# FULBRIGHT CORNER

# Collaboratively Investigating How to Teach Information Literacy to K-14 Students in Bulgaria

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**Abstract**

*This article documents recommendations for teaching information literacy at the K-14 educational level in Bulgaria. Over the span of five focus groups (a qualitative research method), professional librarians, teachers, university professors and NGO leaders met to discuss the information literacy landscape in Bulgaria, current best practices in how to teach information literacy and suggestions for future changes in the educational system, including the creation of a national framework for information literacy. Through the use of qualitative methods, this research highlights the voices and expertise of local educators and civil society members, seeking to gain an in-depth understanding of the educational and information literacy contexts present in contemporary Bulgaria. Moreover, this article also reflects upon the relationship between information literacy, intercultural education and intercultural dialog, using the Bulgarian focus group as a case study.*

**Keywords:** *information literacy, Bulgaria, intercultural education*

Most young people around the world today are connected to the Internet. However, simply being connected to the Internet does not automatically make one information literate. Julien (2005: 210) writes, "Information overload, misinformation, and complex information retrieval systems, in addition to people's natural inclination to be satisfied with conveniently accessible information, regardless of its accuracy or reliability, combine to challenge most claims of competence in information skills." According to the American Library Association, "Information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information."

From March to August 2022, I met with information literacy stakeholders in the field of K-14 education in Bulgaria through the award of a Fulbright Bulgaria-Romania Joint Research Award. The aim of my grant was to investigate how information literacy is being taught in both countries

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in a K-14 setting from the perspective of local stakeholders (i.e. teachers, university professors, school, public and university librarians and local NGO leaders). K-14 is an American term defined as educational instruction from kindergarten until twelfth grade plus two additional years of post-secondary instruction. Both the premise set forth above by Julien (2005: 210) and the definition of information literacy from the American Library Association, shaped the primary direction of my research. This article will focus mainly on the research methodology and findings from the Bulgarian half of my grant, which will be subsequently explored in greater depth.

In Bulgaria, I organized a focus group consisting of six information literacy stakeholders, including two university librarians, two secondary school English teachers, one university professor of library science and one member of a local NGO that worked frequently with underserved youth. Focus group participants were found by putting out a call by email through a faculty member of Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, which was my host institution during my grant and through the Bulgarian Fulbright Commission, which administered my grant and has a large professional network in the country. Six candidates responded favourably to the call that also could agree to the time commitment of five focus group meetings that lasted around two hours each time. Applicants needed to work in some capacity with youth in the county and have a general interest in teaching information literacy skills. Participants worked in Sofia, Blagoevgrad, Mezdra and Gorna Oryahovitsa. This presented a mixture of urban, mid-size and small towns.

As in Romania, focus groups were the main research methodology I chose to investigate how information literacy is being taught in Bulgaria. Focus groups are a type of qualitative research method that centres on the communication between research participants to create data. According to Kitzinger (1995: 299), "Although group interviews are often used simply as a quick and convenient way to collect data from several people simultaneously, focus groups explicitly use group interaction as part of the method. This means that instead of the researcher asking each person to respond to a question in turn, people are encouraged to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes and commenting on each other's experiences and points of view."

I explicitly chose the methodology of focus groups in order to get a cross-section of viewpoints regarding how information literacy is being taught in Bulgaria from different stakeholders from multiple regions in the country. I also intentionally kept my general research question open-ended in order to let the local stakeholders guide the focus group discussions.

Before each focus group I sent a list in advance of about 8-10 questions to the participants. After the first meeting, I would revisit my notes from the previous discussions. Then, I would create new questions based on the past ideas that had come up in the other sessions. As the moderator of the focus group discussions, I wanted to provide structure for the participants, but also allow them to be the primary guides for our conversations.

This is because I believe that in social science research, local stakeholders should work collaboratively with researchers to help identify problems, solutions and best practices to real-world topics and issues that are present in their own countries. Outsiders can take an active interest in these issues and questions but must work in tandem with local professionals in order to provide recommendations that will have any lasting success. Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021: 3) write, "Exercising critical reflexivity is a key approach to decolonizing research. Critical reflectivity is powerful for examining researchers' epistemological assumptions, their situatedness with respect to the research, and crucial in addressing power dynamics in research." Although Bulgaria is a European country, it is still a nation that is not well known to most foreigners and I strongly believe that any recommendations that come from my research should be based on the experiences of local stakeholders to ensure any form of lasting change. This conscious decision to use focus groups for this research is an active exercise in critical reflexivity concerning the epistemological position and methodological framework for this research project.

The focus group meetings were recorded with the consent of the participants and the analysis of the meetings was done using the method of emergent coding. Stuckey (2015: 8) writes, "One of the keys in coding your data, and in conducting a qualitative analysis more generally, is developing a storyline." She goes onto state that codes can be emergent, meaning that they were concepts, actions, or meanings, that evolved from the data. From this coding process, five main concepts emerged that are subsequently explored.

Firstly, young students today are digital natives but they need guidance and instruction in information literacy. Being information literate requires a different set of skills than being able to use social media or to do a simple search on Google. Becker (2018: 2) writes, "The term digital natives is a categorization of a person born or brought up during the age of digital technology. In many ways this leads them to be familiar with computers and the Internet from an early age. The problem is that being familiar and being literate are not necessarily the same thing." This statement was echoed in the focus group meetings multiple times. Having students who are digital

natives in the classroom gives students the potential to be interested and competent in information literacy. However, they must be taught these skills as part of a curriculum. It should not be assumed that they automatically have the proficiencies to determine when information is needed, where to locate it, how to evaluate it or how to use it effectively, simply because they feel comfortable using technology for other tasks.

Secondly, educational stakeholders in Bulgaria need an online hub where they can collaborate to share trainings and materials for teaching about information literacy in the Bulgarian language. The focus group determined that no such universal platform at this time exists to accomplish this goal. Most of the materials created by organizations (such as UNESCO for example) to teach about information literacy are only available in major world languages. Bulgarian teachers or students who do not have a high proficiency level in another language are often left out from having access to high-quality materials for learning about information literacy strategies. This is simply due to this lack of materials available in their mother tongue.

Thirdly, the focus group meetings determined that information literacy is an integral part of the learning process. Warmkessel and McCade (1997: 80) write, "Librarians and other educators have written extensively about the need to promote information literacy as an integral part of the education process. The basic goal of information literacy is to enable people to become lifelong learners. The premise for this goal is that information literate individuals will be able to sift through the enormous amount of information available, effectively using appropriate sources to solve problems and make decisions in all areas of their lives."

As Warmkessel and McCade express, this idea was not particularly new even at the time of their article's publication in 1997. However, it bears repeating, since many countries still have not sufficiently invested in developing or funding curriculums that support teaching about information literacy. It was the focus group's consensus that students would do better in their studies across the board, if they had more instruction in information literacy. A clear example that highlights this is the issue of plagiarism. If more students knew where to search for information, how to paraphrase the information and then properly cite it, it is probable that less students would submit plagiarized work. Some students will always plagiarize out of laziness. However, the focus group members cited multiple circumstances where they also saw students plagiarize because they lacked the proper skillset to do research or to summarize and cite information correctly.

Fourthly, short and efficient information literacy trainings are needed for Bulgarian teachers. This point was particularly underlined by the

secondary teachers in the focus group. Many teachers in Bulgaria do not have access to trainings on how to teach their students about information literacy. However, these trainings must be truly worth the teachers' time and cannot simply add more busy work to the teachers' plates. They need a program that is efficient and targeted for them to be able to directly use in their classrooms to build upon the general national curriculum that is already in place.

Fifthly, civic engagement is connected to information literacy. This is the final theme that was determined by the focus group. Correia (2002: 15) writes, "Information literate citizens know how to use information to their best advantage, both at work and in everyday life. They identify the most useful information when making decisions when voting or to participate in community life." The focus group concluded that it is in Bulgarian society's best interest (as it is in all countries) to invest in and promote teaching about information literacy on a standardized, national scale with a clear framework. This would be of great long-term benefit to not only students and teachers, but to society as a whole.

In summary, regarding the focus group, these meetings provided a snapshot of the current information literacy landscape in Bulgaria as seen by a variety of different stakeholders in education and civil society. The findings and proposals regarding improving teaching information literacy are straightforward and common sense. There are even experts on information literacy who already live in Bulgaria and have the professional background to implement most of these changes. What is needed moving forward is commitment and funding from an entity such as the Ministry of Education, a large NGO or UNESCO, etc. to make these suggestions a reality.

Bulgaria would strongly benefit from having a common framework for teaching information literacy, an online hub where educators and civil society members could learn about and share strategies and materials for teaching about information literacy in the Bulgarian language and teachers need to have access to short and effective trainings for teaching about information literacy that fit into the busy curriculum and schedules that have been already set for them. All of these goals are practical and realistic, but require the proper support and funding. However, the potential benefits to Bulgarian society are immeasurable and the topic merits a deeper exploration to be undertaken by a large entity with the resources to implement a wide-scale program for teaching about information literacy in the country.

Of equal significance is the space for reflection that this research grant and project provided me regarding the relationship between

information literacy, intercultural dialog and intercultural education. Neuner (2012: 29) states, "As long as we stay in our own world, what we experience and know about its objects, its underlying values, about attitudes and sets of behaviour seems 'normal' to us." As a trained teacher and school librarian, I believe it is imperative that we reach across borders to work together and better understand similar issues that are facing students, teachers, librarians and societies today. How information literacy is being taught (or in some cases not being taught) is arguably one of the greatest questions in education for this decade with the rise of social media use, misinformation and disinformation. The Bulgarian focus group is an example of how using concepts from intercultural education and intercultural dialog can create productive and rich conditions for exploring global issues from the viewpoints of multiple stakeholders with different cultures and backgrounds.

Młynarczuk-Sokołowska (2013: 139) writes, "The paradigm of coexistence constitutes the basis for intercultural education. It also determines its main goal, which is to prepare society for living in the post-modern world, where diversity is inherent." Intercultural education does not value any culture more than another. In the same vein, I have sought to create a research project to investigate how information literacy is taught in Bulgaria that does not simply impose American teaching and library standards on the Bulgarian educational system. Rather, the focus group was a collaborative effort to look at what are the information and educational landscapes of Bulgaria, what are the needs of local stakeholders and students and how can possibly taking some practices from different countries be adapted to truly meet the needs of Bulgarian students and educators. The epistemological positions and methodological approaches to this research created an ample space for Bulgarian stakeholders to present their views, experiences and reflections on improving teaching about information literacy in their own country in conjunction with approaches and ideas that we examined from the U.S. and other countries.

Kotilainen and Suoninen (2013: 141) write, "Media and information literacies are regarded worldwide as core skills of active citizenship. The challenges seem to be in creating local versions of the global declarations and learning materials, which mostly present the ideal situation." Guided by the principles of intercultural education, our focus group discussions were nuanced and accommodated a multitude of viewpoints instead of searching for one-size-fits-all recommendations. This embrace of an intercultural education approach helped us achieve the first part of a larger project that should be carried out in Bulgaria that respects Kotilainen and Suoninen's

recommendation of "creating local versions of the global declarations and learning materials" for information literacy.

In addition to intercultural education, intercultural dialog also has an important overlap with information literacy and this research project. According to Grizzle, Torrent and Manuel Pérez Tornero (2013: 11):

> The media and other information providers, including those on the Internet, influence the view that a society has of itself and of others. They also represent a communication bridge between communities and groups, especially with the spread of ICT [information and communication technology]. Therefore, they can contribute to generating conflicts and vilifying differences or, to the contrary, to bringing about dialogue, understanding and respect for differences. If citizens improve their media and information competency, they can contribute to representing a serious demand for the mass media and other information providers to operate in accordance with peace and harmonious international relations.

One of the outcomes of the focus group was creating meaningful dialog and potential change regarding teaching about information literacy in Bulgaria through having discussions and examining resources from various points of view. As an extension of this, it was also an aim that the focus group would have a multiplier effect, meaning colleagues of the participants or different local stakeholders might be inspired to work collaboratively across borders and cultures to also find their own potential solutions to problems related to teaching about information literacy or different questions in education. Holmes (2014: 1) states:

> The term 'intercultural dialogue' is now in wide currency and offers much hope to peace and harmony among nations. Officially inaugurated in 2008, via the Council of Europe's White Paper and promulgated by the European Union's declaration in the same year, the concept suggests a social and political response to the need for intercultural communication and understanding in what was then a rapidly expanding European Union.

As the focus group shows, intercultural dialog however, does not only need to be carried out on a large scale, but can also be conducted on a smaller level. Plenty of small mobility exchanges and structured person-to-person interactions of people from different cultures can countries can be equally as valuable as large events in promoting intercultural dialog. Ruffino (2012: 83) writes:

> Living in another environment helps participants to recognise that the world is one large community, a global island, in which certain problems are shared by everyone everywhere. They become able to empathise with their hosts' perspective on some of these problems and to appreciate that workable solutions must be culturally sensitive and not merely technologically feasible. Such awareness prepares them to understand the crises facing humankind.

In conclusion, this research grant and project cemented my belief in the power of intercultural education and intercultural dialog. When structured correctly, opportunities that allow ordinary people to communicate, interact and exchange ideas across borders can assist them in finding potential solutions to shared problems. This research project took place from March-August 2022 in the form of a focus group consisting of six information literacy stakeholders in Bulgaria. The qualitative method of focus groups was chosen as the methodology for this research. This was intended to highlight the voices and expertise of local educators and civil society members from within Bulgaria, concerning questions surrounding teaching about information literacy in the country. The structure of the data collection and the reflection on the findings was collaborative and guided by principles of intercultural education and intercultural dialog, so as to not place more value on the views of individuals or organizations from one culture above another.

To recapitulate, the key recommendations from the focus group consist of: the need for a common framework for teaching about information literacy in the country, an online hub where educators and civil society members could learn about and share strategies and materials for teaching information literacy in the Bulgarian language and teachers need to have access to short and effective training for teaching about information literacy that fit into the busy curriculum and schedules that already exist. As previously documented by Grizzle, Torrent and Manuel Pérez Tornero (2013: 11), a large benefit of being competent in information literacy skills is that it can directly contribute to dialog, understanding and respect across cultures. Furthermore, another extension from the focus group, although not a direct finding, is again the power of ordinary people to also use intercultural education and intercultural dialog as meaningful tools to work towards finding solutions to complex problems in the fields of information literacy and education. In today's political climate, this takeaway seems especially meaningful and relevant.

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