

# LIBRARY ISSUES

## BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

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### A New Strategy for Enhancing Library Use: Faculty-Led Information Literacy Instruction

by William Miller and Steven Bell

Information literacy is now widely understood and valued in academia, and even enshrined in the criteria of the regional accrediting bodies. While academic librarians continue to debate the best ways in which to plan and assess information literacy, they have never seriously questioned who the most appropriate people are to deliver it: the assumption is that librarians are the most appropriate purveyors of information literacy, and perhaps the only acceptable ones. This article questions that assumption. Who is best suited to teach students the necessary skills to become effective researchers and wise consumers of information?

We suggest a new approach to library instruction for students: let faculty do it. Let librarians concentrate less on teaching students directly, and more on helping primary instructors to do so, and developing tools and resources that faculty would use to integrate information literacy skill building into their courses.

Why are we making this radical recommendation? Simply because we doubt that librarians are the most appropriate instructors in this situation, and believe that librarians' skills would be better used in facilitating the work of traditional faculty members.

#### The Case of Mary

Consider the case of Mary, an instruction librarian at a mid-sized university. Mary is a seasoned library educator who has invested time in learning the important pedagogical skills needed to develop active learning experiences for undergraduates. She conducts numerous instruction sessions each semester, many of which are an hour or two in length, which occur both in classrooms and the library, and which cover a range of disciplines.

Like many other instruction librarians, however, Mary has nagging questions about the effectiveness of her instruction. She knows that students value the words and deeds of their primary instructor, the person who will be grading them, far more than they do her words. She wonders if the students are really paying attention as their faculty member retreats to the rear of the room to grade papers or catch up on reading while she takes the students through an exercise that she hopes will prepare them for their research assignment.

Although she spoke with the faculty member about that assignment, she really knows little about how it fits into the scope of the entire course, or what the faculty member will tell the students about research after she leaves. She questions what the faculty member will do if the students request follow up instruction about the library databases she covered. She realizes that this instructor, like many at the institution, really knows little about the library's resources. When faculty depend on a librarian to explain it all to the students it sends a message that the instructor considers the knowledge secondary to the course. To Mary it suggests that faculty are unintentionally signaling that they are above or properly outside the process of teaching library skills. Mary worries that there is a disconnect between herself, the faculty member, and students that lessens the effectiveness of information literacy efforts at her institution. She thinks there may be a better way.

#### Shifting Library Instruction to Faculty

We think that there is a better way: instead of attempting to do the instruction, librarians should be helping faculty do it. Instead of treating faculty members as invisible agents or catalysts who have no direct role in information literacy training, we

should be facilitating faculty efforts, using our knowledge to develop instructional materials, both in print and online, which make it easy for faculty to integrate such instruction into their teaching.

**The BI Movement.** How did it happen that librarians became the primary instructors for information literacy in the first place? Probably it happened because all library resources were print resources located in a physical building, and librarians were the custodians of these physical volumes. But it also began with a sincere desire on the part of librarians to help people and make better use of library collections. Beginning in the 1960s, a serious movement arose in librarianship—“bibliographic instruction”—to become more proactive in getting students to use library resources. Librarians started going out of their way in an organized effort to reach students. This involved asking faculty for permission to engage their students during class time, preferably in connection with a research assignment.

As this movement grew and took hold, it became very much a victim of its own success. There simply were not enough librarians to reach the bulk of students, and those who attempted to do so quickly became burned-out and frustrated. As Patricia Lyons Basu noted as far back as 1993, “We’re fighting a losing battle (there are more of ‘them’ than there are of ‘us’) if we continually try to schedule more and more sessions, workshops and classes for students” [Posting on BI-L, 29 June 1993].

**Workbook and Online Programs.** Attempts to cope with this overload, such as the massive workbook programs of the early 1980s, reached thousands of students, but only through make-work exercises of questionable value and of little long-term benefit to anyone, at great cost. There is every indication that information literacy instruction for students, as a one-size-fits-all, exclusive domain of librarians, is at best a hit-or-miss, haphazard proposition which is valued by few, still leaves many underserved, is far too labor-intensive, and overall is a paradigm of how to work dumber instead of smarter.

The electronic age allows us to escape from the tyranny of numbers, and change the paradigm of instruction, both for librarians and faculty. Librarians can now be the designers of instructional modules, delivered by faculty who can now engage in “stealth information literacy” efforts—they can teach information literacy not as a dose of castor oil but rather as a useful and integral part of their courses. In this way, librarians can reach many more students than ever before. Faculty can be empowered to impart research methods and introduce students to materials which will greatly enhance learning outcomes and improve the quality of student work. Students can minimize dependence on “junk Internet” resources and maximize the use of the quality materials which the library is already paying for, and which faculty really would prefer students to use.

**Integration.** We think it is time to integrate library instruction into courses so that it becomes transparent to students. The widespread use of course systems like Blackboard and WebCT greatly increases the ability of faculty to integrate learning objects into their courses. We need to move beyond the current model based on “now the librarian is here to teach you how to become information literate in the first hour of today’s class” to one in which faculty embed the building of research skills and knowledge of library resources into the course content in ways that allow students to gradually absorb it along with subject knowledge.

No librarian, no matter how gifted an instructor, can squeeze a round peg of information literacy into some square hole in the student’s mind, whether he or she has just one hour or even a semester long, credit-based library instruction course. If the instruction lacks centrality to course content, it’s likely to fail.

### **A Matrix Approach to Information Literacy Instruction**

As a prelude to librarian/faculty collaboration on information literacy instruction, the curriculum as a whole should be examined for a rational and efficient approach, rather than

a haphazard, repetitious, “generic” instruction, repeated in class after class, which leads to “IAKT (I already know that)” and turns students off. Working collaboratively, librarians and faculty can create an information literacy matrix that eliminates the need to target every course for information literacy. The matrix approach works when, in the early stages of the information literacy initiative, librarians, administrators, and faculty jointly determine for each school and at each curricular level which courses will be targeted for information literacy.

Then, specific objectives for each targeted course across the curriculum are identified. For example, the freshman marketing course focuses on using an introductory business database, while the freshman writing course focuses on evaluating information and properly formatting citations.

Addressing information literacy in a matrix fashion can eliminate the need to teach library research haphazardly, in as many classes as possible, and it provides a clear vision of how information literacy connects to accreditation standards. Finally, because the faculty takes responsibility for determining which courses complete the matrix and the specific objectives taught in each course, there is greater buy-in and that can set the stage for taking course-integrated, faculty-taught information literacy to the next level.

### **Electronic Empowerment**

The electronic age allows faculty and librarians to save time on task. Even without targeting specific courses, online tutorials created by librarians can be used by faculty for a variety of purposes to improve their course offerings. One good example is James Madison University’s “Go for the Gold,” “a set of Web-based instructional modules designed by the . . . reference staff to introduce students to the services and collections in Carrier Library and to teach students basic information-seeking skills.” The eight self-paced modules, at <http://www.lib.jmu.edu/librarians/go/gold/modules.htm>, walk students through the basics of information literacy and enable them to complete

their general education requirements more successfully.

The modules, designed for the General Education curriculum but usable much more broadly, link students to basic library information and resources, and also cover such topics as evaluating sources of information, information ethics (citing sources and fair use), and search strategy. Faculty teaching any course can assign any aspects of the modules they wish, as they feel the need. Students in the GenED sequence must work through the modules on their own, and take a test by April of their first year to demonstrate proficiency in the skills taught.

Faculty are encouraged to modify modules to fit a particular course, and faculty teaching courses in the GenED cluster are encouraged to "coordinate use of Go for the Gold to insure that all modules are covered without giving students duplicate assignments." Assignments within the modules range from creating an annotated bibliography to doing research using a variety of online tools in various fields. These modules are versatile yet require minimal grading or librarian/faculty intervention.

**Learning Objectives.** "Go for the Gold" is a good example of a learning object, any digital learning material easily adapted for re-use by other faculty. There are two major repositories of these learning objects, MERLOT and PRIMO. MERLOT (Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching) at <http://www.merlot.org> and PRIMO (Peer Reviewed Instructional Materials Online) at <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrlbucket/is/iscommittees/webpages/emergingtech/primo/index.htm> both contain many information literacy-specific tutorials, web-based pathfinders, and other tools that students can use to learn about research skills.

Many institutions are developing such objects. At Philadelphia University, for instance, the information literacy librarian has developed a number of learning objects, including tutorials and quizzes, that students explore in their online course system (i.e., Blackboard) before they get to

actual in-class information literacy instruction. These learning objects are particularly useful to adjunct instructors, many of whom have limited time on campus and little previous exposure to information literacy. The learning objects facilitate the adjuncts' ability to help students conduct research in freshman science courses. The objects also enable instructors to engage in a "classroom flip" model in which students become more responsible for their own learning outside of the classroom.

Pedagogically, we all know that instruction, when conducted by faculty members rather than by outsiders, has several real advantages: students perceive it as important to the instructor, and as part of the course, rather than an ill-fitting add-on which is extraneous to the central core of what they are doing. The instruction becomes part of what is valued and leads to improved research and learning outcomes. In addition, students become lifelong learners able to update the course content for themselves. So, how do we make this happen?

### **Ideas for Increasing Faculty Involvement**

We can think of a variety of proven techniques for encouraging faculty to take a more active role in information literacy instruction. Here are some examples:

- Faculty development programming led collaboratively by librarians and faculty development experts
- Stipends to faculty to encourage them to attend workshops and teaching retreats
- Embedding librarians into online courses
- Adding instruction designers and technologists to library staffs

How do faculty obtain the knowledge and skills needed to add information literacy to their disciplinary curriculum? Those institutions achieving success do so with outstanding faculty development programming. The standard for grant-funded workshops was set by Earlham College in the 1970s. Their innovative program brought together librarians and faculty to create library-related

instructional materials in all areas of the sciences. The groundbreaking work at Earlham has inspired similar programs that foster faculty-librarian team building.

The Faculty Learning Community for Information Literacy at Miami University (Ohio) presents a good model. It is a year-long commitment in which faculty and librarians and faculty development professionals attend Community meetings and retreats in an effort to learn about improving student research skills and integrating information literacy into their courses and assignments. According to Cynthia Mader, Assistant Head Science Librarian at the Brill Science Library, faculty participants may still ask librarians to participate in their courses as instructors, but more than a few are now incorporating components of information literacy education into their classes throughout the semester. Faculty participants receive a stipend towards hardware, software, conference travel, and online courses, among other things.

Because much learning takes place outside the class and inside online course sites, librarians understand the importance of achieving a presence in those course sites as well. Embedding librarians into online courses, where they can act as passive or active participants according to a faculty member's preferences, allows them to suggest both tools and approaches to students as assignments require research. For example, a librarian could monitor the course discussion board and react as needed when student threads demonstrate a need for research assistance. Using resources provided by librarians, faculty teaching online courses would accept primary responsibility for exposing students to library content and how to apply it for high quality research.

A few years ago it was rare to find an instructional designer or technologist on the staff of an academic research library. Because it is still rare to find academic librarians who also are skilled with instructional design and technology, academic libraries are now starting to hire instructional designers and technologists. While we advocate professional development for

librarians so they are more adept at using this skill set to help faculty adopt information literacy instruction, academic libraries should do whatever is most effective to help design and develop tools and resources that faculty can use to teach students to be information literate. If that means adding instructional technologists to their staffs, academic libraries should move in that direction.

### Gradual Implementation

Faculty involvement in information literacy should be a phased process. It would be unrealistic to expect the responsibility for information literacy education to shift overnight from librarians to faculty. In addition to putting into place the proper support structure, such as faculty development, incentives, and an array of learning objects, the transition should occur in planned phases. For example, an individual transition might see a faculty member observe a librarian colleague conducting an instruction session for their course. Then, the faculty member would team with the librarian to conduct the instruction. Next, the faculty member would conduct the instruction on his or her own. In the final stage, perhaps working with the librarian, the faculty member would integrate the instruction so that it is not necessarily just a single session but conducted during multiple sessions, where it best fits the content.

Here is our vision for a sample institution-wide implementation process:

- Bring together librarians, administrators, and faculty to create an information literacy matrix connected to the curriculum.

- Propose a campus information literacy initiative and matrix for the approval and support of the institution's curriculum committee through the formal governance structure.
- Create a faculty development infrastructure or take advantage of the existing one to provide instruction for faculty on the library's resources and opportunities to work with librarians on integrating information literacy into course content and assignments.
- Consider incentives and adjustments to tenure and promotion policies to encourage faculty to participate.
- Work with instructional technology specialists to develop digital learning objects that faculty can use to support the integration of information literacy into their courses.
- Develop a procedure for moving targeted information literacy courses from librarian-instructed to faculty-instructed, along with a timetable for completing the transition.

### Adapting To Change

Change is always a challenging process, and the thesis suggested here would be a challenge, if not a threat, to many, both among librarians and among traditional teaching faculty. The benefits for students, however, as well as for faculty, would be manifold. For students the benefit is enhanced learning, and a gradual cessation of what many perceive as repetitious instruction sessions. For librarians, it fosters the collaboration with faculty that is always so challenging to achieve. It would also allow the shift of resources from a seemingly endless series of rushed and often forgotten

instruction sessions to more significant work creating powerful learning tools for the benefit of faculty. For faculty, who currently bemoan the preponderance of low-quality student research, this is an opportunity to facilitate and encourage the high-quality research they always hope for from students. Faculty-led instruction better positions the institution to empower students as independent learners while allowing librarians and faculty to excel at what they do best. The goal for everyone should be to move to a learner-centered model in which information literacy is woven into the fabric of courses, rather than added on somewhat awkwardly after the fact.

Academic librarians will continue to play an essential role as the architects of information literacy initiatives, but we need to move from faculty dependency to librarian transparency. The idea is not to eliminate librarians from information literacy. They will always have a role in collaborating with faculty to help students acquire high quality research skills. Librarians would create the foundation that supports faculty, and enables them to integrate information literacy effectively into their own courses.

This is a radical change in thinking and execution, however, and it will take time to implement. The first steps are to create the appropriate campus structure to support it, and develop the trust and collaboration between faculty and librarians that will be needed to make this work. If we all keep our focus on the goal we share, to ensure that students achieve institutional learning outcomes, then there is a good chance this can work. Faculty-led instruction is a win-win for everyone.



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