Training the trainers: A public library - higher education collaboration for Media Literacy education in Ireland

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Abstract:

This paper addresses the issue of media, information, and digital literacy training for public library staff by describing a recent collaboration between academics at the School of Information and Communication Studies (ICS) at University College Dublin (UCD), and Meath County Council Libraries in Ireland, which aimed to develop and pilot an innovative media literacy training programme for the Meath public library staff in Spring 2021. In a project initiated by the Libraries Development unit of the Irish Local Government Management Agency (LGMA), and funded by Meta (formerly Facebook), the UCD team adopted a participatory action research approach to exploring the learning needs of the library staff, and creating a bespoke Media Literacy curriculum and training programme to prepare them to teach in their libraries. Needs assessment consisted of a review of the existing media literacy training landscape and a survey of the participating library staff, while a qualitative focus group probed the library staff's perceptions and experiences of media literacy in relation to their day-to-day work, and suggested topics of critical importance for inclusion in the new curriculum. The Media Literacy training programme, which comprised five interactive online workshops on media literacy and pedagogy, took place at the end of June 2021. Participant evaluations provided valuable feedback about the effectiveness of the training, and recommendations for future developments. This paper demonstrates the power of collaborating with external groups - in this case, academics - to create a library-focused media literacy training programme for public librarians.

Keywords: Media Literacy; Public Libraries; Professional Development; Collaboration; Higher Education

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Introduction

In an age of information disorder and 'fake news', the role of public libraries in supporting media, information, and digital literacy education is critical. However, public libraries have received significantly less attention than academic and school libraries in discussions of who should provide this training to the public (LaPierre & Kitzie, 2019). While the need for public education in identifying mis- and dis-information has intensified in recent years, public libraries are often omitted from the discourse, despite being perfectly positioned to address it. Media, information, and digital literacy education in public libraries occurs both in structured and spontaneous contexts: in addition to creating and delivering planned training sessions, public library staff may also experience multiple micro-transactions or "teachable moments" relating to media, information, and digital literacies during their workdays. However, many public library staff do not receive professional training in how to design and deliver media, information, and digital literacy education to their communities, relying instead on self-directed learning, advice from colleagues and professional networks, and continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities of variable quality to develop and enhance their teaching competence. Understanding the needs of public librarians in relation to media, information, and digital literacy, as well as the barriers that may prevent them from accessing suitable training, is the first step in addressing this issue; the second is to create and deliver sustainable, accessible, and up-to-date training programmes, to empower public library staff to confidently fulfil their roles as media, information, and digital literacy experts for their communities.

The project reported in this paper describes the recent efforts of a faculty team at University College Dublin (UCD) to address this challenge directly, through adopting a collaborative approach to researching Irish public librarians' training needs in relation to media literacy and designing a bespoke pilot programme to support their learning in this context. Discussions about the role and responsibility of librarians to combat information disorder and to promote media literacy within their communities have grown more urgent within the past decade (Batchelor, 2017). Although it is viewed as a core element of library service across all sectors, there is still a great deal of uncertainty and debate about

how librarians should tackle media literacy in general, as well as the skills and knowledge they require to do so effectively (Rochlin, 2017; Sullivan, 2019). The discussion was further accelerated by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, as the so-called "infodemic" (Merriam-Webster, 2022) led to serious public health consequences in relation to issues, such as vaccine hesitancy, mask-wearing, and conspiracy theories about the origins and seriousness of the virus (Bangani, 2021). This increased sense of urgency around media literacy and "fake news," along with a perceived lack of suitable, high quality professional training opportunities for librarians, prompted the Libraries Development Unit of the LGMA in Ireland to seek out an external service provider in early 2021 to research, develop, and facilitate a media literacy module for public library staff. Funded by Meta, other project stakeholders included the Irish National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), and Meath County Council Libraries, which are located in the Eastern and Midland region of the Irish Republic. Following its successful tender, the UCD team set out a list of clear objectives to meet the project remit:

- To review the current curriculum and training opportunities for public library staff around media literacy.
- To identify the needs of library staff, communities, and adult library users in relation to media literacy.
- To empower library staff to provide media literacy training to adult library users, by developing and facilitating a learning module which supports them in developing the skills relevant to this role.
- To develop a framework and method for the delivery of media literacy training for librarians and evaluate the same through a pilot project.

The UCD team was composed of five academics, with subject expertise in the areas of library and information studies, media and communication, teaching and education, and curriculum development. Two project assistants were also recruited from the MLIS and MSc Communication and Media programmes in the school. A stakeholder Working Group was formed to monitor weekly progress, while a Steering Committee maintained general oversight of the project, as the team worked to fulfil its objectives. Initially intended as a pilot, the long-term goal of the initiative is the establishment of a national media literacy training programme, available to public librarians across all library authorities in Ireland.

In relation to the appropriate use of terminology to describe this programme, the UCD team endorsed the approach of UNESCO, in recognising the conceptual overlap between the key terms, media literacy, information literacy and digital literacy, with respect to the knowledge, skills and attributes signalled by each term in different contexts. In the recently published *MIL Curriculum and Competency Framework*, the authors chose to combine the three terms to create "a unified notion that embodies elements of information, media, and digital technologies and conveys the aims and objectives of MIL" (Grizzle et al, 2021). For the project reported here, the term 'Media Literacy' was chosen as a similar umbrella term, to capture the ability of individuals to navigate, interpret, create, and use information effectively in multiple media formats.

Public Libraries and Media Literacy

As inclusive and trusted "centres of knowledge, information, and culture" at the heart of their communities (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2022), public libraries offer a natural home for media literacy training and advocacy (Csibi, 2021). Public libraries have always played a critical role in functional literacy learning in their communities (Libraries Ireland, 2022), a remit which, by default, extends to emerging literacy types as the information and media landscape evolves – for example, information literacy, digital literacy, meta-literacy, etc. However, while their important role in this context has been generally recognised and occasionally reflected in political rhetoric (European Parliament, 2016; Matteson & Gersch, 2019), most research and reporting in this area to-date has focused on work that takes place in academic and school libraries: "Library academic literature regarding media literacy initiatives has originated mainly from academic and school libraries

… with a relative dearth of research on public library initiatives" (LaPierre & Kitzie, 2019). As a result, most of the curricula, conceptual frameworks and instructional guidelines designed to assist librarians in media, information, and digital literacy instruction have been developed with formal educational settings in mind – for example, the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (ACRL, 2015), and UNESCO's *Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Teachers* (Wilson et al, 2011). This lack of visibility has, therefore, led to "serious gaps in understanding how public libraries have addressed the issues related to disinformation, as most of the published literature stems from academic libraries" (Kine & Davidsone, 2021).

While the training and development needs of librarians in relation to media literacy instruction are bound to share similarities across different professional sectors, public librarians work in a unique environment with a distinct service mission, which differs structurally and organisationally from libraries in the primary, secondary, and tertiary education sectors. For instance, public library services are not explicitly tailored to support students, teachers, and academic faculty, whose information and learning needs are shaped by prescribed curricula, assessment and examination schedules, formal approaches to teaching and learning, and research and scholarship requirements. While instructional programming and learning support are long-established elements of public library services, a great deal of informal educational work also occurs in unplanned and spontaneous encounters between library staff and library visitors - for example, questions at the information desk or through other channels, such as telephone, email, and online chat. Everyday-life information needs, including those which arise in leisure, employment, community, and social contexts, feature prominently in the work of public librarians. Instructional training for public librarians, therefore, needs to take account of the realistic scenarios that they are likely to encounter in the course of their working days.

Notwithstanding the lack of published research, the literature contains a significant number of international case reports and small-scale studies on media literacy activity in public libraries. For example, in the *Media Literacy at your Library* project in the US (ALA, 2018), five public libraries were selected to undergo targeted media literacy training by the Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University to prepare library staff to deliver effective news literacy training to adult members of their communities. The project ultimately produced twenty-eight public media literacy programmes, delivered to approximately 900 library visitors in the participating libraries. Other reports include a content analysis of public library websites in Ohio to determine their media literacy training activities (Matterson & Gersch, 2019), a survey of public librarians in Latvia (Kine & Davidsone, 2021), and an interesting project reported by Rhinesmith & Urbano-Stanton (2018), which explored ways in which public libraries might collaborate with and draw inspiration from Community Media Centres (CMCs) in the US to facilitate media literacy education. In Ireland, several public library authorities have recently hosted the pop-up interactive exhibition, "The Glass Room: Misinformation Edition," which was created by international NGO Tactical Tech, and promoted by the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA). Curated for public engagement, the exhibition focuses on key media literacy issues, such as smartphone addiction, deep fakes, and data detox. During the online pivot necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the physical exhibition was replaced by a series of publicly accessible online webinars and workshops, addressing important media literacy topics. Several librarians in Ireland are also members of Media Literacy Ireland (MLI), a "unique collaboration between a variety of organisations, including media (broadcast, news publishers, digital organisations), online providers, libraries, academia, and the community and voluntary sector" that was formed in 2018 (Russell, 2019). The goal of MLI is the promotion of media literacy through education and training, public information campaigns, and online and in-person events. Libraries are viewed as essential partners in the network and contribute significantly to MLI's work in this area.

Project Approach

The UCD team chose Participatory Action Research (PAR) for this project, an approach which intentionally includes participants as members of the research team, essentially positioning them as experts in the research process alongside the researchers (Breda, 2014). This is a specialised approach that encourages rapport between the researchers and participants and supports better understanding of

the needs of the community. PAR promotes the co-creation of solutions to address these needs, in addition to dismantling barriers that may have prevented solutions previously. PAR typically follows a cyclical process, involving planning, taking action, reflecting, and evaluating; it also enables a flexible approach, encouraging participants to reflect critically, pause, and modify their research to address questions that arise and to expand learning during the research process.

The project took place in three distinct phases in Spring 2021: 1) Curriculum Review & Needs Assessment; 2) Module Planning & Development; and 3) Module Delivery & Feedback. As per the PAR approach, the UCD team consulted regularly with the stakeholders throughout the process, seeking feedback and advice on the various elements of the project, including the data collection instruments, module content, and feedback channels.

Curriculum Review & Needs Analysis

To inform the programme design, the project team took a two-pronged approach to identifying the needs of the public librarians in relation to media literacy training. First, a comprehensive search and content review of existing media literacy curricula, information resources, and national and international professional training opportunities was carried out, in order to establish the current broad state of media literacy training and support for public librarians in Ireland. While this process produced a detailed list of resources, it also highlighted the lack of targeted local training opportunities available to Irish public library staff, which confirmed the media literacy gap in the continuing professional development landscape.

Second, the team undertook an online survey of public library staff in Meath County Council Libraries, in order to understand how they perceive their training needs in relation to delivering media literacy programming to staff and the public, as well as their preferences for the planned module. Based on a similar survey with teachers that was carried out by Simons, Meeus, & T'Sas (2017), the survey questionnaire was designed to gather information on the participants' educational, career and professional training backgrounds, their self-assessed personal media literacy competence, and their self-assessed personal competence in relation to teaching media literacy to others. The questionnaire was completed by thirty-three members of staff from Meath County Libraries, across the full spectrum of staffing grades, from Library Assistant to County Librarian. The survey results showed that just over half of the participants had either completed a Masters or a Graduate Diploma in Library and Information Studies. The survey additionally revealed that attending Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses and attending standalone seminars were the main ways in which the respondents described their engagement in general professional training; however, when it came to media literacy or instructional training specifically, the majority of survey respondents had received no formal training whatsoever and sought to keep themselves abreast of developments through self-driven means, such as social media, webinars, podcasts, and reading the professional literature.

In terms of self-assessed personal competence in media literacy and in training others to be media literate, the survey revealed that while most respondents rated themselves at an intermediate or advanced level of knowledge for media literacy competence in general, they expressed significantly lower confidence in their ability to teach others. This was particularly the case in relation to media literacy topics which deal with information disorder, media production systems, and the creation and distribution of original media content. When asked what they believed that librarians need to know about media literacy and what training should address, many of them emphasised the importance of a solid grounding in the basics of media literacy, including an understanding of the term itself, rather than advanced topics: "*Staff need structured, taught courses from reliable academic sources rather than informally picking up information and skills by trial and error. They need to understand what media literacy actually is.*"

When asked to state their preferences for a training format, nearly three-quarters of the respondents specified "short courses" (once a week for 3-6 weeks) as their preferred mode.

Module Planning & Delivery

In addition to the survey findings, the module planning and development phase was informed by an interactive focus group carried out with selected library staff from Meath County Council Libraries. The aim of the focus group was to probe the librarians' media literacy conceptions more deeply and identify areas of particular concern or interest. The UCD team created four fictional, but realistic, problem "scenarios" that would require the librarians to have media literacy skills to solve - for example, a library visitor who has received an SMS text scam and is seeking advice. The scenarios were designed to encourage the librarians to problem-solve in groups and to draw on their existing media literacy knowledge, while also seeking to identify where knowledge gaps occurred. Twenty librarians participated in the focus group, which took place via Zoom and was facilitated by the UCD team. Moderators took notes and Google Jamboards were used to collect written contributions from the librarians during the scenario discussions. While breakout room activity was not recorded, the plenary session at the end, in which the librarians discussed the outcomes of their groups, was recorded with permission.

Based on the survey and focus group results, five key media literacy topic areas were identified for the pilot programme:

- Identifying and sharing good media literacy information
- Our data footprints
- Google is not the Internet
- Cyberbullying and hate speech
- Conspiracy theories

Each member of the UCD team created and facilitated an interactive online workshop, based on the topic closest to their area of expertise. The pilot programme ran over five consecutive working days at the end of June 2021; as per COVID regulations at the time, the programme was hosted on Zoom. Between six to ten librarians from Meath County Council Libraries attended each two hour session. Each workshop blended a media literacy topic with instruction and guidance on how to teach the topic to adult members of the library community; teaching children and adolescents was not included in the LGMA project remit.

Module Evaluation & Feedback

At the end of each workshop, participants were invited to complete a Google Form with their feedback. They were asked what they liked about the session, what changes they would suggest, and how they intended to apply what they learned to their work. They were also asked to indicate the areas where they feel that more training is needed. Overall, participants found the pilot programme to be interesting and engaging. They reported that they particularly enjoyed the informal approach and the interactive nature of the sessions, as well as the open discussion about the media literacy topics that was encouraged by the session coordinators. The resources shared by the coordinators and actively used in the sessions (e.g., Padlet, Google Jamboard, Poll Everywhere, infographics) were considered of great value. Most participants also suggested that the sessions should be longer, i.e., three hours, instead of two. A need for more content focusing on teaching skills was also noted; in all of the sessions, most time was spent on the media literacy topics, rather than instructional guidance: "*Great theory and loads of practical tips given across all 5 sessions. But still feel there's a body of work to be done by staff to actually roll out training to adult users. Need to translate the theory and the learning into the practical element of training others.*"

Conclusion & Recommendations

Various recommendations emerged from this project for implementing media literacy programmes in public libraries.

- Consider organising training groups for management staff separately from frontline staff. For the purposes of the pilot project which involved small numbers of staff, groups were mixed. However, these groups can have differing training needs and training should reflect these needs in the distribution of staff for training.
- The length of training sessions should be expanded from the pilot training sessions to allow for greater depth of training in particular areas of interest.
- There is a need to train public library staff to provide instruction, both in formal teaching sessions and informal interactions with library visitors.
- There are opportunities for academic and library partnerships to improve education and professional development and activities that should not be overlooked for future.Working together has the benefit of facilitating understanding of each other, as well as improving the quality of service delivered by both parties.
- The PAR approach in this project supported academic - library partnering. PAR offers a very useful means of exploration for similar projects.

The pilot media literacy programme in this project proved successful for public library staff and garnered positive comments from all involved. The outcome of the project was a course suitable for training public library staff, which addressed the specific needs of professionals working in this area of librarianship. The project has highlighted the need for media literacy training for library and information professionals and has demonstrated the role that library staff can play in promoting media literacy to their communities. Additionally, the project has demonstrated how academics and library staff can work together to devise solutions for problems.

Acknowledgments

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