

A Network of Knowledge and Support

The development of a network of information literacy experts

INASP, 2010

Information literacy is one of the latest disciplines to reap the rewards of 'cascading training', a technique championed by INASP for its sustainability and effectiveness. The beauty of this method is that lasting relationships are forged between people in different countries facing similar challenges. Such a support network can foster the growth of information literacy in developing countries for years to come. In addition, the expertise of the local professionals who attended the initial training is both exploited and extended, making the technique doubly powerful.

"To be information literate an individual must recognize when information is needed, and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use information effectively"

American Library Association, 1989

This is how the American Library Association defined information literacy (InfoLit) in 1989. Other definitions go further, citing the duty to find and use information ethically, or the role of information in the personal, educational and occupational aspects of people's lives. One thing that is universally agreed, however, is that InfoLit is fundamental to the development of economically strong, knowledge-based societies, and to this end UNESCO launched a series of seminal workshops in 2007. Ten such events were held in the world's major geographic regions, and were designed to teach participants both the principles of InfoLit, and how to stage InfoLit workshops themselves in their own institutions.

Where we come in

One pay-off from this type of 'cascading training' is the exploitation of local expertise. Rather than send staff from INASP to run workshops in our partner countries, we nominated ten local professionals from seven of our African partner countries (Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe). With our sponsorship they attended the UNESCO Train the Trainers in Information Literacy Workshop held at the University of Cape Town in October 2008.

All of the delegates returned to their places of work – at major university or college libraries – eager to share what they had learned with professionals in institutions in their own countries. With their understanding of regional strengths and weaknesses, they have been able to custom-build training activities and hone their skills in the process: everybody wins. So far, spin-off InfoLit workshops have taken place in Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Others are in the pipeline, including one in Zambia.

Web of support

But the real benefit of such cascading is that it creates an extensive network of professionals facing similar challenges. This makes the approach sustainable because people can support each other instead of depending on organisations such as INASP. In this case, of course, links may have been forged between any of the 27 delegates at the original workshop, not just those supported by INASP.

One cheering example of networking from the InfoLit project is the relationship struck up between the participants from Kenya and Uganda, both of whom were sponsored by INASP to attend the Cape Town event. In order to sharpen her skills in event administration, Sophia Kaane, from Kenya, co-facilitated a workshop in Rwanda with the help of Peter Underwood from the University of Cape Town. Faith Akiteng from Uganda, together with Sophia, lent her InfoLit expertise to several sessions at this workshop. Sophia and Faith then went on to organise events in their own countries.

Spreading the word

Most of the delegates that INASP sponsored to attend the original workshop were drawn from university libraries in order that they had the resources, facilities and expertise in InfoLit to stage their own events. But the variety of institutions represented at the follow-up workshops was much wider, in line with UNESCO's remit of reaching as broad a cross-section of society as possible: secondary schools, colleges, universities,



An information literacy workshop group session in Ghana, 2009

“Information Literacy has been introduced as one of the components in the Library and Information Science (LIS) programme, and during library user education, InfoLit is taught. Students like the programme.”

Workshop Participant, Malawi

national libraries, and colleges devoted to nursing and teacher training. The aim is for InfoLit to trickle down to people who may have few chances to develop these skills.

The follow-up workshops

So how did the spin-off workshops measure up? Although the content of each one was tailored to meet the needs of the participants, there was a lot of common ground between them. Most included sessions exploring the history and definition of InfoLit, and allowed facilitators to gauge delegates’ existing understanding of the subject. According to Sophia, facilitator of the Kenyan workshop, this highlighted differences in participants’ ideas of what InfoLit is, and generated lively debate.

In contrast, the administrator of the Zimbabwe workshop, Agnes Chikonzo, found that most participants were already well-versed in these aspects of InfoLit and were keen to learn how to put the theory into practice. All of the workshops featured sessions on how to integrate InfoLit into existing syllabuses, with each delegate in Kenya actually developing a curriculum for their institution as an exercise. Hands-on activities such as this were very highly rated at all of the events, in contrast with passive lecture-style sessions.

Many participants were surprised to find that the training covered copyright issues and plagiarism, and were looking forward to using their new-found skills to weed out internet plagiarism from their students’ work. One delegate admitted that they would “stop referring students to the ever-intimidating library collection without knowing their needs first.”

Feedback from delegates at the Lesotho workshop showed that many were happy to have learnt about:

- the variety of search engines available other than Google
- how to assess the quality of material before using it
- evaluating the authenticity of information sources
- the use of Boolean operators to make internet searches more powerful
- possible copyright infringement when copying chapters for students
- how to access peer-reviewed articles online

Men heavily outnumbered women at four of the five follow-up workshops, but Lesotho bucked the trend with 17 women and nine men, and even made it onto the local news!

Getting organised

Strong organisation is key to the success of a series of events like this, and facilitators of the spin-off workshops praised the well-orchestrated provision of sponsorship from INASP. Training materials used at the Cape Town workshop were easy to download and adapt to meet the needs of participants at the follow-on workshops. The facilitators, of course, must take full credit for the smooth running of their own events.

Looking ahead

The workshops were so enthusiastically received by the delegates that several of the facilitators suggested they be repeated, either in their own institutions or elsewhere in their region. Indeed, workshops have already been repeated in Ghana. The few niggles mentioned by participants included slow computers, tiny fonts used in hand-outs, and too little time to practise new skills – small problems to iron out for future events. Since most of the groundwork has already been laid in producing training materials, this would be an efficient way of spreading the InfoLit word further still.

Information Literacy in Parliament

In 2008 INASP began working with parliamentary staff in several African countries to build capacity for evidence-informed policy making. Those who attended the UNESCO ‘Train the Trainers’ workshop in Cape Town, have played a key role in both developing the training approach and facilitating these workshops.

For these information literacy experts, working with policy makers has been an interesting challenge. It quickly became clear that the training approach used for academics is not always appropriate for policy makers. Many sessions needed to be adapted and some needed to be dropped entirely. For example, sessions on accessing and using academic literature are of limited use to policy makers. However, it has been interesting to note that the core components of information literacy — the ability to recognise an information problem and the skills to find appropriate information to address it — are just as pertinent for policy makers as for academics.

INASP has recently published a full set of training materials for information literacy training of policy makers. Links to the materials and further information about INASP’s work with policy makers can be found here: www.inasp.info/eipm

For more information and resources on information literacy, visit: www.inasp.info/information-literacy