The Library's Role in Learning: Information Literacy Revisited
by Barbara Fister

No one disputes the idea that a major purpose of a college education is to develop the skills and disposition to continue learning after graduation. We know that most of the content covered in class will be out date in short order, if it's retained at all. But students who practice gathering, analyzing, critiquing, and building on existing information will be able to continue adding to their knowledge base in the future.

We're not just educating students, we're establishing the conditions for lifelong learning, or at least that's the plan. To a large extent, that's what academic libraries are for: to give students a chance to learn how to learn and how to contribute their own ideas to what we know about the world.

Librarians today have lived through one of the greatest transformations of scholarly and cultural communication in history, changes that will continue for the foreseeable future. Ten years from now, the technological framework for communicating and sharing information is likely to be vastly different than today's knowledge infrastructure, but the ability to ask good questions, find things out, evaluate evidence, create new ideas and communicate them will be enduringly valuable skills.

This is the kind of learning that we're talking about when we talk about information literacy.

What's in a Name?

Librarians have long been involved in helping students learn how to inquire. We've called this effort different things over the years: library orientation, library user education, bibliographic instruction, and now information literacy. The language changes because the meaning keeps spilling out of the boundaries we put around the concept. It's not about libraries, though being able to use a library is certainly helpful. It's not about books, as is implied in the word "bibliography" – though books are likely to be relevant to many kinds of inquiry.

Nor is it just about "information" and "literacy." The active work of framing questions and creating new understanding is poorly represented by the first word, and the second suggests a focus on remedial education or a very basic level of ability. Call it what you will, it's a complex set of skills and dispositions that are important on every campus, and not just to librarians.

In 1996, Jeremy J. Shapiro and Shelley K. Hughes made a claim that information literacy is "a new liberal art." At the same time, they pointed out that it's really not that new. In fact, its value was articulated during the enlightenment, when the argument was made that informed citizens could contribute to progress as free human beings.

What is new is the importance of decisions being made today *about* information – who has access, who controls it, how we can participate in creating it, and whether information is a public good or private property. To participate in these decisions, students need to know more than how to use library resources to complete college projects. They need to know how information works at a fundamental level - and how to create it themselves.

> ### Coming Soon —
> **MOOCs: Library Implications
> for Institutions**

Shapiro and Hughes included in the concept of "information literacy" a wide range of skills that are sometimes examined with a narrower focus:
• digital literacy (which concentrates on the ability to participate in digital communication),
• media literacy (which encourages informed and critical reading of media messages), and
• visual literacy (which deals with the ability to make meaning through images).

Each of these literacies emphasizes a different aspect of information, but all are relevant to information literacy (if not always equally stressed). Alternative phrases - Information fluency, transliteracy, and metaliteracy - have been proposed to overcome the limits of the phrase "information literacy" and to emphasize that this form of learning is far more comprehensive than its library-focused antecedents.

Not just a "library issue." Though librarians have been the most vocal proponents of information literacy, it is inaccurate to characterize it as a library issue. The American Association for Higher Education and the Council of Independent Colleges endorsed a set of information literacy standards proposed by the Association of College and Research Libraries, a signal that these competencies are relevant for all of higher education.

In 2007, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) published a set of "essential learning outcomes" which included information literacy among intellectual and practical skills that are components of liberal learning. However, other skills in the list seem to be integral parts of information literacy: inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, and written and oral communication seem inseparable from what librarians mean by information literacy.

These abilities are developed and rehearsed while formulating a question, seeking, comprehending, and evaluating information related to that question, and building on it to construct new meaning (often in conjunction with fieldwork, empirical research, or the interpretation and analysis of pri-mary documents). It may be the very ubiquity of information literacy that makes it hard to nail down. After all, what scholarly activity *doesn't* involve information literacy?

Whose Job is It?

Like so many critical outcomes of higher learning, information literacy is everyone's business – but nobody's responsibility. Because it is diffused throughout the curriculum, it can be difficult to identify where it is learned, who will teach it, how it will be sequenced for greater complexity, and how learning will be assessed. Here, the role of librarians is both essential and fraught.

> **It may be the very ubiquity of information literacy that makes it hard to nail down. After all, what scholarly activity doesn't involve information literacy?**

It would be hard to find an academic library organization that doesn't believe promoting information literacy is a critical part of their mission, but it's a responsibility shared with faculty in the classroom in every major and across the entire curriculum. Librarians must develop one-on-one relationships with a wide variety of faculty teaching different subjects at different levels. These negotiations most frequently go on between a librarian and a willing faculty member who feels librarians can be co-teachers of at least some of these critical skills. Sometimes they occur at a programmatic level, most commonly in first-year composition courses that include some sort of researched writing instruction.

More rarely, they are integrated into a particular major or program and may be supplemented by credit-bearing courses taught by librarians. Developing and sustaining strong inter-departmental relationships and negotiating how exactly information literacy will be built into the curriculum are enormous challenges for librarians who feel it is nevertheless an essential college learning outcome.

The role of librarians as teachers and partners with the faculty is not universally accepted, either by faculty or by students. One study by a sociologist concluded that the desire to work in partnership to include systematic information literacy in the curriculum is asymmetric: librarians care about faculty perceptions, but faculty have significantly less interest in forming partnerships. Power relationships also infuse decisions: faculty hold higher status than librarians hold, and this may make librarians diffident about making suggestions, or may make faculty protective of their classroom turf. The power to reward student attention is held by those who give grades, a dynamic that students routinely take into account when deciding how to respond when a librarian teaches a class.

And there is the simple fact that many people have no idea what librarians do for a living. The word is commonly applied to anyone who works in a library and is presumed to be entirely defined by traditional library tasks – shelving books, for example, or cataloging. Quite often, it doesn't occur to students to speak with a librarian when they run into trouble with their research because they believe the trouble stems from the content they are working with: why aren't there more books on my subject? Am I using the right words when I search? How can I tell if this article is any good? Boy, I could really use some statistics to support my argument. None of those issues are, in their minds, library questions.

A study that surveyed over 2,000 undergraduates across the country found that 8 out of 10 never or rarely asked a librarian for help. Ensuring that both students and faculty know how librarians can play a role in education is a challenge. The more actively involved in the intellectual life of the institution librarians are, the more likely they will be recognized as educators.

How do we Know if it's Working?

Critics of information literacy instruction complain that it tries to make libraries relevant by inflicting intellectually arid training sessions on bored

students. Some argue that if librarians put their efforts into designing better user interfaces, there would be no need for instruction. Others say the kind of learning students need is already addressed by disciplinary faculty in their courses; librarians are only confusing the issue by trying to turn students into mini-librarians. While many faculty are enthusiastic partners with librarians, it's hard to point to evidence that these partnerships made a difference.

General education outcomes are notoriously difficult to assess, and information literacy is no exception. Though there are a number of assessment tools available, they are relatively blunt instruments. A student who scores well on an information literacy test may fail to integrate that knowledge into practice; a student who does brilliant research may test badly on the minutia of research tasks.

Authentic assessment needs to be a combination of measures, including direct and indirect measures, regularly applied, analyzed, and used to inform practice. Because assessment is often perceived to be a measure of a department's performance, and no one program or department is responsible for making our students information literate, nobody can take credit or blame for assessment results.

Assessments of learning, however, can be useful in cross-campus discussions about what role inquiry plays in higher education and how inquiry skills can be better integrated into courses and programs. A library that takes a lead in this kind of assessment would be well positioned to lead the conversation.

Approaches to Information Literacy Instruction

Finding ways to include information literacy in the curriculum takes many forms, depending on resources available, strategic alliances on campus, and institutional priorities. The best programs are likely to employ a mix of these methods.

Course-related instruction. This is the most common approach libraries take, and the easiest to implement. In this model, librarians build relationships with faculty across the cur-

riculum, sometimes as a function of a department liaison program, and on a course-by-course basis work to integrate specific research tools and approaches into the course, generally meeting once or twice in the library. An advantage to this approach is that students can apply what they are learning immediately and see how it is relevant to a task that they must complete. A disadvantage is that, with little time in the classroom, librarians often find themselves focusing on the use of specific tools and their idiosyncrasies rather than involving students in a deeper exploration of how information actually works. Because these learning opportunities are ad hoc and unsystematic, some students will complain of repetition while others might never be shown how to use library tools. And carefully-nurtured relationships fall apart whenever a faculty member moves on.

Focus on the first year. Many libraries invest effort into showing new students the ropes, often through a formalized tie-in with a first-year writing course or sequence of courses. Since these courses typically include some instruction in the nuts and bolts of writing from sources, including evaluating evidence, organizing an argument, and using scholarly con-

ventions to draw from and document sources, they provide natural occasions for an introduction to using the library and Internet sources in college-level assignments. A disadvantage is that navigating information resources in the first year does not prepare students for more advanced research, but many faculty assume students have already been taught everything they need to know. Developmentally and experientially, students in their first year are prone to take a pragmatic approach to learning, and may learn shortcuts and adopt habits that do not serve them well in more advanced courses.

Sequenced instruction embedded in programs. A robust approach to making information literacy integral to education is to work within a major to build a sequence of skills practiced, developed, and deepened over the course of an education. Though it has been shown to be a particularly effective form of learning, it's one of the most difficult strategies to carry out.

All faculty involved in the program will have to agree on which skills are essential and which core courses will promote those skills. Beyond that, the program has to actually *have* a sequence. In some fields, particularly in the sciences, courses are taken in a standard

order, but in many of the humanities and social sciences, students don't take courses in a prescribed order. In these cases, a required methods course may be the logical place for systematic and in-depth inquiry skills to be developed, but even there much depends on how a department defines "methods." In some, students learn how to conduct research. In others, the methods course is devoted to studying a canon of theory.

Developing trusting relationships between a librarian and faculty in a program and holding departmental conversations about how to embed a sequence of experiences into the program can be both time consuming and intense, with no guarantee of success.

Credit-bearing courses. Some librarians have argued eloquently that course-related instruction is inadequate, that courses focused on disciplinary content skirt the intricacies of information literacy, and that only by teaching entire courses will librarians be able to address all of the skills involved in learning how to use information in the service of inquiry. This approach has been successful on some campuses, but runs the risk of requiring a course that students feel is insufficiently connected to their majors to be worthwhile or, if an elective, being perennially under-enrolled. It also can be difficult to gain institutional support, both to list such a course in the catalog and to staff it with instructors.

Learning Commons. A growing trend in academic libraries is to co-locate a variety of student services in the library. These might include academic advising, services for students with disabilities, programs to support multilingual learners, writing support, tutoring, and technol-ogy services. Librarians may find this kind of proximity a fertile space for making connections with other professionals whose work supports learning and it may strengthen the use of reference services as a site for learning. This kind of support, however, may end up being reactive, helping students complete assigned work successfully rather than helping faculty think though what kinds of assignments can result in the learning outcomes they actually seek.

> The library offers a uniquely fruitful site for learning how to inquire. It is common ground for all disciplines and a place where meaning isn't transmitted but rather made....

Faculty development. A promising, but often neglected, approach to infusing information literacy across the curriculum is through programs that involve faculty in learning together. This approach recognizes that the deepest learning happens in courses and programs, and that it's far too complex to be mastered in a scattering of class periods. Librarians can help, but they are not the chief drivers in student learning. Integrating information literacy into conversations about teaching and learning is likely to have the greatest effect on students who could benefit from redesigned courses or more thoughtful discussions within departments. Involving the faculty at large in defining the place of information literacy among the college's curricular priorities is essential to making student inquiry a meaning-ful learning experience, and a faculty development program may provide the best platform for doing so. This, of course, depends on the campus having a well-respected, effective, and adequately financed faculty development program in place.

Making Connections

The library offers a uniquely fruitful site for learning how to inquire. It is common ground for all disciplines and a place where meaning isn't transmitted but rather made through the interaction with primary material and with other people's interpretations.

Librarians as generalists can help students pull together cross-disciplinary discourse. The trick is not teaching students how to use the library and other information sources; those will change profoundly in the next few years. Rather, we need to focus on how the use of these things today can contribute to critical thinking, analysis, and making meaningful decisions—processes that will continue to be valuable tomorrow. —*fister@gac.edu*

Resources

Association of American Colleges and Universities. *College Learning for the New Global Century*. Washington, D.C.: AAC&U, 2007. http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/GlobalCentury_final.pdf

The Citation Project.
http://site.citationproject.net/

Project Information Literacy.
http://projectinfolit.org/

Shapiro, Jeremy J., and Shelley K. Hughes. "Information literacy as a liberal art?." *Educom review* 31 (1996):31-35. http://net.educause.edu/apps/er/review/reviewarticles/31231.html

Teaching Inquiry Zotero Group
http://www.zotero.org/groups/teaching_inquiry

MOUNTAINSIDE PUBLISHING, INC.