

A Key to Success for 21st Century Learners: Information Literacy

By Mathew Bellhouse-King

"[Information literacy] is a basic human right in the digital world and promotes the inclusion of all nations." (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2005)

Having passed through the agricultural and industrial revolutions, we find ourselves firmly in the information revolution of the 21st century. Characterized by the development of the personal computer in the 1970s and the Internet reaching a tipping point in the 1990s, economies are now shifting from machine-based manufacturing to the manipulation of information. Technology has exponentially increased our ability to share information and instantly access knowledge that would otherwise have been unavailable. This has caused a profound impact on modern society, precipitating a growing necessity for information literacy.

Literacy traditionally included the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic; however, with recent technological developments, the definition of literacy has expanded. Literacy includes computer literacy, the ability to use computer hardware, such as a keyboard, and computer software, such as web browsers and email. Requiring competency in these skills, information literacy is the ability to locate, evaluate, and use information.

Information literacy is not a creation of the 21st century, as we have always had to locate, evaluate, and use information to answer questions and solve problems. What has changed is that we now have access to more information than we ever had in human history, making the ability to be information literate a critically important skill for the education and economic success of children of the 21st century. The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) released a report delineating the fundamentally different educational and economic realities children today face in comparison to children of the 20th century.

	20th Century	21st Century
Number Jobs/Lifetime	1-2 jobs	10-15 jobs (US Department of Labor 2004)
Job Requirement	Mastery of one field	Simultaneous mastery of many rapidly changing fields
Job Completion	Local	Global
Work Model	Routine; hands-on; fact based	Non-routine; technical; creative; interactive
Education Model	Institution centered; formal degree attainment is primary goal	Learner centered; self-directed, lifelong learning is primary goal
Organizational Culture	Top down	Multidirectional (bottom up, top down, side to side, etc.)

Table courtesy of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Museums, Libraries, and 21st Century Skills, 2009, <http://www.imls.gov/pdf/21stcenturyskills.pdf>

Children today will need to develop information literacy skills in order to be self-directed lifelong learners and be competitive in our global information economy. This is where the role of libraries, as centers of learning, and librarians, as stewards of information, play a significant role in the education of the 21st century learner. Librarians are information professionals, teachers, and partners in education. The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills have spearheaded information literacy standards and frameworks for implementing these standards nationally. Along with other initiatives, these standards propose greater collaboration between librarians and teachers (e.g., joint lesson planning and co-teaching), to develop students' information literacy skills. A strong grounding in information literacy skills is dependent on the collaboration between librarians and teachers and is critical to the successful education of children for the demands of the 21st century and information age.

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