

# Information Literacy and Digital Access

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I am a digital immigrant. Having begun undergraduate study in speech-language pathology in 1979 and completing my master's degree in 1984, my native territory involved index cards, depositing many dimes into a photo copier, and waiting weeks or months for articles to arrive in the mail. These practices seem ancient and foreign to the digital natives I now teach as an Associate Professor of Communication Disorders. I completed a doctoral degree after the turn of the millennium. That journey marked my immigration to the world of digital information. I am now honored to be invited to write an editorial for the inaugural edition of the *Journal of Communication Disorders, Deaf Studies, and Hearing Aids*, an Open Access journal.

Open access is a milestone in the history of digital information. As explained by the OMICS Group on the group's webpage [1]. "Open Access should be seen as a means of accelerating scientific discovery by providing free and unrestricted access of scientific knowledge via the Internet". With the rapid expansion of readily available information, comes the increased responsibility for consumers to be information literate.

According to the Association of College and Research Libraries [2], "information literacy forms the basis for lifelong learning". Information literacy involves much more than being able to access information. The Association of College and Research Libraries defines the information literate consumer as an individual who is able to determine the information that is needed and is able to retrieve it efficiently. Once the information is located, the information literate consumer must be able to critically evaluate the information and apply it appropriately. Using the information also carries legal and ethical responsibilities. In this regard, under Open Access

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Among practicing professionals in the field of communication disorders, much emphasis has been placed in recent years on the principles of evidence-based practice. Implementing evidence-based practice involves a balance of the current best evidence with clinical expertise and client values [3]. Evidence-based practice relies on the ability to locate, evaluate, and apply information reported in scholarly sources about best clinical practices. Information literacy plays a key role in being able to interpret and apply the evidence. A study published in 2007 by Nail-Chiwetalu and Bernstein Ratner [4] examined the information-seeking abilities and needs of practicing speech-language pathologists. The findings indicated that speech-language pathologists most frequently asked colleagues for information related to practice issues rather than utilize database searches or published journals. Respondents reported lacking the knowledge and skill for finding relevant information. Although several years have passed since the publication of Nail-Chiwetalu's and Bernstein Ratner's study, the amount of information and the increased ease of access has not lessened the need for information literacy skill development.

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education specifically includes information literacy as an essential skill in its Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education [5]. While digital natives have never known a world in which information was not instantly accessible via the Internet or other electronic resources, information literacy is a skill which must be explicitly taught and practiced. Research by Trail and Hadley [6] and Hadley and Trail [7] indicated that upperclassmen enrolled in speech-language pathology and audiology courses were overconfident in their information literacy skills. Just under half of the students involved in the study scored above the expected proficiency level on a standardized measure of information literacy skills. Following direct instruction in information literacy skills, provided collaboratively by the course instructor and the college librarian, students demonstrated proficiency in applying information literacy skills in a research project as measured by an authentic assessment. A mean score of 28 out of 30 points on a rubric measuring information literacy skills was demonstrated by the students.

As an immigrant to the digital world of information, I do not reminisce fondly on the days of pre-technological information access. The Open Access movement has both simplified and complicated the ability of consumers to engage in information literate practices. Quality Open Access publications with strong standards for peer review will certainly assist consumers in identifying and accessing current research and findings. The *Journal of Communication Disorders, Deaf Studies & Hearing Aids* [8] encompasses original research articles of authentic information and research includes the latest advanced innovative methods of the researchers which are freely accessible without any access boundaries to all internet users globally" (*Journal of Communication Disorders, Deaf Studies & Hearing Aids*). The responsible application of the material relies upon information literate readers. A comprehensive listing of information literacy resources can be located on The Association of College and Research Libraries [9].

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