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Muswazi, Paiki

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The InfoLit Portal: a New Enhancement for Teaching & Learning

By
Paiki Muswazi
Senior Librarian (Education & Training)
<E-mail: paikim@library.wits.ac.za>
Tel.: (011)-717-1953

Background

The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) is committed to maintaining and enhancing its position as a leading university by sustaining globally competitive standards of excellence in learning, teaching and research (Wits 2006). One of its strategic priorities is to develop its reputation as a research driven university and to enrich its undergraduate teaching (Wits 2005). It is in this light that one of the focus teaching and learning areas across all disciplines is the development of information literacy competencies. Specifically, and in compliance with national standards, Wits students are required to demonstrate the ability to collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information in order to successfully complete their degree programs (Wits 2006). These competencies are invaluable in the information and knowledge society where the creation, sharing, manipulation and use of information and knowledge are the key determinants of economic and cultural prosperity [Ministry for Information Technology]. Among some of the library's interventions is the development of subject portals and intensification of information skills training of students and academic staff (Ubogu 2005).

During the past year, the University Library has focused on developing "subject portals" in a number of disciplines, including Accounting and Psychology, Education and Mining Engineering/GeoSciences. The embryo Accounting portal was showcased as part of the Library's presentation at the 2005 Teaching & Learning Symposium. Portals facilitate access to the extensive range of electronic resources available in a discipline, and add value to teaching & learning by including links to a range of service sites such as citation styles, plagiarism policies, guides to preparing assignments and other discipline-related

sources. A portal is initiated by the Library staff and developed in collaboration with teaching (and research) academic staff in the relevant disciplines. Lakos (2001) succinctly observes that "subject portals empower library users to get what they want when they want it and have a huge impact on learning outcomes for the students, enhance research and build better learning communities". At Wits, subject portals represent a significant step in bringing users closer to information resources. Yet, to a considerable extent, optimizing on the teaching and learning opportunities presented by portals depends on the adequacy and spread of information competencies across the Wits research, teaching and learning community.

A recurring concern from academic staff is that students do not know how to identify a journal article citation, how to find journals in e-Wits (i.e. the Wits Library catalogue) and physically get hold of an article, and, they cannot easily find articles from online databases. Similar uncertainties are evident among academic staff. In ongoing consultations on how the library could best serve academic staff, one lecturer indicated a need to get training on "… how to use abstracts" while another observed that "I can't get what I'm looking for though I'm not sure if I'm doing the right thing" . These are issues hindering research, teaching and learning.

The Library believes, in accordance with international practice, that information literacy - the ability to recognize when information is needed, locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information (American Library Association 1989) - underpins success in learning and therefore should facilitate and be incorporated into, teaching. Although the library has collaborated with academic staff in both the ongoing development of subject portals and the provision of information literacy training classes for students (covering electronic access to resources, easy journal article access, e-Wits, structured searching, managing and organizing search results, services such as interlibrary loans, and, remote access procedure), the recurring concerns indicate that not all may be benefiting. The need for information skills training was aptly captured by one student who, after going through one of the sessions run by the Library observed: "…make the rest of the campus know about the course because it is very beneficial for people who are doing research."

In order to bridge the gap between resources and academic staff and students and help improve research, teaching and learning, the library is launching the Information Literacy (InfoLit) portal. More importantly, InfoLit aims to facilitate further integration of information skills into Wits curricular in order to improve teaching and learning.

Goals

This paper offers an overview of the new InfoLit portal. It addresses the question: "What's in it for the Wits user community", specifically (i) students, and (ii) academic staff. Library professional and support services staff also benefit.

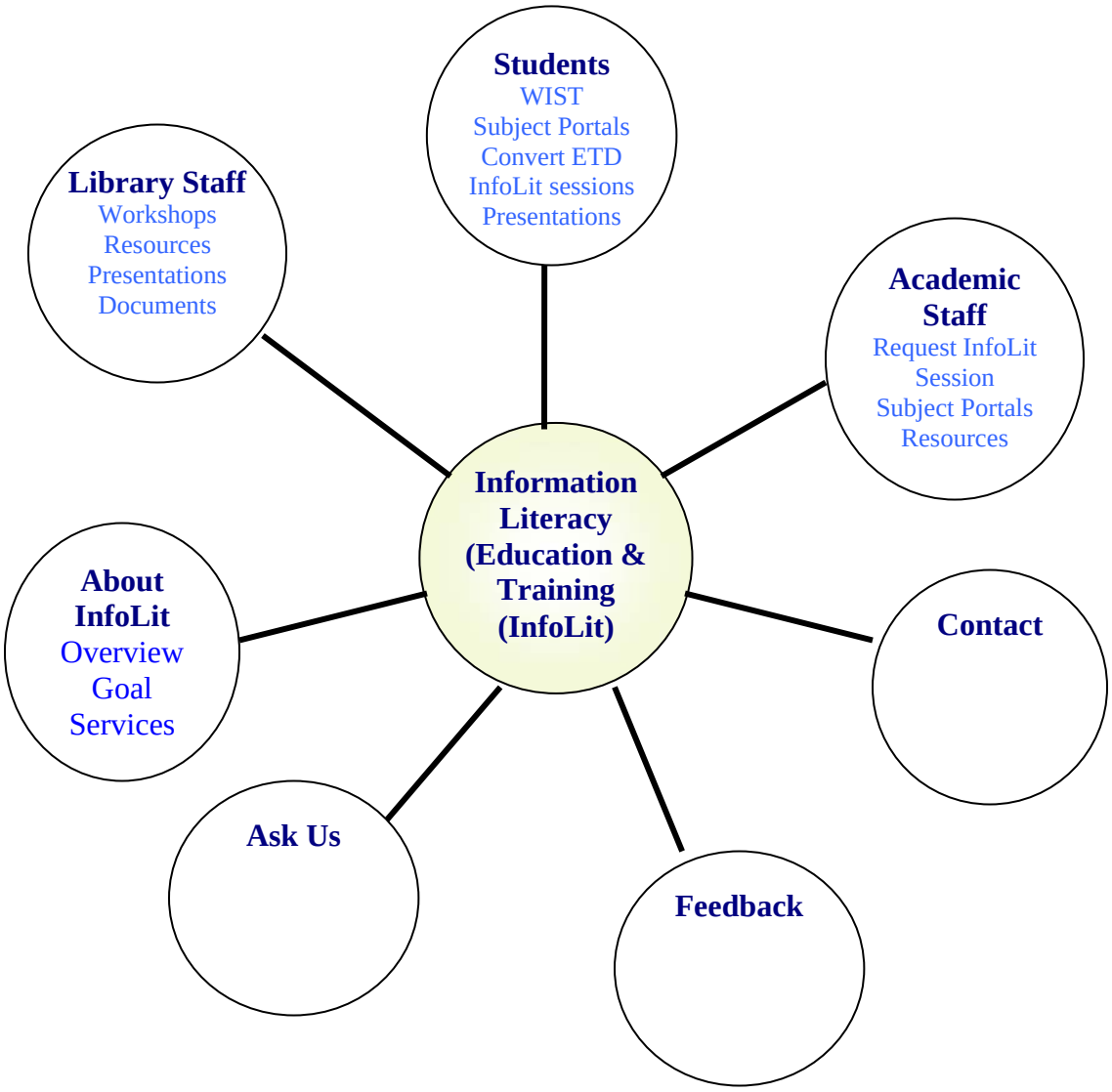
The paper demonstrates the role of the InfoLit portal in enhancing the use of resources for students and academic staff in learning and teaching. Particular attention is given to the generic online Wits Information Skills Tutorial (WIST), the Subject portals and online information skills session requests and feedback facilities. In conclusion, the paper highlights follow-up initiatives: (i) subject specific information literacy training programmes linked to the information competencies required by various degree programmes, and (ii) use of InfoLit as the platform for compilation of quality reading lists and design of assignments that assess student acquisition of information skills, where appropriate.

The InfoLit portal

The InfoLit portal is based on the models propounded by McDonald (2004) and Gilbert (2000) of a Web-based gateway that provides points of access to **information** and **tools** for constituent groups and community/learning hubs. With the deployment of subject portals since 2005, it became increasingly essential to rethink library education and training programmes to enable users to effectively and efficiently navigate the emerging information terrain. The InfoLit portal is a pivotal and logical framework for updating user skills and knowledge to enable them to easily find the information available from the increasing number of customized subject portals. It serves to seamlessly connect subject content on the one hand and information finding skills on the other. Figure 1 below is an

illustration of the InfoLit portal home page accessible at: http://www.wits.ac.za/library/services/ILit/info_lit_index.htm

Figure 1: The InfoLit Portal



Highlights

The InfoLit portal is organized according to constituent user groups and community/learning hubs, namely, students, academics and library staff. Links relevant to a user group are embedded within each hub.

- **Customized Subject Resources**

  The subject portal links are available in the student and academic staff hubs. To date, the InfoLit Portal gives access to portals on Accounting, Chemistry, Education, Mining Engineering, Psychology, Economics, Business Science, and Public and Development Management.

  Within the comfort of their own hubs, both students and academic staff are pointed directly to relevant subjects where they have access to information resources that document and preserve the scholarship of their discipline (Dunn 2001), i.e. full text/electronic journals, library catalogue, databases, indexes to journal articles, periodicals, theses and dissertations, course reserves, reference tools, List serves, freely available quality Web resources, interlibrary loan facilities and other South African university library catalogues.

- **Information Finding & Use Skills: Wits Information Skills Tutorial (WIST)**

  Wits students have diverse educational backgrounds and levels of information literacy. A structured information skills development programme is invaluable to the successful interrogation of the complex Wits Library System. The Wits Information Skills Tutorial (WIST) available in the student hub is a virtual means to addressing this need, especially for the large student population where not all have the opportunity to attend the face-to-face information skills classes offered by the library.

  A generic tutorial imparting broad information skills and concepts, WIST complements the face–to-face & hands on library programmes, serves to level the playing field at a pace convenient to the student and provides a foundation for the

development of specific subject information competencies. In particular, it focuses on developing the following competencies:

- Using reference sources to establish facts on a topic and identifying key concepts and terms and their relationships in order to better understand an assignment/research topic.
- Conducting research/information searching in a structured manner.
- Effectively searching for & locating needed information.
- Independent life-long learning.

WIST seeks to achieve its goals through six modules as follows:

Module 1: How Do You Find Keywords for Your Assignment/Research Topic?
Module 2: How Do You Identify Alternative Keywords/ Synonyms & Construct Your Search?
Module 3: How Do You Search for Books, Journal Articles, & Other Materials?
Module 4: Can You Distinguish Between References for Different Sources?
Module 5: How Do You Evaluate the Quality of Information Resources & the Results of Your Search?
Module 6: How Do You Use the Information to Put Together Ideas Without Risking Plagiarism?

WIST is accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week from anywhere across the globe provided there is Internet connectivity. Wherever appropriate, hyperlinks to resources and tools in the Library web pages and subject portals are provided. While learning the information skills, the student is able to immediately practice skill application by clicking the links to tools and resources provided. Beyond the complementary and virtual WIST environment, the InfoLit portal provides administrative tools to support and ease the delivery of information literacy programmes across the Wits teaching and learning community.

- **Enabling systems**

  At the most basic level, further integration of information skills into Wits curricular requires a user friendly administrative system to make the process as painless as possible. To this end, the InfoLit portal provides for the retrieval, completion and submission of the following online tools:

  - Information literacy booking form
  - Information literacy session evaluation form
  - ETD PDF conversion booking form
  - Information literacy portal feedback form
  - WIST feedback form
  - Orientation booking form
  - Specialized information literacy course booking form
  - Staff workshops booking form

  The portal makes extensive use of links to a list of librarians who are contactable to deal with what technology cannot immediately solve for a user pressed for time. Information literacy training opportunities are announced on the portal. A programme of sessions run collaboratively between the library and schools and departments as well as related statistics are also accessible as reminders and perhaps more importantly, to provide data for inter-Faculty benchmarking purposes.

- **Other Facilities and Resources**

  The InfoLit portal gives access to information literacy standards, mailing lists, documents and scholarly articles. Past workshop and training session presentations are also available to those who may not have the chance to attend or those who may wish to refer to them later on.

How may students and academic staff use the InfoLit portal to improve learning and teaching?

- **Students**

  Students may improve on studying, learning and research by using the InfoLit portal to:

  - Familiarize with the navigation tools of the Wits Library system to find the right reading materials in time to meet assignment and research deadlines, especially during the first year of study.
  - Constantly refer to WIST to overcome any information finding and use obstacles that may arise from time to time.
  - Schedule face-to-face hands on sessions and specialized courses to continuously refresh, polish up and develop skills and knowledge of finding books and journal articles (including course reserves), referencing styles, etc.
  - Access and use current and scholarly full text articles and improve on the quality of assignments and research projects and therefore achieve higher grades.
  - Search Subject portals for other university catalogues to locate materials not at Wits and make interlibrary loan requests where applicable.
  - Prepare assignments and research projects compliant with faculty and departmental guidelines where appropriate.
  - Read relevant information literacy presentations to clarify issues at a convenient time.
  - Ease Postgraduate electronic theses publishing processes.

- **Academic staff**

  The major responsibilities of academic staff are to create new knowledge and improve the quality of teaching. To this end, academic/research staff may use the InfoLit portal to:

- Familiarise with and take advantage of the totality of pre-selected materials available for research and teaching in specific subject areas.
- Constantly stay abreast with advances in knowledge frontiers in subject and research areas of interest.
- Increase the output and quality of research and publication.
- Effectively and efficiently execute interdisciplinary research from the streamlined subject portals knowledge base.
- Organise sessions in collaboration with the library to exchange, share skills and knowledge, and, keep pace with the rapidly increasing volumes of and enhancements to electronic resources.
- Identify and consult with relevant library staff for subject related queries.
- Benchmark the coverage of the information skills component of departmental/school/faculty curricular and take appropriate measures.
- Prepare students to successfully function in the information and knowledge society by systematically inculcating the full spectrum of information literacy competencies, where appropriate.
- Compile and post online course reserves that include print references and, as much as possible, hyperlinks to full text scholarly electronic articles in subject portals and direct students thereto in order to ease the finding of key teaching and learning materials.
- Prepare assignments and research projects that assess students' information skills. Examples of assignments given at the Wits School of Animal, Plant and Environmental Sciences (Balkwill 2006) and San Jose State University (2006) are informative.
- In collaboration with the library, schedule and conduct student information skills education and training sessions with coverage designed to match assignment/research information and assessment needs.

Both academic staff and students can maximize on information finding and use from the time of identifying a research/assignment topic to article publication or assignment submission, by accessing the InfoLit portal from wherever they may

be, within or outside the Wits campuses. They can use the InfoLit portal to supplement information from the Wits print collections, subscription based electronic databases, and materials obtained through interlibrary loans with pre-selected freely available quality subject Web resources. Equally significant, a collection of online forms give academic staff and students the opportunity to give feedback on WIST, the face-to-face and hands on sessions, subject portals and the overall InfoLit portal intervention, so that, in the final analysis, the information literacy curricular component is rooted in Wits circumstances.

The InfoLit Portal: Future Directions

Several departments and courses allocate time for information skills training in their teaching time table. However, this is not necessarily a common practice across all Faculties with the result that the teaching and learning of information skills may not be equitable. Underwood (2002) observes that the addition of another learning element to already crowded syllabuses may not be feasible and suggests that consideration should be given to enhancing information literacy components within existing teaching commitments. The InfoLit portal is one way of mitigating any perceived or potential disruption to the Wits curricular superstructure that may be associated with efforts at further integration of information skills education and training into teaching and learning. Below is an outline of some of the opportunities for academic and library staff to collaboratively contribute to integration and improve teaching and learning:

- Developing subject specific information literacy training courses based on the information competencies defined for the various degree programmes in the Wits Qualification index (Wits 2006), for face-to-face, hands on, and online delivery.
- Organizing information skills and knowledge sharing events to keep pace with tools and functionalities for finding, among other things, the increasing number of scholarly resources born digital and in some cases lacking print surrogates.
- Where appropriate, developing reading lists, course reserves and assignments / research projects that exercise the full range of student information competencies, taking account of their levels of study.

- In the long term, giving consideration to further refining of subject portals to course level so as to match courses to relevant resources.

Conclusion

WIST, subject portals and a set of online templates streamlining information literacy delivery processes constitute the InfoLit portal building blocs. The portal aims to facilitate further integration of information skills into Wits curricular in order to improve teaching and learning. It assists students in developing information finding skills as well as easily finding relevant materials for assignments and research projects. Academic staff have the opportunity to keep abreast with advances in subject knowledge and improve on research, compile teaching resources and assignments that develop student information skills, and, schedule assignment/research specific information literacy training sessions for students. In a large measure, the InfoLit benefits and indeed, the further incorporation of information literacy into teaching and learning are dependent on library and Faculty/School/Department collaborative relationships. Academic/library staff collaboration is the cornerstone of integration.

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