

Information Literacy as a Right and a Duty: The Experience of the Czech Republic

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to briefly review the strategic steps which have been taken in the area of education for information literacy (IL) in the Czech Republic - focusing mainly on the higher education level, but with additional references and applications to lower educational levels as well. The paper also aims to look a bit deeply into the broader, fundamental "right to literacy," in relation to human rights and public duties in general, and which are very often guaranteed by national constitutions, such as the right to education, the right to access (public) information, and the (public) duty to protect weaker parties in certain kinds of legal negotiations in countries such as the Czech Republic.

Keywords: Literacy, information literacy, education, access to information, human rights, Czech Republic, public policy, rights, duties.

1 Introduction

Over the past 15 years, the Czech Republic has gone a long way to design, develop, test, implement, assess and evaluate information literacy policies and best practices, especially in the higher education environment. But, as it unfortunately now seems, we have reached an impasse in trying to implement information literacy as a concept at the primary and secondary education levels in the Czech Republic. Therefore, in order to take the next steps forward, the authors have been investigating case studies of literacy in general and financial literacy more specifically, as one of the newest kinds of literacies being actively advocated and promoted within our country. As a result, we have found some very interesting results that we want to share here, and we hope may help everyone to promote and advance the information literacy concept even further to key top level government and education policy decision makers, not only in our country but worldwide.

2 Information Literacy in the Czech Republic – A Brief Review

Information Literacy (IL) as a term has been used among Czech professionals, mostly teachers and librarians, since about 1990 - building on the long tradition of "user education" programs in libraries. But the more precise use, and the clearer understanding of the term, as well as the concept, and its practice, has differed widely among both institutions and practitioners alike.

The term was apparently first included in Czech public policy documents in 1999. That was the year when the key *National Information Policy* document¹ was published in the Czech Republic as a strategic document, and information literacy was defined therein as one of the main priorities of national policy. Simultaneously, other, somewhat related public policies were introduced, many of which used the term "information literacy" as one of the objectives, but with different meanings, implications and consequences. However, the general understanding of the term "information literacy" in all of these documents still tended to be much closer to what is defined more accurately (in our view) as computer and ICT literacy than to articulating, searching for, organizing and using information itself.

Separate efforts of academic libraries to support the introduction of information literacy led to the merging and organizing of teaching librarians in 2000 into a "working group for information literacy and information education" within the framework of the Academic Libraries Section of the Higher Education Council of the Czech Republic, which was then called the IVIG² working group. Also, after the establishment of the Association of Libraries of Czech Universities (ALCU)³ in 2003, the IVIG working group became one of its most active standing committees.

Defining the information literacy concept by consensus-building was a logical and necessary first step for trying to explain and its more detailed conceptual elements, as it also was for formulating a practical scope for "information education."⁴ IVIG members had to first agree on a clear definition and explanation of the details of the concept that would be acceptable and useful in further documents and activities.

IVIG's understanding of the concept of information literacy was first formulated in 2000 and re-visited and revised in 2010. The "Information Literacy Standards of a University Student" were first established in 2004 and were later refined in 2007. A pilot survey of university students' level of information literacy understanding and use was carried out in 2004 and was repeated in 2005 to verify both the method and hypothesis. Finally, the "Information Education Strategy at Universities in the Czech Republic" document was published in 2008. The IVIG experience was described in more detail at the first ECIL conference held in Istanbul Turkey [1].

IVIG is also an open platform and its members are continuously trying to introduce, assimilate and implement its experiences into other educational levels as well. Even though information literacy has been mentioned in various national

¹ <http://www.vlada.cz/cz/clenove-vlady/historie-minulych-vlad/statni-informacni-politika---cesta-k-informacni-spolecnosti---dokument-2089/>

² <http://www.ivig.cz>

³ <http://www.akvs.cz/en/>

⁴ <http://www.ivig.cz/Understanding-IL-concept.pdf>

educational polices⁵, no specific strategy for implementing it in primary and secondary level curricula exists in the Czech Republic, at least so far.

3 Evolution of "Literacies" as a General Concept

As mentioned, we seem to have reached an impasse in trying to implement IL as a concept in primary and secondary education in the Czech Republic. In order to make strides forward, however, it is fundamental to analyze case studies or good practices of the two types of literacies that have been successfully introduced within the primary and secondary education curricula in the Czech Republic: general literacy and financial literacy. The first case takes us back to the 18th century, the latter one introduces a type of literacy only recently being actively advocated and promoted within our country. We understand "literacy" and "information literacy" as essentially being virtually synonymous in any "information society." And in educational curricula, they are perceived as a complex set of key required competencies. However, as the two terms are defined and being used for purposes of this paper, we have simplified "literacy" as the basic ability to read and write a language correctly, and "information literacy" as a set of abilities focused mainly on how to search for, retrieve, organize, and use publicly available and accessible information for whatever kind of problem-solving and decision-making, personal, family related, job related, education related, health related, and so on.

Taking a closer look at the history of education (in the Czech Republic) we notice some milestones in implementing the various kinds of literacies. Education, and thus literacy as such, was initially available only to selected exclusive groups which were mostly connected to churches or ruling elites. It was decidedly not an inclusive policy or priority. A significant change happened within the context of the worldwide industrial revolution which took place beginning in the 18th century and which also brought a demand for educated labor resources. A government policy act was necessary in order to establish compulsory school attendance as a duty. A regulation promulgated in 1774 by Maria Theresa, the Empress of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, was the beginning of educational reform and promoted a duty for all children, of both genders, from the ages of six to twelve, to attend school. This duty was strengthened in 1869 as a law for the first time and, as such, remained in the Czech legal system even after 1918 when an independent republic (Czechoslovakia) was established (and in 1922, when the first original Czech law in the area of the compulsory school attendance was implemented) [2-3].

Education was, on the other hand, also considered a human right since 1948, worldwide⁶ and has been also recognized under Czech constitutional law since 1920 [4]. Thus, we see education (defined by curricula) as both a right and a duty – a duty of the public sector to provide its citizens with, and a right of citizens to obtain it, and to be provided with it, but also a right of the public sector to expect the exercise of that right by its private citizens which means a duty for them. In short, the government takes many actions, and spends tax resources, based on the expectation that citizens will not ignore or disobey the law. Also, special laws were enacted later

⁵ <http://www.vzdelavani2020.cz/clanek/13/knihovna-koncepci.html>

⁶ <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/history.shtml>

with the aim of protecting and assisting those who were disabled and handicapped, and cannot learn by conventional means.

A complete and thorough explanation of any “curriculum” is very complex for a full treatment in this brief paper, but just to simplify the matter and to summarize our main key points here:

1. a citizen has a right to be taught to read and write, and
2. has a duty to learn those things, and
3. the State has a duty to teach citizens to read and write, and
4. the State also has the right to expect its citizens to exercise that right and to learn from them, and
5. some learning-handicapped persons may need to be provided with special care and assistance if needed.

If we now shift our attention to financial literacy and education in the Czech Republic, we observe a very similar parallel development.

Financial literacy has been selected as the only recent example of successfully implemented educational strategy in the Czech Republic related to a particular type of literacy. To date, there is no other type of literacy (e.g. digital, information, media or other) that would be so complexly embedded into the curriculum within last 25 years.

Financial literacy was discussed among Czech professionals from the very beginning, which, together with general (basic) literacy emphasized the necessity for a closely coordinated kind of education which has eventually emerged, especially with the growing debt of households in the last ten years. Likewise, the situation on the financial market worldwide has raised many questions regarding the level of financial literacy of Czech citizens, especially the new generation of primary and secondary schools students. However, in 2009, there was still no existing educational strategy to improve the level of financial literacy in the Czech Republic [5]. Although the situation was very similar to the situation in other European emerging economies, approaches to the financial education development differ [6]. In the Czech Republic, libraries did not get involved predominantly in financial literacy issues and a direct route to the elementary and secondary schools have been taken.

Once again, following the multistage process outlined above, the professionals in that field first developed the main principles and the methods in the area of financial education, but a political act was then necessary to legalize and expand such education, especially in schools. Key actors succeeded in involving the Ministry of Finance, mainly due the fact that they were all able to agree on one uniform single concept for financial literacy and introduce it in a simple effective manner to decisions makers. Thus, a working group for financial education, established by the Ministry of Finance, started to operate. It is worth mentioning that the IVIG experiences in the field of information education were admirably suited to the area of financial education because, in no small measure, both groups had regular, close, effective networking professional connections with each other, and each offered practical, implementable and sustainable solutions on which all of the involved actors were willing and able to agree.⁷

⁷ <http://www.mfcr.cz/cs/o-ministerstvu/vzdelavani/financni-vzdelavani>

The National Strategy on Financial Education⁸, approved by the Government of the Czech Republic in 2010, was the result, soon supported by the issuance of a key additional guideline - "Standards of a Financially Literate Citizen" (as an explicit list of competencies). Those standards set a dividing line in the levels of financial education as it corresponded to compulsory school attendance (whereby any citizen may achieve and receive recognition by public education authorities without distinctions). Cooperation between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Education made implementing the financial education into (primary and secondary) school curricula possible and established a basic level of financial education not only accessible to but also compulsory for every citizen. A special 2010 law on consumer protection⁹ corresponds to this basic level of financial literacy – consumers have been protected as a weaker party in the negotiations with companies above the limit given by mentioned standards, although it is difficult to implement in each individual case. However, it is still an unfinished task to find the right balance between duties and rights on both sides.

In summary, three major multistage "waves" are discernible in all of the above mentioned processes. First, professionals (or key actors) bring forward an issue or a challenge as a specific topic to focus upon, and they set an agenda to accomplish that. Second, decision makers (politicians and policy makers) take actions on the political level. Finally, it becomes a part of the legal system as a right and a duty.

4 Evolution of Information Literacy

We now take a brief look at information literacy again (i.e. focused on public information – we have a right to access public information and the public sector has a duty to provide us with such information¹⁰) in order to assess the degree to which educational curricula officially and formally recognize, and incorporate the information literacy concept and methodologies into the curricula in the correct, prescribed manner. This subject has been discussed among professionals for a very long time now. If we use the perspective of the above mentioned government policy consensus building process (as mentioned, implemented in multistage "waves") we see that we are still at the beginning of the second wave in the Czech Republic. It shows us that we need to make headway from discussions among professionals to influencing the curricula, which means catching the attention of policymakers and politicians.

This cannot be done only by recognizing that we do not know exactly, and with precision, what information literacy means, and taking into account its many definitions, but also by giving a unified (by key actors at least a fairly unified) answer to an increasing need – while such a need may only be increased by promoting benefits of information literacy among public. The future agenda and goal must no longer be only conducting more analyses and studies, but also clearly translating

⁸ <http://www.mfcr.cz/en/about-ministry/financial-education>

⁹ <http://www.psfv.cz/cs/ochrana-spotrebitele/spotrebitel>

¹⁰ <http://www.sagit.cz/pages/sbirkatxt.asp?zdroj=sb99106&cd=76&typ=r>

agreements achieved so far into concrete actions which are required by the various parties obligated by law to implement them.

Only increasing public interest may force the necessary changes at the political level and in related laws. IVIG may play an important role in this process by creating "Standards of an Information Literate Citizen" which will correspond to the appropriate levels of education, stating what every citizen has the right to obtain and the duty to achieve, and the public sector the duty to provide citizens with, as well as the right to expect actions from them – while such is clearly and enforceably carried out by compulsory school attendance. Such standards must be an explicit list of competencies in clear relation to the national curricula. A further step may be to address the question of protecting those learning-disadvantaged persons who are not able to meet the standards. Proposed standards will also be a mean to explain the ultimate benefits of information literacy to national targets and goals, and to proactively involve decision-makers in implementing these plans and actions.

5 Conclusion

This paper described briefly the history and experience of implementing information literacy in the Czech Republic based primarily on the IVIG working group team experiences. The paper also stated the brief history of implementing literacy into educational curricula and the special case of financial education.

The three major public policymaking "waves" are apparent in this process, as described. First, key actors and professionals identify the issue and challenge, and set an agenda to accomplish it, and then, second, are followed by politicians and policymakers supporting the agenda as public interest; and finally, thirdly, the whole agenda is integrated into the legal system. The Czech experience may help to recognize the described successive, three-stage "policy making waves" as a proven process, and thereby, can better anticipate, prepare for, and cope with upcoming requirements for those who face information literacy challenges in other countries.

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