

West meets East – Information Literacy

In my previous articles, I've discussed the many differences and similarities found between our libraries here in the United States and those that I visited in Japan. The one area where I found a common bond between our two countries is in information literacy. At each library I visited, I asked the librarians if they witness a lack of information literacy skills in their patrons, and at each library I was given a resounding "yes!" The librarians mentioned Google and Yahoo! as a common research tool being used with their patrons, and a lack of understanding in how to evaluate information and why it's important to do so.

The university librarians explained to me that the high school student's main concern is with passing their university entrance exams. As a result, the high schools primarily teach to the exam, which doesn't test a student on their information seeking skills. Although Japan's Ministry of Education recently stressed the importance of information literacy skills, I was told that it will take time for the high schools to include this in their curriculum due to the importance placed on the entrance exams.

Although the students attending public high schools are focused primarily on passing their entrance exams, there are several private high schools operated by the major university systems that guarantee entrance to their students. By removing the focus from the entrance exams, these high schools are able to offer an intensive research-oriented project to their senior students as part of their graduation requirements. At the two schools I visited, the Chuo University High School and the Meiji University High School, students worked on year-long projects that involved all aspects of information literacy skills and better prepared them for the type of research projects they would work on at the university level.

While most public schools in Japan are not offering these types of required projects, I learned of one school system in Osaka that is trying to include information literacy in their curriculum. The Osaka school students have assignments and projects built into their junior high school and high school years that gradually build up their information literacy skills. This same school system has also begun offering a research contest, which is open to the entire Osaka community, includes a public exhibit of the winning entries. The contest has been well-received and had approximately 2000 applicants last year and included many return entrants and non-students.

Finally, in an attempt to teach students information literacy skills at the university level, many of the libraries I visited are offering research workshops or classes to their students. For example, the Meiji University Library offers elective workshops on a variety of topics, including how to use the libraries resources, Nagasaki University offers a First Year Experience course to their incoming students that include one session with a librarian, and Tokyo University provides a research class for university credit.

While Japan is considered a technologically progressive country, their "information seekers" struggle with information literacy skills in the same way that we see it happening here in the US – and I imagine the same is happening worldwide. With this common bond, my hope is that we can work with one another to exchange ideas and develop programs that can be used – internationally - to teach information literacy skills to our users.

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