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The Big6

Information literacy is hard to define. What exactly is “information,” and what exactly about it do we need to know? Several organizations have information literacy recommendations and information literacy skills, providing goals for information literacy, but they do not provide a detailed definition. ALA created the National Forum on Information Literacy (NFIL) in 1989 to explore the concept of information literacy. In 1998, the NFIL released a final report on their findings that focused on the impact of emerging technologies and information on individuals. This report includes recommendations based on these findings, including the “reconsideration” of information structures, the creation of NFIL, research about information use and needs, and the inclusion of information literacy in education governing boards (ALA, 1998).

As a part of the Media and Information Literacy Recommendations, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) provides a good explanation of why information literacy is important. IFLA positions information literacy as a matter of survival and development: “In order to survive and develop, make decisions, and solve problems in every facet of life - personal, social, educational, and professional, individuals, communities, and nations need information about themselves as well as their physical and their social environments,” (IFLA, 2012). This statement emphasizes how information literacy is necessary for everyone in all aspects of their life. An important aspect of this quote is that information is needed about a variety of subjects, including about the individual as well as the environment in which they are situated.

The Big6 aims to provide information and technology skills to K-12 schools, however could be potentially used for any audience. The program is a “problem-solving model” that is specifically applied to technology and information situations. In this model, emphasis is moved from speed of access and solutions, to making smart decisions by “developing skills and understandings that [students] need to find, process, and use information effectively” (Big6 skills overview). There are six information skills that the Big6 aims to teach: task definition, information seeking strategies, location and access, use of information, synthesis, and evaluation. This set of skills will make sure students will be able to access and use information in a “smart” fashion.

The Big6 has both free and paid options to teach these skills. First, the company has an Amazon store where you can buy books, workbooks, posters, and DVDs. The prices for these products range from $7.61 (for a paperback) to $95.00 (for a teacher’s guide). The average price of these products, however, is between $25 - $40. These products provide instructional material and tools, but the company includes a large variety of free teaching aids on the Big6 Web site. These free tools include PowerPoint presentations, articles, handouts, songs, videos, and a mailing list. These tools are free, but the copyright information for the company must be included whenever the tools are used (for example, include it on the title page of a PowerPoint or on a handout). Another tool Big6 offers is Webinars and onsite workshops. No prices are included on the Web site, but they offer “affordable pricing options.” I did e-mail the company for more information on the pricing, but never received a reply.

This program is pretty explicitly designed for a K-12 audience. The about page described the benefits of the program for students, explaining that these skills will help students fully understand assignments and what they are expected to do, learn how to analyze each step of their research process and learn how to recognize what might have gone wrong and how to fix it, learn how to find and cite valid and valuable resources, and finally how to use a specific vocabulary to discuss and analyze the information seeking process. Each of these benefits work well in a school setting. The onsite programs are delivered by “full-time library media practitioners who use the Big6 each day in their classrooms and libraries,” which places this program specifically into school libraries. The tools and lessons themselves are geared towards children. The tools include easy-to-understand presentations and simple games designed for different age levels.

However… this program can easily be adapted for a public library setting, as well. Each of these skills help individuals understand their information seeking process and also strengthen their ability to get useful and valuable information. The lessons could be adapted into content more geared towards different populations, such as adults, senior citizens, the blind, or immigrants, and included in simple computer classes. For example, an adult could use the Big6 wallet card as a helpful guide to remind them how to utilize the Big6 skills in their information seeking tasks. This card could also be translated into different languages, or turned into a poster to place by the public computers.

Since most of the tools are provided for free on the Web site, this program could easily be implemented in both school and public libraries. Public libraries could place posters and other learning material by the public computers (as described above), or provide the handouts at the reference desk to help users become more self-sufficient. Public libraries that provide computer classes could have a session on the Big6 skills to help their students learn how to effectively search for information and also find valid information, or just include some information when they teach how to search. School libraries, of course, could use most of the tools as is or sign up for an on-site workshop or Webinar.

The Big6 Web site includes many customer verification statements, but Yale and Emily Harris (writing for Big6) provide detailed information about the use of Big6 and the development of information skills. Yale’s research on the Big6 skills compared the Big6 to two other information literacy programs. This research found that the Big6 skills helped students “outperform” the students who had received the alternative instruction. Dr. Harris advocates the inclusion of a Big6 unit in the sixth grade to teach students information literacy. She found that while her own state has standards in place about the instruction of information topics, these standards are usually not met as teachers assume other instructors cover this topic in their classes.

Overall, I find the Big6 program to be a useful and cost-effective tool for both public and school libraries to incorporate throughout their institutions in different ways. This program is specifically designed for children; however, the tools could be easily redesigned with different populations in mind. The central skills of the program do not apply to any one population, but can be used by all to fulfill the need for information literacy. These skills help individuals meet IFLA’s definition of information literacy: “In order to survive and develop, make decisions, and solve problems in every facet of life - personal, social, educational, and professional, individuals, communities, and nations need information about themselves as well as their physical and their social environments,” (IFLA, 2012).

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