

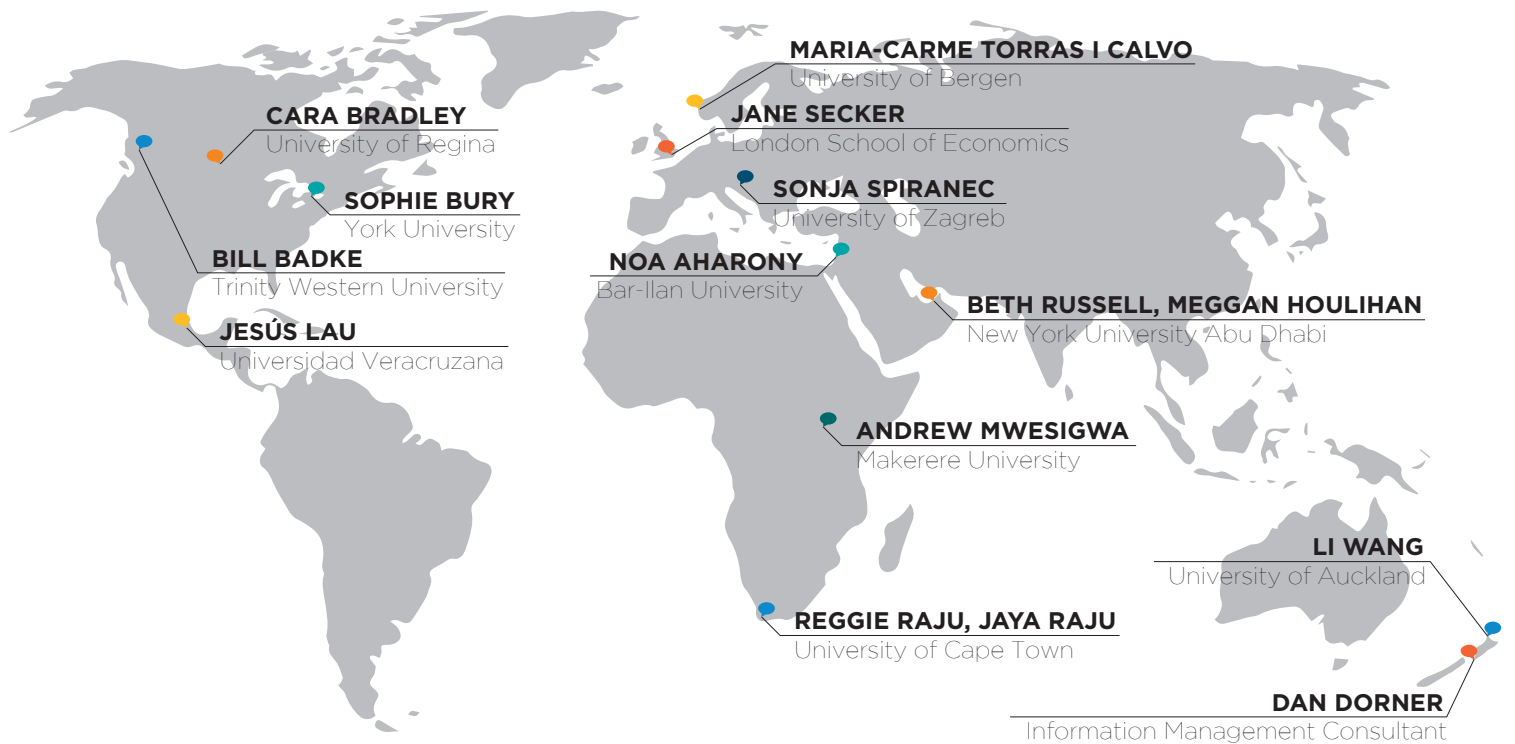
# GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON INFORMATION LITERACY

**Fostering a Dialogue for  
International Understanding**



Edited by the ACRL Student Learning and Information Literacy Committee

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Region: Middle East

Introduction (Beth Russell and Meggan Houlihan):

This paper will highlight the development, growth, and projected outlook, of information literacy initiatives in the Middle East with a focus on the Gulf region, which includes the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, and Oman. The Middle East has a significant and valuable history in higher education and establishing world class higher education institutions. Regional “homegrown” educational institutions include Zayed University and Khalifa University in the UAE, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia, the University of Tehran, and Al-Azhar University in Cairo, long regarded as one of the oldest institutions of higher education in the world, and numerous others.

The Gulf region’s long-standing commitment to education combined with economic wealth has resulted in the development of educational institutions as a priority. In recent years, many Gulf countries, most notably the UAE and Qatar, have begun to embrace western-style higher educational institutions, often establishing new transnational campuses. Many of these new branches stem from universities located in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. According to Hanauer and Phan,

“Of the estimated 100 branch campuses currently operating worldwide, more than a third are in the Arab region. There are nearly 60 transnational institutions and programmes in the Middle East today and of these, over 80% are located in the Persian Gulf with staggering concentrations in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Nearly half these institutions are affiliated with universities in the United States, while the rest are spread across several other mostly Western and Asian nations.”[1]

Newly established transnational campuses often bring with them programs and curriculum that are heavily influenced and modeled after their home institutions. In many cases, the academic library is no exception. Academic programs offered at these institutions are often tailored to suit the local needs of the community. For example, NYUAD offers a Bachelor of Arts in Arab Crossroads, a multidisciplinary program situated to bring a better understanding of the Arabian Peninsula to the global community.[2] Similarly, many of these institutions also recruit faculty and staff from abroad. These expatriate workers, or “expats” bring with them their teaching methodologies, practices, and training from their home countries and apply them in the Gulf. In researching this white paper and drawing on their own experiences, the authors found this to be true in the majority of transnational campuses studied. Most of the expat academic librarians draw on professional education and experiences gained before moving abroad.

With an increased interest in higher education, IL has rapidly developed in the Arabian Gulf, but the IL landscape is at a crossroads. IL practitioners and educators, alike, are trying to address the complex nature of serving international students attending branch campuses, while navigating the complex nature of local needs. Continued education and support for IL is needed. Moving forward, one must consider current models of information literacy, research trends, and paths for future development.

#### Models of Information Literacy (Beth Russell):

Academic libraries in the Gulf follow varying information literacy models and for different reasons. The region has not developed its own framework for teaching IL skills in higher education, though this is certainly an area for exploration and collaboration in the future.

Additionally, the reliance on expats who bring with them their own experiences in teaching IL skills, shapes the models used to teach students. Readers of this white paper might assume that as librarians in the Middle East, we are teaching local students in ways that differ greatly from the prevalent methods or models used in the West. However, it’s important to note that the authors of this chapter are American expats teaching IL skills to a mostly international student body that hails from over 100 countries, including the United Arab Emirates.[19] This is not an uncommon

scenario in the UAE where many professional librarians come from abroad and universities have a diverse population of students. The country itself is a global melting pot of cultures, with immigrants accounting for nearly 85% of the country's population.[20] It's also important to note that we are academic librarians at a transnational campus of a Western institution, New York University, whose curriculum is that of a Western-style liberal arts and research university.

I received my library science degree from an ALA-accredited university in the United States, and spent the first three years of my academic career teaching undergraduates basic information literacy skills at a mid-sized midwestern university. Most of my instructional style drew on ALA's *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*. Our instruction program focused on teaching students how to identify information needs and then efficiently and effectively locate the answers. We conducted many one-shot library instruction sessions but also embedded ourselves into courses, working with students on long-term assignments that required more extensive use of library resources. When possible, we incorporated active learning techniques to move away from lecture-style classes, and also spent a lot of time developing online tutorials to supplement in-class instruction. I find that at NYUAD, my instructional style did not change substantially; I still focus on incorporating active learning techniques into my instruction whenever possible and I guide my instructional practices by the newer guidelines, the *ACRL Framework*. What has changed is that we have to consider that some of our students come with varying degrees of experience doing research in libraries. Some students came from secondary schools with libraries and school librarians who taught information literacy concepts, while others did not. I don't think this is a situation unique to our institution or this region though: academic librarians in the United States also teach IL concepts to students with varying levels of experience in research tools and methods.

The majority of western-style academic libraries in the region that follow an IL framework, such as NYUAD, follow ACRL's standards, formerly the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* and now the *ACRL Framework*. According to Flanagan and Wiebe, "in the UAE all national public universities modeled on western institutions have

libraries that include information literacy instruction as a core service.”[21] At the AUS library, “Classes and assessments are designed to scaffold students’ IL skills within the framework of the *Association of College and Research Libraries Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*.”[22] A range of teaching styles are used, including active learning approaches, and the integration of technology using clickers and online polling.[23] In this way, UAE western-style university libraries teaching methods do not differ greatly from peer institutions in the US and Canada. Given that in the Gulf region, many of the academic librarians are themselves expats, it makes sense that most of us tend to use models and frameworks from our home countries. At AUC, the majority of faculty librarians have an ALA-accredited degree as do the majority at NYUAD, all earned from institutions in the US and Canada.[24]

Like our colleagues at Western academic libraries, we are still contemplating how to best integrate the new *ACRL Framework* into our library instruction program. We are also still trying to figure how to adapt that for our global student body. Librarians in the Gulf look forward to reviewing threshold-based lesson plans and assessment activities, as ACRL makes more supporting materials available.

According to Houlihan, Furno, and Spencer, IL programs at AUC and AUS both used *ACRL’s Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* “to enhance and improve the existing information literacy programs at AUC and AUS and reinforce information literacy as a key component in the path towards academic excellence.”[25] The Libraries and Learning Technologies 101 course at AUC “was designed to teach all of the ACRL IL standards to freshman” while AUS’s General Education Program includes an IL outcome “that proposes that students should be able to “identify and access information resources efficiently and effectively based upon the ACRL standards”[26][27].

Moyo and Mavodza’s 2016 comparative study of information literacy programs at academic libraries in the United Arab Emirates and South Africa found that the majority of programs were also guided by the *ACRL Standards* but that they were often tailored to the local students’ IL

needs.[28] Even among national universities, including Zayed University, Khalifa University, and United Arab Emirates University, there were differences in the way IL programs are administered and taught. Nationally, there is no singular IL framework to follow. In the coming years, several national universities will be merged into a single institution which could provide a unique opportunity to establish a national IL framework.

At King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals Library (KFUPM) in Saudi Arabia, the instruction program also follows a western model and “was able to tailor the US information literacy model to meet their local needs. Presently, KFUPM offers its academic community a variety of IL programs, including the library-orientation, the library-user program, the library-integrated English courses, and the information-searching skills course.”[29] Similarly, our first-year library instruction program at NYUAD focuses on introducing first-year students to an academic library through a library open house to familiarize them with “places and faces,” orientation sessions, integration into the First-Year Writing Seminar, and the incorporation of a library workshop into the First-Year Dialogue series, a program that helps students navigate the introductory year of their academic career.

Since many of these universities use the same frameworks, we need to continue to move toward cohesiveness in the region while also recognizing our local population's needs. Click and Houlihan write in their chapter “Library Instruction Programs at American-Style Academic Libraries Outside of United States” that, “It is clear the majority of the institutions surveyed have based their instruction programs on American standards but have adapted these standards to meet the needs of diverse student populations”.[30] For example, simplifying terminology such as calling “bibliographic instruction” with the simpler phrase “research skills” will help communicate main objectives to ESL learners.

At NYUAD we are guided by the *ACRL Framework* while incorporating our own teaching styles and methods. We emphasize active and group learning over lecture-style demonstrations. The Library has strong partnerships with the campus Writing Center, (so strong it moved into the

library) and often collaborates on research and writing partnerships, including the annual Long Night Against Procrastination, a bi-annual event where students receive dedicated research and writing help until 3am, with motivational snacks. Our First-Year Experience Librarian works diligently with the faculty who teach in the Core Curriculum as well as those who teach in the Writing Program, to integrate information literacy early on in our students' academic career.

Speaking from a personal perspective, the authors have found that while there may be a few differences in information literacy approaches abroad, much of what we teach and how we teach it remains the same. The authors tend to mostly use the same models they would if they were in a classroom in the U.S., however we maintain a flexible, user-centered approach. For example, we have simplified the language used to explain IL concepts to non-native English speakers using more approachable terminology and reviewing basic library definitions as needed. We've also adapted our language and search examples to suit local needs. We steer away from usual slang terminology and idioms when teaching. During one of our peer-reviewed IL sessions, a colleague noticed that we addressed the class by saying "come on, guys" which in a local context automatically excluded the female students from answering. US-centric search examples don't work well as many of our students do not closely follow Western mainstream popular culture, thus eliminating search examples that many of our western colleagues might use in an IL classroom. Another example of catering to local needs is offering a "Conducting Research in Arabic" workshop, where one of our Arabic-speaking colleagues demonstrates how to find Arabic language resources in our catalog. Being mindful of cultural norms will help us adapt our teaching styles to ensure we reach all of our students.

For the most part, however, the authors have found that methods and models used in the IL classroom (in our experience) have depended more so on the academic setting the program is situated in and not necessarily the geographic location. For example, the students at NYUAD are high performing, come from rigorous academic backgrounds, and have strong English-language skills. While some may not have been exposed to conducting research in an academic library, they are nonetheless highly-motivated learners who are quick to adopt new methods and



techniques. This is not to say that we couldn't do more to tailor our information literacy efforts to our global student population. This is still an area of information literacy development that the authors are exploring.

Research Trends (Meggan Houlihan):

LIS practitioners in the Arabian Gulf have produced a notable body of literature related to information literacy (IL), but there is still much regional work to be done. In order to gain a better understanding of the daily practices and research interests of librarians in Arabian Gulf, it is helpful to break down recent publications into three main categories: innovative teaching practices, programmatic approaches in the Gulf, and IL assessment.

Librarians in the Arabian Gulf, like many Western librarians, have focused on improving their daily IL practices by studying instructional activities and innovative library instruction sessions. Bendriss, Saliba, and Birch experimented with the effectiveness of a flipped IL classroom to prepare budding scholars for the rigor of medical school.[3] Martin, Birks, and Hunt developed Infoasis, a homegrown online learning module developed at Zayed University in 2005, and the trio later assessed the impact and relevance of Infoasis in 2010.[4] The authors concluded that with specific updates to the program, Infoasis was a useful tool for Emirati students, and suggested that the tool continually be assessed. It should be noted that Infoasis was specifically designed with Emirati students in mind, thus language and examples were customized to meet local needs. For example, images of people used in the tutorial were all of Arab descent to better connect with students.[5]

Librarians in the region have also taken care to document the development and launch of their successful IL programs, in an effort to help others avoid common mistakes and duplicate successes. Ashoor highlighted the development of the IL program at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM) in Saudi Arabia.[6] Ashoor suggested that developing countries should adopt an established IL framework and adjust according to local needs and literacy rates.[7] When the American University of Sharjah (AUS) Library was being designed,

supporting information literacy was a main objective.[8] The library was built to accommodate interactive learning spaces that allow for group collaboration and promote learning. Flanagan and Wiebe recently outlined the major developments of libraries and libraries services in the Gulf region, including identifying information literacy as a “foundational element of most libraries.”[9]

Librarians across the globe, and we are no exception, are continually trying to improve the effectiveness of their IL instruction sessions and programs through assessment, both formative and summative. The growing focus on assessment has also extended to librarians in the Arabian Gulf. Furno and Flanagan administered pre- and post-tests to students enrolled in an entry-level English course and identified weakness within their one-shot teaching methods.[10] The authors concluded that their learning outcome of “identifying key components of a scholarly article” was not being met, and they should revisit lesson plans and make adjustments accordingly. Two colleagues and I, Christine Furno and Jayme Spencer, outlined the assessment efforts at our respective institutions, AUC and AUS, and the growth in IL program development.[11]

I find that librarians located in the Arabian Gulf are invested in the same day-to-day issues and research topics as American librarians, and as a result, publish short studies and “what we did well” pieces that commonly appear in American journals and edited volumes. In addition, many regional librarians are attempting to address higher-level, conceptual issues, such as the complex nature of teaching information literacy to diverse students populations and implementing the *ACRL Framework* in an international context. Many librarians are also using original research methods and mixed-methods to gain a better understanding of complex topics. These two recent publishing trends are innovative, and without more advancements regional literature will not develop.

My former colleague, Ilka Datig, explored the concept of “what is a library” and how international students perceive libraries.[12] Within this study Datig delves into the question of how we can improve library services and outreach based on our understanding of diverse student

views on the subject. Datig also suggests further research on the topic, including polling librarians on their definitions of libraries and interviewing upper-level students to see if views on libraries differ from those of new students.[13]

Amanda Click, Claire Wiley, and I conducted a systematic review of library literature and international students, in order to better identify trends in the LIS field related to international students.[14] We reviewed a 25-year period of literature, 1990-2014, and used this data to track key-findings and recommendations in LIS literature. We found that LIS scholars made recommendations related to: “library instruction,” “campus collaboration,” “library staff training,” “assessment,” and “cultural understanding/awareness.” Recommendations were related to: “campus collaboration,” “staff training,” “assessment,” “cultural awareness,” and “library instruction.” For example, collaboration with other campus groups, including the Office of Student Life, often makes students feel more comfortable in an academic library setting. We hope that applying a scientific research method to library research will help others bridge the gap from “what we did” literature to original research.[15] Together we will be publishing a number of follow-up articles, also using original research methods to study international students.

Salaz and McGregor, published a recent book chapter concerning the adoption of various international frameworks, such as the *ACRL Framework*, at transnational campuses.[14] The authors suggested that when conceptual tools, such as the *ACRL Framework*, are deployed on transnational campuses local factors must be addressed, including the “political and economic objectives of higher education systems.”[16] Successful instruction of international students will heavily rely on the classroom teaching of these frameworks.

Johnston, Partridge, and Hughes studied how international students, specifically English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, understand information literacy.[17] In this innovative study, the author utilized phenomenology in order to document the IL experiences of female Emirati students. Four major areas of IL understanding were identified: process, quality, language, and

knowledge.[18] Ultimately, the authors found that EFL students have difficulty with IL, due to language related issues.

The studies highlighted above have had the greatest influence on my research practices, and I believe they will have a lasting effect on the Gulf region and the international library community. The studies listed above tend to use original research methods to explore their research question, which provides greater insight and more detailed results. As much as I appreciate and value ‘what we did articles’ I believe the use of original research methods to explore IL issues is crucial. Furthermore, grounding IL research in theory will help create superior studies and result in stronger recommendations to the field. Although time-consuming, regional and international librarians need to tackle tough research questions with methodically sound studies, in order to make clear advancements in the field.

Historically, there has been an active and engaged LIS research community in the UAE and the Gulf, and there is much to learn from this body of literature. Librarians from around the world have had the opportunity to collaborate on research projects that identify and study many aspects of information literacy, specifically focused on issues related to the Gulf and our unique student populations. Together we must systematically make recommendations that inform our teaching of international students. Globally, librarians would benefit by reading this diverse body of literature, especially as the number of Gulf citizens travelling abroad for their university education continues to grow.

#### Future Visioning and Reflection (Meggan Houlihan):

We feel that the role of academic libraries in the Gulf region is bright and burgeoning; information literacy is a crucial to the success of all future library and reading related initiatives. Librarians in this region should be optimistic. Regional support from government entities, universities, regional and international library organizations, and local businesses, will continue to make a lasting impact on the development of libraries and information literacy.

The government of the UAE has spearheaded the growth of libraries in the country. There is a strong emphasis on preserving the Arabic language and local heritage. The UAE's tremendous support for reading and library-related initiatives resulted in 2016 being marked as the "Year of Reading," which has provided resources and support to promote reading to all ages and create generations of avid readers.[31] I helped organize a UAE Reads event here at NYUAD, where invited all local universities to read and discuss *I Am Malala* followed by a screening of *He Named Me Malala*. The largest library in the Arab world, the Mohammed bin Rashid Library, is set to start construction next year and once completed, will provide access to 1.5 million print volumes, 1 million audiobooks and 2 million e-books.[32] This library will serve as the bridge between library services, cultural heritage, preservation, and the academy.

Neighboring Qatar has quickly followed suit. The Qatar National Library will serve as a national library, public library, and academic library, all under one roof. Central to their mission is to help users become "information literate".[33] The Qatari government also launched a national reading campaign in 2016 to help introduce young readers to books, along with several other initiatives. This shift in thinking and programmatic approaches to library services will help Qataris and expats alike, become lifelong learners.[34]

Regionally, there are several free and fee-based professional development opportunities. The home-grown Information Literacy Network of the Gulf organization (ILN) offers free workshops, through the generous support of local universities and businesses, on current topics every year. Recently, the organization hosted a series of workshops on user experience design, threshold concepts, and assessment, throughout the Emirates and Doha.[35] As mentioned previously, the ILN will also offer LIS research methods workshops this academic year. As the current Chair of the ILN Professional Development Committee, I can say with confidence that the organization is working toward serving all types of librarians in their efforts to create, sustain, and assess information literacy programs. We're actively collecting data to improve our outreach and professional development opportunities.

The Special Libraries Association-Arabian Gulf Chapter (SLA-AGC) and the American Library Association (ALA) both offer fee-based conferences and workshops. SLA-AGC offers LIS professionals in the Gulf the opportunity to participate in annual conferences on a wide array of topics that vary by year. Although I have never attended SLA-AGC, I have heard from other librarians that presentation quality is developing. SLA-AGC is charging \$350 for non-members and \$300 for members for their 2017 annual conference.

ALA has teamed up with the Sharjah International Book Fair (ALA Sharjah) to bring in regional and international library experts to the only ALA conference held outside of the United States. The downside to ALA-Sharjah and SLA-AGC is that they are quite costly for the amount and quality of programming offered; this year ALA Sharjah cost \$165 USD for onsite registration for ALA members and \$190 USD for non-ALA members. This also raises the question of what other types of professional development opportunities these organizations offer their members in the region to generate lasting impact. I attended the ALA-Sharjah 2016 conference, and found that the lack of international context in conference presentations left the audience looking for more. NYUAD librarians assisted with the development of a regional panel focused on academic librarianship to help establish a programmatic academic librarian track. The conference would better suit local participants, the vast majority of whom are not American, by diversifying speakers and bringing American, international, *and* local perspectives to library issues.

While the Gulf has a burgeoning library community and professional development opportunities are on the rise, the diverse communities of library staff and education levels can cause unevenly distributed professional development (PD) offerings. I find that many PD opportunities are geared toward entry-level librarians, while the more experienced librarian might not feel like there are as many opportunities. Another consideration is continued PD funds for international travel. Many universities and schools have seen a decrease in PD funding with the decline in oil prices.

Although the IL community in the Gulf region is growing and libraries are becoming a prominent part of the community, success still depends on continued support for high-quality library education, which is currently fragile. The American University in the Emirates is the only university in the UAE to offer a Master's degree in Library and Information Science. This program is accredited by the UAE Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.[36] The Al Jazira Institute, an Abu Dhabi vocational school, used to offer a diploma in library studies, but it has recently closed. Currently, there is one accredited library program at University College London, Doha, but there are many whispers of this program closing in the near future. As far as the authors know, there are no current plans to create more library science programs in the region. A national library organization, as argued by Johnston, Mavodza, and Jirjees, could help solve the library education and professional development problem.[37] A national library organization could establish and approve library school curriculum, while developing a regional plan for the development of library services and professionals. Establishing local chapters of support for library professionals is another area ripe for opportunity.

In regards to future of information literacy in the Gulf, one must also consider access to Arabic language professional development opportunities and library materials. A majority of professional development events in the Gulf are held in English, sometimes with Arabic translation. Emirati and Arab librarians need access to IL support in Arabic, in order to suit local needs. Also, without properly translated materials, non-English language speaking librarians and scholars cannot utilize articles, white papers, books, committee reports, and various other resources. For example, to the authors' knowledge there are no current Arabic translations of the *ACRL Framework*. This essential work must be translated in order to make it more widely accessible.

We both feel that we are in a unique higher education environment and that is reflected in our thoughts and practices on the integration of information literacy in a global context. We bring with us our own background and standards, drawn from ACRL's *Framework for Information*

*Literacy Standards for Higher Education* and ALA-accredited library science degrees from US institutions. We work in a region that lacks its own standards, and thus we teach what we know. This is not to say that there isn't work to be done on examining what it means to teach IL in a global context. Moving forward, we must base our IL advancements using original research that studies our local population. We can't continue to insert Western IL principles into non-Western academic settings without consideration for our diverse population. We must develop our own framework that considers the local educational environment by asking our students the fundamental question, "What is a library?" and using their responses to guide us.

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