Information Skills (InfoSkills) training has become a crucial service that MMU Library offers to students. This training involves more than just teaching students how to use a database or find a particular book on the shelves. InfoSkills is about developing students’ critical awareness about information, enabling them to evaluate resources for quality and relevance to assignments and to use them effectively in the work they produce. InfoSkills teaching at MMU Library aims to equip students with skills that they can apply across all aspects of their studies and encourages them to become better independent learners.

As Johnston (2003) says, “both academic and library staff are in the business of enabling students to become more successful independent learners. Students who are critical in their thinking, motivated and confident in managing their learning, and who have developed good research and information skills, will be much more able to take on the challenges of higher education and lifelong learning” (accessed online).

This paper will highlight the link between InfoSkills training and independent learning, showing that the training provided by MMU Library equips students with the research and information skills needed when learning independently through their studies and beyond.

Information literacy theory and independent learning

The development of good research and information skills is vital for today’s students, who are contending with an increasing amount of choice in the range and quality of information resources available to them. In many ways, the growth in recent years of electronic resources – such as electronic books, journals, databases and websites – has increased the potential for students to learn independently as they can now access information outside of the physical campus in the online learning environment. Yet the overwhelming amount of unmediated resources also presents a challenge for students, who can be burdened by information overload if they are lacking in the skills needed to find and use information effectively (Andretta, 2005). As Diana Laurillard (1996) surmises, “it is as absurd to try and solve the problems of education by giving people access to bricks”. In order to address this issue, students need to become information literate; this is defined by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) as:

“knowing when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner” (2004, accessed online).

Information literacy or information skills training plays a key role in the development of independent learners in an academic environment where students are encouraged to go beyond reading lists and recommended texts to discover and exploit information on their own.

The theoretical framework behind InfoSkills training at MMU is founded on the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) seven pillars of information literacy. The SCONUL paper Information Skills in Higher Education (1999) (see Figure 1) identified ‘the seven headline skills’ needed in order for a learner to progress from being a “competent information user” to a person with a more advanced level of “reflection and critical awareness of information as an intellectual resource” (p.8-9).
Figure 1 illustrates these seven skills:

- Recognise information needed
- Distinguish ways of addressing gap
- Construct strategies for locating
- Locate and access
- Compare and evaluate
- Organise, apply and communicate
- Synthesise and create

![Figure 1](image)

The SCONUL model influenced (2002). After surveying good practice in information literacy teaching across the HE sector, the project team established eight key skills (Figure 2) that make an information literate student. As shown in this diagram, these skills reflect the seven skills identified in the SCONUL model:

![Figure 2](image)

As these models illustrate, in order to be information literate students must be able to recognise when they need information and have a strategic approach to addressing their need. They must have the skills to retrieve information from a variety of sources and be able to critically evaluate the quality of the material found in terms of relevance, currency, bias and authority. Students also need to be able to interpret information using appropriate methods. Finally, they have to be able to review this process in order to manage and reflect upon the experience of learning. These skills form the basis of current InfoSkills training at MMU. The InfoSkills programme is built on the notion that library training must involve more than simply teaching students how to access a database or use the library catalogue. It takes a more holistic approach that helps students develop these skills and enables them to progress from being competent users of information to becoming information literate.

The importance of developing information skills in students reaches far beyond helping them write an essay or complete other coursework. The skills associated with information literacy help foster independent learning and prepare students for lifelong learning. The emphasis on training students how to think critically and independently about information and its sources, and how to find, use and manage it—in other words, to learn how to learn—aims to give students skills that can be applied to all areas of university study and are transferable beyond the classroom, into the workplace and everyday life. This connection between information literacy, independent learning and lifelong learning is illustrated...
Therefore, as Andretta (2005) points out, current government and university agendas to equip HE graduates with the skills for independent learning and other competencies for working successfully in the modern knowledge-based economy should acknowledge the fundamental importance of information literacy training in meeting this aim.

InfoSkills in practice at MMU Library

The Big Blue model of an information literate person was translated into a practical framework of competencies for MMU. The Big Blue Project’s eight key skills were adapted and modified to users’ needs and became the InfoSkills “5 steps to success” (Figure 4): This model offers students a strategic approach to finding information for their next assignment; it also demonstrates to students that undertaking scholarly research is a cyclical process which can be built upon with each new assignment. Students are encouraged to employ this model in all their work, and by following this process they can become competent independent learners.

InfoSkills sessions focus on these five steps:

• Step 1 – Shows students how to plan their search by defining their topic, highlighting their keywords and considering alternative terms.

• Step 2 – Demonstrates how to find the information they need by introducing students to a range of high quality academic resources and displaying the most effective techniques for finding information within them.

• Step 3 – Highlights the importance of critically evaluating information, with particular emphasis on web resources, and informs students how to do this.

• Step 4 – Focuses on organising and using that information including how to cite references and avoid plagiarism.

• Step 5 – Stresses the importance of reviewing the whole process for future work by understanding what worked well or did not work well and responding to feedback.

1 The Department for Education and Skills White Paper, The future of higher education (2003) recognises that: “This is truly an era of lifelong learning” where “independent learners … will underpin innovation and enterprise in the economy and society” (p.16).
Training materials have been designed for four different levels – level one aimed at first year undergraduates, moving up to level four for postgraduate students. As the levels progress, students are introduced to new resources and more in-depth search strategies so that each level builds upon and enhances students’ information literacy skills.

In all InfoSkills sessions students apply the five steps to their current assignments. Although the sessions do teach students the skills to search a particular database, once they have learned a search strategy in a training session they can then proceed and apply this technique to other resources as well. Training is typically tailored to each student’s subject area and focuses on research for coursework they are in the process of undertaking. Such tailoring needs to be the result of collaboration between librarians and academic staff. By delivering training in this way, which is timely and relevant to students and which they are able to apply immediately, it is hoped that the skills learned will be easily retained and put into practice in future independent study.

Students are encouraged to see how the whole process can be applied to everyday problems as well. For instance, in the first version of InfoSkills level one, the process was likened to booking a holiday so that students could apply the model to their own lives outside of university. By seeing the link to everyday situations they were able to understand the importance and relevance of the process.

Recognising that students throughout the university will benefit from receiving InfoSkills training by a range of methods, the library has developed training materials in various formats and mediums. Many training sessions are delivered in classroom workshops which allow students practical PC time to apply skills they have seen demonstrated. However, workshops cannot always be accommodated and in order to support those students who are either only seen in a lecture environment or those who are not seen at all, the library offers alternative methods of delivery and support. Lectures can be supported by workbooks, giving students materials that they can refer back to and review in their own time. The library also has a growing number of online training materials, such as INFORMS tutorials – available via the library website\(^2\) – that provide online step-by-step instructions for using electronic resources. These tutorials use a split-screen format which allows students to read through a guide on the left-hand side of the screen while working through searches on the live database on the right. WebCT modules are also available for students, giving them access to InfoSkills training on or off campus. One example of good practice in this area is the WebCT online tutorial currently undertaken by all undergraduate students in MMU’s Business School. Completion of this tutorial is mandatory as part of the first year Personal Development Unit. Such online training allows students to learn at a pace and time most suitable for them. To make these independent modes of learning most effective, online materials include quizzes and self-tests for students to check their understanding and progress. Students are also supported in their learning by being encouraged to contact the library if needed, and help is offered by phone, email or face to face.

Conclusion

The library’s InfoSkills training provides a crucial step towards meeting MMU’s aim to “be a university which produces independent autonomous learners” (Manchester Metropolitan University, 2005, p.1). With an increasing shift towards e-learning in the university and a growing expectation for students to learn independently, it is vital that students are given opportunities to build their skills and competencies for autonomous learning. Information literacy is a fundamental element in the development of independent learners, with information skills being essential for effective learning in Higher Education in the twenty-first century. Yet for students to see the relevance of InfoSkills training and for these skills to be retained and transferred to all aspects of university study and beyond, it is also important that academics and librarians work together to develop appropriate strategies for delivering this training to students so that the greatest benefits can be achieved.

For more information, see the InfoSkills section of the library website at: http://www.library.mmu.ac.uk or contact your subject librarian.

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\(^2\) To view an example of one of the library’s INFORMS tutorials, go to: http://inhale.hud.ac.uk/perl/jump.pl?28-1637 for a tutorial on searching for journal articles on the ASSIA database. (Please note: Pop-up blockers must be removed in order to access the tutorial. The tutorial only works in Internet Explorer.)
Knowledge Cafés

Knowledge cafés, also known as ‘conversation cafés’ or ‘roundtables’ are based on the socialization approach to Knowledge Management (Demarest, 1997; McAdam & McCreedy, 1999) which places communication at the heart of the creation and sharing of knowledge (More, 1999). The aim is to bring people together to share knowledge or experiences and to learn from each other through informal discussion. Well planned cafés “foster collaborative dialogue, active engagement and constructive possibilities for action” (World Café Community, 2002); attributes which would be of obvious benefit to those involved in teaching and learning.

A knowledge café involves progressive rounds of conversation around a central theme or problem. Cafés can be held around any subject, general or specific. For example “Overcoming problems with the assignment”, “The future of Knowledge Management”.

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This paper discusses the use of the knowledge café as a learning and teaching method in higher education. It presents an actual case where knowledge cafés were used in final year undergraduate teaching at MMUBS, including an analysis of qualitative data on the student experience.