ABSTRACT

Today's youth is immersed in media-rich environment with many and varied types of information. Teenagers are embracing the online world as a way of life. They are being characterized as “tech savvy,” or “born digital”. Their social interest, vulnerability to online misinformation and high use of the Internet bring about new information literacy (IL) demands. In 2013, the National Library Board launched the IL initiative, known as S.U.R.E. campaign for the nation. The campaign aims to promote the importance of information discernment among the Singaporeans, especially, students, parents and educators. To make the term, information literacy easy for the man-in-the-street to understand, the key concepts were distilled into a simple tagline: Source, Understand, Research, Evaluate (S.U.R.E.) There are two aspects of IL outreach in schools: (1) inside classroom and (2) outside classroom. For outreach inside classroom: collaboration with the Ministry of Education has enabled IL concepts to be incorporated into secondary history and geography syllabus and primary social studies textbooks, which are compulsory subjects in schools and conducting IL workshops for teachers. Training the teacher has great benefits – it has a multiplier effect of opportunities to impart IL knowledge to students during lessons. For outreach outside classroom: an enrichment programme, known as S.U.R.E. club was introduced in the secondary schools. Students earn rewards and points based on the Ministry of Education’s Co-Curricular Activities framework after completing information literacy-related projects and tasks. Training and self-directed content – such as infographics, video, comics, elearning coursewares, cheatsheets and handbooks – for teachers and parents respectively are put in place to help them teach information literacy skills to their students and children. There are also interactive content such as online quizzes and engagement via social media channels. This paper will share on the activities, workshops, events, collaboration and resources developed to raise the awareness of and create better understanding of IL to the target audience. It will also highlight a pilot programme to encourage information discovery and inquiry, in line with the Singapore secondary history curriculum.

Keywords: information literacy, youth, teenager, born digital, SURE campaign, SURE Club
1. INTRODUCTION

Singapore is one of the most wired nations in the world and boasts a high Internet penetration rate of 73 per cent; above the global rate of 35 percent. The citizens enjoy free wireless Internet access in many public spaces across the island including libraries, café, shopping malls, MRT (Mass Rapid Transport) train stations and airport. Singaporeans are also most active users of the social media and spend 2.2 hours on average per day on all social media channels, above the world average of 2.0 hours.

The younger generations in Singapore are often depicted as technically savvy and digitally empowered. Access to social networking sites, online games, video and photograph sharing sites, and gadgets such as tablet computer, smartphones and ipods perpetuate the “youth culture”, in addition to competition for academic achievement. An annual survey in 2012 shows that 91 per cent of the residents have Internet access and close to 100 per cent of the age group (15 to 24 years) has used computer and access to the Internet. In fact, case study of a group of Singapore students indicated that social media platforms are increasingly used as a tool to communicate with friends and schoolmates, for entertainment purposes and express their emotions.

2. SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS’ INFORMATION LITERACY SKILLS

Although Singapore students are generally tech savvy, the information literacy (IL) levels among them may not necessarily be high. For example, in 2010, the National Information Literacy survey for Singapore Schools involving more than 3,000 secondary students found that the overall score across all IL competencies stood at only 38.7 per cent. The scores recorded for each of major category in the survey such as “Information seeking strategies”, “Location & Access”, “Information use”, “Information synthesis” and “Information evaluation” were below 50 (out of a maximum of 100) except for “task definition”. The finding indicated that students lack the aptitude to discern the authenticity of the source and giving credit to source materials.

The growing reliance among students on the Internet as a source of information for work and recreation has raised the red flags among educators. The Minister of Education, Mr Heng Swee Kiat acknowledged the challenges posed by the Internet and said that IL skills are “are very important and if we can do that well, our students will certainly have an edge”. With the greater reach of Internet and increase in online time, a corresponding spike in cyber crime has also been observed. More criminals are targeting victims on the cyberspace and reports of rising number of young Singaporeans falling prey to online crime, cyber extortion and frauds. Teens often do not protect themselves from online threats or lack critical thinking and problem solving skills to be able to evaluate the quality of information they encounter.

3. RAISING INFORMATION LITERACY AWARENESS IN SINGAPORE

Information literacy is defined as a set of skills, which require an individual to: “recognize when information is needed and has the abilities to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.” With the explosion of information output in the technology-infused societies, it is increasingly clear that IL is a critical skill for individuals in
the 21st century. An information literate person will be able to discern information based on the authenticity, validity and reliability of the information and communication received.

In 2013, the National Library Board (NLB) which oversees the operation of the National Library and its 24 branches of public libraries launched a nationwide campaign to promote IL awareness to all Singaporeans. The aim is to bring across the message that information literacy skills are important and relevant to every citizens in their daily lives. The campaign was branded as S.U.R.E. - which stands for Source, Understand, Research, and Evaluate. The intention is to simplify the concept of IL into its building blocks and make it easy for the average Singaporean to understand and adopt the 4 easy steps when they handle information:

- check whether the information Source is reliable
- Understand the context of the information
- Research into other sources to verify the accuracy of information (cross-check)
- Evaluate the best way to use the information

The initiative focuses mainly on generating awareness on IL to the target audiences who are active online users. They range from youths (13 year olds or secondary one onwards) to working adults (age 20s-50s). The campaign strives to reach out to the audiences through online interactions on the S.U.R.E website (http://nlb.gov.sg/sure) and S.U.R.E facebook (http://fb.com/sgsure) as well as offline/face-to-face interactions during the workshops, talks, outreach event.

4. INFORMATION LITERACY NEEDED FOR SECONDARY STUDENTS

With the shift in school curriculum towards project-based learning in Singapore, students are required to have good research skills for their school works. However, imparting IL skills to students goes beyond giving library or bibliographic instruction or knowing how to use different information sources. It includes teaching critical and analytical thinking skills regarding the use of information and abilities to brainstorm generate new ideas from current thinking and prior knowledge. To do so, the S.U.R.E. team has implemented strategies “inside and outside the classroom” to equip secondary students with the required IL skills before entering pre-tertiary institutions.

Inside Classroom

(1) Integrating IL materials into school curriculum

Teachers can approach IL as a means to teach students how to handle information in the process of learning a subject during lesson time. This allows students to develop and apply IL skills through practice rather than learning it as a standalone skill. In this sense, it is best that IL is integrated into the lesson appropriate to the school syllabus. Hence, with inputs from the Ministry of Education curriculum planners, the team developed sets of IL materials that are incorporated into the national school curriculum (for subjects such as lower secondary history, geography and social studies). These materials explain key IL concepts and provide relevant examples and activities for students to directly apply the skills in the course of their study.

(2) Accessible online IL resources
To support teachers in the teaching of IL concepts in the classroom, a wide variety of ready-to-use resources on IL were developed and made accessible on the website. These resources range from one page Infographic with bite size information on many hot topics to Cheat sheets, parents’ handbook and children’s activity book, videos, comic strips, resource list, library guides, magazine-style interviews with professionals (which provide insights into how people in various occupations use IL skills in their area of work) and self-directed e-learning courseware. Some e-learning titles include “Basic introduction to research methods”, “Cite it right to avoid plagiarism” and “Advanced research skills”.

Extra efforts were put in to ensure that these resources include IL instructions that are easy to understand and more importantly, visually attractive. The team believed that IL awareness and the 4-step adoption will be useful and relevant for educators and students at the point of need by equipping them with the much-needed search tips and evaluation techniques.

There are also daily blog articles (written by librarians with an IL learning angle on topics ranging from arts, health, parenting to education) illustrating how IL is relevant in daily life. To bring this further, the team collaborated with two local authors to embed S.U.R.E. messages in the story of their popular teen fiction series books (Sherlock Sam and Triple 9 Sleuth). In addition, the team also worked with a well-loved local comic author, Mr Johnny Lau to develop limited edition of "Mr Kiasu" comic to spread the S.U.R.E. message in an entertaining and accessible way. The special comic were given out at workshops and outreach events.

(3) S.U.R.E to teachers and parents through workshops

Teachers and parents are important influencers to instil S.U.R.E. concepts in the students. It is vital to cultivate good research skills in the students and be able to determine the validity and appropriateness of information received. Working closely with the Ministry of Education, the whole cohort of lower secondary history, geography and social studies teachers were trained on IL concepts and how to teach IL skills to students through the school curriculum. The team also conducted ad-hoc training on IL for teachers in the schools. Parents are also invited to attend special workshops held at the public libraries on how to help their children ace their project work.

Outside the Classroom

(4) Student engagement via S.U.R.E club

To foster better understanding of IL among secondary students in a fun and creative way, an IL Club called S.U.R.E. club was established and administered by NLB. The Club offers enrichment programme via a menu of 3-levels task list to engage in progressive learning and application of IL. S.U.R.E. schools are provided with supporting resources such as resource packs and IL workshops for the students.

A host of activities are also organized for Club members: in 2013, the Club held a Library Advocacy Book Display competition in conjunction with the 2013 IFLA Satellite Meeting in Singapore. Students working in teams were able to display their knowledge of IL in an enriching manner rather than the usual classroom learning. There were also exclusive visits to places such as Singapore Google Inc. office and Mint Museum of Toys; in 2014, there was storyboard contest on how IL skills are used at work and play as well as special training such
as movie review writing workshop cum movie screening organized for graduating S.U.R.E. Club members.

The S.U.R.E. Club used the Singapore School Co-Curricular Activities (C.C.A.) framework as a reference and allowed teachers the autonomy to run the programme. The role that C.C.A. plays in the schools is to encourage students’ holistic development in terms of life skills, competencies and values. Students earn C.C.A. points based on their active participation, contribution and leadership qualities in their co-curriculum. Students participating in the S.U.R.E. task list earn rewards such as T-shirts, books and exclusive visits to places of interest, etc., on top of the platforms provided by the Club to gain C.C.A. credits which are taken into consideration for students grading.

(5) Beyond information literacy – Inquiry based and experiential learning

As part of the “Future National Library Master Plan”, NLB is prototyping a programme called “Next Generation Researchers”. This is a curated learning journey with the aim to engage the budding researchers to experience and learn by exploration and discovery. The theme of the programme is aligned with the historical investigation component of the secondary history syllabus. Using local history and inquiry-based learning approach, the programme serves as a stimulus for thinking, questioning, evaluating and reflecting for the students. Such learning process enhances the students’ abilities to apply IL skills in new situations. It also increases the likelihood that it will be remembered and used.

5. CONCLUSION

Though the tech savvy youths are active consumers and producers of digital information, many teens lack basic information literacy skills for academic works and recreation. Information literacy is an acquired skill that can be learnt, practised and applied both inside and outside classroom environment. So far, the NLB efforts on providing accessible IL resources, teacher training and social media engagement have received positive and encouraging responses from the school community. Overall, the students could see the value of the skills they learnt from the activities they had participated in. Currently, there are 633 S.U.R.E. Club members from 33 secondary schools who are in the programme. More students will be joining the Club as the team reaches out to the schools.

One learning point the team has gained was that the 3-levels task list was complicated for the students to complete and tedious for teachers to supervise the students’ works. The team has since revised the 3-levels task list into a single and more manageable list (known as S.U.R.E. Specialist) where students can attempt selected IL tasks. The team will continue to look for ways to work with schools and the Ministry of Education to reach out and empower more students to become information literate individuals and lifelong learners.
REFERENCES


