

FANTASY SPORTS: THE ROAD TO INFORMATION LITERACY CHAMPIONSHIPS

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INTRODUCTION

Information literacy is relevant in every student's life. Academic success and its lifelong applications require information literacy skills. The trouble lies in finding ways to connect with students, showing them how these information literacy skills can transfer into the research skills that their courses require. Fortunately for academic librarians and students, fantasy sports are here to help. Fantasy sports players are unknowingly applying information literacy skills on a daily basis and librarians should seek to tap into this pre-established knowledge base when implementing information literacy programs. An August 2007 survey conducted by the Fantasy Sports Trade Association (FSTA) showed that 19.4 million Americans and Canadians are actively involved in fantasy sports, which includes 1.2 million American students – our library users. These numbers cannot be ignored; they represent a significant number of students who are already developing their information literacy expertise, providing the perfect groundwork for educational opportunities in libraries.

Since it is doubtful that very many, if any, fantasy sports players are contemplating their successful utilization of research skills, it is in the library's hands to be the bridge connecting fantasy sports skills to information literacy. The library at the University of Dubuque did just this by teaching fantasy football research to incoming student athletes. The assessment of these instruction sessions showed incoming students successfully identifying evaluation criteria and reporting positive changes in how they perceived research and libraries. This application is one of many fantasy sports lessons that can be a building block to future information literacy skills and success.

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WHAT ARE FANTASY SPORTS?

A fantasy sport is any game in which participants build teams composed of real life players and compete against one another using a scoring system based on the real life statistical performance of players. Fantasy sports fans play in leagues for every sport imaginable, from professional sports like football, baseball and basketball to smaller sports like bowling, skiing and sumo wrestling. Fantasy football is by far the most popular of the fantasy sports, with 91 percent of fantasy sports players participating in football (and possibly other fantasy sports in addition to football).¹ Due to the universal popularity of fantasy football, this paper focuses primarily on fantasy football, though all fantasy sports could offer similar applications for library instruction programs.

Fantasy football leagues typically consist of eight to fourteen participants who act as both the general manager/owner and head coach of their team. More likely than not, the participants in a fantasy league are friends, family or coworkers. Participants build their teams through a draft at the start of the season and can supplement their rosters using trades and free agency, just as in the actual NFL. Each week the individual NFL players on a team receive a point total based on their actual performance from that week's NFL game and the scoring system that was established in the fantasy football league. A fantasy football league using a traditional scoring system keeps track of statistics such as passing yards, interceptions, fumbles, touchdowns and field goals, among other statistics. At the end of each week's games, all of the point totals for individual NFL players on a fantasy footballer's team are summed. Fantasy football teams compete head-to-head each week against a different member of the league vying for the higher point total, which would result in a win for the week. At the end of the season, those teams with the best records and scoring output compete against each other in the fantasy playoffs, resulting in a fantasy football champion. Therefore the goal of fantasy football is to create a roster each week in pursuit of the greatest statistical production so that when you compete head-to-

head against another participant, your team will produce a win.

All of this requires players to practice strong research, critical thinking and communication skills in order to succeed. Participation in fantasy sports entails research on a large number of game and season statistics, as well as offensive and defensive position match-ups, injuries, rivalries and weather predictions. Some of this research even occurs months before any official season starts as players prepare for the league drafts that allocate players to fantasy teams. The research is continued throughout the season to determine starting line-ups, roster moves, trades between players and free agency acquisitions. The educational value of this process is striking. Beyond just acquiring and utilizing lifelong research skills through these steps, FSTA survey results show that fantasy football players have also increased their general sports knowledge. After playing fantasy sports, 43 percent of respondents agreed that they knew more about sports terminology, 40 percent knew more about professional sports and 77 percent knew more about professional sports players.

Based on this high quantity of research, it should not be surprising that during the peak of football season, fantasy football websites receive one billion page views a month, indicating that a staggering amount of football research is conducted.² Research goes well beyond just the web though; the FSTA 2007 survey indicates a high usage of a variety of sources including print materials and fantasy shows on television as well, as noted in Figure 1.

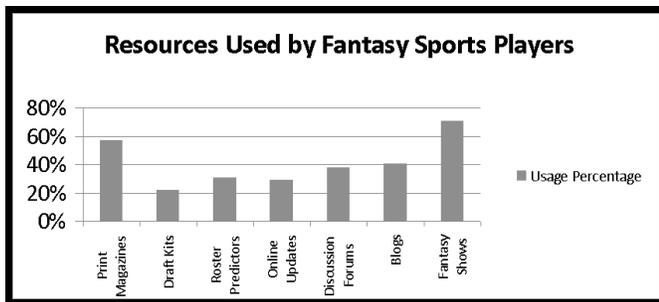


Figure 1: Usage of various resources is noted from an FSTA survey in August 2007.

A study by Fantasy Sports Association determined that fantasy sports players devote an average of just over five hours every week to fantasy sports³ and yet very little is written about these research skills or how they can be used for educational purposes. A search through the professional literature finds no relevant literature; even a Google search turns up nothing more than a few librarians talking about their personal passions for fantasy sports. This connection has rarely been explored until now.

Fantasy sports can be the building blocks of many students' successful use and integration of information literacy in their lives. Fantasy sports players are in fact overwhelmingly lifelong learners with a startling 40 percent of fantasy footballers who have played fantasy sports for over ten years.⁴

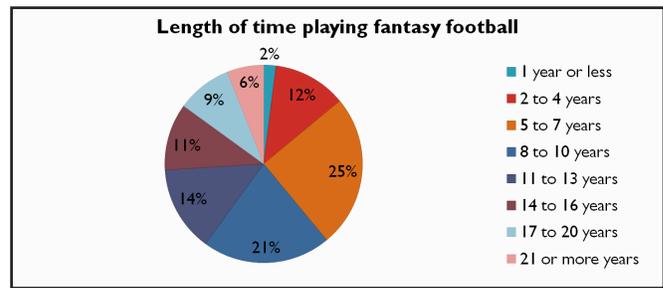


Figure 2: An FSTA 2007 survey shows that fantasy football players have been involved in fantasy sports for often longer than a decade. The majority of fantasy footballers though have been playing for between 5 and 10 years.

When asked if they would play fantasy sports again next year, 96 percent of survey participants said yes. And when asked if they would still be playing in ten years, 86 percent answered yes. Fantasy sports are not going away and librarians would be remiss not to take advantage of this opportunity to translate fantasy research skills into academic research skills.

FANTASY FOOTBALL = INFORMATION LITERACY?

The high level of player investment both in terms of research time and overall participation creates educational opportunities for librarians. Librarians can build upon the information literacy skills that students are already unconsciously using through fantasy sports. The weekly process of researching and setting lineups mirrors the library research process as described by Kuhlthau.⁵

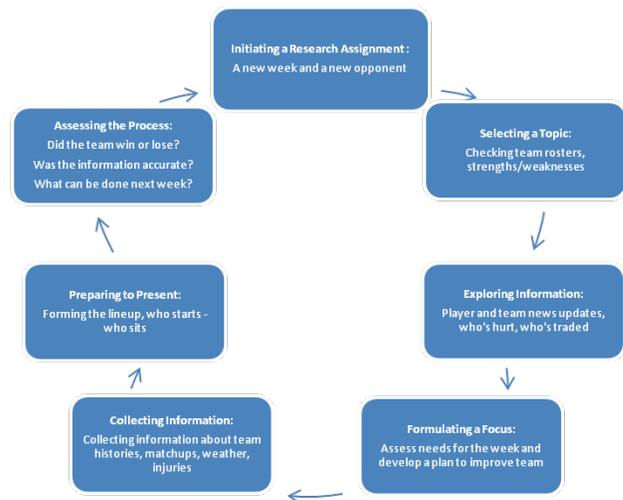


Figure 3: A week of fantasy football research based on the Carol Kuhlthau process.

As shown in Figure 3, students playing fantasy football are applying the Kuhlthau process on an ongoing basis and therefore applying information literacy skills throughout their research process.

The successful fantasy sport player consistently applies four of the five ACRL Information Literacy Competency

Standards.⁶ Weekly, and often daily, fantasy sports players meet the ACRL Indicators through a variety of research and evaluation activities. These activities include identifying a variety of information formats, evaluating and refining search results, applying criteria to determine the bias and credibility and creating new knowledge.⁷ Librarians have the ability to connect these existing skills to academic content in order to help students become successful information literate students. This connection of skills can occur through traditional library instruction, new student orientation, library fantasy football leagues, campus partnerships and many other new and creative ways. Regardless of the application, every campus has the opportunity to build upon these untapped information literacy skills.

Today's assessment-based culture in libraries means librarians are increasingly interested in methods of examining effectiveness within their organizations. Due to the ease with which fantasy football skills fit into the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards, assessing the success of a fantasy sports-oriented instruction session would be quite simple. The skills taught in fantasy football are still traditional information literacy skills. Fantasy football changes the context but not the content of what librarians have taught for years. Therefore, because fantasy football skills are rooted in standardized skills, assessment can be done using existing instruments or applying other pre-established information literacy assessments.

FANTASY FOOTBALL RESEARCH UNIT

Librarians at the University of Dubuque saw this untapped potential as a way to reach incoming students. During 2006 and 2007, the traditional library orientation (introducing space, resources, and policies) was dropped in an effort to take advantage of the opportunity to connect these students to information literacy using what they already knew: football. The initial pilot was developed by Paul Waelchli, assistant director, and Ryan Banchak, a senior business student. The lesson was constructed to use this search and evaluation process to mirror the research process for academic material. Information literacy skills were built into the lesson and the parallels were intended to show the student athletes that they possess many of the necessary information literacy skills to succeed in college. The research question was developed to reflect a timely controversy in fantasy football that would create a variety of viewpoints and require the student athletes to use information literacy to decide on the controversy, "Who should be the third running back selected in fantasy football drafts?" The question was general in order to provide a low barrier for any student who had not played fantasy sports before, "Who will be the third best running back this season?" The lesson identified and mapped specific information literacy outcomes to the fantasy football research, as seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4: ACRL information literacy outcomes for fantasy football class.

ACRL IL Outcome	Skill demonstrated in Outcome	Classroom activity demonstrating Outcome
1.1.a	Confers with instructors and participates in class discussions to identify an information need	The class uses discussion to decide the criteria to use in evaluation and uses peer discussion to decide upon a final player selection.
1.2.c	Identifies the value and differences of potential resources in a variety of formats	The librarian leads a discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of various formats (print magazines, websites, podcasts, radio shows) containing fantasy football information.
1.2.d	Identifies the purpose and audience of the potential resources	The question of the audience and purpose of fan websites, discussion boards, and professional sites is discussed.
1.2.f	Realizes that information may need to be constructed with raw data from primary sources	The students use previous season statistics to help predict and draw conclusions about the research question.
2.2.a	Develops a research plan appropriate to the investigative method	The class plans where to look and how to record the information.
2.2.b	Identifies keywords, synonyms and related terms for the information needed	The class lists out search terms before searching, as a pre-searching activity and discussion.
2.4.a	Assesses the quantity, quality, and relevance of the search results	Students report out the results of their search and together the class evaluates the results.
2.5.d	Records all pertinent citation information for future reference	Students write down, copy & paste, or bookmark the sites to record source, date published, and author.
3.2.a	Examines and compares information from various sources in order to evaluate reliability, validity, accuracy, authority, timeliness, and point of view or bias	The class defines criteria on the board with both students and librarian contributing and then uses class discussion of criteria on each source to make decisions about the quality.
3.2.c	Recognizes prejudice, deception, or manipulation	During the reporting out process, the librarian helps the class identify potential prejudice from each site.
3.4.a	Determines whether information satisfies the research or other information need	After reporting process, students determine if they want more information and if time allows use the second search activity if results do not satisfy the need.
3.4.c	Draws conclusion based upon information gathered	The class votes on the draft pick, based on their findings.
3.4.f	Integrates new information with previous information or knowledge	If the results are different in final vote compared to initial vote, the class will discuss reasons for the change.
3.6.a	Participates in classroom and other discussions	The class engages in multiple discussions through questions and the research reporting process.
5.1.b	Identifies and discusses issues related to free vs. fee-based access to information	If students find information behind a wall requiring a fee, a discussion of fee vs. free information is briefly discussed to show library relevance.

The University of Dubuque librarians conducted two football orientation sessions in August 2007 with a total of 71 students. The librarians who taught the sessions had varying degrees of experience with fantasy football. One librarian had no previous experience and emphasized that the program's success was more about research than about football.

The research activity resulted in a wide variety of potential sources and created multiple opportunities to touch on information literacy topics. The student athletes discussed the sources and argued over their conclusions. These discussions could have taken place in any traditional information literacy class and were the true intent of the session itself. The students seemed surprised at the similarities to academic concepts.

At the end of the sessions, the students completed a short evaluation that assessed both criteria for evaluating sources and library perceptions. More than 80 percent of students were able to describe two of three appropriate source evaluation criteria and more than 60 percent provided all three. The students were asked to describe what research meant to them before the session and responses included, "headaches," "work I didn't want to do," and "school work." The responses to the same question after the sessions showed a dramatic change in perspective and included, "making sure one is getting accurate information," "comparing and knowing where I'm getting my information," and "fun work." While the "fun work" might be a stretch when homework is involved, it does show a change in perspective and awareness about research. One student first said that before the session, research meant "school," but afterwards he responded, "everything."

In addition to the change in perception of research, the student athletes were asked how they perceived librarians. Prior to the fantasy football orientation session, the students had a 66 percent "very positive" impression of librarians. After the session, the students' "very positive" perception was more than 90 percent. While these results are not scientific and large enough to generalize, they show a distinct change in this group of students' impressions of libraries and their own abilities.

The fantasy football sessions created the building blocks for future information literacy successes by bridging the students' existing interests to the skills required for college. The positive impressions the students reported show an openness to future research, a confidence in their own abilities and the development of a positive relationship with librarians. Any one of these outcomes would be considered a success for a traditional orientation; combined they demonstrate the potential to create a meaningful connection between fantasy sports and information literacy to enable student success.

Additional college and public libraries in Missouri and Ohio are beginning to apply this successful model to connection fantasy football to their patrons. Fantasy football creates new

outreach possibilities for a variety of libraries and allows librarians to connect daily activities that users passionately engage in to information literacy skills.

ROADBLOCKS TO BUILDING SUCCESS

While the success of the University of Dubuque and the interest from other libraries is encouraging, there are potential challenges. It is important to note that while the NCAA does not prohibit fantasy sports as a whole, they do state in section 10.02.1 - Sports Wagering (2007) that collegiate athletes are not allowed to participate in fantasy sports where an entry fee is required or prizes are distributed.⁸ However, this is easily solved, as there are many fantasy sports leagues that do not require fees or offer prizes and those are not prohibited.

Another challenge is that when the students in the University of Dubuque's orientation sessions were surveyed, only a small percentage had previously played fantasy football. As a result of this limited experience, the students were initially skeptical. This potential roadblock was removed by starting out with a discussion of the football video game *Madden 08* by EA. The class was drawn into active participation, sharing their personal reflections of the video game. Even with limited fantasy football experience, the students valued their general football knowledge, which allowed for more detailed fantasy football research and evaluation.

FANTASY FOOTBALL TOOLKIT

While there are challenges in any outreach, the chance to meaningfully connect information literacy to patrons and help build the skills necessary for academic success make fantasy football research an invaluable tool.

In order to help other libraries develop a fantasy football program that suits their needs, the authors are in the process of developing a Fantasy Football Toolkit with the support of ALA's Public Information Office. The toolkit will provide valuable resources whether a library is interested in creating their own fantasy football research lesson plan, or if they would like to create a community fantasy football league run by the library. Resources for the toolkit will include: Fantasy Football 101, League Setup Process, Suggested Resources, Promotional Materials and Suggested Lessons.

Through the initial success from schools like The University of Dubuque and strong ties to information literacy, fantasy football has a place in continuing education and information literacy programs at any type of library. The Fantasy Football Toolkit is a resource that will allow librarians, regardless of their football experience, to use the lessons and success discussed throughout this paper. The skills embedded in fantasy football are at the core of information literacy skills and now is the time for librarians to reach out to patrons and build those connections between real world practice and information literacy success.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Fantasy Sports Trade Association. (2007). Retrieved on April 22, 2008, from www.fsta.org/index.php.
- 2 Fantasy Sports Trade Association. (2007). Retrieved on April 22, 2008, from www.fsta.org/index.php.
- 3 Fantasy Sports Association Resources. (2007). Retrieved on April 22, 2008, from www.fantasysportsassociation.org/resources.
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- 5 Kuhlthau, C. (1993). *Seeking Meaning: A Process Approach to Library and Information Services*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Co.
- 6 ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. (2000). Retrieved on April 22, 2008, from <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.cfm#stan>.
- 7 Waelchli, P. (2008). Librarians' sport of choice: Teaching information literacy through fantasy football. *C&RL News*, 69(1). Retrieved April 22, 2008, from <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlpubs/crlnews/backissues2008/january08/librariansport.cfm>.
- 8 NCAA Division I Manual. Retrieved on April 22, 2008, from http://www.ncaa.org/library/membership/division_i_manual/2007-08/2007-08_d1_manual.pdf.