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Everyone Can Be an 'Advanced' Learner with Information Literacy

Introduction

Elevating learners to an advanced level of information practice is an ambitious target which is explored in this paper from the perspective of the Information Literacy educator. Overall this paper proposes that the Relational frame of Information Literacy can help us achieve such an ambitious goal through the following strategies: start with the learner-information relationship and develop a customised learning profile for each learner; make learners create rather than just find information to encourage ownership of learning; facilitate reflection on information practice through the evaluation of the outcome of learning. The aggregate impact of these strategies is a qualitative change in the learners' awareness of information, enhancing their attitude towards learning and their overall perception of the world (Andretta, in press). This is contrasted with Information Literacy perceived solely as the development of information skills and knowledge of the information environment which dominates educational policy at national level (Andretta, 2005a; Andretta, 2005b), and determines learning and teaching strategies within the HE sector, where skills and knowledge are preferred because they are more easily measured (Andretta, 2006a). It is the contention of this paper that the Information Literacy community needs to consider issues of facilitating (rather than teaching) Information Literacy and address the challenge of assessing the emancipation of learners generated by the Relational approach (Andretta, 2007b). The ultimate aim of this paper is to demonstrate how the conceptual framework proposed by the Relational approach can be applied effectively at different levels of provision, giving any learner the opportunity to be an 'advanced' learner.

Defining the 'advanced' learner

A clear distinction between 'basic' and 'advanced' learners is encapsulated in the HE culture at undergraduate and postgraduate provision. This point is illustrated by SCONUL's Information Skills Model:[1]

> "The progression from novice to expert is indicated by an arrow. First year undergraduates will largely be at the bottom of the arrow, perhaps only practicing the first four skills, whilst postgraduate and research students will aim to be towards the expert end, and will be aspiring to the seventh." (SCONUL, 1998, p. 7)
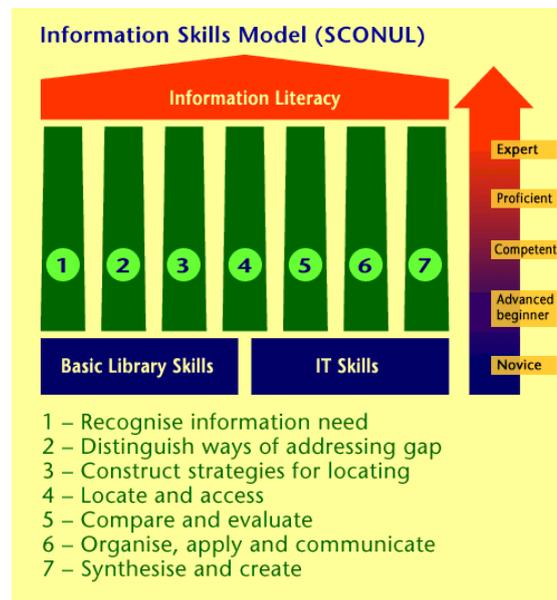

Diagram 1: SCONUL's information Skills Model (1998)

SCONUL's hierarchical structure of knowledge acquisition and the creation of new knowledge is associated with the seventh and highest Information Literacy competence that can be achieved only by advanced learners, such as postgraduate students. By placing library and IT skills as the foundation of the seven Information Literacy competences, SCONUL promotes the view that the latter can only be developed after the learner has mastered the basic set of skills, and has become a competent information user. This distinction

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[1] Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL). The used in this paper model was designed by C. Taylor, the original SCONUL's information Skills Model is available online. Retrieved October 24, 2007, from http://www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/ Information Literacy/papers/Seven_pillars.html

creates a false separation between basic information skills, and a complex process of knowledge acquisition which is difficult to sustain in practice. When using information systems for basic research, such as the library online catalogue, or a search engine like Google, the students must be equipped with critical thinking competences which SCONUL attributes to the more complex Information Literacy strand. Research by Andretta (2005a) points out that even at postgraduate level, students do not automatically operate as advanced learners. This questions the validity of the claims regarding the arbitrary limit on the Information Literacy competences of first-year undergraduate students, and the expected ability for Information Literacy and independent learning at postgraduate level.

Information Literacy = information-skills

Measuring the level of information skills achieved is a common view in the Information Literacy HE culture. Again, the Information Literacy approach promoted by SCONUL is a case in point.

> "Information Literacy encompasses library user education, information skills training and education, and those areas of personal, transferable or 'key' skills relating to the use and manipulation of information in the context of learning, teaching and research issues in higher education."[2]

The Relational model of Information Literacy

In line with the Relational perspective promoted by Bruce (1997), Lupton (2004), and Edwards (2006), the Information Literacy Relational model presented in this paper is influenced by the Phenomenographic view of learning which states that the way of experiencing something is characterised by the internal relationship between subject and object (Marton, 1994). It is a contention of this paper that the Relational model identifies information as the 'object' in the subject-object relation. This is in line with Bruce's claim that a Relational approach requires:

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[2] SCONUL (2007) Information Literacy. Retrieved October 8, 2007, from http://www.sconul.ac.uk/hot_topics/info_literacy/

> "Descriptions of these conceptions, or experiences, reveal variation in the internal relation between subjects (people) and some object (in this case information) [...] internal variation suggests that the meaning of Information Literacy is derived from the ways in which people interact with information [..]."
> (Bruce, 1997, p. 9)

This view is also promoted by Bruce, Edwards and Lupton (2006) where their Relational frame describes Information Literacy as a "complex of different ways of interacting with information" (Bruce et al, 2006, p. 5). Drawing from Marton and Booth's model of experiencing learning[3], Edwards (2006) provides a detailed account of what a Phenomenographic investigation of Information Literacy entails. This starts with the identification of the structure of awareness, consisting of internal and external horizons which depict the dynamic relationship between learner and information (Diagram 2).
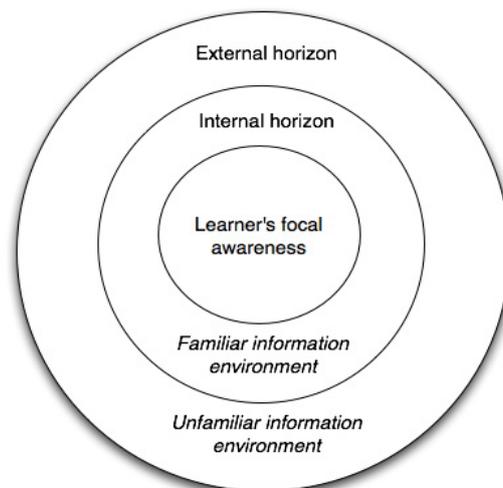

Diagram 2: the dynamic relationship between learner and information (Relational model)

The diagrammatic representation of the internal and the external structures of awareness shown in this diagram is based on the concentric circles analogy initially devised by Bruce (1997), and later implemented by Edwards (2006). The circle at the centre represents the focal awareness of the learner (the information goal). The next circle shows the internal horizon, representing the aspects of the information environment the subject is aware of, things that are 'thematised' (Marton, 1994), or 'internalised' (Bruce et al, 2006). While

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[3] Marton, F., & Booth, S. (1997). *Learning and Awareness*, Mahwah: New Jersey, LEA.

the external horizon, or outer circle contains elements of the information environment that are partially or totally unknown. Therefore, the external horizon is characterised by fuzzy awareness, where the existence of information may be acknowledged, but remains outside the subject's focus. The diagram proposed here was devised by the author of this paper as part of her doctoral thesis[4] and a detailed account of this is published elsewhere (Andretta, 2007b; Andretta, 2007d; Andretta, in press). What is worth stressing here is that Information Literacy (and by implication independent learning) is demonstrated by the ability to engage effectively with information and expand his or her internal horizon. As one of the students interviewed during this research explains, for him the ultimate goal of an information literate person (ie an 'advanced' learner) is:

> "[To] manage uncertainty. If you go back to the familiar/unfamiliar situation, in a familiar environment you are expected to be a good user in a way. But I think that the real good user the user, with real skills and know how to operate with information and information systems, is the one that can find his way through information within unfamiliar situations (PhD)."

Three strategies of implementation: how to expand the internal horizon

These three strategies are presented here together with suggestions on their practical applications drawn from the author's Information Literacy practice at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The undergraduate module shall be referred to as ILDASS (the Information Literacy module run by the Department of Applied Social Sciences at London Metropolitan University). ILDASS was delivered from 2000 to 2006 as part of the core provision of the Department's undergraduate scheme. While at postgraduate level examples are taken from the Applied Information Research (AIR) module[5], covering research methods for the MA in Information Services Management and the MSc in Digital Information Management, at London Metropolitan

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[4] The main focus of the thesis is on 'Mapping perception and practice of Information Literacy by Library and Information Science (LIS) postgraduate students.'

[5] AIR is supported by a dedicated webpage. Retrieved October 6, 2007, from http://www.ilit.org/air/indexair.htm

University, and Facilitating Information Literacy Education (FILE).[6] This last module was sponsored by London Health Libraries[7] as a Continuing Professional Development course for their Learner Support Programme (LSP), and accredited as a 20-credit module by the University. A detailed account of this provision is beyond the scope of this paper, here we offer a brief explanation of how the three strategies are applied in each of these modules.

Strategy One:

Start with the learner-information relationship and develop a customised Information Literacy profile for each learner.

This strategy establishes the learner' structural awareness exemplified by the internal and external horizons, also described as what the learner 'knows' (to foster confidence) and 'doesn't know' (to foster motivation to engage with Information Literacy practice).

Information Literacy profile for ILDASS

To address Strategy One the Information Literacy module delivered at undergraduate level employed a web-based diagnostic questionnaire[8] (Andretta, 2005a, p. 83). This covered the following areas of Information Literacy: the effective use of ICT resources, the ability to search for, evaluate and reference information for a specific academic purpose. An automatic scoring of the students' responses was generated at the end of the questionnaire and produced customised Information Literacy profiles that the students consulted to devise a programme of study addressing their individual learning needs. If the profiles showed an overall competence in Information Literacy, then the students could complete the module in fast track mode, that means skipping the tutorials and completing the assignments directly (Andretta & Cutting, 2003). Conversely, if the students scored novice in one or more Information Literacy areas, then support was provided in the form of 1:1 face-to-face and/or online tutorials. This diagnostic strategy led to a

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[6] FILE is supported by a dedicated webpage. Retrieved October 6, 2007, from http://www.ilit.org/file/indexfile08.htm

[7] Retrieved October 6, 2007, from http://www.londonlinks.ac.uk/

[8] The full diagnostic questionnaire for this module is available in printed format from Andretta, 2005, pp. 171-178.

flexible mode of delivery that enabled the students to become information literate in their own time:

> "[The ILDASS module] allowed me to progress at my own pace whilst providing access to assistance when it was required. [..] useful in developing Information Literacy tailored to my needs."[9]

It is important to stress that in this module, the diagnostic task was integrated in the assessment simply because, as recent research has shown the students' engagement at this level is assessment-driven (Stubbings et al, 2006, p.7).

Example 1 ILDASS: Information Literacy profile (Component 1)

After you have completed the online diagnostic questionnaire you need to examine the score displayed on your feedback sheet as this shows the areas of Information Literacy that you need to work on to successfully complete the module.

Write a short sentence of between 100 and 150 words to identify the categories where you have scored as novice and explore ways in which you expect the Information Literacy module to help you develop these competences. Email the file to the tutor for approval and feedback.

This exercise was particularly effective in addressing the problem of retention by identifying students who were information illiterate, and therefore at risk of 'dropping out' of the degree course at the end of the first year.

> "I feel that this module has been very beneficial to me [..] it has given me an insight into how to improve and better myself [..] It has truly improved my chances of obtaining a degree." [10]

Information Literacy profile for AIR

By contrast, the diagnostic strategy in AIR is accomplished through the application of an investigative activity that illustrates the students' ability to research a topic. This is a different approach from the strategy employed at undergraduate level, although the idea of making the learners aware of their Information Literacy competences at the beginning of the module underpins

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[9] Extract from Component 5 of the assessed portfolio, ILDASS cohort 2005/6.

[10] Extract from Component 5 of the assessed portfolio, ILDASS cohort 2004/5.

both diagnostic practices. In AIR, the students' initial Information Literacy profile is produced by the combined process of completing a brief entry for an encyclopaedia and acting on the areas of Information Literacy that they need to improve, discerned from the tutor's comments. The diagnostic exercise used in AIR is not assessed, because, in contrast with the assessment-driven attitude of undergraduates attending the ILDASS module, LIS postgraduate students have a strong motivation to engage with the AIR activities, whether they are assessed or not (Andretta, 2005a).

Example 2 AIR: Encyclopaedia entry
Extract from the guidelines to the encyclopaedia entry task.

> Write an entry of no more that 250 words to provide a definition of qualitative or quantitative research and how this fits in with the current role of information professionals.

> Email your entry to one of the AIR tutors for comments. The entry must be written in your own words and any direct or indirect quotes should be referenced using the Harvard method. Information Literacy profile for FILE

The diagnostic exercise in FILE adopts yet a different approach compared with AIR and ILDASS. This is because this module focuses on the role of the Information Literacy facilitator, rather than concentrate on the development of Information Literacy within an academic scenario. As a result, the diagnostic strategy needs to take into account the initial Information Literacy position of the facilitators as learners. This is in turn influenced by the Information Literacy profiles of the users they support. In FILE, the diagnostic task draws from the personal statements produced by the participants during their initial application, outlining their expectations of the course. An additional input to a pre-course online survey[11] also generates data on the FILE participants' preferred learning style, their background as trainers, and a detailed profile of their users. To ensure that the participants fully appreciate the importance of this diagnostic strategy within the process of facilitation, the data from these activities is used to draw up an evaluation of their own competences, together with an outline of their expectations of

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[11] Retrieved October 8, 2007, from http://freeonlinesurveys.com/rendersurvey.asp?sid= n1cv568kep1cj2t240701

the course. This is assessed in Component 1 of the e-portfolio.[12] Example 3 illustrates the instructions for this component indicating the relevant documentation for each aspect of the assessment.

<u>**Example 3 FILE: Guidelines for Component 1**</u>

Write 300 words max addressing the following:

Your own expectations of FILE contextualised within your current training experience. (Based on the personal statement in your application form).

Users' profiles - and by implication their diverse information needs (based on the users' profiles given in the online survey).

Learning perspective - Your perspectives on what constitutes effective learning and how your view/experience of learning affects your role as facilitator of Information Literacy (based on the online survey).

<u>**Strategy Two:**</u>

Devise learning outcomes that make the learners create, rather than just find information to encourage ownership of learning (internalisation of the information – shifting awareness from unfamiliar (external horizon) to familiar (internal horizon).

The most effective way of achieving this strategy is to devise real-world and problem-solving assessment activities (Lantz, et al, 2006) that enhance the learners' academic and professional development (Andretta, in press; Andretta, 2007d).

Learning outcomes and real-world assessment in ILDASS

This module aimed to enhance the academic performance of learners by developing their competences in locating, manipulating, retrieving, evaluating and presenting information through effective interaction with customised web resources and ICT facilities available at the University. The learning outcomes were therefore articulated as follows:

- Use essential features of the University's ICT facilities effectively and appropriately.
- Develop competences in locating, evaluating, processing and presenting information, using both printed and online formats.

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[12] Details of the e-portfolios produced by the 2007 FILE cohort are online. Retrieved October 8, 2007, from http://www.ilit.org/file/eportfolios07_1.htm

- Develop ICT skills to European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) standards.

A full account of the impact of this module is given in Andretta (2005a, pp. 67-102), here it should be noted that the active production of information was promoted by a number of assignments that focused on information goals where the answer was based on the application of several searching strategies and on the use of more than one source. For the purpose of this paper we explore a tutorial, displayed in Example 4 below, demonstrating how to produce answers using the Newspaper database and Google when little is known about the topic searched.

Example 4 ILDASS: Tutorial on how to conduct a search using the Newspaper database and Google

> Task: In 2002 the designer of the Apple iPod gave a rare interview.
>
> Where did he study before he joined Apple?
>
> When was the Apple iMac launched?
>
> First do a Google search to find out who this person is. Just like with the biographical search you can use a phrase search for example:
>
> "designer of the Apple iPod" which will give you the name of Jonathan Ive
>
> Now that you have found the name of the person you can search the Newspaper database to find the needed article by entering the following keywords in the search box:
>
> Jonathan Ive iPod
>
> Limit the search to the year 2002 (so the date option would be between: January 1st 2002 and December 31st 2002)
>
> The search strategy is specific enough to produce one article: 'The fruits of his labours' written by Sathnam Sanghera, and printed by The Financial Times, June 11, 2002.
>
> All you need to do is read the article and find the answers to the following questions:
>
> Where did he study before he joined Apple?
>
> Newcastle Polytechnic

When was the Apple iMac launched?

1998

The students found this task extremely difficult for two distinct reasons. Firstly, because they had not used the newspaper database prior to the module, and therefore found it difficult to master. Once this resource became familiar it was seen as: 'an extremely useful', and 'a really helpful' source for articles that improved the quality of their research by retrieving information relevant to other assignments: "[The newspaper database] helped me find an article for an assignment on poverty and social exclusion." (Andretta, 2005a, p. 90). The problem caused by unfamiliarity with the database was compounded by lack of critical thinking required to complete the task, which did not come naturally, particularly to the weaker students.

Learning outcomes and real-world assessment in AIR

In AIR the assessment is based on two distinct components: a research proposal using the application form from the AHRC[13], and a 5 minutes oral presentation of the preliminary research plan to an adjudicating panel.[14] The aim of this module is to ensure that students engage in research that is valid and transparent, while at the same time focus on topics that are innovative and reflect the current concerns of the information profession. The learning outcomes clearly promote these real world and applied research practices:

- Design a research project exploring an issue relevant to the information profession in support of an application for funding.
- Identify and evaluate relevant literature in order to contextualise the research proposal
- Select research strategies appropriate to the nature of the proposed research project.

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[13] The Arts and Humanities Research Council funds research and postgraduate study within the UK's higher education institutions. Retrieved October 12, 2007, from http://www.ahrb.ac.uk/

[14] The guidelines for the proposal are available online Retrieved October 24, 2007, from http://www.ilit.org/air/files/airproposalform.doc, similarly, the guidelines for the oral presentations are available online Retrieved October 24, 2007, from http://www.ilit.org/air/files/airpresentguidelines.doc

- Communicate the various aspects of the research project using a range of dissemination strategies.

The full impact of this strategy is beyond the scope of this study and is examined elsewhere (Andretta, 2005a; Andretta, 2007d), here it suffices to illustrate how the communicative confidence developed by the presentation benefits the professional practice of a part-time student who is also working full time as an academic librarian:

> "[..] I find myself now using those transferable skills [from AIR]
> [..] for instance there is a staff conference this month [March]
> and I'll be presenting with some other people as well. I have to
> do some kind of literature review on [subject] and [the assessed
> presentation for AIR] helped. [..] because [otherwise] it would
> have been the first time I did a presentation. (PhD)"

Learning outcomes and real-world assessment in FILE

FILE aims to equip information professionals with the competences and the confidence required to facilitate Information Literacy education and address the needs of a wide range of users[15]. The learning outcomes are formulated to fully reflect these aims:

- Identify diverse Information Literacy requirements of the users you support
- Develop a learning strategy that appropriately addresses the needs of a targeted group of users
- Facilitate a range of Information Literacy activities
- Reflect on the process and the impact of Information Literacy practice on your professional development

A full evaluation of this course is presented in an earlier publication (Andretta, 2007c; Andretta, 2007d; Andretta, in press). What is worth noting here is that the assessment consists of the production of Information Literacy strategies and resources that are collated in electronic portfolios, which are made available to the FILE participants and a wider Information Literacy community of practice. The feedback from a FILE participant shows that this

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[15] Ranging from home care workers to NHS support and perioperative staff, ie nurses to surgeons.

strategy promotes successful sharing of Information Literacy resources developed for the e-portfolio:

> "[..] I've just run a training session for library assistants on searching the databases such as Medline. Used my Boolean presentation as part of it [Component 4 of FILE] and bits of both Jane's and Louise's presentations around selecting search terms and introduced the citation matcher into my session for the very first time. All down to FILE and my wonderful colleagues! One lady [who attended the session] said she learnt more this afternoon than in the last 3 years together and has been 'inspired'." [16]

Strategy Three:

> Devise assessment strategies that facilitates reflection of Information Literacy practice through the evaluation of the outcome of learning. (transforming impact)

> Reflection 'in action' is encouraged through formative assessment, and 'on action' through summative assessment. (Hughes et al, 2007; Andretta, in press; Andretta, 2007d).

Reflective assessment strategies in ILDASS

In ILDASS students were exposed to self-reflection primarily through Component 1 where they needed to address the question 'how information literate am I?', while in Component 5 they completed the reflective process by answering the question 'what have I learned from the Information Literacy module?' A detailed evaluation of the responses generated by the fifth component are published elsewhere (Andretta, 2005a; Andretta, 2005c, Andretta, 2006b), the comment presented here summarises the overall experience of a student from the 2004 cohort describing confidence in the manipulation of information that transcends academic use:

> "[..] the fundamental aim of the module is to develop our handling of information. After taking this module, I believe that I can now handle and use information effectively both for my degree and in other areas of life."

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[16] Extract from email correspondence from a FILE participant received March 15, 2007 (Andretta, in press)

Reflective assessment strategies in AIR

As the presentation of the project occurs approximately six weeks prior to the submission of the written proposal, reflection in action is promoted by the students' interpretation of the feedback from panel on quality of their projects. The panel's comments are then used by the students to improve the final proposal, therefore reflection on action is measured in terms of the changes made to the proposal in response to the feedback received. The emphasis on reflective practice is seen as beneficial not just to enhance academic research embodied in other research modules, such as the dissertation, but also to improve professional practice:

> "The AIR module has furnished me with useful transferable skills. What are needed now are opportunities for practice and reflection – not only in my dissertation but also (hopefully) in my future career.
>
> - I hope that what is module has taught me will enable me to become better at clarifying my thoughts – reflecting critically on information I need to find and putting it to the best use. In turn this will help me to provide better services to the library/information users that I assist in their research during the course of my job.
>
> - Its emphasis on reflection – how theory and practice inform each other. Information services can be improved and expanded by Action research." [17]

Reflective assessment strategies in FILE

The e-portfolio promotes continuous professional reflection through formative assessment strategies underpinning Components 2 to 4. Here self-evaluation is complemented by feedback from peers and the tutor, and further enhanced by the use of video recording technology (Andretta, 2007c). Components 1 and 5 also enable initial and final reflection by identifying a set of CPD targets at the beginning of the course by evaluating the extent to which these have been met. A FILE participant confirms that reflection in and on action has enhanced her professional practice:

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[17] Extract from feedback to AIR, 2004 cohort.

"I am more aware of my own strengths and abilities and feel more confident in the preparation of training, setting out targets and evaluating. I have been able to take what I have learnt to my workplace and make improvements to the training offered there."[18]

Transforming impact of the three strategies

This paper proposes that the aggregate impact of these strategies is a qualitative change in the learners' awareness of information, enhancing their attitude towards learning and their overall perception of the world (Andretta 2007d; Andretta, in press). This view is based on Bruce's definition of the outcome of learning seen as:

"[..] a qualitative change in a person's way of seeing, experiencing, understanding, conceptualising something in the real world - rather than a change in the amount of knowledge which someone possesses." (Bruce, 1997, p. 60)

Evidence of this transformation is found in all three modules explored here. For example the feedback from a student who attended ILDASS shows that thanks to this module she successfully developed tool literacy that enhanced her overall academic performance:

"This [module] proved to be of great benefit for later modules as it enabled me to take notice of all the tools available to conduct and narrow down a search, whether it is on the Internet, using the newspaper database or even the university library catalogue." [19]

In AIR this transformation extends to the professional practice by equipping the students with a lifelong learning attitude needed to deal with professional challenges: "[AIR] has given me a greater confidence when dealing with academics/academia. It has made me look, increasingly, to evidence-based decision making when confronted with changes in the work environment." [20]

While in FILE the transforming impact is multifaceted and includes: a shift in the perception of Information Literacy from the teaching of information skills to the facilitation of an Information Literacy attitude, a

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[18] Extract from Component 5 submitted by a FILE participant in May 2007.

[19] Extract from Component 5 of the assessed portfolio, ILDASS cohort 2004/5.

[20] Extract from feedback to AIR, 2005 cohort.

clear increase in confidence as a professional facilitator of Information Literacy education, and the establishment of a supportive community of practice.

> "The FILE course enabled me to see Information Literacy (IL) training from a new perspective. It made me re-evaluate the fundamental need for IL training and allowed me to evaluate the process involved in preparing an IL training activity. Working with other IL trainers provided an insight into the variety of ways training sessions can be run and the peer feedback was very useful. The tutor was very supportive and encouraging. Overall I feel that the course was very useful and a great confidence builder." [21]

This means that anyone can be an advanced learner irrespective of the level of provision they operate at, but most importantly irrespective of the information literate attitude they possess when they enter in a relationship with information.

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[21] Extract from an online evaluation of FILE. Retrieved October 24, 2007, from http://FreeOnlineSurveys.com/rendersurvey.asp?sid=m2buodhd6v2ogjo274447

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