The Politics of Information Literacy in Higher Education:
Librarians, Institutional Stakeholders, and College Information Literacy Programs

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The concept of information literacy has long been discussed in the literature of librarianship and information science. Behrens (1994) offers a discussion of the concept’s growth through the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s; by 1991, information literacy was being discussed as a “revolution” in academic libraries and in higher education as a whole (Rader, 1991). More recently, writers such as Bundy (1999) have discussed the incorporation of information literacy into higher education as a component of national educational agendas. The establishment of information literacy standards for the year 2000 by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (ACRL, 2000) serves as a further indication of librarians’ view of information literacy as vital to higher education.

However, much remains to be discovered about effective ways of actually integrating information literacy into college and university curricula. In addition to debates about the best methods of teaching information literacy to students, academic librarians must address the practical and political issues involved in “revolutionizing” college curricula. In order for information literacy programs to be effective, they must be truly integrated into the core curricula of colleges and universities. Unfortunately for the cause of information literacy, these core curricula are controlled not by librarians, but by administrators, teaching faculty, and other powerful stakeholders in higher education. This paper outlines some of the political issues involved in instigating curriculum-wide information literacy programs, as well as surveying the options and avenues available to librarians who are struggling to establish information literacy initiatives in colleges and universities.

Definitional Issues:
A Political, Not Just Intellectual, Problem

The term “information literacy” is far from complete acceptance by either librarians or educators. Snavely and Cooper (1997b) offer an in-depth discussion of the professional-level intellectual debate over the term and its definition. The fine points of this debate are outside the scope of this paper; however, it must be noted that the term “information literacy” may be considered inordinately vague or off-putting by some people, including those in control of curriculum at colleges and universities. Snavely and Cooper (1997a) emphasize the necessity of clarity in expressing the concept of information literacy to faculty and university administrators; to non-information professionals the term is far from intuitive, and librarians seeking to establish
information literacy as a core curriculum component must be prepared to clearly articulate the nature and goals of such a program.

Given the above, it is tempting to develop lists of specific skills or student competencies to represent information literacy. However, Webber and Johnston (2000) cite problems with this “tick list” method of defining information literacy, such as the list of skills and competencies used by ACRL (ACRL, 2000). They note that this practice may encourage non-information professionals to believe that information literacy consists of isolated skills, each of which can be taught alone and once, within a short period of time. The “tick list” approach may also offend faculty members and administrators who dislike the inclusion of “skills” (as opposed to intellectual “content”) in college curricula. Given this climate, it is necessary for librarians to portray information literacy as a field of study in itself, requiring integrated teaching and application. How to do this while maintaining the clarity of the information literacy concept is a challenge that researchers have not yet adequately addressed.

Integrating Information Literacy Into the College Education: Case-by-Case or Across the Curriculum?

Information literacy programs described in the literature vary widely in terms of how, and how deeply, they are integrated into the overall structure of education at their institutions. “Information literacy” may be offered to students as a separate course, either required (e.g. Ruess, 1994) or elective (e.g. Greenwood and Frisbie, 1998). It may be integrated into one or more existing, required general education courses (e.g. Daragan and Stevens, 1996; Sonntag and Ohr, 1996). It may be administered in the manner of much traditional bibliographic instruction, via one or a few brief sessions arranged for by a faculty member on a voluntary basis (e.g. Furlong and Roberts, 1998; Leckie and Fullerton, 1999). Finally, it may be offered on a voluntary basis to individual students, as in Furlong and Crawford (1999) or the University of Michigan Undergraduate Library’s Research Consultation Program (University of Michigan, [2001]); this will be discussed in a later section of the paper.

There is little agreement as yet as to which of these approaches produces the best results in terms of student learning, at least partially because of the lack of large, ongoing programs to evaluate the various approaches, as well as the lack of consensus on how to measure gains in information literacy (Bruce, 2000; Webber & Johnston, 2000). However, even if consensus on this point were to be achieved, the realities of college administration and curriculum design
might prevent the ideal teaching situation from being achieved. As researchers in the field have noted (e.g. Snavely and Cooper, 1997; Iannuzzi, 1998), organizational cultures change very slowly, and college and university cultures may be even more entrenched and slow to change than most. Universities may be understandably unwilling to introduce an entire new required course into their core general education curriculum, particularly if this entails hiring more librarians or other professionals to teach the course; even if the expense is not considered, such curricular change can wreak havoc with the system of course requirement guidelines, graduation audits, and student advising. Integrating sufficient information literacy instruction to make a difference into existing general education or subject courses may be equally difficult, particularly when teaching faculty feel that they already lack the course time to adequately cover the subject content of their classes.

Despite these difficulties, writers seem to agree that the shallowest and apparently easiest manner of integrating information literacy into the curriculum--allowing professors to request brief librarian-instructed sessions for their courses, as with much traditional bibliographic instruction--is the least effective model. For one thing, it does not guarantee exposure for all students, being dependent on the decisions of individual professors. Also, a single brief session may not be sufficient to deliver the necessary information literacy skills a student needs to complete a single term paper assignment or course, let alone a general, overall knowledge base; students themselves tend to react to such a “lecture” session with boredom and to fail to retain knowledge (Leckie and Fullerton, 1999; Webber and Johnston, 2000). Webber and Johnston note that librarians’ willingness to be confined to brief “BI” sessions can lead to a vicious circle, in which librarians acquiesce to this inadequate opportunity to teach because it is the only opportunity they have, and teaching faculty assume that since the librarians accepted this alternative, they find it sufficient.

The upshot of all this is that librarians need to be active advocates for effective usage of their knowledge and skills to provide information literacy instruction to students. The following sections of this paper will discuss how librarians can work with university administrators and faculty to make the case for across-the-curriculum information literacy programs. Librarians must demonstrate the value of information literacy and of their own teaching abilities in order to escape the confinement of brief, insufficient instruction sessions that do not recognize the necessity of information literacy as a component of the college curriculum.
Working From the Top Down:
Powerful Stakeholders and the Politics of Information Literacy

Working with the Administration

On the surface of the matter, it may seem that both university administrators and faculty should support and encourage information literacy initiatives (Leckie and Fullerton, 1999). As Bundy (2000) notes in relation to the Australian national education system, governments and educational bureaucracies are beginning to recognize the ever-increasing need for technological skills and competence in seeking, evaluating and using information. Librarians’ associations and professional literature have also emphasized the increasing need for information literacy and the central role of librarians in promoting information literacy programs (Snavely & Cooper, 1997a). However, these authors also note the gap between rhetoric and reality among governments, educational institutions, and even librarians’ associations. Faced with decreases in funding and increasing numbers of competing educational interests (often all confusingly labeled “literacies,” e.g. technological, environmental, and cultural literacy), university administrations may be unable or unwilling to make large-scale efforts to incorporate information literacy into the curriculum.

Of course, librarians do not support information literacy programs for no reason; compelling arguments exist as to why these programs should be instituted in colleges and universities. Iannuzzi (1998) suggests utilizing existing campus initiatives and interests to the library’s advantage. She lists common “hot initiatives” on college campuses into which information literacy can be incorporated, including writing-across-the-curriculum programs, “technology in the classroom,” distance learning, and the movement toward interdisciplinary “learning communities.” She also suggests that an information literacy program can be an asset for institutions seeking accreditation, since many accrediting agencies now emphasize technology and preparation of students for the information age.

Snavely & Cooper (1997a) also offer compelling arguments for the inclusion of information literacy programs among the high priorities of college administrators. They cite “information overload” as a reality that makes information literacy a necessity. They also argue that information literacy programs conform to the overall mission statements of many educational institutions, citing aspects of education for lifelong learning and intellectual preparation for a changing future. Finally, they argue that information literacy enhances, rather
than competes with, competing “literacy” programs such as environmental literacy, cultural literacy, and writing competence, as well as students’ major programs of study. Information literacy, they suggest, is an all-embracing set of skills which can help all types of students in all their endeavors.

Despite all these compelling statements, convincing university administrators of the need for information literacy is often as much a matter of politics as of intellectual argument. Snavely and Cooper (1997a), Iannuzzi (1998), Bundy (1999), and Webber and Johnston (2000) are a few of the many authors who note the need for political maneuvering and advocacy in order to secure a place for information literacy programs; Chiste, Glover and Westwood (2000) even use an extended military metaphor to describe how they “captured territory” for information literacy at their college. Strategies suggested by the above authors include “starting at the top” by securing the support of high-level administrators; keeping informed about university-wide initiatives and getting acquainted with the key people involved with each initiative; and becoming actively involved in campus politics as outspoken advocates for libraries and information literacy. Chiste, Glover and Westwood offer particularly down-to-earth political advice, such as securing “required credit” status for information literacy courses in order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of students and faculty; and making a point of distinguishing information literacy courses from “remedial English” and any past failed initiatives that may seem superficially similar.

Working with Faculty

Where information literacy is incorporated into existing courses, rather than being treated as a separate area of study, effective cooperation with traditional college teaching faculty is particularly important (Iannuzzi, 1998; Leckie & Fullerton, 1999; Snavely & Cooper, 1997a). No matter how an information literacy program is structured, the current size and organization of library systems in relation to overall university bureaucracies prevent librarians from being able to “do it all” for a campus-wide information literacy program (Snavely & Cooper, 1997a). Therefore, cooperation between faculty and librarians becomes a vital component of any effective, institution-wide information literacy program.

Some literature has suggested that faculty (like the idealized university administrations discussed above) should naturally want their students to be more effective users of information and so should favor information literacy programs (discussed by Leckie and Fullerton, 1999). However, faculty may at times be resistant to information literacy programs, for a variety of
valid reasons. Snavely & Cooper (1997a) note that faculty often object to “writing-across-the-curriculum” initiatives because they were trained to teach their disciplines, not writing; the same may apply to information literacy. Where bibliographic instruction sessions are to be incorporated into individual courses, faculty may feel that they have too little time across the term to even cover the fundamental concepts in their disciplines, leaving no time to spare for library instruction (ibid.) Faculty may object to the idea of “skills” being incorporated into college education, viewing skills as remedial or vocational in nature, “not academic subjects and unworthy of university accreditation” (Chiste, Glover & Westwood, 2000; see also Snavely and Cooper, 1997). Finally, faculty may be distrustful of librarians and librarian-led initiatives for reasons unrelated to information literacy in itself, such as anger at budget-stretched libraries for discontinuing subscriptions to expensive scholarly journals (Chiste, Glover & Westwood, 2000).

As with university administrators, establishing cooperative links with faculty depends on the active efforts of librarians to market the concept of information literacy and dispel myths or fears subscribed to by faculty members. If faculty members are to participate in information literacy instruction, they must know that they will be sufficiently trained and that undue demands will not be made on their time (or, if such demands are inevitable, convinced that they are necessary and will lead to benefits such as more organized, easier-to-grade papers from students) (Chiste, Glover and Westwood, 2000). Faculty who fear they are giving up control of their classrooms to librarians may be reassured by team teaching or involvement in the planning of information literacy courses (Leckie and Fullerton, 1999; Snavely and Cooper, 1997a). Explanations of the financial situations of libraries may help dispel the myth, based on concerns with collection reduction, that librarians are the enemy. Finally, librarians, particularly those working without heavy support from the university administration, may have to pick and choose their “battles” (Chiste, Glover, and Westwood, 2000), working with professors who are interested and bypassing those who are resistant to participation. (This latter approach does not ensure that all students will receive instruction in the short term, but it can create momentum for a program, leading eventually to administrative support and university-wide implementation.)

While it is vital that librarians be a part of an information literacy program, wherever faculty have a role to play in the teaching process, the development of their skills must not be forgotten. As Amstutz and Whitson (1997) note, early research and publishing on information literacy programs tends to focus on political or “problem” aspects of librarians’ relationship with
faculty, ignoring the need to develop faculty skills. In order to teach information literacy, faculty
must to some degree be information literate themselves, and their own programs of college and
graduate study likely do not prepare them for this role (Bundy, 1999). Studies such as those by
faculty vary in the degree to which they either utilize library and/or online resources themselves,
or require their undergraduate students to utilize these resources. Researchers such as Snavely
and Cooper (1997a) suggest utilizing faculty outreach workshops to help familiarize faculty with
the skills they are to help teach.

Working from the Bottom Up:
Administering Information Literacy on a Student-by-Student Basis

Where no curriculum-wide information literacy program exists, it is still possible to give
students, rather than just professors, the choice of partaking of information literacy on a limited,
task-specific basis. The University of Michigan Undergraduate Library’s Research Consultation
Program (RCP) (University of Michigan, [2001]) is a program open to all students, in which a
student can schedule a one-on-one instructional appointment with a library-knowledgeable
person. The program is advertised as a help session for researching term papers and similar
projects, and the instruction session usually focuses on information-seeking tasks and resources
specific to the paper or project, with generalizable principles incorporated when possible.
Researchers and practitioners (e.g. Greenwood and Frisbie, 1998; Webber and Johnston, 2000)
have noted that students find this real world, hands-on approach to information literacy learning
effective and helpful. Similar programs have been implemented at other colleges and
universities (e.g. Furlong and Crawford, 1999).

Further advantages of such programs are that, so long as they are conducted on a small
scale, they require relatively little additional funding or boat-rocking on the faculty and
administrative levels. Small-scale programs like the RCP may be integrated into the regular
range of duties of reference librarians and library-knowledgeable student employees, reducing
the need for additional funding and staff. Disadvantages include the non-universality of the
program—all, or nearly all, students may be informed of the program through advertising in
widely used student media, but it is still the student’s choice whether to participate, and non-
participation choices may be driven by student ignorance as to the resources available to them
and the comparatively rudimentary level of their own information-seeking skills. And such
programs, by their nature, must be kept small and non-universal; small staffs and budgets could not possibly cover one-on-one instruction sessions for every student, or even for a significant percentage of the students at an institution like the University of Michigan. However, small-scale successes may be used as a springboard to demonstrate the effectiveness of information literacy instruction and gain faculty and administrative support for larger-scale programs. Program evaluation and record-keeping to demonstrate success is of course vital in this regard.

Conclusions

Changing the curriculum of colleges and universities is a political, not just an intellectual process. In order to promote information literacy programs, librarians must recognize this and become active advocates for their own professional skills and for the rights of students to be educated for navigation in the coming “information age.” Westwood (in Chiste, Westwood, and Glover, 2000) chronicles her own transformation from self-effacing librarian to effective advocate and peer of her university’s powerful stakeholders: “[The] milestone I had to reach was to come to an understanding that the people I would partner with are my peers in this educational endeavor. When I began [teaching information literacy] I did not really feel like a professional colleague or peer of the teaching faculty. The first step I took was to become involved in the same activities as the rest of the faculty....The final milestone was believing that librarians are the most qualified people to teach information literacy.”

Librarians therefore require a set of professional competencies which may not be specifically taught in library and information science programs. They must interact with people at all levels of the university hierarchy, whether high-level officials or freshmen students. They must gather data and utilize research and national policies to demonstrate the need for information literacy programs in higher education. They must engage in difficult and sometimes sensitive negotiations with teaching faculty and administrators. They must design effective programs, market those programs to stakeholders, evaluate their effectiveness, and publicize their successes. The advent of the information age has moved the concept of “teaching by librarians” beyond traditional bibliographic instruction, requiring librarians to participate in the politics of curriculum development in order to contribute their vital skills to the education of college and university students.
References


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