

## THE ENIL OBSERVATORY: A LENS TO FOCUS EUROPE

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Report of European  
Observatory on IL Policies  
and Research

The recent Barack Obama's proclamation of October 2009 as National Information Literacy Awareness Month has turned the searchlight on Information Literacy (IL), which encompasses, in the words of the US President, "the skills necessary to acquire, collate, and evaluate information for any situation... to effectively navigate the Information Age": thus "this new type of literacy" has become much more crucial at this time, when the advanced Western societies, coping with the global crisis, face an essential redefinition of themselves, and an overall structural reorganisation.

Actually, in the US the searchlight has been steadily turned on IL topics, with more or less intensity, for more than thirty years.

On the contrary, in Europe IL still struggles to develop a strong identity, if not common, at least widely shared. In the uneven European panorama, characterised by avant-garde areas and by lacklustre and waste regions, the volume edited by Carla Basili, *The Observatory on Information Literacy Policies and Research in Europe* (Rome, Italian National Research Council, 413 pp.), published in January 2009, outlines the current status of IL in the Old Continent in the wake of her first pioneer review (2003)<sup>1</sup>.

More specifically, the different presentations highlighted how in the next future, several innovations, such as open educational resources, mobile devices, social software and virtual mobility will radically change the landscape of global learning and expand the global learning community.

The volume provides a critical selection of European IL initiatives, collected, described and organised within the European Observatory on IL Policies and Research<sup>2</sup>, one of the main outcomes of the EnIL research project.

The EnIL - European network on Information Literacy project<sup>3</sup> was established within the Italian National Research Council in 2001 by C. Basili, the volume editor, as a peculiarly European voice in the broad debate on IL, until then characterised by a strong Anglo-Saxon slant, because of the US, Australia, and UK's leading role in the area.

From its beginning it has been conceived and developed by its creator along three main action lines: the management and enlargement of the network of European IL experts, which is at the base of the project; the development of an assessment and certification system

1. Cf. C. Basili (edited by), *Information Literacy in Europe: a first insight into the state of the art of Information Literacy in the European Union*, Rome, CNR, 2003

2. Cf. <http://www.ceris.cnr.it/Basili/EnIL/gateway/gatewayhome.htm>

3. Cf. <http://www.ceris.cnr.it/Basili/EnIL/index.html>

of IL competencies, and the European Observatory on IL Policies and Research. Published at the start of 2006, it is a freely available online gateway devoted to IL initiatives in the European Union, to date comprising ten nations - not the well-known and predictable ones, but the less-known countries, emerging or advanced ones, harmed by languages little-known beyond their national frontiers - and a specific section for the policy documents issued at the European level.

In fact, in a complex and fragmented general situation the IL concept has taken on many forms in the different national contexts, mixing with very heterogeneous experiences, and, due to “its protean, hybrid and transdisciplinary nature” and to its ever-changing pattern, its name has often varied, with alternating fortunes.

The gateway shows a primary, macroscopic *country-based structure*, immediately usable; then it provides a *hierarchical perspective* - grounded on the priority order in which the initiatives have been ranked according to *typology* - which is observable in the national indexes.

Since the point of view from which the Observatory has been designed and built especially focuses on policies, research projects and on what innovative has been carried on in the IL sector within European education, particularly higher education, the most original features, distinguishing the EU diversified reality, and the prevailing trends clearly stand out.

The policy initiatives hold the first place in the national indexes, as they lie at the core of the Observatory’s interest; the survey reports, “the bridge between the policies and the research activities”, come after; in the third place, there are the research projects, another issue of interest to the gateway.

The campus initiatives and the neighbouring and occasional initiatives of institutional bodies emphasise the strong link which connects IL to higher education, professional development, vocational training and lifelong learning. The events and the special interest groups (SIGs) follow, and afterwards there is, within the university world, the wide library area, the native core domain of European IL, in the forms of *library instruction* and *user education/user training*: the academic library initiatives, to which the learning resource centres - innovative educational environments contiguous to the university libraries - can be added, although hierarchically placed after the tutorials.

The tutorials are the products of university faculties and libraries' didactic engagement; at the end there are the public library initiatives, especially characteristic of the German-speaking area, where public libraries traditionally play a prominent role in civil life and education.

Instead, in the criterion of choice of the initiatives as well as in their reorganisation, the volume really stresses the EnIL original point of view. In fact, it only includes policies, survey-reports and research projects, and rather an accurate and representative selection of them. The choice favours, among the projects, a precise focus on IL and a genuine research approach; or it accentuates aspects more emblematical of some national, local and professional realities, of a sector or a specific institution.

As it appears from the *Index* (p. 413), the primary distribution is not country-based - as in the online gateway - but *typology-based*; the macroscopic reorganisation by types and the successive classification by countries allows a very effective and immediate comparison among the various European countries: thanks to the massive presence of one type or to its scarcity or absence, to the nature itself and the predominant features of the initiatives and of their promoting bodies, the differences among the nations and their conspicuous peculiarities become highly noticeable.

After a brief foreword by Massimo Cannatà, who highlights some key concepts relating to Information Society and Knowledge Society, i.e. *access to information*, *IL and education to information*, and besides *era of competence*, there are three introductory contributions, that offer different perspectives from which to look at the Observatory: the focus moves from a wider, general and theoretically and methodologically grounded view, to the concrete implementation of the gateway, gradually increasing the zoom.

In fact, the first contribution, *Information Literacy Policies in Europe: a framework for analysis*, by Carla Basili, draws out the critical horizon of the Observatory, the deep sense of its establishment and architecture, and its development potential. To repeat the words of the abstract, it outlines "a common reference framework for analysing and comparing IL policies and research in Europe".

First, it examines the chief guiding lines along which the IL concept has been developed *over three decades*: born in the U.S. in 1974 *as policy issue*, within an Anglo-Saxon milieu the IL notion has evolved into a *skill*, which has been specified as a *graduate attribute*

and has led up to the definition of standards; these standards have progressively spread across several countries. Later, in the UNESCO context, the IL key relationship with lifelong learning has ripened and consolidated.

So, from the multifariousness of the concept different study angles derive, which are faithfully mirrored in the main research axes of the EnIL project.

Furthermore, the contribution explains the central questions of its research agenda, and then focuses the prior goal of the gateway, i.e. to represent *IL-readiness* in Europe.

The design criteria - "purpose oriented, geographical, and research-sensitive" - fine-tuned by the author as early as the planning stage of the Observatory, allow the EnIL gateway to effectively accomplish this task.

Secondly, the fixed fields of the entry template constitute the basis to survey some key *IL-readiness variables*, which, in their turn, are the starting point for developing *IL policy indicators*, originally devised and calibrated on the European context.

Thus the Observatory has been taking shape "as a source of policy indicators", and this is one of the most promising and vital future prospects.

The second contribution, *Implementing the Observatory: towards a controlled language*, by Lisa Reggiani, preliminarily points out that the main search path followed, though not linear, has, however, been able to overcome the major critical points - *the semantic plurality of the concept, the variability in space, the variability in time* - and to identify an essential evolutionary thread, running from the *(library) user centred approach* to the *(active) learner centred approach*.

After dwelling upon some aspects of the actual building of the gateway, hence it concentrates on the search keys which have proved themselves most successful in finding the IL initiatives; this review represents the precondition for the set-up of a domain specific lexicon.

Though the order in which the different countries have been released on the online gateway is approximatively followed, they are now grouped in homogeneous areas, in order to emphasise their most striking features. More exactly, the first unitary block is formed by Denmark and Finland: in the former, the search(ing) side absolutely prevails (*information searching, information seeking, Informationsøgning* in Danish); in the latter, the solid and deep

relationship between IL and *information society/information society skills* stands out, to underscore the very strong *civil* connotation of Finnish IL. A tenacious link among IL, reading literacy and media literacy (*Informationskompetenz, Lesekompetenz, Medienkompetenz*) distinguishes the second compact pair, Germany and Austria. In Italy, the long institutional silence, broken only in 2007, has encouraged the fragmentation, the asystematicity and the extemporaneousness of the initiatives: the “search(ing) facet” predominates also here, especially in applied didactics.

If in Poland IL skills are mostly reabsorbed into the ICT domain, on the contrary in Spain IL appears distinctly identified and rather highlighted as *Alfin* - i.e. *alfabetización informacional, alfabetización en información, alfabetización informativa* - connected to current educational trends (autonomous learning, learning to learn, problem solving, lifelong learning). The Baltic world of the ex-Soviet republics, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, puts *information skills* - to which Lithuania prefers *information culture* - into the centre of the educational reform, a key element of the State renewal in view of a full European integration. Finally, at the European level, particular attention is paid to a crucial policy document of December 2006, in which, among *the key competences for lifelong learning*, the communication in the mother tongue and the digital competence encompass contents unequivocally related to information skills.

Lastly, the third introductory contribution, *Design criteria of the website*, by Anna Perin, shortly describes the construction of the website and the corresponding content organisation into a tree structure of three levels, according to the nature of contents and the target audience; moreover, it lists the main parameters observed.

In conclusion, in opposition to the intrinsic liquidity and the structural unfinished and ever-evolving character typical of the web - and thus of the online gateway - the paper of the volume aims at putting a full stop, providing a rich and plural sight; at the same time, it looks at the future, at the major future directions, emphatically and deliberately connoted in a European sense: the development of IL policy indicators, and, secondly, of a thesaurus devoted to the Culture of Information.

