



Perceptions of the SCONUL Seven Pillars of Information Literacy

A brief review

December 2015

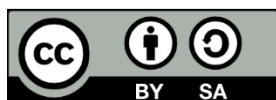
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1 Introduction

The SCONUL Seven Pillars of Information Literacy were originally formulated in 1999. In the ten years that followed, the model was adopted and deployed by academic librarians and teachers in the UK and beyond. In 2011, and notably following a survey of how UK institutions perceived and used the Seven Pillars¹, SCONUL revised and expanded the model, to reflect more clearly the range of different terminologies and concepts that have come to characterise information literacy. An important innovation was the adoption of a generic, core Seven Pillars model, complemented by a series of specialist lenses that reflect context-driven perspectives and needs of different categories of users. Five such lenses have been created to date²: research, digital literacy, open educational resources, evidence-based practice healthcare and, most recently, graduate employability.

SCONUL does not plan, at this stage, to undertake a full review of the Seven Pillars, nor to re-cast or significantly alter their essential structure. Instead, it is looking for a brief assessment of the core model as it stands and an indication of what might be done in the future to improve it. This report therefore aims to verify that the Seven Pillars are still seen as a valuable resource, and is founded on two elements:

- A light-touch literature review: this is not intended as a comprehensive review of the use of the Seven Pillars. Instead, it focuses on references, in scholarly literature and other selected resources, on how the model is perceived, and whether it is making a useful contribution to discourse or practice. Because of its limited scope, the review does not cover material which simply references the Seven Pillars or describes the model without particular comment on its value.
- An examination of the feedback on the Seven Pillars that Moira Bent (University of Newcastle) has been collecting in recent years, which provides further insights into the perceptions of the model.

2 Initial assessment

Broadly, it is apparent that the Seven Pillars are seen as a useful framework and tool for practitioners. Although the model, and the approach underlying it, has attracted criticism from certain quarters, its credibility has been enhanced by the revision undertaken in 2011.

From their inception, the Seven Pillars attracted both supporters and detractors. On the one hand, at a pragmatic level, they were viewed as a valuable aid to teaching about

¹ Gallacher, C. (2009), 'Use of SCONUL's 7 Pillars Model for Information Literacy: Findings of a Study of SCONUL institutions 2008-2009' –

http://www.sconul.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/7pillarsStudy_0.doc

² All available at <http://www.informationliteracy.org.uk/definitions/il-models/>

information literacy, not least by making clear the spectrum of knowledge of skills required for IL. Their relative simplicity and accessibility, particularly in comparison with the more complex ACRL Standards³, has been commented upon; this may make it easier to get IL concepts across to academics⁴. The Pillars were deemed to be sufficiently broadly-based – through the coverage of seven distinct but related areas – to address the varied and holistic nature of IL⁵. They were seen as scalable and structured in a way that helped IL to be built into the curriculum⁶. SCONUL's 2009 survey⁷ demonstrated that the model had been put to practical use by academic librarians, notably for purposes such as underpinning the design of institutional IL programmes, serving as a basis for the development of policy and strategy, and devising institutional frameworks.

But at the outset there were doubters and critics too, particularly those who stressed that information literacy relates not just to the acquisition of skills, but crucially also to pedagogy, and, as Andretta put it, the ability of individuals to 'learn how to learn'⁸. From that perspective, the Pillars – and indeed IL frameworks in general – were felt to be **too focused on an enumeration of skills and too reflective of the views of librarians as practitioners**. Andretta *et al*, through their conversations with a range of institutional players (including librarians), noted that the most popular way of perceiving IL was as a set of competencies and skills to the detriment of other factors such as IL viewed within a social context. The authors noted that librarians' widespread adoption of the Seven Pillars reflected an emphasis on skills and confirmed practitioners' preference for capabilities that can be measured⁹. Boon *et al* further suggested that such IL frameworks

"identify a potential curriculum for teaching information literacy, and one might expect them to draw on relevant research in pedagogy, information behaviour and social informatics to define content and influence course design. This is often not the case, however, as these frameworks [...] have been produced by library and information science practitioners, rather than academics and/or researchers and were not devised through the use of an applied research methodology [...] Deriving from the experiences of LIS practitioners, the information literacy frameworks reflect the conceptions of those practitioners, but do little to

³ Association of College & Research Libraries (2000), 'Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education' – <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency>

⁴ DaCosta, JW. (2010), 'Is There an Information Literacy Skills Gap to Be Bridged? An Examination of Faculty Perceptions and Activities Relating to Information Literacy in the United States and England', *College & Research Libraries*, vol. 71(3), pp. 203-222

⁵ Webber S. (2003), 'An international information literacy certificate: opportunity or dead-end?', paper to 69th IFLA General Conference – <http://core.ac.uk/display/50813>

⁶ Harrison J, & Rourke L (2006), 'The benefits of buy-in: integrating information literacy into each year of an academic program', *Reference Services Review*, Vol. 34(4), pp. 599 – 606 – <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/00907320610716486>

⁷ Gallacher C., *op. cit.*

⁸ Andretta S. (2006), 'Information Literacy: the New "Pedagogy of the Question"', in Walton G. and Pope A. (eds.), 'Information Literacy: Recognising the Need', Oxford: Chandos.

⁹ Andretta S., Pope A. & Walton G. (2008), 'Information Literacy Education in the UK: Reflections on perspectives and practical approaches of curricular integration', *Communications in Information Literacy*, 2(1) pp36-51 – [http://www.comminfolit.org/index.php?journal=cil&page=article&op=view&path\[\]=Spring2008AR3](http://www.comminfolit.org/index.php?journal=cil&page=article&op=view&path[]=Spring2008AR3)

illuminate the conceptions and experiences of other groups involved in information literacy education”¹⁰.

Thus the Seven Pillars and other models were seen as being too library-centric, suggesting “*what librarians do and believe others should do, generalising information skills and competencies to other disciplines*”. This concern was expressed from a phenomenographic perspective that seeks to draw from a range of varied experiences wider than those of librarians, and encompassing personal, social and ethical dimensions of interacting with information. Librarians were called upon to adapt their approaches to take account of the perceptions of other professional groups, not least academics. Similarly, Hepworth and Walton¹¹ took the view that IL models, including the Seven Pillars, are rigid and fail to take account of the interactive and context-driven nature of dealing with information. And librarians themselves were not universally convinced about the applicability of the model; the 2009 SCONUL survey picked up on reasons why practitioners did not use the Seven Pillars, including a feeling that they weren’t suitable for e-learning environments, that other models were more appropriate, and that institutions sometimes favoured an approach based on academic competencies linked to the curriculum rather than on the attributes identified by the Seven Pillars.

3 Assessment following the 2011 revision

However, it can be argued that such arguments have been to some extent addressed by the revised version of the Seven Pillars and the development of the series of thematic lenses that flowed from that. Following the re-launch of the Seven Pillars at the Librarians’ Information Literacy Annual Conference in 2011 (LILAC2011), Webber blogged approvingly about the **move away from a linear model**, and the value of treating the Pillars as a circle rather than a one-way sequence¹². Osborne reflected on this evolution, in the context of his work on the value of IL for nursing students¹³. He described how the original 1999 model evolved to reflect a necessarily more refined approach to IL that goes beyond a generalised enumeration of skills:

“[The] framework shows how the user progresses through competency to expertise via the steps described in it. Mindful of the criticism that had been levelled at a purely skills approach, the [Seven Pillars] approach reflects the two strands of the competent information user and the information literate person”.

Osborne then noted that the revised model “makes specific reference to the range of different terminologies and concepts that the revision took into account, along with the

¹⁰ Boon S., Johnson B. & Webber S. (2007), ‘A phenomenographic study of English faculty’s conceptions of information literacy’, *Journal of Documentation*, 63(2), pp204-228

¹¹ Hepworth M. and Walton G. (2009), ‘Teaching Information Literacy for Inquiry-based Learning’

¹² Sheila Webber’s Information Literacy Weblog (24/04/2011), ‘LILAC report: SCONUL Seven Pillars new edition’ – http://information-literacy.blogspot.co.uk/2011/04/lilac-report-sconul-seven-pillars-new.html?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter

¹³ Osborne A, ‘The Value of Information Literacy: Conceptions of BSc Nursing Students at a UK University’, Doctoral Thesis, University of Huddersfield – <http://core.ac.uk/display/9256833>

need to ensure that information literacy reflected the needs of specific groups of learners". Similarly, Kutner and Armstrong suggested that the revised model

"illustrates a more holistic way of perceiving information literacy that moves away from a linear approach and progression of skills, and therefore holds potential for engaging more deeply with overarching information constructs"¹⁴.

And Walsh contended that, "while the original [Seven Pillars] model has been argued to undermine constructivism to some extent, the revised version extends the focus on skills to include attitudes and behaviours as well, in greater consonance with a constructivist approach"¹⁵— that is, the Seven Pillars now pays more heed to learning through personal experiences and reflecting on those experiences; this is highlighted, for instance, in the 'evaluate' pillar, through critical appraisal and evaluation of one's own findings and those of others. Such views suggest a more rounded, all-inclusive approach to IL, which can help to situate it within a broader perspective of literacies within a framework of metaliteracy.

Such views appear to acknowledge that the Seven Pillars do now place a **greater emphasis on learning**. The references to learning in the 'identify' pillar ("[Understanding] that being information literate involves developing a learning habit so new information is being actively sought all the time") arguably points to a more pedagogic approach to IL, one which is more in phase with teaching and learning processes in higher education. McKinney and Sen, in considering the merits of students' reflective writing as a means of assessing IL development, "*recommend the Seven Pillars model in the [higher education] context due to the detailed descriptions of the understandings and abilities and the range of competencies covered*"¹⁶. The authors also commend the scope and breadth of the revised model as an analytical tool, and suggest that future incarnations of the tool might usefully cover other areas:

"In looking at conceptions of IL revealed by the breadth of competencies described in the Seven Pillars model, we can develop our own conceptions of IL. In mapping our students' reflections against the model we can further validate the model by giving example of the understandings and abilities described in the model, and also offer potential additions and improvements. One "understanding" of IL revealed by the data was that IL needs can change over time as a research project progresses and in the light of information found. This is not currently expressed in the Seven Pillars model but could be inserted if the model is revised".

¹⁴ Kutner A & Armstrong A, 'Rethinking Information Literacy in a Globalized World', *Communications in Information Literacy* 6(1) pp24-33 –

<http://scholarworks.uvm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=libfacpub>

¹⁵ Walsh A. (2012), 'Mobile information literacy: a preliminary outline of information behaviour in a mobile environment', *Journal of Information Literacy*, 6(2) pp. 56-69 –

<http://ojs.lboro.ac.uk/ojs/index.php/JIL/article/view/PRA-V6-I2-2012-4>

¹⁶ McKinney P. & Sen BA.(2012), 'Reflection for learning: understanding the value of reflective writing for information literacy development', *Journal of Information Literacy*, 6(2) pp110-129 –

<http://ojs.lboro.ac.uk/ojs/index.php/JIL/article/view/LLC-V6-I2-2012-5>

So as a learning aid, the Seven Pillars are now seen as having the flexibility and adaptability to cater for evolving IL needs. But not everyone agrees, and in a further critique of the model, Walton expressed disappointment that even in its post-2011 incarnation, it still fails to address learning styles as well as emotional and social dimensions¹⁷. He viewed the changes as having been largely cosmetic, and based on insufficient research.

As suggested above¹⁸, even before the 2011 revision, some had seen in the Seven Pillars a useful vehicle to help develop **understanding of information literacy among academics**. This capacity has also been recognised more recently; in the Delphi consultation that took place to prepare the ground for A New Curriculum for Information Literacy (ANCIL)¹⁹, the experts that provided their input felt that *“a model such as the [Seven Pillars] could provide a helpful way of entering into a dialogue with academic staff about the knowledge and skills they expected their students to have”*.

The capacity of the post-2011 Seven Pillars to **reflect the needs and priorities of different environments** has also been viewed favourably. It is increasingly accepted that information literacy cannot consist solely of a series of generic attributes applicable uniformly to all situations and environments – particularly where IL is envisaged beyond the familiar and well-trodden pastures of higher education. IL is influenced by the context in which it is deployed. Walsh thus argued that

“the concept of IL means subtly different things depending on the process you are undertaking or the context in which you are operating. The recent revision [2011] of the Seven Pillars Model recognises this distinction and creates a core model with the aspiration for different lenses to be created using the core as a basis. However, at heart it is still presented in the manner of a set of standards that describes the attributes of an information literate person”²⁰.

The idea of splitting the Seven Pillars between a basic core model and a series of specialist lenses – of which, as we have seen, there are now five – has therefore been seen as a wise and timely recognition of the importance of adapting IL to different circumstances in higher education and beyond. Dalton, who developed the evidence-based practice healthcare lens in 2013, understood the importance of reflecting the unique information landscape and needs of given domains. He proposed that the

“flexibility of [the] lens approach supports a constructivist framework by potentially increasing the personal relevance and direct meaning for users. By adapting the generic model to the specific real-life context of learners, it reflects an approach to

¹⁷ Geoff Walton’s blog (15/07/2011) – <https://geoffwalton.wordpress.com/2011/07/15/sconul-seven-pillars-of-information-literacy/>

¹⁸ DaCosta, JW. (2010), *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Secker J. (2011), ‘A New Curriculum for Information Literacy – Expert Consultation Report’, Arcadia Project, Cambridge University Library - <http://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/220313.pdf>

²⁰ Walsh A. (2012), *op. cit.*

instructional design and delivery that allows individuals to construct new skills in a familiar territory"²¹.

There is a debate to be had about the way in which the lens-based approach might lead to an evolution of the model. Participants in an online discussion facilitated under the auspices of the IL Journal Club, in January 2013, were receptive to the idea of such an evolution²². They recognised the value of the lenses reflecting real-life experiences and settings. Lenses could "allow people to use their own vocabulary to understand the underlying concepts"; for similar reasons, there would be value also in mapping lenses to existing and recognised professional standards. The discussion further pointed to the need for evolution by recognising that there is some overlap between pillars, and that perhaps there are too many of them.

The extent to which **the Seven Pillars have been adapted** represents further evidence of their perceived usefulness. A significant example of a practical expression of the model is the detailed handbook²³ drawn up by Jacobson *et al* and aimed at students. At nearly 160 pages, it explores in depth, with the help of case studies and practical exercises, each of the Pillars in turn. The handbook "introduce[s] students to critical concepts of information literacy as defined for the information-infused and technology-rich environment in which they find themselves. This book helps students examine their roles as information creators and sharers and enables them to more effectively deploy related skills". On a less detailed scale, other attempts have also been made to adapt and refine the Seven Pillars, for example:

- The University of Tasmania has mapped the Seven Pillars against its graduate attributes, with an indication of learning outcomes for information and research skills²⁴.
- Ulster University has devised a set of theme cards that build on the Seven Pillars and teases out what each of them means in practice for students²⁵.
- Birkbeck College has designed a grid that maps each of the Pillars against six ascending levels of expertise/experience: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, expert and information literate (lifelong learner)²⁶.

²¹ Dalton M. (2013), 'Developing an evidence-based practice healthcare lens for the SCONUL Seven Pillars of Information Literacy model', *Journal of Information Literacy*, 7(1), pp. 30-43 – <http://ojs.lboro.ac.uk/ojs/index.php/JIL/article/view/PRA-V7-I1-2013-3>

²² Information Literacy Journal Club, discussion on the 2011 revision of the Seven Pillars model, 17/10/2013 – <http://infolitjournalclub.blogspot.co.uk/2013/01/first-journal-club-discussion-thurs.html>

²³ Jacobson T. *et al*, 'The information literacy user's Guide' (Bobish G & Jacobson T, Eds.) State University of New York (SUNY) Open Textbooks – <http://textbooks.opensuny.org/the-information-literacy-users-guide-an-open-online-textbook/>

²⁴ University of Tasmania Library, 'SCONUL 7 Pillars and information and research skills' – <http://www.utas.edu.au/library/teach/information-research-skills/sconul-7>

²⁵ Ulster University, 'Theme Card: Information Skills', Ulster Viewpoints Project – <http://wiki.ulster.ac.uk/download/attachments/29557521/InformationSkills.pdf?api=v2>

²⁶ Birkbeck College, 'Information Literacy Skills Grid' – <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/lib/life/InformationLiteracy/LOs/InformationLiteracySkillsGrid.pdf>

4 Conclusions and recommendations

The Seven Pillars model has stood the test of time. Over the nearly fifteen years since it was first conceived, it has attracted widespread recognition within the academic librarian community, in the UK and internationally. For many librarians, it is now a familiar, well-used tool which has served as a basis for much work, within higher education institutions, on developing a better understanding of information literacy. Moreover, the revision of the Seven Pillars in 2011 has to some extent helped to overcome scepticism about the earlier incarnation of the model, notably through an approach that recognises the importance of attitudes and behaviours as well as skills, and that can be adapted to different contexts. There is some consensus therefore that the Seven Pillars remain useful. But in order for this usefulness to be maintained, it is suggested that attention should be paid to a number of conditions:

- There should be an effort to sustain the momentum of developing new lenses, couched in a language that potential users (not just librarians) can understand; by the same token, existing lenses should be periodically reviewed, in order to maintain their currency. The lenses are the instrument through which information literacy can be presented as relevant to the circumstances of different professional groups and communities; and on that basis, information literacy could be better understood as a factor that contributes to educational, social and economic well-being.
- Because the lenses must necessarily be adjusted to different contexts, it should be recognised that the Seven Pillars model might sometimes require adaptation for it to remain meaningful. It could therefore be opportune, in the light of circumstances, to move away from its seven-pronged arrangement. It could be that, for some players, given pillars are relatively less important or relevant, and the model should not be rigidly wedded to a particular structure that was originally designed with the needs of higher education in mind, but that might fit less well in other domains.
- At the same time, it should be recognised that for some, or maybe most lenses, there are important themes that cut across several or all of the Pillars – for instance, as suggested above, the deployment of learning methods. It could be opportune to find a way of drawing out and illustrating these common, cross-cutting themes, and maybe also relating them to other literacies – which might require a visual adaptation of the model.

As stressed earlier, this paper reflects a light-touch review and is not a substitute for a more thorough review and analysis of the Seven Pillars model as it has evolved since 2011. There may be a case for a detailed survey of users (and potential users), not just among SCONUL members, but also addressed to other professional groups. The three points suggested above might form one of the bases of such a survey, as would questions about the scope and coverage of future lenses.

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