

The arrival of information literacy

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Abstract

Paul Zurkowski coined the term Information Literacy in 1974, since then it has evolved into a dynamic research area within Library and Information Science, with many milestones achieved in Europe and the United States, reflected in English-written literature. This issue of *Developing Latin America* traces an alternative route, exploring the arrival of information literacy to the region and its main developments.

Keywords: Latin America, development, information literacy

Information Literacy (IL) involves the most basic competences that might ensure our countries' development through the education, advancement, and emancipation of its citizens. Although the concept has been defined with many different nuances, there is international agreement in relating it to an individual's proficiency in accessing, using, and evaluating information.

The arrival of information literacy

In the late 80s and early 90s, regional IL related academic discussions were still around concepts such as user formation (understood as the German *bildung*). Until now, the adoption of IL as a concept has been far from a common agreement. Three main denominations have been used: user formation, development of information skills (or competences), and a literal translation of IL (not necessarily correct given Latin American languages and contexts), introduced by researchers from Spain. The former has fallen into disuse, while the latter is the most extended denomination and it seems it will remain dominant, for the amount of researchers using it.

During the 1990s, there was an emerging key regional need of building increasingly complex, larger and stronger information systems, while having insufficient information demand (regarding both user attendance and requests) in order to justify this labor and the work of information professionals generally. Demand was lacking in quantity and quality; users were mostly satisfied by using textbooks and not journals or English resources. Furthermore, the issue at stake was beyond ideas such as bibliographic instruction, user training, and guided tours to libraries, which are activities of showing users what we have, but not necessarily teaching them how to use it. Hence, the first IL advocates had to make colleagues realize this was a strategic way to address this need. Although library stakeholders did not necessarily have the idea of IL, fortunately they already recognized the key need.

The 61st International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) World Conference in Istanbul was important for the arrival of IL in LA. Some LA professionals such as Mexican Jesús Lau attended; intrigued by the concept and mainly

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Rader's (1995) presentation, and upon their return they started to learn more to develop initiatives in their institutions. The earliest literature in Spanish to explicitly mention the term IL is the translations of the Association of College & Research Libraries' *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* and 1999's *Information literacy in the reference environment: Preparing for the future* (Rader, 2000). Documents written by LA researchers are Vega (2000), Cordoba (2000), and Hernandez (2001). It may be possible to find earlier examples written in Spain, but that would go beyond the present scope. In 2003, IFLA's Information Literacy Section was formed and Lau was its first president, who was also responsible for one of the key IL documents: *Guidelines on Information Literacy for Lifelong Learning* (Lau, 2007). The *Guidelines* gave IFLA visibility and some importance with regard to IL for the following decade, which helped make the topic known in smaller LA countries where it was previously unknown.

The first IL initiatives in LA can be traced to the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juarez (UACJ) in Mexico, which might be one of the precursors in the field; at least it was the first university in Mexico and most probably in LA. UACJ had the key need described above, but was yet to identify its name and implications for academia, although they started working on it after some conceptual workshops. They organized the first regional IL-related conference in 1997, the *1st National Meeting on Developing of Information Skills*. Its aim was to promote the topic in the country and invite international experts to deepen IL discussion, understanding, advocacy, and pushing initiatives from libraries and universities. The conference had the presence of and presentations from regional institutions and academics still active in the field and produced the first IL declaration in the world (Aguilar et al., 1997), predating the Prague Declaration, which was written in 2003. Many conferences followed and they were positive for the field in LA, by facilitating the circumstances and giving academics the motivation to write, publish, network and collaborate with peers. They allowed LA researchers to mobilize and be known in the region.

Information literacy in Latin American countries

Around 2009, IFLA's Information Literacy Section created InfoLit Global, a website to store IL materials produced worldwide, but it has been abandoned. However, after the site was created, a set of resources was launched under the name AlfinIberoamerica and started to be constructed as part of a doctoral research (Uribe-Tirado, 2013). The wiki 'Information literacy in Ibero-America: State of the art' (AlfinIberoamerica, 2015)¹ is possibly the most comprehensive referential resource in the field of IL in the region, and although it includes Spain and Portugal, it is possible to locate references to documents developed by academics from most LA countries. The other resources use data from the wiki: a map² that displays libraries and projects with IL experiences, and the IL timeline³ that presents milestones, publications and experiences from 1985 to the present.

Table 1 was constructed with data gathered from the AlfinIberoamerica (2015) wiki, with 1329 references corresponding to LA, ranking countries by their development of IL. The first column indicates the countries, the second the intellectual production: the sum of articles, conference presentations, books and book chapters, videos and web content; the third column indicates the number of events and conferences; the fourth reflects the number of documented experiences and courses; and the last contains the number of theses. Leading countries have high numbers in all the characteristics measured and the amount of theses produced seems to be a clear factor in the development of IL. Every country has interesting developments that would be a challenge to even summarize in this space. Hence, we provide brief insights into the top three countries: Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia. Brazil entered the field later but it has already surpassed Mexico. Brazil has many researchers, theses, and the conference *Information Competence: Scenarios and Tendencies*, which had its third edition in 2014. Relevant Brazilian institutions are: the University of Brasilia; Paulista State University (UNESP); and the Brazilian Institute of Science and Technology Information (IBICT). In Mexico, conferences have led the field and it might be important to study this influence. At the moment of writing, the UACJ has hosted both the first and the most recent regional IL conferences, in 1997 and 2014 respectively. Important Mexican institutions regarding IL are: UACJ; the Institute of Library Research of the National Autonomous University (IIBI – UNAM); and College of Mexico. Colombia has very relevant production and experiences. A good amount of Colombia's success in IL, and arguably for the push of the field at a regional level, has been due to the labor of Uribe-Tirado as an academic,

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advocate and communicator through the Alfinberoamerica websites he has been responsible for. Noteworthy institutions are: the Inter-American Librarianship School of the University of Antioquia; the Department of Information Science of the Pontifical Javerian University; and the National Network of Public Libraries.

Table 1. Latin American information literacy scientific production, conferences, experiences and theses

Country	Production	Conferences	Experiences	Theses
Brazil	203	7	33	30
Mexico	204	8	27	20
Colombia	150	6	23	13
Cuba	149	7	11	22
Chile	44	2	16	24
Argentina	57	2	13	1
Puerto Rico	41	0	15	5
Venezuela	45	3	5	7
Peru	47	3	6	2
Costa Rica	17	1	3	3
Uruguay	20	0	1	3
Ecuador	6	0	2	0
Bolivia	6	0	0	0
Dominican Republic	5	0	0	0
El Salvador	1	0	2	0
Honduras	1	0	2	0
Guatemala	2	0	0	0
Paraguay	1	0	0	1
Panama	1	0	0	0
Nicaragua	0	0	0	0

Information literacy declarations

IL researchers recognize the Prague Declaration as the first IL declaration, written by the Information Literacy Meeting of Experts organized by the US National Commission on Library and Information Science and the National Forum on Information Literacy in the Czech Republic. However, as we have stated, the declaration produced in the first UACJ conference (Aguilar et al., 1997) predates it. Table 2 details the dates, places and names of the eight declarations made in LA, specifically in Mexico, Panama, Peru, Venezuela, Brazil, and Cuba.

Conference declarations are important advocacy instruments which are brief and signed by many experts; they are the product of a consensus, so may become voluntary guidelines, and are useful to communicate professional concerns to societies. However, in LA we must review their impact; determine how they are being used (if they are) by IL stakeholders, and further disseminate them among experts to improve our understanding from these milestones in order to build from them.

Information literacy with a Latin American flavor

Taking a look at international conferences such as the European Conference on Information Literacy (ECIL), now preparing its third edition, we have a long way to go. Although the concept is from the 1970s, it took a while to start in LA. There are many IL facets that are being worked worldwide that we are just getting at (e.g. pedagogies, scientific, for schools, for businesses), and we have to work toward further and more powerful ways to analyze and disseminate our developments, as well as transcending the English language barrier in order to gain international visibility.

Our education systems are a current challenge, because some of them are still centered on textbooks and not diverse sources. This is why students might graduate from different levels with deficient information competences. Another issue of the developing world in general is to start initiatives, publications, and even conferences without properly researching or using

Table 2. Information literacy declarations produced in Latin America

Date	Place	Name
1997	Ciudad Juarez, Mexico	Development of information skills in Mexico's higher education institutions
1999	Ciudad Juarez, Mexico	Library's role in learning-centered educational models
2002	Ciudad Juarez, Mexico	Information literacy guidelines for higher education
2008	Panama	XXI Century Central American librarians and information services
2009	Lima, Peru	Lima Declaration, information literacy workshop: Training the trainers
2010	San Cristobal, Venezuela	Paramillo Declaration for information literacy
2011	Maceio, Brazil	Maceio Declaration on information competences
2012	Havana, Cuba	Havana Declaration: 15 information literacy actions from Ibero-America
2013	Florianopolis, Brazil	Manifest on information competences, minorities and vulnerable communities

scientific values; an irony because it reflects poor IL. Academic developments do not take place in a void. If we paid more attention to each other we could build bigger things. However, the perspective is positive: professionals with leadership qualities both in institutions and as researchers are aware of IL opportunities. In LA, we do things very passionately. Generally, we do not have all the necessary resources; we continue working in the face of difficulties. If we could just review with proper IL what we have done to get here, how did we get here, and what we have thought and dreamt from the academia, society and literature, we would achieve regional integration and development. We could build marvelous things.

Notes

1. <http://alfiniberoamerica.wikispaces.com>
2. <https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=zIpU6uLMCMsA.krgexwtUNHBI&usp=sharing>
3. <http://www.dipity.com/alfiniberoamerica>

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