

**ACRL Best Practices in Information Literacy Invitational Conference
Atlanta, June 11 – 13, 2002**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Program: Zayed University Information Literacy Program, United Arab Emirates
Contact Person: Jane Mandalios**

Zayed University opened in September, 1998 with the mandate of providing a liberal arts education through the medium of English to the young women of the United Arab Emirates. It has adopted a learning outcomes-based academic model and Information Literacy is the first of the six overarching learning outcomes. The majority of its students come from government schools, where their education has been conducted in Arabic in a very traditional educational environment with the emphasis still mostly on rote learning. Libraries are rare in UAE schools, and students' level of information competence is extremely low when they enter the university. In response to these challenges, a two-fold approach was adopted. The major strand is an Information Literacy Program, devised by a team consisting of two librarians and two English faculty members. It provides systematic teaching in information literacy for students in a required pre-university program, which enables them to face the research challenges that they meet in the university. The program helps students develop an increasing complexity of research skills, beginning with the most basic ones and taking them up to writing an argumentative research paper of 1500 words. All students are required to take three Information Literacy courses, which total 150 hours of instruction and supervised learning, and during much of this time students are in close contact with their teachers, getting support and feedback. The course development team works extremely closely together on all aspects of the courses, viz. course and materials design, team teaching and joint assessment of both the research process and the product. In addition to this formal program, the Information Literacy Libraries also offer a variety of support options for faculty and their students who are taking courses at later stages in the university.

We consider the Information Literacy Program at Zayed University to be unique in several ways. Firstly, the outcomes-based academic structure of the university has ensured that information literacy is incorporated as a general requirement. Secondly, the program is unique in the Arabian Gulf region with regard to the systematic teaching of information literacy skills in a tertiary environment. Thirdly, we believe that the program is unique in the very extensive degree of collaboration between the libraries and the faculty in the design and delivery of the information literacy courses. Fourthly, our course development team consists of members who are not only deeply committed to the teaching of information literacy, but who are also extremely well qualified and experienced in the fields of both education and library science. Finally, our program allows unusually close and constant interaction between the teachers and the students, which ensures a very supportive learning environment for the students. Evidence of the program's success has been observable in several ways. Student pass rate for the required courses has been very high. In addition, testimonials from other faculty members

indicate that the ability of graduates from our courses to carry out research assignments for other courses is of a high standard. However, some of the most notable evidence has come from students themselves. Comments have been extremely positive, and include such statements as, “This is the best course in [the English] program” and “This course has given me the key to my studies.”

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**Program Description: Zayed University Information Literacy Program,
United Arab Emirates**

Jane Birks, Fiona Hunt, Jane Mandalios, Anna Remondi, Carol DiPrete

I. Program name & team members

Name of program: Zayed University Information Literacy Program

Name of team members:

Jane Birks & Fiona Hunt: Information Literacy Librarians, Dubai Campus & Abu Dhabi Campus.

Program co-coordinators, collaborative partners in program development; program instructors; materials developers.

Jane Mandalios & Anna Remondi: English Faculty, Dubai Campus.

Collaborative partners in program development; program instructors; materials developers.

Carol DiPrete: Director of Libraries (both campuses).
Administrative Support.

II. Brief history of the program and synopsis of current activities

A. History of program

Zayed University opened in September, 1998 with the mandate of providing a liberal arts university education through the medium of English to the young women of the United Arab Emirates. Its mission is to produce graduates, who, in addition to excelling in Arabic and English, are masters of the computer, well grounded in academic disciplines, fully prepared in a professional field and capable of providing leadership in the home, community and nation. In the academic year 2000 – 2001 the University adopted an outcomes-based academic model, with six overarching requirements for student graduation. These Zayed University Learning Outcomes (ZULOs) are in the fields of information literacy and communication, information technology, critical thinking and reasoning, global awareness, teamwork and leadership.

The majority of young women who enter Zayed University come from government schools. Their education has been conducted in Arabic, in what is still a very traditional educational environment, where the emphasis is still mostly on rote learning. Libraries are not common in UAE schools. Things such as simple research tasks, project work and

the critical thinking skills that these require, which children engage in as a matter of course in western education, hardly feature at all. Students' level of information competence is often so low that most of them are unable to deduce the subject of a book from its title or use an index or table of contents. They often have no idea of how even very basic information can be classified and retrieved. Therefore when they begin their studies at ZU, students have to deal not only with the very obvious hurdle of studying in a foreign language, but also with the mammoth challenges of carrying out research assignments when their information literacy skills are almost non-existent.

However, the University wisely made provision for the teaching of information literacy at the institution from the outset, appointing Information Literacy Librarians as part of the library complement for both campuses.

Much of the start-up year, 1998-99, was spent by the librarians in establishing the physical plant of the library and building the collection. The English faculty members of the team were involved in writing the curriculum for the English program, and included a wide range of information literacy skills in this. It was in the second year of the university that progress in information literacy was made and the librarians were able to begin working to support students studying in the university courses, albeit on a somewhat ad hoc basis.

However, Fall 2000 saw the beginning of an exciting joint venture when the IL libraries and two English faculty who had extensive experience in, and deep commitment to, the teaching of research skills came together to form an IL team. The University's pre-academic program is called the Readiness Program, and prepares students for the rigors of study through the medium of English. One of the exit requirements is the ability to produce an argumentative research paper of 1200 – 1500 words. The team devised two courses of 45 hours each, entitled Basic Information Literacy Skills (BILS) I and II, which all Readiness students are required to take, and which ensure that by the time they leave the program they have acquired the basic skills and are ready to begin the first year of university study. In addition, the team was successful in persuading the administration that a further, 3 credit-bearing course of 60 hours (Academic Research Skills – ARS) should be required in the freshman and sophomore year, which would ensure that students were able to demonstrate their ability to apply information literacy skills at university, rather than pre-university level.

B. Current activities

Most of the work of the information literacy team is taken up with the delivery, development and refinement of the BILS and ARS courses. At any one time they may be dealing with up to 500 students and 20 teachers over the two campuses.

BILS I and II are delivered in pseudo context, i.e. students are learning through dedicated information literacy courses, with a research paper as their outcome, rather than through having to produce a research report for their content course. The third level course, Academic Research Skills, is designed to be offered when students are in their freshman

or sophomore year, and are required to produce a report or assignment by their content teacher; in other words, the information literacy teachers are helping them to develop and apply the information literacy skills that are being concurrently required for a content course. Success in this venture requires commitment on the part of both the information literacy team and the content teaching team to working closely together to meet the needs of their students in both teaching and assessment. The IL team is striving to ensure that this becomes the norm, rather than the exception for courses at this level.

The specific learning outcomes are that students can:

1. use the language and concepts of information literacy effectively
2. decide on a suitable thesis statement for an argumentative research paper
3. write a research proposal
4. plan their activities and manage their time so that they meet course deadlines
5. plan the content of their research paper by writing an outline and redrafting and updating this as often as required
6. develop classification skills in order to determine where information may be found
7. use a variety of search strategies to get information effectively: use the library catalogue; use effective search terms; use electronic search strategies e.g. Boolean operators and wildcards; use titles, tables of contents and indexes
8. make appropriate use of the range of university library resources, including general non-fiction books, reference books, newspapers, magazines, journals, maps, atlases, almanacs, dictionaries, Internet, information databases and on-line library catalogs
9. use Internet and information databases appropriately and effectively
10. read or listen to their sources efficiently
11. take notes, paraphrase, summarize and synthesize information so that the student's voice is apparent and plagiarism is avoided
12. obtain information from primary sources (e.g. interviews and questionnaires) where appropriate
13. write an argumentative research paper of 1500+ words in academic format
14. cite other people's work appropriately, both in-text and in the bibliography
15. discuss, defend and elaborate on their research in a viva (oral defense)

In addition to these formalized and required courses in the initial stages of the university program, the libraries also provide extensive support for students taking later courses in the Colleges of Communications, Education, Family Science and Information Science. This support may take the form of a series of sessions requested by and supported by the faculty member, or it may be arranged on a more ad hoc basis. The libraries are actively engaged in efforts to achieve more institutionalized support for the courses in the majors.

All four members of the team are very committed to raising awareness at all levels about the importance of getting information literacy into the DNA of the university experience. To that end they are currently involved in initiatives such as being members of the Information Literacy and Communication ZULO development team; acting as Faculty

Fellows, a group chosen by the administration to put the ZULO theories into university practice; and working on providing mentoring and cascade training for teachers new to the BILS and ARS courses.

III. Best practices

The team believes that it exemplifies best practices in information literacy in many of the categories articulated in the ACRL document.

A. Administrative and institutional support

The fact that information literacy takes pride of place as the first of the ZULOs, ensures that it has by definition a university-wide focus. All graduates must demonstrate that they can:

- determine the nature and extent of information needs
- access information
- evaluate information and its sources critically
- use information to communicate effectively to varied audiences in multiple contexts
- adhere to ethical practices in the use of information.

The Information Literacy Librarians have, therefore, institutional ‘blessing’, and have been given a clear mandate to work closely with faculty in devising strategies for meeting the information literacy needs of the students in a variety of ways.

Institutional support has also been clearly demonstrated by the fact that each campus has a dedicated Information Literacy Librarian position, in addition to other library positions. In fact, it was an Information Literacy Librarian who was the first librarian hired, after the supervisor on each campus. Their job description states that they are “responsible to develop and implement the Information Literacy program and bibliographic instruction activities, working closely with teaching faculty (to) develop an innovative program to meet the expanding needs of students.” Opportunities for professional development are identified and encouraged by the Library administration.

B. Collaboration

What makes the BILS and ARS courses unusual and so successful is the degree of collaboration between the librarians and the English faculty. For the last 18 months these four people have worked closely and continuously together to pool their expertise and interests to make the best possible provision for meeting the information literacy needs of their students. They have collaborated at the conceptualization level before the courses were established, at the syllabus design level, in devising the content of the teaching materials, in the actual teaching and assessing of the students, and in refining the courses in the light of their joint experience. Students enrolled in the courses take it for granted that they have the benefit of two teachers, not just one, throughout their whole learning experience.

C. Pedagogy

Information Literacy at Zayed University is taught in the context of existing courses. Our pedagogical philosophy is that it is better introduced in response to a real information need, than as a disconnected, standalone activity. As we were running the BILS courses for the first time we found ourselves constantly reminded of the teaching vs. learning paradigms. We found the following two things were made apparent as never before: firstly, the crucial importance of getting students to apply what we have ‘taught’ in situations that were meaningful to their own learning, and secondly, the importance of only teaching something when students really need to know it. This applies at both the macro and micro level. For example, students learn how to write research papers at the stage in their university career when such papers are required; they learn the enabling skills of note taking at the stage in the research project when they actually need to take notes. We have found that this teaching on a “need to know” basis has been hugely successful with our students.

Our courses have a very interactive pedagogical approach, which has proved popular and effective with our learners. A large part of the first course is extremely hands-on, and the library is usually a hive of bustling activity. For example, in the early stages students are required to demonstrate that they can find relevant information by physically showing the relevant parts of books to the teacher. This may be the last stage in a series of activities where they have had to use the computerized catalog, walk up and down the library shelves, decipher the mysteries of the LC classification system by finding a book with a complicated call number and use the index or table of contents efficiently. All of our input sessions involve very active learner participation, and many of them encourage the students to take on the role of providers of learning opportunities for their peers.

The acquisition of information literacy skills is a very long process, one which children in most western countries begin at a very early age in primary school and refine throughout their school career. Our students have not had these benefits. However, our courses address an increasing complexity of skills, starting with the very basic ones, and we work closely with our students so that these can be constantly reinforced and refined as they progress throughout their early pre-academic career. Intrinsic to the courses is the development of the processes of critical thinking and reflection which are so vital to the building and internalization of information skills. Our students come to us with minimal proficiency and leave the Readiness Program with an impressive range of skills that equip them well for the demands of academic study in English.

Putting the learner’s needs first is central to the pedagogical approach of our information literacy courses. Students learn the skills within the context of their own fields of interest, and are given extensive one-on-one interaction and feedback opportunities with the teachers at each stage of their research process. This ensures that they are able to move on to a new research stage appropriately and confidently.

D. Assessment

We pride ourselves on our assessment procedures, which focus on both the research process and the product. Too often, teachers determine a student's ability to carry out research simply by looking at the product, i.e. the research paper or an oral presentation. We maintain, on the other hand, that this does not provide insight into how well the student has actually learned the research process.

Our program uses four types of evidence to determine how well the student has learned the steps. The first is a portfolio which includes anything and everything that sheds light on the student's learning process: evidence of brainstorming at the early stages, search strategies, outlines and their subsequent revisions, notes, copies of sources used, comments on problems encountered and solutions used, journal-type entries with student reflections on the process so far, etc. The second is the research paper or presentation. The third is formal and informal interviews, which provide opportunities for formative feedback as students progress through the different stages of the research process. The final type of assessment is a viva, or oral defense, an essential component for ascertaining the student's understanding of the key concepts and processes involved. This allows for specific interaction between the student and the assessors to determine information that may not be gleaned from the portfolio or paper in isolation.

E. Areas to work on

We are currently fully articulated with the Readiness Program, albeit in a quasi context. In addition, we have made inroads into various of the colleges (Education, Communications, Information Systems, Family Science), who have asked the librarians to be involved permanently in the research component of at least one of their courses. We now wish to expand further, into the remaining colleges (Business, Arts and Sciences), and to integrate information literacy instruction more fully into courses in all colleges, whether this be through librarian-led sessions at appropriate times during a course, or through the instructors' own awareness and presentation of information literacy skills as they naturally arise in their students' course of study.

We are also interested in exploring the avenue of developing independent programs for students to learn information literacy skills.

IV. Evidence of success of program to date

We have been delighted to note extensive evidence of the success of our program. Most obvious and measurable has been the extremely high success rate of our students in passing the BILS and ARS courses. Testimonials from other teachers, both from Readiness Program faculty who are co-teaching our students and from freshman and sophomore faculty who are teaching the students who have graduated from our courses are also extremely positive. Such testimonials result both from teachers observing students on our courses, and also from observed improvement in student performance in their own courses. In the case of the university level courses, the librarians are now

finding that word is getting round the institution, and there are more requests from faculty for librarian time and expertise for collaboration and classroom sessions. Perhaps the most notable evidence has come from the students themselves. In their formal and informal evaluation of the courses students have written comments such as “This is the best course in Readiness”; “It is not just a course to teach us searching, it is an excellent course and it is very helpful .. for the future, so it is really important to have this course for all new students”; “This course has given me the key for my studies”.

V. What makes our program unique? What would we contribute to the conference?

We believe that our program is unique in several aspects. Firstly, information literacy has been configured into the academic structure of the institution by virtue of its identification as one of the university learning outcomes. We have therefore had the advantage of being able to infuse the teaching of information literacy into the curriculum from the beginning and to function without the problems of dealing with preconceptions and history that often bedevil older institutions.

Secondly we are blazing the trail of information literacy instruction in the Arabian Gulf region. English-medium education is burgeoning in the region, but there are no other institutions in the Gulf which take such a successful systematic approach to meeting the very obvious and pressing academic needs of their students at tertiary level in information literacy. We have been active advocates of our cause at regional conferences and meetings.

Thirdly, we believe that we are unique in the degree of collaboration that we have achieved between our team members. We are now in the position of feeling a two-fold allegiance: firstly to the information literacy team and the students that we are responsible for, and secondly to the departments to which we actually belong, viz. the Library and the English Language Center.

Fourthly, we believe that the degree of commitment and competence on the part of the team members is quite unusual. All team members are passionate in their commitment to the information literacy program and spend a large part of their time acting as advocates for it and ensuring that the program functions in the most effective way on both campuses. All four of the program developers have excellent credentials. Jane Birks and Fiona Hunt have the huge advantage of having qualifications and experience in both education and library, and are publishing a book tentatively entitled *Hands-on Information Literacy: Activities for Librarians and Teachers* in 2002. This publication will provide teachers and librarians with interactive information literacy activities to use in their classrooms and libraries. Jane Mandalios and Anna Remondi have many years' experience in teaching English at tertiary level, and have spent a large part of their recent endeavors in the teaching of information literacy skills within the English curriculum. Jane Mandalios is also pursuing doctoral studies, with information literacy as the subject of her thesis.

Finally, we feel that our program is unusual in its focus on close, ongoing interaction between students and teachers, generating many opportunities for learning through dynamic assessment.

We believe that we could make a useful contribution to the conference in two main ways. Firstly, we feel that our experiences with teaching information literacy to ESL students who are practically tabula rasa can have useful applications and insights for teaching native speaker students. Although the latter undoubtedly have many information literacy skills, these are usually somewhat random in nature as they have rarely been exposed to a systematic and extensive program such as ours. Informal observation of the information literacy skills of native speaker students at both tertiary and upper secondary level indicates to us that a program such as ours would be of huge benefit to them.

Secondly, we feel that our experience in dealing with the information literacy needs of ESL students will be beneficial for other conference members who have ESL students, whether in pre-academic or university-level programs.

VI. Questions for consideration at the conference

A. Our belief is that all information literacy skills should be taught “in context” and these skills should be systematically introduced and revised with increasing levels of complexity and sophistication throughout the university curriculum.

This presents a number of inter-related practical problems:

- Exactly how do we translate this theory into practice?
- How do we advocate for information literacy to ensure that everyone at every level shares our vision?
- How do we identify key areas e.g. subjects or courses which provide the best opportunities for students to learn and apply the appropriate skills and concepts?
- How do we ensure that each member of the faculty recognizes the need for information literacy and is willing to take some responsibility for ensuring that students learn and refine these skills?

B. In much of our program students learn through close and ongoing contact with and feedback from dedicated information literacy teachers. We feel that this accounts for the huge degree of success in terms of student learning and achievement. We are keenly aware, however, of the emphasis being placed on independent, computer-based programs for information literacy in other institutions, and would like to discuss with other professionals which is actually the most effective and efficient way of ensuring student learning in the field.