

Information literacy efforts addressed to schools in Greece

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Abstract:

As we know, information literacy is an important element that defines success in higher education and in the professional world. The skills for information literacy are better developed in primary and secondary education. In Greece with the lack of school libraries in public schools to promote information literacy, the issue causes a lot of anxiety among librarians. In addition, the Greek educational system is based on the textbook and mostly on rote learning and does not give the students the possibility of exploration and the development of critical thinking skills. Several academic, special and public libraries offer informal programs to schools in their neighborhood with the intention to remedy the gap between the student abilities and the demands of higher education. In this paper, we will try to present three different cases of providing information literacy skills to Elementary, Junior and High School students in Greece.

The first involves the case of Athens College, Hellenic American Educational Foundation, a non-profit educational institution that operates two elementary, two Junior High Schools, two High Schools and an IB program. Information literacy skills are developed through a scheme where library periods are integrated into the curriculum of the students in many subject areas. The second case involves the Eugenides Foundation Library, a special library, that has developed an information literacy program, certified by the Ministry of Education and geared towards students both of elementary and high schools of the greater Athens area. Another effort that is presented involves the pilot program of the Hellenic Council of Libraries and the Institute of Educational Policy during the 2017-2018 academic year.

The above-mentioned programs are based on a student-centered teaching approach and the use of active learning and reflective practices.

Keywords: Information literacy; School libraries; Active learning; Research and Information Skills; Greek libraries

Introduction

It is well-known that information literacy is one of the fundamental 21st century skills and an important element that defines success in higher education and in the professional world. In recent years there have been several surveys in Greece that attempt to explore the status of Information literacy skills of students at various levels of university studies. The reports of these surveys reveal the gaps in students' information skills. Some examples: “*students while they consider themselves experienced in retrieving information, in their searches mainly use search engines*” (Korobili, Malliari, & Zapounidou, 2011). Furthermore, “[...] *they adopt a relatively unsophisticated, simplistic approach to searching and limited or no use of Boolean operators or other advanced searching techniques, such as the method of truncation*” (Brindesi, Monopoli, & Kapidakis, 2013). That is to say, university students lack the basic competences that they should already have acquired before finishing high school.

It seems that while this problem was noticed at the university level, students' poor acquisition of even basic information literacy skills is mainly due to the lack of organized school libraries in Greece, as the skills for information literacy are better developed in primary and secondary education. “*Except for some private schools in Greece that operate decent libraries, school libraries are not well developed*” (Glossiotis, Vassilakaki, & Semertzaki, 2019), More specifically, “*most public schools have no libraries, or their libraries are not well-organized[...] School libraries have not thrived in Greece for several reasons [...] they have been regarded as redundant in a centralized, teacher-centred system, where teaching is limited to a single textbook*” (Malliari et.al., 2014). However, the last few years, the Greek Ministry of Education has shifted towards introducing “*Student-Centred methods of teaching, such as the project method in the first grade of Lyceum, which presupposes papers and written assignments and the development of information literacy skills*” (Malliari et.al., 2014). This is an important step that attempts to provide students with lifelong learning skills, with modern inquiry-based learning approaches. Furthermore, it offers the opportunity to teachers to collaborate and use off-site libraries for their students.

As the issue causes a lot of anxiety among librarians, several academic, special and public libraries offer -mainly informal- programs to schools in their neighborhood with the intention to remedy the gap between the student abilities and the demands of higher education. This phenomenon is widely recorded in the foreign literature (Davis-Kahl, 2003; Carlito, 2009), but recent efforts have also begun in Greek libraries.

In this paper, we will try to present three different cases of providing information literacy skills to Elementary, Junior and High School students in Greece, which are highly representative of the entire landscape:

- The first involves the case of Athens College, Hellenic American Educational Foundation, where information literacy skills are developed through a scheme where library periods are integrated into the curriculum.
- The second case involves the Eugenides Foundation Library, a special library that has developed collaboration with schools in its wider area offering one-shot information literacy sessions for elementary and high school students.
- The third case refers to a pilot program of the Hellenic Council of Libraries and the Institute of Educational Policy. The National Library of Greece (NLG), one of the participating libraries worked with two public high schools and a total of 169 students and 17 teachers (March – June 2018).

Athens College- Hellenic American Educational Foundation

Background: Athens College – Hellenic American Educational Foundation is a non- profit educational institution, established in 1925 by Greeks of the diaspora, with the purpose to offer quality education to Greek students. Thanks to an extensive scholarship program, all socioeconomic classes are represented at the school.

The Foundation operates two schools, Athens College and Psychico College, on two campuses, Psychico and Kantza. The two elementary schools are at Kantza, the two Junior High and two High Schools, the kindergarten and an International Baccalaureate program that is administered by Psychico College at the Psychico campus.

There are four libraries, one for each elementary school, the main library at the Psychico campus that serves the Junior High and High School faculty and students and the library at the newly established kindergarten. They serve a total of about 5.000 students and 600 faculty and staff. The main library has about 70,000 volumes and is well equipped with 140 computers for student use and offers several important databases for research. Each of the elementary school libraries has more than 25.000 and about 25 computers for student use.

The Athens College library since its early days in the 1930's had a "user education" program and the school curriculum included in High School, library periods for the writing of an extensive history paper based on research.

Since the early 1990's with the new worldwide emphasis on Research and Information Skills, a series of programs were put in action at the main library. The question is always how can a school library assist students with their information literacy skills (IL), their critical thinking skills and the avoidance of plagiarism?

The goals of all four libraries is to teach students, according to their level:

- to locate, retrieve and use the information they need using all available media (printed and electronic sources) starting with the kindergarten;
- to expose them to a variety of sources.
- students are being taught how to formulate research questions, carry out research using appropriate sources, printed and electronic, evaluate information, take notes and use information without plagiarizing it, and finally make a synthesis and cite their sources (MLA 8). Usually the work is presented orally with the use of a PPT or a poster. Emphasis is placed on the searching methodology and the acquisition of skills, rather than the acquisition of knowledge.

During the many years of practicing the above, it was determined that the goals are best achieved when the research project and the IL are integrated in the curriculum through short research projects in a variety of subject areas.

Implementation: At the kindergarten and elementary schools, there is a weekly library period in the curriculum of each grade. Research projects are prepared by the librarians according to curricula needs, especially now that the schools have adopted the Primary Years Program (PYP). Great effort is made to keep them short, in order to accommodate other needs like activities to foster the love for reading and the borrowing of books by students. However, even books that students are asked to read in the summer are used for research purposes, their themes offering possibilities for further information finding activities.

At the Junior High and High School, IL is developed through research projects integrated in various subject courses and also through the "Research Project" in High School. All projects are carried out through close Teacher-Librarian collaboration.

In Junior High school, a one period weekly course called "Research and Information Skills" was introduced through the English Department and taught by librarians. The skills taught through a mix of theory and practice exercises included: parts of the book and bibliography, the Decimal Classification System and the way to locate a book, the online catalog and the way to use keywords and get the best results. Also discussed was the approach to get the best results from the internet. The second part of the course was the application of the acquired skills through a research project on an animal, a different one for each student. Here the skills of note taking, summarizing and paraphrasing were addressed. Also, the important one of making a synthesis of the information collected. At first students had a physical portfolio but since 2008-2009 there was a gradual move to an electronic portfolio through the use of CMS (Course Management System by Microsoft) and more recently of Managebac.

The same idea at a more advanced level and with more emphasis on the evaluation and use of electronic sources was conducted in 10th grade, again through the English Department. The skills acquired through these programs were reinforced with short research projects, meticulously prepared by the librarians, in many subject areas: Modern Greek literature, English, history, home economics, geography, technology, religion, career guidance. Students came out of this vigorous teaching equipped with excellent skills. Graduates who went to the university, expressed their gratitude as to how well prepared they were to face the challenges of higher education studies. However, curriculum changes and the loss of the extra period from the English Department meant that the library had to adapt and devise a new course of action. Also, the progressing greater reliance on the electronic sources required that some skills had to be dealt with earlier, either at the elementary school level, or at the early grades of Junior High, e.g. the evaluation and bibliography of internet sources.

Recently, the school periods devoted to a structured information literacy program have been reduced and have been incorporated into the course of Home Economics.

Rewards and challenges. By devising and implementing information literacy program the library actively participates in the educational program of the school. The librarian becomes a teacher/librarian and the creator of educational material. Students get the best possible preparation for higher education and for life. Their critical thinking skills are developed. Information literacy provides them not only with academic skills, but also with life skills. Teachers get more involved with concepts that only lately have become part of their pedagogical approach. Plagiarism can be limited with the use of special software like Turnitin, Athens College is using, it but it is best to teach students through a systematic and structured approach how to avoid it altogether.

The challenges are many. Librarians involved with information literacy courses face a heavy workload. They have to prepare all the teaching material needed, follow up the work of the students, assist them individually while they work on a task. They need to be flexible and be able to move from one subject area to the next during a single day. Collaboration with teachers is an important element of success as is the ability to adapt to constant change. To have a successful information literacy program one needs the support of the institution, qualified librarians and an adequate infrastructure - a good collection, an adequate number of computers for the students. The support of the institution and of the faculty needs to be constantly negotiated and reevaluated.

Eugenides Foundation Library program

The second case of our paper involves the program of the Eugenides Foundation Library (EFL), a special library focusing on certain scientific and technical fields, but also with

collections comprising a variety of other subject categories. It is over 15 years since the EFL launched its first program for student groups, as an initiative to meet their needs observed through the daily contact with kids, while helping them with their assignments in the youth section of the Library. From this constant contact with students, the EFL librarians have been given the opportunity to notice some typical examples of difficulties the students face during the process of information searching, respectively to those mentioned in our introduction. For example, they were feeling embarrassed when they were offered a lot of material from different sources; they considered sufficient for their schoolwork to simply photocopy some pages from the first book in which they would find information, or to copy and paste the first result of Google searching; in many cases, they were feeling unable to locate the information needed and they had to ask the librarians to find it for them.

By identifying these problems, a program for schools was decided to be launched, initially aimed at familiarizing the students with the organization of the Library, as well as, with the use of its various bibliographic resources and advanced tools. Over the years this program was constantly evolving and formulating with increasingly clearer targets for the students, as to create new knowledge based on discovering the appropriate information through the resources of the library, to develop search skills, to understand the search methodology and the necessity to use a combination of online and printed resources to cross-check the information for their research projects. In that way, the program is currently formulated in the context of information literacy, is certified by the Ministry of Education, and is geared towards both elementary -of the last two classes- and high school students of the greater Athens area.

This current program is the result of a series of special features that had to be taken into consideration, and of solutions that had to be adopted for various problems encountered, as described below:

- The continuous interaction with the students has revealed a series of equally important issues with the above mentioned, such as the following: the majority of them has no previous experience of a library, as a result of the fact of non-existence of organized libraries in the public schools; being used to the well-known copy-paste method their main concern is to gather an abundance of information that a lot of times proves to be irrelevant or unnecessary; they exhibit weakness in the selection of suitable information towards the focus of their schoolwork; although students may feel comfortable with looking for information on the Internet, they do not know how to identify and choose the information they need and more important, how to evaluate it; they select data not scientifically accurate or data that have changed throughout the development of scientific research; they have just a slight idea of copyright issues and how they can use appropriate referencing in order to show respect for others' intellectual property.
- As can be seen, the identified needs are many and varied. On the other hand, there are many limitations that have to be faced, with lack of time being the greatest one, due to the fact that EFL is not a school library. It can just play the role of an external school collaborator.
- Embedded librarianship and integration of information literacy into the school curriculum is the best solution for covering all the students' information needs, but of little use to the librarian who works outside of the school.
- So, certainly, EFL could not be in a position to cover the whole range of the emerged information literacy issues, as its librarians have to work with classes for single sessions - at best of three school hours-, which are commonly referred to among librarians as "one-shots".

- What also concluded is that the students, in order to appreciate the value of a library session must be in need of the information for the accomplishment of their own assignments. In that way, by seeing an immediate and practical application, they become engaged, and express more interest. This detail is estimated important; that's why effort is given so that any one-shot library session to be based on that need.
- This means that it is preferable for school visits to take place at post-focus stage. Having reached at a focus the students would be more receptive to learning about new resources and more advanced search techniques. They are more ready and eager to find, evaluate and use appropriate information
- This also means that each meeting with students is different and tailored to the schoolwork of each group.
- Consequently, the need for collaboration with course instructors also emerged. In order the goals to be met, a previous contact with the teachers is sought before any school visit, so as librarians to collect the necessary information about the students' assignments and their objectives. Appropriate previous preparation is necessary, as no time should be wasted.

Regarding the way of implementation, for the selection of the appropriate methodology, the international literature has been extensively studied, which has revealed a variety of methods used internationally for the creation of information literacy programs. Constructivism frame, reflective and active learning were selected, following also the action research principles. In that way, learning is succeeded as an active process, with the librarian being a facilitator of learning, and not another teacher. Also, the learner-student builds meaning by connecting new information to its prior knowledge, and information skills are "taught" to students when and where there is a need during the process; not as a lesson. For example, the basic tool features are presented just at the beginning of the procedure, leaving space for students to test and try these tools actively and creatively during their research process. This option was selected, given that the focus is on the research process and the actual use of printed and digital resources, not on the detailed learning of their features. It is also obvious that this kind of methods require continuous assessment of pupils' needs and of the development of their skills.

The results of the work in EFL are interesting and positive. Under the librarians' supervision, and indirect consultation, students, working in small teams, have the opportunity to use its printed material (books and journals) as well as its digital resources to locate the appropriate information they need for their assignments. A lot of times they find additional or different data to what they have already located on the Web. In this way they can compare and cross-check their data by using various kinds of resources. It is obvious that, by means of the use of appropriate and varied resources, a series of other needs of students are covered. The EFL program helps students experience and participate in knowledge acquisition; throughout the program, they are actively engaged in critical thinking, by evaluating and selecting information towards their inquiry focus and by being involved in search strategies; they understand the differences of sources as well as which source is best used on a case-by-case basis; they acquire proficiencies to explore a topic further; they learn how to learn, instead of rote memorization.

It is worth mentioning that in addition to this main program, EFL has designed and implemented at a pilot stage, a series of new intriguing programs. The idea behind them is that the trigger for information search is given by other actions of the Eugenides Foundation. So, the Library on the basis of certain questions raised by the planetarium shows or the

exhibits of the Science and Technology Center of the Foundation, extends students' knowledge through its collections, while introducing them, at the same time, to the basic principles of the research methodology.

The third case to be discussed here, is the initiative to assist public school students, aged 15 to 18, with their information skills through a pilot program introduced in 2017-2018 by **the Hellenic General Council of Libraries and the Institute of Educational Policy**, both reporting to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. The objective was for librarians of public libraries to support both teachers and students in dealing with a newly introduced project in the High School curriculum called "The creative project". The project could be on a variety of topics and teachers were coached by the librarians in how best to determine those topics so that students could deal with a contained and well-defined subject. The pilot was very successful, and all parties involved were very pleased with the experience gained and with the outcome. It remains to be seen if this initiative will continue in the future or it will remain an isolated effort.

The cases presented in this paper represent information literacy best practices in Greece. A lot more needs to be done for the students of the primary and secondary public school system.

Despite the challenges, a strong information literacy program is a must in today's educational context, a necessity that will train future citizens on how to deal with the mass of information and with the multitude of fake news that come from everywhere.

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