ANCIL: Information Literacy First Aid

The New Curriculum for Information Literacy (ANCIL) provides a model for effective, holistic guidance to students on a one-to-one basis which will both meet the immediate need and also promote the development of independent learning. Student-led provision, in which a learner approaches the information literacy professional in response to an issue they have identified themselves, can be extremely effective, as it responds to the student's learning need at the time it is relevant to the learner, is embedded in the context of their immediate studies and can be tailored closely to the individual's needs and preferences. In many cases, such interventions are not part of a regular, ongoing series of interactions supporting learning on a broader scale, but 'one-off' ad hoc enquiries at a specific, short-term point of need. However, skilful 'first aid' provision may play a vital part in developing a student's information literacy more broadly and in the longer term.

This initial point of need is often 'crisis point' - the need may be a very acute, short-lived one such as the need to find or use information for this week's essay, or one which the student has neglected to address and which has now become the source of distress or has impacted negatively on the student's overall academic progress. Both student and staff may initially be concerned with 'fixing' the immediate information literacy need, and the intervention can be seen as remedial, but such an approach does not promote high-level independent learning over the longer term.

The analogy with first aid does not necessarily imply that an interaction with a student has to be at a point of serious crisis, however; discovery of a learning need is an inherent part of learning and need not be remedial, but can be used to encourage deeper, longer-term development of information literacy. 'First' in this instance means that this may be the first approach the student has made towards developing their information literacy in this area, or the first opportunity the information literacy professional has to engage with the student's learning on this issue.

The aims of Information Literacy first aid are therefore to:

- Support the student's immediate learning need
- Prevent future learning needs from becoming critical incidents by promoting 'transferable' learning beyond the specific immediate need
- Promote the empowerment of the student in proactively developing their own information literacy to the highest levels, and fulfilling their potential

This approach may be undertaken by a range of 'information literacy professionals' within an Higher Education context, which could include a Librarian, Learning Developer, Disability Tutor, Counsellor, Healthcare professional, Peer Mentor, Careers Adviser, Language Tutor, Student Union Adviser or subject Lecturer. Each of these groups will focus on information literacy to a greater or lesser extent, and have their own models and approaches which address information literacy and similar areas at very different levels, with differing ranges of expertise in the ten strands of ANCIL's information literacy curriculum. As information literacy will touch on the work of each of these professions to

some extent, it is hoped that this model will complement existing professional models to enable the practitioner to promote learning and reflection in the student and empower them to take ownership of their own development, to whatever degree is relevant for that professional role.

The four aspects of the model can aid information literacy provision in two ways. The model helps the information literacy professional to assess the student's individual learning needs in order to tailor the guidance given more effectively, but also to encourage the student to develop a fully rounded information literacy, on more than one level. The model draws on the four categories into which the ten strands of the curriculum loosely fall:

- **A practical key skill**, such as using a software tool (e.g. a catalogue or database), or basic aspects of more higher-order abilities, such as grammar (rather than negotiating specific disciplinary writing conventions).
- **Subject-specific context** in which to situate and deploy the skill, including increased awareness of academic reading and writing conventions within the discipline.
- **Advanced information handling,** allowing the student to develop sophisticated and nuanced techniques for evaluating, assimilating and synthesising information.
- **Learning to learn**, allowing the student to reflect and assess how the new skill, insight and behaviour will affect or enrich their existing practices and attitudes.

To promote the development of high-level, holistic and independent information literacy, any provision should include an aspect of each of these levels to a greater or lesser extent. This model is not prescriptive in what should be taught or the priority it should assume in a professional's interaction with a student. It is simply a way of informing discussions with students when they request guidance on an aspect of information literacy, whether these discussions are a passing request or a booked appointment.

Diagnosis:

The learning need which the student initially presents may be any one of the four levels of information literacy, but may perhaps most frequently appear as a basic key skill, such as using a tool to find an information source. A skilled information literacy practitioner, using this model, can both meet this need and guide the student in setting it within a more embedded, holistic context so that it contributes to their broader development.

Students may not always be able to identify or articulate their learning need if they do not have the experience to reflect on their broader learning, or if they do not share the language we use to describe the various attributes we expect them to acquire. For example, terms such as 'critical' may seem vague or have a completely different meaning to the student, or the student may state that they have problems with their writing, without being able to pinpoint the exact nature of these issues. Other students may initially present a lesser learning need, until they have the confidence or feel they have built up enough of a relationship with the information literacy professional to discuss the real issue.

The first step in providing Information Literacy First Aid is to help the learner to ascertain precisely what the learning need is, which may not be what it first appears. This will also help the Information Literacy professional to consider which other aspects might contribute to helping the student develop their information literacy in a broader sense. It is important to help the student to explore their own learning need a little more, in case the wrong need is met or the issue is dealt with in isolation, without helping them become independent

learners and therefore disempowering them. This process will also help the professional decide at which level if might be most helpful to begin, which may *not* be the practical key skill or issue first presented.

It is important to listen actively, using the four aspects of the model as a guide, to explore the student's learning need in some depth, and to agree with the student the type of guidance you can offer, including how much time you can spend and the type of expertise you can offer.

Case study:

A student may ask for guidance as they are struggling to find the books on their reading list. They may feel that this is because they are unfamiliar with the library catalogue or the library layout (a key skill: Strand 5). This may indeed play a role, but the underlying issues may be:

- That their *strategies* for searching need to be better developed e.g. interpreting bibliographic data, or choosing search terms (strand 5)
- That they have put off beginning their reading and the texts are indeed all unavailable (time management: strand 6)
- That they have encountered a similar issue before, but have not reflected on how this situation relates to previous learning and how to develop strategies for approaching new situations (Strand 2).
- That they have not grasped that there are different types of information source, or how to recognize them from the conventions of how bibliographic data is presented on a reading list. The items may in fact be journal articles, chapters in edited books, reports etc. (Strand 4)
- That they are not clear about the implicit assumptions made in the reading list; perhaps the supervisor or lecturer has offered a small starting point, expecting the student to go beyond it, or has given a large number of alternatives in case some of the texts are not available. The student may not have realised that they do not have to find *all* the texts, but that they have been provided with alternatives (strand 4).
- That they have lost the reading list, or have not copied down bibliographic data correctly (strand 6)
- Any of the above may have been raised by a transition in their learning: from school to university, or when expectations change from one stage of their course to another (strand 1). The affective dimension of learning may also impact on their ability to find what they want (strand 2)

Simply finding the resources for the student will not address any of these issues or develop the student's information literacy and independent learning.

Four levels of Information Literacy First Aid

The four aspects need not be addressed in order; in fact, the practical key skill may be better addressed in the middle or at the end of the interaction once a context has been established for it. In considering each of the aspects, the focus should not primarily be on telling the student how to do something, but in guiding them with questions in a structured way so that they arrive at their own understanding. This may be reassuring to practitioners who are not subject experts. The focus is on procedural knowledge as much as

declarative; students need to be guided so that they can put what they have gained into practice as well as simply 'knowing it'.

Practical key skill (Strands 5 and 6)

Strands 5 and 6 cover many of the key skills traditionally associated with information literacy, many of which are associated with tools such as software. Other strands also have more basic elements associated with them. It is important that the key skill is not taught in isolation from the other three levels which situate it in the learner's own context, or it will be difficult for the student to see its relevance, put it into practice, build on it or even remember it for another occasion. The practical skill, although an essential part of information literacy, may not be the main issue, although it may mask other things. It is therefore important to explore beyond the key skill, using the other three levels. Conversely, if a student requests guidance on a more advanced level of information literacy, it is important to ascertain if they have the practical skill needed to support their learning.

- Think about how to teach the basic skill so that the student is as active as possible. This may be, for example, encouraging the student to sit at the computer and input things themselves, or prompting them for suggestions and exploring how well they work instead of telling them what to do or intervening to much.
- Consider how much of the skill needs to be taught on any one occasion; the student may not be able to take in more than directly relates to their current need, as it may be too much information and not embedded in their current learning. Instead of exploring the whole of, for example, a tool's functionality, it may be better to explore the other levels of information literacy so that the student is able to return to and build on the key skill when appropriate, having already embedded it to some degree in their broader learning.

Subject-specific context (strands 3, 4 and 5)

This aspect encourages the student to situate the guidance given in their own work, recognising and adapting to the specific conventions and demands of their own subject. The information literacy practitioner need not be a subject expert to guide the student in navigating the information landscape of their discipline and mastering the subject specific conventions of academic writing. At the least, an awareness that generic advice is rarely valid for all disciplines will ensure that guidance is appropriately nuanced.

Suggested approaches:
- Help the learner to explore for themselves what the conventional forms and structures of academic texts are in their subject, as they may not have looked at texts in their subject as models for their own writing or as having a formal structure that can aid their reading strategies.
- Prompt the reader to outline the range of information source types with which they are already familiar and what specific purpose each might have in terms of their information needs. Learners may not realise that different types of source fulfil different functions, or be able to select appropriately for their needs.
- Encourage the student to articulate and critique their own evaluative criteria for their choices. Asking the student why they have chosen one source over another may help them to develop their evaluation skills further. You might prompt them to talk through their decision-making process.
- Encouraging the student to develop short-cuts and using their own personal networks and less traditional sources of information can also help them to streamline their

research. You might ask them how they would approach a task if they had an even more limited timeframe to do so, which will help them to develop strategies for prioritising and finding short-cuts.

Advanced information handling (Strands 7, 8, 9)
This aspect of information literacy concerns what the student will do with the information they use, assimilating it to change and create their own understanding. Encouraging students to think beyond finding information to using it to develop their understanding at a deeper level will promote good academic practice and avoid plagiarism, as well as improving performance.

Suggested approaches:
- Encouraging the student to gain an overview of how various sources of information relate to one another as a debate, rather than seeing each one in isolation, will help to promote a more nuanced understanding, critical approach and their own response to it. Help them to identify the clues, such as date, title, use of references and persuasive language etc which indicate a text's position.
- Prompting the student to consider how various authors present themselves and how the student themselves want to portray themselves to various audiences can help to develop students' approaches to themselves as authors.
- Encourage the student to take their own position on a text rather than reading it uncritically. Prompt them to consider how it relates to what they currently know or think - whether it confirms, nuances, contradicts or changes their views.

Learning to learn (Strands 1, 2, 10)

It is useful for both the information literacy professional and the student to reflect on the impact of the guidance given in terms of a student's overall learning.

Suggested approaches:
- On the part of the information literacy professional, this may simply be an awareness and validation of the affective dimension of learning. Bear in mind that the student may be under pressure or feel overwhelmed by the guidance given, which will affect how they respond to it.
- It is also useful to invite the student to identify their preferences in terms of how they best take in and manage information, so that you can tailor your guidance appropriately. This will be particularly relevant for students with disabilities, or those who do not have English as a native language, but should be considered good practice for any student.
- The student can be encouraged to consider how the guidance given impacts on, is transferable from, builds on or conflicts with their prior experience. This is especially if they are seeking guidance in response to a recent transition from one stage of learning to another (i.e. leaving school, beginning a new part of their degree course or a new type of assessment such as a dissertation).
- It might be useful to help them to clarify their own assumptions about their learning and their lecturers' expectations of them.
- You could also encourage the student to consider how the guidance might change their future learning practices, and help them to think through the changes they might make to accommodate it long-term.

- Invite the student to identify how their peers or lecturers approach the issues which they have raised, and to critically consider the pros and cons of these strategies for them.

Assessment

Active assessment is a key attribute of the curriculum. Students are encouraged to put their learning into practice - partly so that they engage with it more deeply and translate it into strategies to act on, and partly so that the information literacy professional and they can assess their learning.

It is not enough to ask them whether they have understood or learned the strategies, skills and approaches you are teaching them. Closed questions, such as 'did you understand that?', which restrict the student to a limited range of simple answers such as 'yes' or 'no' are not as useful as open questions such as 'how might this apply in a different situation?'. For many reasons, the answer 'yes, I did understand' may not be accurate reflection of the student's learning - embarrassment, lack of reflection or misunderstandings may all lead the student to tell you that they have understood when they have not.

It is better to encourage the student to take an active role in practicing the new skill or articulating the new approach that they are learning. You could encourage this by asking them to summarise in their own words, explore a process themselves rather than talking them through it, repeat a process by themselves after it has been explained, or ask them open questions about what they have learned and how it relates to what they already know. This will also build the student's confidence in putting into practice what they have learned when the information literacy professional is not present.

Referral and signposting

If the information literacy practitioner does not feel that the basic skill falls in their area of expertise, then helping the student formulate exactly what they need to do, and referring them or signposting them to an appropriate source of expertise would be very helpful. You may wish to build up a 'map' of such referral sources for your own information, whether individuals or services in your organisation, or paper-based and online information (strand 5). The student should be given clear information about who to contact, why they are appropriate, how to contact them, and it may also be useful to help the student clarify the precise request that they will make to the professional to whom they have been referred.

Review

It is valuable to spend a short period reflecting on the questions raised by the student, and the session spent in helping them. Reflection may help to identify where current information and guidance is not clear, where additional resources might be created, or where feedback to other professionals might be useful. This is especially true if many students are asking the same questions.

Case studies:

Academic writing (subject Lecturer)
A student might request advice on academic writing, as feedback indicates that she needs to address this aspect of her work to improve her performance.

- **Practical key skill**: the lecturer might suggest using a software tool such as a spellchecker, text-to-speech or plagiarism detection software as a mechanical means of reviewing the quality or work. Advice on proofreading strategies or checklists could be offered.
- **Subject-specific context**: the lecturer might ask the student to identify some of the characteristic features of written language (style and structure) in the student's subject, perhaps using a discipline-specific book or article as a model.
- **Advanced Information handling**: The lecturer might ask the student how she goes about collating, organising and synthesising her sources of information, to see how her reading drives her writing, and if she needs to consider other strategies to find her own voice and structure.
- **Learning to learn**: The student might be encouraged to reflect on her assumptions about the role that writing plays in her learning, in this and other contexts, and to look at how and why she uses writing in different ways to present herself appropriately for different audiences at different stages of her learning.

Searching for information (Librarian)
A student might ask how to search for useful information on a particular topic as he has been recommended to read around the subject more in future assignments.

- **Practical key skill**: the librarian might discuss with the student how to use a catalogue effectively, using appropriate search terms and other ways to refine the search.
- **Subject-specific context**: the librarian might prompt the student to think about what 'reading around more' means in the context of the subject and at that stage of the course. They might ask the student to describe how he reads, to ascertain whether his reading practices are slowing him down and preventing him from reading more.
- **Advanced information handling**: the librarian might ask the student to describe how he signals what he has read in his writing, using referencing, quotation and paraphrase effectively to make the extent of his reading visible to the lecturer.
- **Learning to learn**: the librarian might ask the student to think about whether his assumptions about reading stem from an earlier stage of education e.g. school, and whether they are still appropriate. They might prompt the student to make explicit comparisons between school and university expectations, or the way that expectations change as he progresses in his course. They might also be aware of any potential difficulties associated with reading, such as a Specific Learning Difficulty.

Evaluating information (Healthcare professional)
A student might approach a healthcare professional with a specific health issue about which she are concerned, having looked up her symptoms on the internet. The healthcare professional's aim might be to empower the student in taking responsibility for and finding out about her own health in partnership with a qualified healthcare professional.

- **Practical key skill**: the practitioner might briefly ask how the student has reached her decision to approach them about a particular healthcare issue, and discuss using the effective use of search engines and terms, and where best to look for initial information on a health topic.
- **Subject-specific context**: the practitioner might encourage the student to discuss the appropriate handling of unfamiliar professional terminology and assessing the differing value of sites written for the lay person and for the healthcare professional, in this context.
- **Advanced Information handling**: the practitioner might make apparent how they themselves identify and evaluate appropriate information from a complex situation and synthesise it to identify a range of options or outcomes, to empower the student in researching her own wellbeing.
- **Learning to learn**: The practitioner might validate the practice of transferring the information literacy skills the student has learned in the academic context to other contexts, being mindful of the impact of the student's healthcare concerns on their ability to do so.