This compact but insightful new book on information literacy is edited by the two originators of “A New Curriculum for Information Literacy” (ANCIL), the “practical framework” of the book’s title which sprang from the Arcadia Programme at Cambridge University. Financed by the Arcadia charitable fund, one of the aims of the three-year programme (2009-11) was to use research fellowships and projects to explore innovative services for academic library users. ANCIL is the fruit of one of these projects, while a subsequent Arcadia fellowship examined strategies for implementing it.

Designed for the benefit of undergraduate students and composed of ten “strands”, ANCIL views information literacy as a process, a “continuum of skills, behaviours, approaches and values”. While it is certainly laudable when an institution makes being information literate an attribute all graduates should attain, ANCIL makes clear we are looking at a journey rather than a destination.

The book crams in an introduction, ten case studies, afterword, conclusion, and four appendices on the curriculum. Each case study concentrates on one of the strands:

1. Transition into Higher Education
2. Becoming an independent learner
3. Developing academic literacies
4. Mapping and evaluating the information landscape
5. Resource discovery within discipline
6. Managing information
7. Ethical dimension of information
8. Presenting and communicating knowledge
9. Synthesising information and creating new knowledge
10. Social dimension of information

Some of these strands may not have been seen as being within the purview of university librarians in the past, or are somewhat novel and not yet widely taught. In the latter case it can be argued new information-related sessions are as effectively delivered by an academic librarian as anyone else within such institutions. As librarians seem to have claimed the demonstration of bibliographic management software (used to illustrate Strand Six, Managing Information) from IT departments or subject academics, it makes just as much sense for us to be the ones delivering sessions on the academic uses of blogging and Twitter, which the editors use to illustrate Strand Eight (Presenting and Communicating Knowledge).

As the editors note, if this is a “new” curriculum then what of the old? They do not propose a tabula rasa; the majority of these strands will already be familiar to academic librarians (especially when concrete examples are given). This is welcome for practitioners still getting to grips with the newly-revised SCONUL Seven Pillars or alternatives, who might glance at ANCIL’s ten strands and despair at more work to do, delivering even more with decreasing resources and staff numbers.

On that point, the editors and chapter authors are keen to emphasise the holistic and flexible nature of ANCIL, encouraging communities of practice and collaboration within the profession (as effectively demonstrated by the wiki set up as part of a follow-on Arcadia Fellowship, on strategies for implementing ANCIL), and crucially, with academic and other staff within an institution. The message is that while we can continue to champion information literacy and indeed claim new aspects of it for the library, we should not be seeking to do all this on our own. Rather, academic librarians should be forging partnerships and seeking to embed information literacy within the academic curriculum itself as an integral part of the student experience. Not a novel concept to most of us, but one which needs stressing all the same. With this in mind, it was pleasing to see one of the chapters was co-authored by a lecturer rather than another librarian; an example of this type of partnership in action. As above, so below – the information literacy of students can be enriched enormously by reflection and collaboration among students where appropriate.

While a well-written afterword on the process of implementing ANCIL is included, it is worth noting that of the ten case studies, only one seems to have been developed with ANCIL specifically in mind – not surprising perhaps given the “newness” of the New Curriculum. Rather, these vignettes are used to illustrate each of the ten strands with concrete examples of prior good practice, although clearly there is overlap between strands in these projects. Curiously, some concentrate on postgraduate information literacy, despite the focus of ANCIL dealing specifically with undergraduates, although this does of course illustrate the flexibility of the ten strands as elements of any information literacy programme. That the chapters are kept brief (all are fewer than 16
pages, often including generous amounts of figures and references) means they are in the most part very accessible. However, this also means that, by necessity, one is given only a shallow overview of a particular project, and if that project doesn’t seem interesting to the reader then there is no alternative example. But it should be remembered that ANCIL is best viewed as a framework that can be adapted and given value by the practitioner as needed. One minor niggle is that the nine university case studies refer to English institutions (bar one institution which also operates an Asian branch). It would have been useful to have included other UK universities – although note that Scottish and Welsh frameworks were also recently published, which may partly explain their absence. Non-UK examples would also have been welcome, to demonstrate that ANCIL can have universal appeal, which I believe is true when I reflect on my own experience in Ireland. A small criticism and one that doesn’t detract from the usefulness of ANCIL – and this volume – to information literacy practitioners.