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ECIL 2015: Information literacy in the greenhouse

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1.ECIL 2015: Best practice and innovative approaches

Istanbul in 2013, Dubrovnik in 2014, Tallinn in 2015. The European Conference on Information Literacy (ECIL) covered the latest annual stage of its trek across the continent when it met in the Estonian capital on 19-22 October.

Tallinn: A view of the city. © Stephane Goldstein, licensed under CC-BY-ND 2.0

Tallinn is a quirky and charmingly careworn little city with medieval buildings, soaring spires, cobbled streets and clanging, Soviet-era trams. There was nothing careworn (or indeed clanging) about this third edition of ECIL. More than 350 participants and a very full, four-day programme were a testament to the liveliness and breadth of the event. Numbers were boosted by the running of the event in parallel with the COST Action Network, which allowed for some interesting exchanges. ECIL continues to cover a lot of ground, and it demonstrates the extent of information literacy's (IL's) relevance to a wide range of settings and environments. There were no fewer than 160 sessions, covering theory and practice (with part of the event devoted especially to best practice and innovative approaches), 20 posters, nine keynotes and invited speakers. The many themes included IL learning and instruction; IL in the context of professional environments; compulsory education; higher education and academic libraries; democratic engagement and activism; health; everyday life; and the relationship between IL and other literacies: digital, copyright, media, visual.

The theme of the conference was IL in the green society, so there was also a strand on sustainability – demonstrating the extent to which ECIL's agenda relates to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals – and perhaps a nod also to the forthcoming major climate change conference, COP21, in Paris at the end of November. More than 50 countries were represented and, in keeping with the international – not just European –

nature of the event, sessions presented a wide range of national perspectives. It was noteworthy that there was less discussion this year about terminology and what IL means, which perhaps signifies that the discipline is maturing.

The clanging of Soviet-era trams. © Stephane Goldstein, licensed under CC-BY-ND 2.0

It is impossible, in a few words, to convey the richness and depth of the event. As part of the contingent of about 20 UK participants, we presented on an eclectic range of themes that reflected the variety of the programme: methodologies to enhance the digital capabilities of school teachers, IL outreach and advocacy beyond the world of higher education, information discernment and misinformation, copyright literacy of information professionals and determining the value of IL in the workplace. Aside from our own contributions, we were all struck by the discussions around the place of IL in the democratic process, and the contribution that it makes to citizenship, empowerment, political activism and overcoming exclusion. Thus, from a Scottish perspective, John Crawford, Bill Johnson and Lauren Smith spoke eloquently of how citizens' use of information can contribute to highly topical debates such as that around the 2014 Scottish referendum campaign and the place of older people in society. The use and misuse of information will doubtless be a factor in the looming and emotive debates on UK membership of the European Union – a theme for a future edition of ECIL, perhaps. The social and political implications of IL were also clearly present in other presentations, such as the relationship between digital literacy and the digital divide – and by implication the social divide – in schools in Ghana (James Sunney Quaicoe and Kai Pata); and the role of public libraries in helping to promote digital literacy and inclusion of local communities (Konstantina Martzoukou and Joanneke Elliott). A social and ecological perspective was apparent in a presentation comparing the information habits of farmers in a wealthy country, Sweden, with those of their poorer and less educated counterparts in Turkey (Demet Soylu, Nilay Cevher and Marco Schirone) – an illustration of the green society theme.

2. Plenary presentations: reflecting societal challenges

Jane Secker and Chris Morrison at ECIL. © Jane Secker, licensed under CC-BY-SA 4.0.

The plenary presentations from keynote and invited speakers also often reflected societal challenges. Sonia Livingstone spoke about digital literacies of children across Europe, drawing on the EU Kids Online project she has led. Susan Danby shared insights into young children's internet searching. Carol Kuhlthau asked us if we should be rethinking IL for the 21st century. Mandy Lupton spoke about the four 'windows' (generic, situated, transformative, expressive) for critically evaluating information, and gave special mention to Geoff Walton's workshop on information discernment. Olof Sundin shared his worrying thoughts on how people's increasing reliance on (and trust of) Google is undermining their critical faculties. These are all big issues and a cause for much reflection.

Although once again the conference was excellently organised, one aspect which should be considered for future events is the way in which IL might reach out from beyond its traditional home. Unsurprisingly, delegates consisted essentially of information professionals and academics, but given the extent to which the sessions branched across so many domains, it would provide much greater insight and support the wider advocacy of IL if at least some participants came from other backgrounds. For instance, politicians could take part in the discussions on democracy and citizenship; and business leaders to give their views on topics related to professional environments. It is a real challenge to attract anyone from those 'external' perspectives, and we recognise the difficulty of persuading such players that IL really is for them too. However, without doing so the field of IL risks continuing to exist in its own silo (or greenhouse). In their session Jane Secker and Geoff Walton suggested that IL theorists and practitioners should reach out to other disciplines by attending conferences and events dedicated to other related fields. This has the potential to build a stronger set of connections between IL and other domains. It might be that ECIL and other conferences would benefit from outreach becoming a persistent theme, a standing agenda item in the discourse of IL.

Presenting on copyright literacy.
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Of course, no conference would be complete without its social programme. ECIL2015 lived up to the reputation of its predecessors in this respect, and participants were treated to the delights of Estonian hand-bell ringing, folk-dancing (Dubrovnik set a precedent for leaping about in quaint traditional costumes; it could become an unavoidable part of future conference); salmon marinated in vodka; and the digestive wonders of the local tipple, Vana Tallinn, whose virtues were not fully appreciated by all the authors of this article. Next stop Prague, in October 2016. Praha, tady se dostáváme!