INFORMATION LITERACY FOR CULTIVATING SUSTAINABLE MINDSET

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Abstract
Sustainable thinking and information literacy (IL) are essential for developing resilient, informed citizens with a sustainability-oriented mindset. IL provides individuals with critical 21st-century skills, empowering them to sustain and enrich democratic communities.

To better understand the role of IL in fostering sustainable thinking, this paper begins with a comprehensive literature review exploring key research clusters and emerging trends at the intersection of these concepts. The findings reveal a strong correlation between IL competencies - such as information evaluation, critical thinking, and ethical information use - and the cultivation of sustainable thinking. These skills are pivotal for fostering awareness of global challenges and promoting social inclusion.

Building on this foundation, the study explores the perspectives of students from the University of West Attica (UNIWA) and the University of Bologna (UNIBO) regarding the role of IL courses in secondary education and their influence on students' thinking. This quantitative study demonstrates that such courses significantly enhance students' critical engagement with information, equipping them to navigate complex information ecosystems responsibly.

Finally, to demonstrate practical applications, the paper presents a case study of an IL course taught to students in UNIWA's Department of Archival, Library, and Information Studies (ALIS). Inspired by the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the course emphasizes defining information needs; searching, accessing and evaluating information; synthesizing new content; using information ethically; and sharing knowledge. The course equips students with transferable skills while raising awareness of sustainability issues, providing a model for integrating IL into broader educational curricula.

This paper highlights the potential of IL to cultivate critically engaged, sustainability-oriented learners. It underscores how embedding IL into education can better equip individuals to address global challenges.

***Keywords**: information literacy, sustainable goals, critical thinking, resilience, University of West Attica, University of Bologna*

Introduction

The 21st century presents humanity with unprecedented challenges, from climate change to resource depletion and growing social inequalities. In this context, sustainability has become a key priority, requiring individuals and societies to make informed, responsible decisions. At the same time, we live in an era of information overload, where distinguishing credible, relevant knowledge from misinformation is increasingly difficult. This makes information literacy (IL)—our ability to locate, evaluate, and effectively use information—an essential skill for sustainability efforts.

The term "sustainability" is defined variously across different contexts, but there is general agreement that highlights subjects about humans and their environments, understanding the complex relationships in diverse ecosystems, securing the well-being of future generations and valuing equity in socio-economic aspects (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

Access to information has been recognized in the SDGs as a target under Goal 16.10 "*Ensure public access to information, because it enables people to make informed decisions that can improve their lives. Communities that have access to timely and relevant information for all are better positioned to eradicate poverty and inequality, improve agriculture, provide quality education, and support people's health, culture, research, and innovation."* Therefore, providing access to information as well as embedding IL courses in the curriculum in libraries context has been an important issue for these information organizations.

On the other hand, libraries as cultural institutions that serve all members of society without any discrimination, have both a legal and a moral obligation to enhance sustainability through IL courses. The central promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its SDGs is to "leave no one behind" (LNOB), that could be interpreted in leaving no one illiterate and unfamiliar with reading and studying but reverse this fact through a more practical approach offered by libraries (Stark, 2011).

This paper explores the correlation of sustainability and IL, demonstrating their deep interconnection. IL is not merely a beneficial tool for sustainability but an essential component. Through a review of relevant literature and best practices, this study examines the role of IL in fostering informed decision-making, strengthening community initiatives, and enhancing sustainability practices. Additionally, it incorporates perspectives from students at the University of West Attica and the University of Bologna on the necessity of IL as a fundamental cognitive skill that shapes their mindset. Furthermore, it presents a case study of an IL course at UNIWA's Department of Archival, Library, and Information Studies (ALIS), inspired by the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The course develops key IL competencies while promoting sustainability awareness.

Literature Review

The literature review was contributed based on two pillars: the first one is 'information literacy', and the second one is 'sustainability'.

Literacy serves as a powerful instrument for both individual and societal advancement. Enhanced literacy leads to economic development, alleviation of poverty, and the fostering of democratic values, while simultaneously acting as a catalyst for transformation at both personal and community levels. It equips individuals with better problem-solving abilities. Nevertheless, the conventional understanding of literacy—defined merely as the ability to read, write, and perform basic arithmetic—has evolved in this era of technological innovation. Given its significant role in human and historical progress, literacy should be viewed in a broader context beyond traditional definitions (Adedokun, 2018).

According to the 1994 manifesto by IFLA and UNESCO, each library serves as a unique local information center, an "information hub" that connects the information requirements of its users with top-quality information services, by utilizing expertise and delivering accurate and objectively verified information. It could be described as the "local gateway" leading to knowledge and providing the basis for lifelong learning and the development of critical skill by implementing IL courses (Katsira & Koulouris, 2023).

One of the key theorists who described IL is Lloyd who states that, "*Information literacy is a practice that is enacted in a social setting. It is composed of a suite of activities and skills that reference structured and embodied knowledges and ways of knowing relevant to the context. Information literacy is a way of knowing*" (Lloyd, 2017).

IL is typically defined as the capability to recognize a need for information, find relevant sources, evaluate their credibility, and utilize them appropriately. The American Library Association (ALA, 2016) defines IL as "a set of skills that enable individuals to understand when information is required and have the capacity to find, assess, and effectively utilize the necessary information." In a time characterized by misinformation, these abilities are essential for navigating complex global challenges, such as those related to sustainability. There are five clear and distinct standards for IL, which include well-defined performance indicators and outcomes:

a. The information literate student identifies the nature and scope of the information needed.

b. The information literate student retrieves the required information effectively and efficiently.

c. The student who possesses IL skills critically assesses information and its sources, integrating chosen information into their knowledge system and value framework.

d. An information literate student utilizes information proficiently, either independently or as part of a community, to achieve a particular objective.

e. A student with IL is aware of various economic, legal, and social considerations related to information use, ensuring they employ information ethically.

By embedding sustainability into the core aspects of IL, libraries may alleviate Sherman's main concern that "sustainability is a list of things one should do" rather than "a way of critically thinking about our individual and collective role in the world, as a way of informing individual and collective decisions" (Sherman, 2008). IL courses enhance with a focus on sustainability can help students accomplish each of these elements of critical thinking and prepare them to critically and sustainably engage with information in the real world.

Library science as a discipline should not be underestimated because information science drives the knowledge economy (Shafack, 2016). To Shafack the information profession is critical in the development agenda because it provides the platform on which to access necessary information that enhances the progress of human activities and it is closely linked to IL which helps people to access quality information to face socio-cultural and economic needs, thereby leading to healthy living and improved standard of living which ultimately brings hope for sustainable development.

Sustainability is not a synonym for environmentalism. Conserving natural resources for future generations is only one of the three components of the sustainable development concept (Kurbanoglu & Boustany, 2014). Sustainability is commonly defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.". It encompasses three fundamental dimensions: environmental, social, and economic sustainability. Achieving sustainability requires long-term planning, critical thinking, and the ability to analyze diverse and often conflicting sources of information.

Libraries have long embodied the principles of sustainability, preserving knowledge and information across generations well before the concept gained widespread recognition (Connell, 2010). Their lending practices significantly contribute to environmental conservation by promoting the reuse of materials, thereby reducing the demand for paper and limiting deforestation (Jankowska, 2011).

The Green Library Movement, which seeks to minimize libraries' environmental impact (Antonelli, 2008), emerged in the early 1990s and gained momentum in the early 21st century. A key influence on this movement was the Talloires Declaration the first formal commitment to environmental sustainability in higher education (ULSF, 2001), signed by institutions in over 40 countries. This declaration, which emphasized fostering environmental literacy, promoting responsible citizenship, and integrating sustainability into university operations, played a pivotal role in motivating academic libraries to adopt greener practices.

By incorporating sustainability concepts like environmental literacy into the curriculum, there is an opportunity for significant impact due to the greater exposure it offers students to the subject and the methods for engaging with it through various interdisciplinary perspectives (Rowe, 2002). Nevertheless, sustainability should not be isolated within a specific area of study such as environmental science, as it spans a wide range of fields including the arts, humanities, economics, political science, and history (Barlett and Chase, 2004).

At their core, sustainability and IL both depend on critical thinking and informed decision-making. Addressing sustainability challenges requires individuals to sift through a vast array of information, from scientific data and economic reports to government policies and corporate sustainability claims. Without strong IL skills, it is easy to fall prey to misinformation, greenwashing, or biased narratives. Scholars such as Kuhlthau et al. (2007) argue that sustainability challenges require interdisciplinary approaches, making IL a crucial enabler of effective action.

Good Practices and Challenges

Integrating sustainability and IL requires education. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), is a foundational framework that equips students with the abilities and information needed to tackle global issues. Interdisciplinary programs in all levels of education that integrate sustainability and IL give students the ability to assess sustainability-related material critically and apply what they have learned in practical settings.

In the past, public libraries have been essential in ensuring that everyone has access to knowledge, and many are now expanding their mission to include sustainability education. According to Katsira and Koulouris (2023), libraries can serve as vital hubs for sustainability literacy in their communities by organizing workshops, curating specialized collections, and contributing to regional sustainability projects as vibrant cultural institutions. Some libraries, such as the Seattle Central Library (USA) and the Stuttgart City Library (Germany) have been designed with energy efficiency in mind, using advanced climate control operators and natural

ventilation, geothermal heating and cooling system, while at the same time they embrace sustainable practices, such as minimizing paper usage and advocating for digital resources.At Vancouver's Public Library (Canada), the central branch has a green roof incorporating recycled materials in its construction. Simultaneously, it offers a range of sustainability-focused programs and workshops for the community (Papageorgiou, 2024). Local communities can apply IL as a way to induce sustainable change. For example, the Transition Towns movement uses shared online resources to help catalyze grassroots sustainability projects. Likewise, clear, accessible, well-organized information, such as the HEAL-link consortium is often critical to public programs that encourage recycling, energy efficiency and responsible consumption.

Many scholars view sustainable policies as a crucial factor for enhancing the environmental performance of libraries. Libraries in developed nations also struggle with adhering to sustainable policies. Only a handful of academic libraries in the United States have received LEED certification (Aulisio, 2013). Further, Jankowska & Marcum (2010) synthesized the existing literature on the topic of "green libraries" and found that academic libraries remained slow in either developing their own sustainability indicators or adopting from other organizations. Various studies indicate that no established guidelines exist to minimize printing waste management (Dempsey & Palilonis, 2012), and there is a lack of a sustainability policy for library collections (Marcum, 2009). Nevertheless, it remains essential to identify effective ways for libraries to operate as environmentally friendly entities and librarians to be well-engaged with sustainability issues (Noh, & Ahn, 2018).

Different researchers have strongly argued that practicing sustainability holds greater significance than merely having eco-friendly library buildings. Alders (2018) highlighted the case of the National Library of Aruba, which encountered difficulties in forming strong partnerships with schools and other educational institutions to fulfill sustainable education objectives. Furthermore, many studies noted a deficiency in expertise and competencies and felt that professionals involved in environmental IL had not assumed their expected responsibilities (Abiolu & Okere, 2012). Other obstacles include public libraries investing in training citizens through environmental literacy, while not adopting effective sustainability practices.

The mission of green libraries was not explicitly stated. The primary challenge of educating users hinges not solely on having environmentally friendly buildings but also on sharing the educational responsibility with users (Binks et al., 2014). Beyond sustainable library construction, the principal challenge lies in implementing sustainability initiatives to raise public awareness (Brodie, 2012). Most importantly, it is crucial to teach individuals that a green library does not necessarily need to be housed in a green building; rather, green actions represent a different challenge (Aulisio, 2013).

Information Literacy necessity: a quantitative analysis of students' perceptions

This study presents the findings of a quantitative survey conducted between April and May 2023 at two universities: the University of West Attica (UNIWA) in Greece and the University of Bologna (UNIBO) in Italy. The survey aimed to explore students' perspectives on the importance of IL and its impact on their research skills.

The survey received approval from the Committee on Ethics and Research Integrity of the University of West Attica before the questionnaire's distribution. At UNIWA, the questionnaire was disseminated via email, resulting in a total of 254 responses. The survey was divided in three sections: the first collected demographic data, including age, gender, educational level, and country of origin; the second examined whether respondents had access to a school library during their middle school years; and the third assessed students'

perceptions of IL and its impact on their research abilities. At UNIBO, the survey was conducted in person during a short-term Erasmus+ mobility program from April 17 to April 22, 2023. A total of 102 students completed the questionnaire after attending three instructional sessions on IL, which covered its definition, benefits for academic research, and the skills it enhances. This approach ensured that participants were familiar with the concept before responding to the survey.

The findings from this study provide valuable insights into students' awareness and attitudes toward IL, contributing to a broader understanding of its role in academic success. This section presents a quantitative analysis of the perceived importance of IL at different educational stages and its impact on lifelong research skills. The analysis includes Mode, Mean, and Standard Deviation to offer a comprehensive understanding of students' responses from UNIWA and UNIBO.

The table that follows (Table 1) reveals students' beliefs on the importance of IL courses from infancy. While the survey focuses on IL courses during secondary education, it is worth noting that some kindergartens are already introducing basic IL skills to toddlers, so they get familiar with simple strategies on informed decision making.

The mode analysis for this question indicates that the most selected rating for the significance of IL in infancy was a score of 4 for both the University of UNIWA and UNIBO. Nevertheless, respondents from UNIBO exhibited a significantly higher percentage of selections at this level, with 36.2% as opposed to 25.5% at UNIWA. Further statistical evaluation of the mean and standard deviation reveals that the mean score at UNIWA was 3.35, accompanied by a standard deviation of 1.28. On the other hand, students from UNIBO reported a mean score of 3.79 with a lower standard deviation of 0.94.

These findings imply that UNIBO students generally attach more significance to IL in infancy than their UNIWA counterparts. Moreover, the reduced standard deviation noted in the UNIBO group suggests a stronger consensus among respondents, while UNIWA students exhibited a greater variance in their perspectives regarding this matter.

Table 1. Q1: Do you think that information literacy is important from infancy?

Institution	Mode	Mean	Standard Deviation
UNIWA	4	3.35	1.28
UNIBO	4	3.79	0.94

The following table (Table 2) highlights students' perspectives on the importance of implementing IL courses during secondary education (Junior School and Junior High School).

The mode analysis reveals that the most selected response regarding the importance of IL among middle school students was a rating of 5 from the respondents of UNIWA, with 58.6% choosing this option; on the other hand, UNIBO respondents most frequently opted for a rating of 4, with 42.2% of responses falling into this category. This indicates a strong acknowledgment of the significance of IL during this educational phase at both institutions.

Statistical analysis shows that the mean score for UNIWA was 4.49, accompanied by a standard deviation of 0.67, while UNIBO students had a mean of 4.17 and a standard deviation of 0.78. These results demonstrate that IL is generally regarded as highly important at the middle school level, as both mean scores exceed 4.0.

Moreover, the higher mean and lower standard deviation for UNIWA students suggest a greater and more consistent consensus on IL's importance during the years of this educational level. In contrast, the relatively higher standard deviation for UNIBO students indicates a wider range of responses, showing somewhat more variability in their perceptions.

Table 2. Q2: Do you think information literacy is important at middle school?

Institution	Mode	Mean	Standard Deviation
UNIWA	5	4.49	0.67
UNIBO	4	4.17	0.78

At Table 3, students were asked to answer if their research skills as university students would have been affected if they had attend at least one IL course during their secondary education. The mode analysis indicates that the most common response concerning the enhancement of research skills through IL was a score of 5 from UNIWA, with 46.7% of participants opting for this choice. In contrast, students at UNIBO demonstrated a more even distribution, with equal percentages of 42.1% each choosing ratings of 4 and 5.

The statistical evaluation shows that UNIWA had a mean score of 4.31 and a standard deviation of 0.80, while UNIBO had a mean of 4.11 and a standard deviation of 0.84. These findings confirm that students recognize the significant role of IL in improving their research skills, as evidenced by the high average scores from both universities.

Additionally, although UNIWA students rated the influence of IL marginally higher, the slightly larger standard deviation for UNIBO indicates a greater variety of responses, reflecting a wider range of views on this subject.

Table 3. Q3: How much would your Research Skills be affected, if you had attended an IL courses at secondary education?

Institution	Mode	Mean	Standard Deviation
UNIWA	5	4.31	0.80
UNIBO	4/5	4.11	0.84

There is a clear agreement among both institutions regarding the importance of IL, particularly in its impact on middle school education and the cultivation of research skills. Students from UNIWA and UNIBO recognize the relevance of IL, pointing out its vital role in achieving academic success.

However, the views on the significance of IL in early childhood differ more significantly, especially among UNIWA students. This discrepancy indicates a broader range of perspectives on the necessity of IL during formative years, with some students placing a higher emphasis on its importance than others.

The findings also indicate that the middle school years are seen as a crucial time for acknowledging and integrating IL. The highest average scores at this educational level suggest that students from both institutions view middle school as a pivotal stage for developing IL skills, reinforcing the idea that early engagement with IL can have a lasting effect on academic achievement.

Additionally, both universities collectively acknowledge IL's role in enhancing research competencies. While there is general consensus on this matter, students from UNIWA seem to be slightly more persuaded of IL's influence on research development, as evidenced by the higher average scores noted in their feedback.

This statistical evaluation highlights the widespread acknowledgment of IL as vital for cultivating sustainability-oriented knowledge and facilitating informed decision-making, illustrating its significance across both institutions.

From theory to action: an information literacy course redesigned for global challenges

In light of the preceding discussion on the importance and necessity of IL, as well as its correlation with Sustainable Development, the Department of Archival, Library & Information Studies at the University of West Attica has redesigned the course "Information Literacy" to align with the United Nations' Agenda 2030— the blueprint of 17 Sustainable Development Goals that promote global peace and prosperity. Below, the innovative approach of the course (hereafter IL-SDGs course) is outlined, and its outcomes are highlighted, emphasizing the active participation of students.

The IL-SDGs course is designed with clear objectives, aiming to cultivate essential 21st-century skills through a constructive teaching approach in IL. Students engage with a range of critical competencies, including identifying informational needs by understanding what information is required, searching for and accessing information efficiently within vast information landscapes, and evaluating information—a skillset that will be further elaborated upon (Information Literacy Website, 2024).

Additionally, the course emphasizes the ability to study and synthesize content, transforming information into meaningful insights (Blachowicz & Ogle, 2017; Lapp, Flood & Farnan, 2016; McNamara, 2007; Santi & Reed, 2015; Snow, 2002), while also fostering the ethical and responsible use of information by promoting respect for intellectual property and proper attribution (HEALLEGAL; Creative Commons; EDUCABILITY, 2024; Kanaki, 2023; Secker & Morrison, 2016). Furthermore, students refine their ability to share knowledge effectively, from content creation to impactful dissemination.

What distinguishes this course is its applied learning approach, as students practice these skills through real-world topics directly aligned with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensuring both practical relevance and meaningful engagement.

Among the various skills emphasized in the IL-SDGs course, the ability to evaluate information is particularly significant for fostering sustainable thinking. This process involves multiple key criteria, including thematic relevance, which assesses whether the information aligns with the given topic, and temporal relevance, which considers the adequacy of the publication date. Accessibility is also examined, as restrictions or the lack of them on obtaining the full content may have implications for the levels of its credibility. Additionally, students assess source credibility by determining the trustworthiness of the publisher, while accuracy and reliability are evaluated to ensure the correctness of the presented facts. Objectivity is another crucial factor, requiring an analysis of potential biases in the information. Furthermore, validity and completeness are considered by examining whether the content is thorough and logically structured, while consistency is assessed by verifying whether facts and figures align across different sources. The evaluation process also takes into account popularity and presentation, ensuring that the information is professionally and engagingly presented, as well as the clarity, precision, and contextual appropriateness of language use (Keshavarz, EsmaeiliGivi, & Norouzi, 2020; Boothby, Murray, Waggy, Tsou, & Sugimoto, 2021; Habibi, Fatemi & Doshmangir, 2019; Rotboim, Hershkovitz & Laventman, 2019; Rethlefsen, Kirtley, Waffenschmidt, Ayala, Moher, Page & Koffel, 2021; Frampton, Whaley, Bennett, Bilotta, Dorne, Eales... & Schofield, 2022).

By developing these competencies, students are better equipped to discern high-quality information, a skill that is essential in addressing global sustainability challenges. Moreover, this rigorous and thoughtful evaluation process reinforces responsible decision-making, further contributing to sustainable development efforts.

The students' efforts culminate in the creation of 92 IL-SDG blogs, which present rich, reliable content and diverse perspectives on Sustainable Development. Each blog serves as a reflection of their understanding of IL and global challenges while emphasizing the critical

role of libraries and other organizations in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To facilitate the dissemination of their work, students registered metadata on Omeka.net, an online platform for digital collections, ensuring systematic organization and accessibility. These blogs are publicly available at https://infolitalhc.omeka.net/, providing a valuable resource for individuals interested in sustainability, particularly libraries and other institutions seeking to engage with and contribute to SDG-related initiatives.

By the end of the course, students move beyond theoretical knowledge, engaging in the cooperative design of scenarios that bring their learning to life. These activities include role-playing library workshops in class, focused on sustainable living, climate change, and renewable energy, aiming to inspire environmental action. Additionally, students brainstorm and propose literacy programs and technology training initiatives that help address educational barriers and reduce inequalities. Many student teams think of and present in class cultural events and discussions on gender equality, peace, health, and sustainable consumption that foster awareness and encourage meaningful dialogue. Furthermore, students transform the class into a community innovation space that promotes creativity, and collaborative problem-solving. These experiential learning opportunities not only deepen students' understanding of key issues but also empower them to drive meaningful change as future information professionals within their communities.

The course yields transformative outcomes, significantly enhancing students' IL skills. By mastering the full spectrum of IL competencies, students are better prepared for success in academic, professional, and personal contexts. Additionally, they develop a deeper understanding of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), enabling them to connect global challenges with actionable solutions and actively contribute to sustainability efforts at both local and global levels. Moreover, the course fosters a sustainable mindset, encouraging habits of thinking and acting that emphasize collaboration, inclusion, and resilience.

Ultimately, the course aspires to nurture learners who are not only well-informed but also inspired to take action. It aims to instill a mindset that prioritizes knowledge sharing and collaboration, breaking down silos to address global challenges collectively. Additionally, it promotes social inclusion and equity, fostering a world free of stereotypes and exclusions. Most importantly, it encourages students to envision and work toward a sustainable future where all individuals can thrive. By integrating IL into educational frameworks, this course equips learners with the resilience, awareness, and leadership skills necessary to tackle complex global challenges and contribute to a more sustainable world.

Conclusion

To establish a community that is more aware and liable, sustainability and IL must coexist. This paper demonstrates how IL empowers people and communities to actively participate in social and environmental initiatives, fight misinformation, and make environmentally friendly decisions. However, addressing problems with information access, complexity, and bias is crucial to achieving these benefits in their entirety.

Policymakers, educational institutions, and libraries all contribute to bridging this divide. Future generations will be better equipped to make sustainable decisions if we integrate sustainability literacy into IL programs, pledge adequate access to information, and use digital tools to enhance comprehension.

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