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Teaching information concepts in the French educational system : the role of teacher librarians

Vincent Liquète

IUFM d'Aquitaine
EA n°465 - Sciences cognitives -
Université de Bordeaux 2

Abstract :

The French teacher librarian implements, at the present time, information research learning sessions which are largely defined according to his own initiative. The question is that of contents specifically related to the use of information and documents with an educational prospect. The link with the disciplines is necessary, but information research activities require transversal approaches. There are still a number of issues to debate, as far as contents are concerned.

1. Introduction

Through the observation of the domains in which the French teacher librarians are actors, particularly during the last thirty years, we can highlight several major points proposed here for an introduction :

On the one hand, teaching students information skills and more largely helping them to become (pre)- information literate is developed within the frame of individual initiative. When these training activities actually take place, they are impelled by the teacher librarian himself. From there, we cannot consider there is a “ curriculum ” implemented within a referential frame, according to common core notions, and according to stabilised teaching

standards, so as to give sense to everyone's action (Charbonnier, 1997 and 2003)¹. The intentions, the significances, and the goals which are fixed by every teacher librarian are very diverse in the field of information research situations, and that of the development of information literacy. We could grant this sort of teaching with the name of "puzzle effect".

On the other hand, during the same period, the French educational system implemented a variety of devices to help students develop autonomous activities, and shared work, with the aim of integrating new forms and new modalities to access information, and even more specific times for re-writing and re-composing the information retrieved. These types of devices have been enhanced since, and they are now compulsory for all students, and in that way impossible to pass through. In the past, we were speaking of "modules", "cross-curricular activities", "personal guidance", now we have "personal accompanied activities", "vocational personal projects", "discovery routes"...

All the more, the injunctions made in the official documents, especially through the subject curricula, imply to take into account activities in which students will have to deal with documents (videos, electronic resources...). Students are required to develop citizen behaviours, and to have a critical mind when analysing and comparing different information resources². Nevertheless, the institutional approach is poor, because in a certain number of disciplines, subject teachers feel they can deal with the information education of students without the help of the school library, nor that of teacher librarians. We could say the pedagogical documentation area is submitted to a "subject by-passing effect".

At last, we can underline that this individual, collective and institutional dynamics does not prevent teacher librarians from restraining themselves to instrumental lesson plans, placing the students in a situation where they cannot avoid determinism and hyper-technologisation of information research processes. Referring to the information processing tools, to international classification systems, to normative items etc., is determinant for the design of information research educational activities, where technical competencies and the mastering of tools and technologies are developed³.

What if we consider a more cultural approach, taking into account the economical, cultural, political aspects of information, or the notions of complex systems, of informational environment, of learning strategies? The informational paradigm (Fondin, 2002) seems more than ever in a distance and in a discrepancy with the present teaching practices.

2. The actual questions asked by information professionals and teacher librarians

Diverse pieces of work led during the last months in high schools⁴, within the frame of "personal accompanied activities", show it is very difficult for the teacher librarian to define his position with regards to contents. As a matter of facts, we cannot at the present time define what would be the contents, the objects, the problematic of information skills in schools.

2.1 Teaching Information

When the information professionals speak of information, they surround diverse fields of knowledge, and not with accuracy. Till now, what was put forward was the definition of

¹For this notion of a curriculum applied to Library and Information Science, see the reflexive work of Jean-Louis Charbonnier

²A few professionals go so far as presenting notions linking information and culture such as "info-citizenship"

³We can find this approach in other countries, especially in Spain with the notion of ALFIN for "Alfabetization informational".

⁴This concerns students aged 15-18, during the last years in secondary school

information linked to some object “ mass media : television, radio, print press⁵, more recently, the Internet ”. As far information (in the sector of documentation) is concerned, frontiers are more difficult to place. Fundamentally, there are some core principles, like “ transmission ”, the place of the environment, the complex approach of “ processes ”. Teaching students information is thus combining teaching objects linked to the informational area, and objects linked to that of Information science, which is more theoretical ⁶(see the diagram next page).

2.2 A separate approach of a complex process

Searching information is traditionally seen as a process with different pre-established steps, defined in specific models. But, little by little, other approaches are appearing, in which the learner is supposed to repeat iteratively his research activities, depending on the question or on the problem (Rouet-Tricot, 1998). We can see there a reduction of the number of steps necessary for the research process, which can be limited to only three : preparing the task (starting from a representation of the subject of the research, from the knowledge of the aims to be achieved, and from a capacity of self-analysis of the personal knowledge about the subject) ; selecting the information, with the support of the knowledge of resources ; processing the selected information to achieve the subject requirements. This changing approaches implies for the teacher librarian to define teaching goals more modest, more targeted. The training sessions must be considered on the long time, not only at precise moments in the student’s curriculum, and more frequently than they actually are, and precisely in the case of innovative devices.

2.3 A necessary link with the disciplines

We must acknowledge that teacher librarians have to define the modalities of their actions in teaching matters, and as a consequence, in the field of resource managing, in relation with the diverse subject progressions and objects. Teaching information without any direct link with the subject pedagogical aims reduces the impact on students, who apparently prove great difficulties in transferring methods and learning techniques to other learning environment (Marcillet, 2000). Then teacher librarians must integrate in their teaching approach a “ didactics engineering “, based on the aims and approaches of the different disciplines concerned with the research. New forms of dialogue or group work have to be found.

2.4 Awareness of the student and of his environment

It is a difficulty to convince the student himself, and his parents too, of the necessity to combine such cross-curriculum approaches, on top of mono-disciplinary achievements. Even if quite a number of them declare they are pleased to work in the sessions designed within the frame of the innovative devices, an important part still is not convinced of the final necessity of this type of activity, and particularly because the production goals have not been clearly stabilized. Serious researches on the impact of teaching information are still to be led, when their efficiency is concerned. We can evoke the researches by Alain Coulon in France, about the level of achievements of undergraduate students who had followed such courses.

3. A few perspectives to overlook so as to impulse teaching information courses in secondary schools

⁵Cf the main directions of the reflexive work to be found on the website www.clemi.org

⁶The area of “ Information Science ” grasps information through other disciplinary approaches (Economics, law, Information sociology...)

During the last years, the French educational system attempted to implement a number of devices centred on information research, but their impact was limited, and unexpected by-passing effects were discovered (Liquète, 2002). A second orientation could be seen, with teacher librarians considered as subject teachers, with contents to transmit, and pedagogical progressions to implement. But the risk would be to make this meta-discipline poor in contents and goals. A third orientation could appear, in which the centre would be the contents and the methods to transmit themselves, rather than the teachers. The subject teachers would then become responsible for the teaching of these new pieces of knowledge. Some subject fields seem to be concerned : French for example.⁷

A necessary statement is that the pedagogical and institutional place of teacher librarians is still a fragile one. Teaching information in the French educational system is at the present time esoteric, and only initiates seem to be convinced of the necessity of generalisation and systematisation of such contents.

As an evidence, major issues are to be examined for the future :

- What major items, derived from the epistemology of Library and Information science must be kept for information courses in secondary schools ?
- So as to avoid a repetition of teaching items, and in relation with the intellectual development of students, how is it possible to elaborate a progression in information skills achievements ?
- What reference knowledge fields integrate systematically the object “ information ” in their learning approaches ?
- How can we imagine the field in which teacher librarians can be actors, knowing they have to solve a real professional dilemma, between an efficient information system management (the CDI) and the necessity of teaching students information contents still to be defined ?
- At last, in what measure researches in pedagogical information would be able to demonstrate, on a scientific level, the importance of integrating these new pieces of knowledge in the curricula, so as to enable students to have power on their environment and their own individual learning strategies.

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⁷In the curriculum, when teaching French at the first levels of secondary school is concerned, there is no explicit reference to the CDI (resource centre), nor to the role of the teacher librarian, even in the specific parts about information research processes.

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