beliefs and practices associated with each perspective while identifying the advantages and disadvantages of the three. The perspectives correspond to the history of information literacy, from the traditional perspective, up to the contemporary perspective.

The first MIL perspective is information literacy as a skill (Addison & Meyers, 2013; Sample, 2020). This is the traditional information literacy viewpoint, and its roots can be traced back to Paul Zurkowski, who coined the term "information literacy" in 1974. Badke (2010) discusses Zurkowski's definition as "a new way of understanding the requirements of the emerging information age" (p. 2). Zurkowski wanted to ensure that new emerging media and information formats would be understood and used by people; he thought that the solution to this was to retrain the population regarding the use of media and information sources through information literacy skills. These information literacy skills were sometimes also referred to as information-age skills and focused on the capabilities of information users to: identify an information need, locate information, evaluate information and its sources, and use information effectively and ethically (American Library Association [ALA], 2000).

Further, this perspective promoted the idea that the said skills are measurable using performance indicators. These performance indicators are based on tasks related to libraries and research such as how to search in a catalog, or how to cite sources. This approach to teaching

MIL is effective if the intent is skills training; but it is not without pitfalls, some of which are: a lack of skills transferability, and poor utilization outside the library. Sample (2020) adds that when people ignore the “contextual and iterative” nature of research and focus solely on the rules in applying MIL skills, they might feel incompetent when they are unable to complete their research or do related tasks using the steps prescribed. Today, the skills perspective has been redefined, and the skills-based definition rescinded. New frameworks such as the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education released by the American Library Association (ALA) through the Association of College and Research Libraries in 2015 were developed to reflect a more contemporary understanding of what it means to be media and information literate.

The second MIL perspective is information literacy as the cultivation of habits of mind (Addison & Meyers, 2013; Sample, 2020). This emphasized the application of information behavior models for the accomplishment of media and information-related activities. Teaching MIL following this perspective uses information behavior models from Kuhlthau, Derwin, or Wilson, among others. Criticism of this perspective includes the complexity of the models which contributes to the difficulty of studying and applying it while in pursuit of information.

The third MIL perspective is the one that reflects the contemporary understanding of the concept: information literacy embedded in social practices (Addison & Meyers, 2013; Sample, 2020). This viewpoint believes that MIL is embedded in specific activities. These activities are socially constructed and not predetermined. It also recognizes that MIL is more than just a set of skills, instead, it is general capabilities that people possess for living, learning, and working. UNESCO’s Five Laws of Media and Information Literacy, released in 2017 is a very useful resource in teaching MIL in this context, due to the weight placed on the intersection of media and information and its connection to human rights (UNESCO, 2017). It is also very effective in communicating the value of MIL because it highlights the role of the creator and the consumer in responsible knowledge creation and use, without being limited to rigid skill sets. The view that MIL is honed through different experiences and the passage of time allows learners to recognize that non-linear processes in the information-seeking process are normal.

Looking at these perspectives, one could glimpse how MIL could be taught. The tricky part is to ensure that MIL is relatable to learners. Simply teaching the definition of MIL is not enough, and I have discovered from my years of teaching MIL that context is very important in teaching the concept.

Context and MIL

While it is true that MIL could be of great use in the research process, it is also equally significant that its application beyond research is highlighted. This is where the importance of context in teaching MIL should be emphasized. One resource that could be very useful for this approach is the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) discussion of information literacy. According to them, information literacy is “the ability to think critically and make balanced judgments about any information we find and use; it empowers us as citizens to develop informed views and to engage fully with society” (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals [CILIP], 2018, p. 3). In addition to this, CILIP also states that information literacy could be applied to five different contexts, and these are: everyday life; citizenship; education; the workplace; and health (CILIP, 2018). In the succeeding section, I will discuss these contexts

one by one and give suggestions on how they can be used in teaching MIL.

MIL for Everyday Living

People might not be aware of this, but in everyday life, media and information are used extensively, even in the simplest of activities. An individual who is educated in MIL is better equipped to make decisions, so associating MIL with decision-making could be a good way to communicate its importance. Teaching MIL using this approach could involve some of the following activities:

- Discussing the practical application of MIL in certain life aspects, such as: finding the best resources on finance and investments, as it could protect someone from making terrible investment decisions or engaging in dubious financial involvements.
- Being familiar with media and resources containing consumer information, to help people make better consumer decisions.
- Orienting learners on the specifics of data privacy and social media etiquette, so they would be better equipped to use social media in communicating and socializing.

MIL and Citizenship

Aside from everyday life, MIL also contributes to being aware of what is going on in the community. MIL allows people to engage actively in community discussions and helps them understand issues of local and global concern, including but not limited to political and environmental issues. When people know which resources to consult when looking for information, or which media is best for a certain purpose, it empowers them through becoming educated about important issues. It must also be mentioned nonetheless that it is not only in finding information that one can be called media and information literate; being critical and evaluative of what is read, heard, or watched is of paramount importance in MIL. Given that the problem of information disorder polluting the information landscape has been observed and studied extensively in recent years, experts argue that MIL is one of the key solutions to addressing information disorder. Teaching MIL in this context could involve the following approaches:

- Fact-checking websites and comparing real news versus fake news. This could involve having to explain how learners were able to form their judgment of the quality of the information they read or watched.
- Familiarizing learners with the different kinds of information disorder, how these are created, how they differ, how they impact discourse, and the factors that lead to the virality of some of them.
- Discussing the potential benefits and pitfalls of social media as a tool one can use for connecting with people, while also potentially being used as a tool to manipulate consumers.

MIL and Education

When information literacy was first conceptualized, the understanding was its application was only for school. It was used primarily for writing research papers, for doing assignments, and for knowing how to navigate the library. So, in this portion of the essay, let me discuss how MIL benefits people in the context of education. A person who practices MIL skills is better able to commit to learning even outside formal schooling. Lifelong learning and MIL are two mutually reinforcing concepts. It means that a person who has honed their MIL skills is more capable of engaging in lifelong learning activities. It would be easier for a person to look for learning opportunities if they can identify their information needs and know where to find information. To further strengthen the importance of MIL in education, the ALA (2015) released its Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, discussing six core concepts, also referred to as frames, which are central to teaching and learning information literacy. These are: “authority is constructed and contextual, information creation as a process, information has value, research as inquiry, scholarship as conversation, searching as strategic exploration” (ALA, 2015, p. 8).

These six frames are relevant to the context of education and could be applied to teaching MIL through:

- Differentiating authority when it comes to media and information sources; and learning how the nature of authority is influenced by expertise and experience.
- Orienting learners regarding the process of information creation, and how knowledge is generated through conversation, experimentation, and critique.
- Teaching students the different learning modes and its differences: formal learning, informal learning, and non-formal learning as this could show them novel ways of upskilling or learning new hobbies.

MIL and the Workplace

When MIL is discussed within the context of education, it is imperative that it also be examined in the context of the workplace. Being media and information literate in the context of work enables a person to fully understand information needs within the work setting. Further, it also contributes to improved performance at work as it enables workers to upskill in areas crucial to their job responsibilities. Another benefit in this context is it enables organizations to develop an understanding of how information can be used to achieve their goals, such as establishing a data or information management arm within the organization so that they can document best practices to further improve their services. Teaching MIL in this context could be through some of these activities:

- Depending on the field of study, familiarizing learners with the ICT tools they can use for the ease of doing job-related tasks, as well as the potential benefits of ICT especially considering the current work setup brought by the pandemic.
- Discussing different media and information-related policies that could affect or govern occupational practices.

MIL and Health

Considering that we are living amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, people must place great importance on health and well-being. MIL in this context means being critical of health-related and well-being-related media and information, as well as practices. Teaching MIL based on this context could include activities such as:

- Watching vlogs that talk about health practices and counter-checking the validity of information presented by reading medical research published on reputable journals, or accessible through medical databases.
- Studying the different examples of medical hoaxes or dubious practices and letting learners think of ways of how to counteract said questionable beliefs.

Conclusion

Given my discussion in the previous sections, MIL educators must communicate the value of MIL in a way that learners would appreciate. Doing so will provide more opportunities for learners to master MIL concepts and apply them to different aspects of life. This is especially important now that most activities operate virtually and people using media and information are given more freedom and flexibility in their engagements, in some of these instances they could not be guided by MIL experts. Situations such as these call for thorough MIL education, to ensure the responsible access, evaluation, and use of media and information.

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