

THE ROLE OF INDEPENDENT READING STRATEGIES IN DEVELOPING STUDENTS' DIGITAL INFORMATION LITERACY

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Abstract. The development of digital information literacy has become an essential component of higher education in the digital age. University students increasingly rely on online databases, electronic libraries, educational websites, digital textbooks, and artificial intelligence-supported tools to complete academic assignments and conduct research. However, access to a large amount of information does not necessarily guarantee the ability to identify reliable sources, evaluate evidence, recognise bias, and use information responsibly. This article examines the role of independent reading strategies in developing students' digital information literacy. Particular attention is paid to critical reading, source evaluation, selective reading, annotation, comparative reading, and reflective reading. The article also discusses pedagogical approaches that can help university students become more independent, critical, and responsible users of digital information.

Keywords: digital information literacy, independent reading, critical reading, digital pedagogy, source evaluation, information searching, academic reading, university students, information credibility, learner autonomy.

Introduction

Digital transformation has significantly changed the ways in which university students access, interpret, and use information. Traditional printed textbooks and library materials are now supplemented by electronic books, online academic journals, digital repositories, educational websites, and multimedia learning resources. These developments have created new opportunities for independent learning and academic research. At the same time, they have increased the importance of students' ability to evaluate information critically and distinguish reliable evidence from inaccurate, misleading, or irrelevant content. Digital information literacy extends beyond the technical ability to search the internet or operate digital devices. It involves identifying information

needs, locating relevant materials, evaluating their credibility, interpreting information in context, and using sources ethically. Students who lack these competencies may rely on superficial search results, accept unsupported claims, or reproduce information without examining its accuracy and relevance.

Independent reading strategies can play a significant role in addressing these challenges. Independent reading involves learners selecting, interpreting, and evaluating texts according to their learning objectives. When students read strategically, they learn to identify central arguments, compare different perspectives, examine supporting evidence, and connect new information with their existing knowledge. The importance of these abilities is particularly evident in higher education, where students are expected to prepare presentations, write academic papers, complete research projects, and engage with complex theoretical materials. Consequently, developing digital information literacy through independent reading should be considered an important educational objective. The purpose of this article is to analyse the relationship between independent reading strategies and digital information literacy and to identify practical approaches for developing these competencies among university students.

Theoretical Foundations of Digital Information Literacy. Digital information literacy is a multidimensional concept that combines information-searching skills, critical evaluation, digital reading, ethical information use, and independent decision-making. It enables learners to interact with digital information purposefully rather than accepting every available source as accurate or authoritative. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 2016) presents information literacy as a set of interconnected abilities involving the discovery, evaluation, interpretation, and responsible use of information. This perspective is particularly relevant to university students because academic learning requires more than collecting facts. Students must understand how knowledge is produced, how evidence supports arguments, and how different sources contribute to scholarly discussion.

Digital environments present several challenges for information literacy. Search engines may display commercially promoted or highly popular content before more authoritative academic materials. Social media platforms can circulate information without adequate verification, while websites may present opinions as established facts. In addition, automatically generated content can contain unsupported statements or inaccurate references. For these reasons, students need systematic strategies for evaluating digital materials. They should examine authorship, publication context,

supporting evidence, publication date, purpose, and potential bias. The credibility of a source should not be determined solely by its visual appearance, popularity, or position in search results. Independent reading supports this process by encouraging learners to engage actively with information. Rather than passively receiving content, students formulate questions, identify key concepts, compare arguments, and assess whether the available evidence supports the conclusions presented.

Independent Reading Strategies and Their Educational Value. Independent reading is most effective when students understand how to select and apply different strategies according to their reading purposes. Several strategies are particularly useful for developing digital information literacy.

1. *Skimming and scanning.* Skimming involves reading a text quickly to identify its main idea, structure, and relevance. Scanning involves searching for specific information, such as a definition, date, statistic, or key term. These strategies help students manage the large volume of digital content available online. Before reading a lengthy academic article in detail, a student can examine its title, abstract, headings, and conclusion to determine whether it addresses the research question. The student can then locate specific evidence through targeted scanning. However, skimming and scanning should be used as preliminary strategies rather than substitutes for careful reading. Important academic claims require detailed examination of their context and supporting evidence.
2. *Critical reading.* Critical reading involves examining the reasoning, assumptions, evidence, and conclusions presented in a text. Students ask whether the author's claims are adequately supported, whether alternative explanations exist, and whether the evidence is relevant to the research question. For example, when reading an online article about the effectiveness of digital learning, students should distinguish between personal opinion, institutional reporting, theoretical discussion, and findings from empirical research. They should also consider whether the conclusions are justified by the evidence presented. Critical reading encourages intellectual independence because students learn to evaluate claims rather than accepting them automatically.
3. *Comparative reading.* Comparative reading requires students to examine two or more sources addressing the same topic. This strategy helps them identify similarities, differences, conflicting interpretations, and gaps in available knowledge. A university assignment might ask students to compare two articles discussing the use of artificial intelligence in education. Students could examine the authors' arguments, research methods, evidence, and conclusions before developing

their own position. Comparative reading also reduces dependence on a single source. By considering multiple perspectives, learners can develop a more balanced understanding of complex issues.

4. *Annotation and reflective reading.* Annotation involves recording questions, definitions, key arguments, and personal observations while reading. Digital annotation tools and electronic notes can help students organise information and return to important passages when preparing assignments. Reflective reading extends this process by encouraging learners to consider how a text changes their understanding of a topic. Students may identify information they previously misunderstood, recognise unanswered questions, or determine which ideas require further investigation. Together, annotation and reflection support deeper engagement with digital texts and help students transform collected information into meaningful knowledge.

Developing Source Evaluation Skills in Digital Environments. One of the central components of digital information literacy is the ability to evaluate the quality and credibility of online sources. Students should develop a systematic approach to examining information before using it in academic work. First, they should investigate authorship and expertise. Identifying the author, institutional affiliation, and relevant qualifications can provide useful context, although these factors alone do not establish that every claim is accurate. Second, students should examine the evidence supporting the information. Academic publications often provide references, methodological explanations, and data that can be checked against other sources. Unsupported claims and vague references should encourage further investigation. Third, students should consider the publication context and purpose. A scholarly article, an institutional report, an advertisement, and a personal blog may serve different purposes and therefore require different forms of evaluation. Fourth, students should check the date of publication when recency is important. Information about technology, legislation, or current educational policies may become outdated, while established theoretical works may remain relevant over longer periods. Fifth, students should compare claims with independent sources. The lateral reading approach encourages readers to leave the original webpage temporarily and investigate what other reliable sources say about the author, organisation, or claim. This can reveal important information that is not apparent from the webpage itself.

The Stanford History Education Group's research on civic online reasoning has highlighted the importance of teaching learners to evaluate digital information through evidence-based practices rather than relying only on the appearance of a website. Source evaluation should therefore be incorporated into regular reading assignments rather than taught as an isolated theoretical topic.

Conclusion. Independent reading strategies are important instruments for developing digital information literacy among university students. Skimming, scanning, critical reading, comparative reading, annotation, and reflective reading help learners identify relevant information, evaluate source credibility, interpret evidence, and develop independent academic judgements. In higher education, these competencies contribute to stronger research practices, more responsible information use, and greater learner autonomy. Their development requires systematic instruction, regular practice, access to appropriate digital resources, and assessment criteria that reward critical engagement with information. Universities should therefore integrate digital information literacy into independent study, academic reading, research writing, and subject-specific learning activities. By combining strategic reading with evidence-based evaluation, higher education can prepare students to navigate increasingly complex digital information environments with confidence and responsibility.

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