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Implementing Information Literacy in Higher Education: A Perspective on the Roles of Librarians and Disciplinary Faculty

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Communities and organizations spend money on library materials and services as a cost effective way to help community members gain access to the works and ideas of others so as to answer questions, solve problems, learn new things, and explore entertainment opportunities. Since the library is the agency that manages access to the social transcript paid for by the community, it is a widely shared belief that the library, particularly those funded by educational institutions, should be the lead agency in articulating, promoting, and developing the community's information literacy.

What is information literacy? In *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) (2006) quotes the Final Report of the American Library Association's Presidential Committee on Information Literacy: "Information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to 'recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.'" The ACRL framework lays out five standards linked to twenty-two performance indicators. Colleges and universities can use these elements to shape and assess their information literacy programs. The standards are:

- Standard One: The information literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed.
- Standard Two: The information literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently.
- Standard Three: The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system.
- Standard Four: The information literate student, individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose.
- Standard Five: The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally.

In higher education, the development of most of these attributes has traditionally been integral to learning every academic discipline, and is nurtured by the methods faculty use to convey the conceptual frameworks, language, content, and research perspectives of their disciplines. The assignments and activities in the curricula of disciplinary faculty define for students: 1) the nature and extent of information needed to comprehend the discipline (as well as get a good grade) [Standard One]; 2) how to critically evaluate information and its sources within the conceptual framework of the discipline [Standard Three]; 3) how to use disciplinary information to communicate knowledge and understanding to others [Standard Four]; 4) the importance of

building upon, and respecting, the work of others [Standard Five]. ACRL's information literacy attributes are most potently communicated and developed in the context of learning content in the instructional arena created by disciplinary faculty.

Of the five ACRL information literacy standards, academic librarians would seem to have the most credibility contributing to the realization of Standard Two, which is helping students to effectively and efficiently discover and access relevant information. As a university public services librarian the author conveys strategies and methods learners can apply to search for materials that respond to their queries. Learner outcomes include knowledge and experience of: 1) where to search; 2) how to search; and 3) how to locate material found in the course of a search.

When considering "where to search," the author has found that most students and faculty appreciate librarian expertise in clarifying the cartography of the information landscape, i.e., conveying the pathways they might explore to uncover relevant materials. When considering "how to locate material found in the course of a search", the author has observed that many students and faculty are overwhelmed and confused by the abundance of search interfaces and vendor sites and the complexity of the procedural knowledge they must apply to interpret the information retrieved by their searches. Academic librarians are working to make more transparent both the delivery of locally held materials and the facility to request the delivery of materials that are not available locally. These practical issues present problems for users. The most interesting learner outcome is conveying "how to search." The current discovery tools/search engines often require conceptual and linguistic adroitness on the part of searchers to translate their expressed needs or interests into terms that will prompt search tools to display an array of potentially relevant material. For example, a user searching for, and using the words "cell phones and car accidents," might find five articles. Upon closer examination, it turns out that the database is constructed using a thesaurus that offers alternative language to describe the same subject. Using the search terms "wireless telephones and traffic accidents" in the same database would reveal over seventy relevant articles. Further, prior knowledge or understanding of a subject, as well as a degree of imagination, is sometimes required for learners to recognize that items found during a search are actually relevant to their question. The crux of searching for and finding relevant material in the academic context is the subject knowledge of learners and their ability to use language to express that knowledge. College and university disciplinary faculty are the primary agents for defining and transmitting knowledge via the student experiences and activities faculty design and the student motivation faculty stimulate via the grades they award.

The author agrees with Fister, Hutchens, and MacPherson's observations (2001):

The main goal is to hand over ownership of information literacy to the faculty because for the most part its success is in their hands. The librarians will help—as they have for decades—but the faculty are the ones who will work most closely with students on the whole process of learning to ask good questions, learning to assess arguments, and learning how to turn what they've found into new knowledge (p. 208).

Of course faculty might not view their instructional territory as explicitly including the dimensions of information literacy delineated by ACRL. Perhaps this is the real challenge of the ACRL's information literacy standards. Most of the standards counsel the improvement and development of what might be considered *generic skills* (Bennett, Dunne, & Carre, 1999) – reading, writing/speaking (communicating), and critical thinking. It would certainly be a “social good” if colleges and universities could strengthen their students’ generic skills. How are these skills nurtured over the course of a student’s higher education? Traditionally, these skills have been cultivated by disciplinary faculty when they assist their students in completing the assignments and projects they have created for them. Students not only acquire disciplinary content, but along with it, using the feedback and guidance provided by faculty, the students improve their ability to read, critically think about, and communicate their knowledge of the subject material. The creation of the ACRL information literacy framework indicates that ACRL perceives that: 1) students can use additional help in mastering the array of generic skills—reading, critical thinking, and communicating—traditionally developed via disciplinary coursework and exercises; and 2) librarians possess the training and knowledge to develop these generic student skills. Apparently, colleges and universities also see a need to supplement the generic skills instruction of disciplinary faculty, since many colleges choose to fund, and operate *outside the graded curriculum*, learning support centers/academic success centers/writing centers that offer students generic skills workshops and individual counseling.

Where do librarians fit in? First and foremost, libraries in higher education manage the acquisition of and/or access to the records of the creations, observations, and explorations of members of the larger human family. Like other academic support centers, libraries provide student educational services that arise from their organizational functions and the professional preparation and certification of their employees. The schooling of librarians makes us conscious of and attuned to the details of the recursive process of searching for and connecting with the ideas and works of others. Librarians are well positioned to deliver assistance and instruction that develops the students’ ability to “access needed information effectively and efficiently” (ACRL Information Literacy Standard Two).

When it comes to fostering the development of the other ACRL information literacy skills, the role of librarians might be reconsidered.

- How appropriate or realistic is it to expect librarians to “help students determine the nature and extent of information needed” (ACRL Information Literacy Standard One)? Since “information need” arises from the content and the context framed by disciplinary faculty, it is those faculty who can best help their students articulate information need.
- Student ability to critically evaluate information (ACRL Information Literacy Standard Three) is dependent upon students’ knowledge of the facts, theories, and analytical structures of the disciplines they are studying. Critical thinking requires content to consider, and it is disciplinary faculty who deliver it. Actually, when the author encounters librarian colleagues who profess their role developing critical thinking, it mostly comes down to reminding students to be skeptical of the veracity of the sources they use to document their work. And the framework for implementing this critical thinking is an attribute checklist, such as the CRAAP (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, Purpose) Test (Meriam Library, California State University Chico, 2007).

Marc Meola (2004) observed that “When a piece of information is in dispute, our society calls on subject experts for judgments, not librarians...When push comes to shove and information needs to be evaluated, it is subject expertise and not librarian expertise that is valued” (p. 336).

- Why are librarians the appropriate instructional agents for ACRL Information Literacy Standard Four, which stipulates that the information literate student uses information to “accomplish a specific purpose.” Traditionally, disciplinary faculty have guided students in executing projects through which students demonstrate their understanding and mastery of subject content. It is the author’s opinion that the training of librarians does not prepare them to provide support to students in communicating their understanding of the subjects that they are studying.
- ACRL Information Literacy Standard Five has librarians raising their voices for the ethical and legal use of information, bringing to mind the stereotypical didactic, rules-enforcing, librarians of old. While it is certainly fitting for librarians to address these issues, these themes are more successfully imparted when presented by disciplinary faculty as organically growing from the process of how knowledge is built on the work of those who have come before us. Acknowledging prior work honors those who preceded us and helps those who follow us to better understand the path they are on.

As college educated adults, often with two graduate degrees, academic librarians certainly *can* provide some reading, critical thinking, and communication guidance to students. However, most librarians did not enter their chosen profession to do so, nor did their graduate education prepare them to do so.

The ACRL information literacy agenda of robust generic skills will be commonplace across the academy when individual disciplinary faculty and academic departments endorse the ACRL’s holistic educational goals, and when accrediting agencies and academic administrators require these standards as measureable outcomes. However, at this time the professional mandates and academic credentials of librarians do not prepare us to lead the developmental parade for the majority of skills enumerated in the ACRL’s information literacy standards. What theoretical or educational background gives librarians credibility preaching to disciplinary faculty about the learning outcomes and skills faculty courses should engender?

Librarians, along with other academic support staff, both inside the classroom (collaborating with faculty) and outside the classroom, can and do contribute their own expertise and passion to facilitate the transformation of student attitudes and skills. A local newspaper article on cookery concludes “Keep your expectations in line with your ingredients and you’ll be happy.” Most of the ingredients in the ACRL’s information literacy stew fall under the instructional control of disciplinary faculty. With the ingredients available to librarians, what expectations can keep them happy? Steven Bell (2008, May 4) proposed that librarians think about and compose a signature statement that encapsulates what defines their activities as librarians. Why? To serve as “a source of inspiration and to keep you focused on why you make a difference.” The author’s signature statement follows:

By helping folks discover and connect with the ideas and works of others I hope to enable them to illuminate the interests and issues in their lives.

To clarify, as a university public services librarian, the author's role is not to help seekers apply the resources they find to the questions they have asked or the issues they confront. As a librarian, the author strives to try to bring together the seeker with the recorded ideas and works of others whose creations might be applied by the seeker to the panorama of issues with which they are dealing. The application and use of the recorded knowledge that librarians manage, search, and uncover is the domain of the information seeker, perhaps with the assistance of the disciplinary expert, e.g., the psychologist, the accountant, the historian, the economist, the musician, the physician, the attorney, the plumber.

Library users experience fulfillment when they successfully acquire what they are seeking. Librarians contribute to this experience by facilitating the connection of users with the ideas and resources they desire. Library users also derive satisfaction from their experiences during the resource discovery and acquisition process. How can academic public service librarians create appealing and distinctive user experiences? In the college setting, librarians typically do not teach credit-bearing classes. **This is an asset!** The author takes great delight in being able to enter into an instructional and supportive relationship with students without wielding the emotional stick of applying grade rankings. Librarians bring to the academic stage a *process* of discovery and an *attitude* of exploration. These compliment the substantive content and topical fervor that disciplinary faculty convey. Librarians deliver compelling user experiences by:

1. Paying attention to the learner and their questions, the mysteries and problems users desire to engage and solve. As nonjudgmental “strangers” joining and embracing the quests of searchers, librarians offer users a positive and *socially unique* relationship;
2. Modeling and sharing, with patience and clarity, the methods and techniques they apply to discover resources, thus empowering our users to employ (or at least be aware of) these elements when thinking about and executing future searches. As empathic coaches, librarians get to partake of the wonders and surprises our users encounter in pursuit of their queries. And our users have the opportunity to share their pleasure with a caring person.

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