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Teaching Information Literacy to Undergraduate Students: Reflecting on the Past, Present and Future of Library Instruction

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Abstract

The need to teach information literacy skills to undergraduate students is often framed as a 21st century concern, but debate over the value and practice of teaching this set of skills can be found as far back as the early 1900's. This article reviews the history of information literacy instruction in academic libraries from its origins to the present, examines the current state of information literacy instruction in academic libraries, and explores possible future directions that this instruction may take. Looking to the past, present and future shows that while library instruction has evolved, many central concerns remain unanswered.

Past

Instruction in academic libraries is not a novel concept; it is evident in the literature as early as the 1800's. Gunselman and Blakesley (2014) describe the origins of library instruction in detail. In 1880, Harvard librarian Justin Winsor identified the need for bibliographic instruction. Soon after, William Rainey Harper, the first president of the University of Chicago, proposed librarians perform instruction as part of their duties. Library instruction continued to play an active role in academic libraries throughout the early 1900's (Gunselman and Blakesley, 2014).

Instructional efforts in academic libraries slowed during the 1920's throughout the 1950's. Holder (2010) details the evolution of library instruction during these

decades, indicating that as the role of the librarian was changing in the academy, libraries themselves were becoming more complex environments. As academic libraries became multifaceted, librarians were required to be trained in the technical aspects of librarianship; whereas in the past librarians were academics on campus who were experts in chosen academic fields. The role of librarians became more administrative in nature and less involved with academics. Libraries were also growing in size, both in terms of their physical collections and their number of users. During this time there was an influx of students in higher education, which led libraries to focus their attention on service points, such as the reference desk, in order to accommodate these students. This in turn resulted in a drop in instruction efforts (Holder, 2010).

The 1960's saw a renewed interest in instruction efforts from academic libraries (Holder, 2010). Librarians such as Daniel Gore at Ashville-Biltmore College recognized this need and in 1964 called for separate library instruction sessions. Gore called for these sessions because he felt that reference interviews alone did not satisfactorily account for user instruction (Holder, 2010). That same year, Patricia Knapp posited that libraries had become too bureaucratic and had lost their direction. Thus, there was a need for librarians to rebuild their relationships with students and faculty (Gunselman and Blakesley, 2014).

As observed by Behrens (1994), in the 1970's information skills were beginning to be recognized as essential to an "emerging information society." In 1973, Paul Zurkowski, president of the Information Industry Association, coined the term "information literacy." Zurkowski identified the rising need for workers to be trained in the effective use of information in the workplace, stating that the "information literate are those trained to apply information resources to their work" (Zurkowski, 1974). Zurkowski estimated that only one-sixth of the U.S. population could be considered information literate, and called for the establishment of "a major national program to achieve universal information literacy by 1984" (Zurkowski, 1974). Behrens observes that throughout the 1970's Zurkowski's concept of information literacy was expanded upon by other thinkers such as Cees Hamelink and Major R. Owens, who related information literacy to critical thinking about mass media and to active and informed citizenship, respectively. Assessing the notion of information literacy during this era, Behrens states that "information was seen as essential to society," and these early definitions expressed the need to be information literate in order to be a productive and informed citizen.

The proliferation of computers in the 1980s and the rise of new information technologies furthered the need for information literacy instruction. By the mid-1980s academic libraries began to shift instruction from user instruction of the physical library to information literacy programs (Behrens, 1994). In 1989, the ALA

Presidential Committee on Information Literacy report was published, and it supported this shift in information literacy instruction. The 1989 report also articulated the most recognizable and influential definition of information literacy to date, stating that to be information literate, “a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information” (ALA, 1989).

In the 1990’s much effort was put toward implementing recommendations from the ALA Presidential Committee on Information Literacy report. By 1990, the National Forum on Information Literacy had been established, and librarians began working on creating national standards for information literacy instruction throughout all levels of education. In the meantime the widespread use of the Internet and the need to educate students in its use became seen as an integral part of information literacy instruction. In 1998, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) published its set of national standards, entitled *Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning*.

In the early 2000’s, the ACRL extended the work of AASL by drafting and publishing their own set of standards for higher education. Much of the scholarship of the 1990’s was taken into account during the formation of these standards. Some of the key components of the standards included the importance of performance indicators and learning outcomes for assessing teaching, emphasis on collaborating with faculty and the administration to institutionalize information literacy, and the importance of information literacy to lifelong learning (ACRL, 2000). Despite fervent debate over the adequacy of these standards over the past decade, they have served as a starting point for instructors developing information literacy programs at their institutions, and have had a tremendous influence on the increasing number of information literacy programs that have grown throughout the 2000’s.

National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) biannual reports on academic libraries over the last decade indicate that significant progress has been made by academic librarians in developing and institutionalizing information literacy instruction in higher education since the publication of the ACRL Standards in 2000. However, there are still many questions about the quality of this instruction that have not been adequately addressed. Debate over the adequacy of these standards during the 2000s is exhibited in the writings of Owusu-Ansah (2003, 2005), Zabel (2004), Wilder (2005), Grassian (2005), Budd (2008) and many others. This debate has led to calls for reform on a national level, and increasingly, challenges to the ACRL Standards’ ability to serve the needs of information literacy instructors and students.

By the end of the 2000's, many librarians had voiced that the ACRL standards of the 2000's would not suffice as a guide for information literacy instruction moving forward. In 2011, the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards Review Task Force reviewed the standards, and in 2012, recommended that the Standards be significantly revised, in order to:

reflect the current thinking on such things as the creation and dissemination of knowledge, the changing global higher education and learning environment, the shift from information literacy to information fluency, and the expanding definition of information literacy to include multiple literacies, e.g., transliteracy, media literacy and digital literacy (ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards Review Task Force, 2012).

A new Information Literacy *Framework* was proposed by the task force to replace the Standards. This framework aims to incorporate some of the "current thinking" contributed by leading scholars of information literacy, so further analysis of current literature and trends in information literacy will provide insight into the direction information literacy instruction is taking.

Present

We have observed the evolution of information literacy over the past few decades, but where does this evolution leave us? Many instruction librarians would answer that we are in a period of transition. With the new ACRL Framework being drafted, the path forward could lead in several distinct directions.

One major voice in this debate is Project Information Literacy, who in partnership with the iSchool at the University of Washington has conducted a national study asking, "how do recent college graduates find, evaluate, and use information for lifelong learning in the workplace and in their daily lives" (Project Information Literacy, 2014). Project Information Literacy has published a number of findings that promise to help us better understand how information literacy is learned. These findings will help shape the current debate on the effectiveness of our teaching.

One of the important findings of Project Information Literacy is that although the number of information literacy courses being taught in higher education is increasing, employers are still finding students insufficiently equipped to apply critical thinking and decision making to information in the workplace (Head and Whibey, 2014). This concern echoes that of Zurkowski and others as far back as the 1970's - 40 years since this need was first identified and the "information literate" individual was defined.

The work of Project Information Literacy also echoes other articulations of information literacy from the 1970s, particularly with its emphasis on the importance of information literacy to active citizenship. Head and Whibey (2014) stress the importance of information literacy to active and informed citizenship and leadership. Over-emphasis on teaching specific tools such as electronic databases may have turned us away from these important aspects of information literacy, but it seems we are now reconsidering their importance.

Recent interest in the concept of metaliteracy has also had a large impact on these standards. The scholarship surrounding metaliteracy was developed by Mackey and Jacobson (2010), who recognized parallels between information literacy and similar educational programs arising in other disciplines, such as visual and media literacy instruction in the field of communication. In addition to this, they observed that the widespread use of mobile devices and social media called for a significant revision of information literacy instruction.

The influence of metaliteracy upon the new ACRL Framework cannot be understated. In their report, the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards Review Task Force repeatedly cited Mackey and Jacobson's work on metaliteracy as a major influence, and Jacobson serves as co-chair of the committee that is revising the Standards (ACRL, 2012). Based on a recent presentation by the Task Force co-chairs Craig Gibson and Trudi Jacobson (2014), some of the central ideas being addressed and incorporated into the new framework include, but are not limited to:

- Moving from seeing students only as content "consumers" but as content "creators" as well;
- Stressing the impact of social media and the learning communities that spring up as a result of its use;
- Acknowledging recent evolution in the fields of scholarly communication and data management. (Gibson & Jacobson, 2014)

While the revision of the ACRL standards will have a major impact on information literacy instruction programs nationwide, some librarians have gone even further to challenge our practices of teaching information literacy. Many librarians feel that the new Framework will not address the most important problems, and that more comprehensive reform is needed, while others have questioned whether information literacy should continue to be taught by librarians at all (Cowan, 2014).

Future

For all of the focus academic libraries have placed on information literacy one could argue that the deficiencies observed by Zurkowski in 1974 are greater than ever;

however, employers are reporting that graduates do not possess these skills (Head and Whibey, 2014). Additionally, accrediting bodies are now requiring institutions of higher education to incorporate information literacy into their curriculum and to produce information literate graduates. The debate on who should teach information literacy still permeates campuses, but we still do not know if information literacy instruction is effective.

One thing we have not done well is assess our efforts. Gunselman and Blakesley (2012) summarize the lack of assessment of library instruction programs, quoting Barbara Fister, who said “we do not have strong and consistent evidence that course related instruction has a positive effect on student learning, even though it has been a fixture of academic libraries.” They also cite a 2011 ACRL conference paper written by librarians at California State University, “we certainly need to do a better job of assessing our impact on student learning, but we also need to specifically assess what our students know, don’t know and need to know rather than making assumptions.” Gunselman and Blakesley do acknowledge the work of a few individuals who are focusing on assessment, specifically Megan Oakleaf; and recent research conducted by Sue Samson (2010) and Margaret Fain (2011) could be added to that list. However, Gunselman and Blakesley’s observation that “we need to look more into what we do, and be receptive and flexible when assessment data, shifting priorities, and new circumstances suggest changes” rings true in our changing information environment.

How do academic libraries address the issues of assessment, faculty and employer’s expectations, and mandates from accrediting agencies? One possible direction would be to take Susan Cowan’s advice to heart and step back from information literacy, by moving away from its programmatic and institutional aims, and “to *really* hand over infolit to our faculty and, most of all, to our students” (Cowan, 2014). Cowan’s point is that information literacy will continue to thrive in these competent hands. Granting this, what would this stepping back look like in practice, and how would this refocusing of efforts take place?

Refocusing Information Literacy at Montana Tech

One way of answering the question of how to refocus information literacy instruction is to examine our own institution. At Montana Tech we are in our own way stepping back from information literacy. This is not to say we have abandoned our one-shots or for-credit classes, as we have not. However, we are rethinking and refocusing the role of the library regarding information literacy.

In order to better communicate to students and faculty we have developed our own definition of information literacy. We use this definition whenever we speak to students

and faculty as we find that it helps us consistently promote information literacy on campus. We say that information literacy is *asking good and important questions about information and its use, regardless of source or format*. Using this definition as a starting point, we are trying to create a library environment that fosters engaging conversations and promotes activities that encourage critical thinking. To facilitate this we are planning open-ended lunch meetings with small groups of students where we encourage them to think critically about their information needs and practices. We hope that these meetings will not only help students to ask important questions about how they use information, but also help us as librarians to understand our students better and critically assess our services.

The librarians at Montana Tech have also worked to maintain an open door policy. We reiterate to students that our doors are always open no matter the need. The students take this message to heart and visit our offices for assistance. When a student does visit our office, no appointment is necessary, and we stop what we are working on and attend to their needs. Only under extraordinary circumstances do we turn the students away, helping them first before returning to our work. It could be an in-depth research question or a simple request to assist with a computer or printer issue. If a student comes to an office the librarian will assist them, even if these questions could be fielded by the librarian currently working at the information desk. This builds a supportive environment which helps the students succeed, and we have found that if we carefully tend to small needs, students will return for help with their larger needs.

At Montana Tech we are also working with some faculty to encourage conversation about information literacy beyond the traditional classroom. One way we are attempting to accomplish this is by having faculty bring their classes to the library. Faculty bring their students to the library for five minutes. They show their students a specific resource, typically reference material commonly used in class assignments, such as the ASTM Standards. During this time they introduce their students to the appropriate liaison librarian. The faculty then state that there will be assignments based around the library throughout the semester and that students must meet with the librarian to complete the assignment. The initial meeting is that concise. We found that this approach serves to both introduce students to the library and to instill in them that the librarian is there to help. The librarian works one-on-one or in small groups with students on the assignments. The librarian does not only teach how to use library materials, but instead engages students in a critical discussion about information use, evaluation and creation. In many cases, a relationship is formed between the students and the librarian, and the students return to the library for help on other assignments.

We are also attempting to build unique relationships with students that are supportive and empowering and that encourage information literacy in their very nature. For

example, through our open door policy one of our librarians created a working relationship with an engineering graduate student. The relationship began when the librarian found a conference proceeding for the student. After this initial meeting the student regularly returned to the librarian for assistance. These meetings resulted in a friendly relationship where the student would drop by to visit with the librarian. As the student's graduation date neared she asked the librarian if he could give a presentation on how to conduct a literature review to her student organization, which consists of over 200 students, and the librarian said he would be more than willing to do so. A week before the librarian was scheduled to speak, the student visited the librarian and shared an excellent presentation that she created on how to conduct a literature review. She then asked if she could give the presentation herself. The librarian immediately said yes, as he felt that the students would take the information to heart if it came from a fellow student and peer. This example demonstrates how the campus community at large can promote and participate in information literacy instruction, rather than a traditional library-centered approach.

What is working for Montana Tech may not be viable at every institution. However, we strive to build unique relationships with students and faculty and offer them an environment that is supportive and empowering. We are working to create spaces and opportunities that engage students and faculty in conversations about information literacy and critical thinking. We believe that fostering this environment is vital to graduating information literate students, who will apply these skills in the workplace and in society.

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