

# INTEGRATING THE CREDIT-BEARING INFORMATION LITERACY COURSE INTO THE CURRICULUM: GOALS, BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

DOMINIQUE DANIEL AND ELIZABETH W. KRAEMER

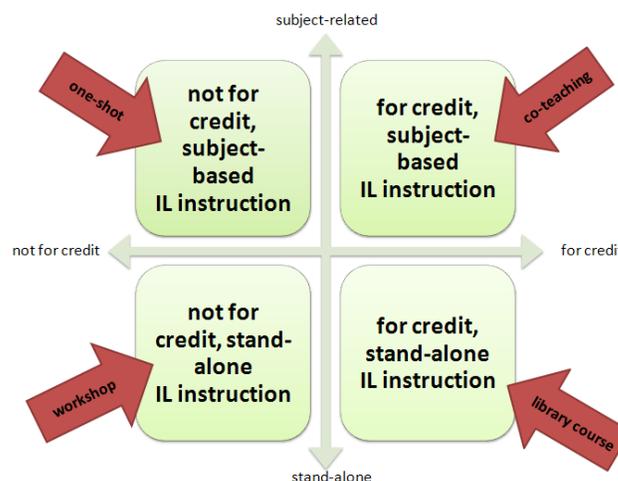
## INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries have offered credit courses since the late 1800s and have long been divided over their merit and feasibility. As new interest in library instruction developed in the 1960s, librarians examined the stand-alone, credit-bearing course in comparison to other forms of instruction. At the first Library Orientation Conference organized by Eastern Michigan University in 1971, James Kennedy argued strongly against it and in favor of course-related instruction; yet a few years later Jacquelyn Morris wrote “a philosophical defense of a credit course” (Holder, 2010; Kennedy, 1971; Morris, 1980). Library instruction, both course-related and stand-alone, was clearly on the rise in the 1970s. In a survey conducted by LOEX in 1973 and again in 1979 the percentage of libraries offering credit courses increased from 22% to 42% (Kirkendall, 1980, p. 31). In 1987, however, it was down to 29%. Starting in the 1980s the credit-course declined in popularity even as course-integrated instruction continued to rise (Mensching, 1989). The percentage probably remains low today.<sup>1</sup> Among the problems cited for this decline are low enrollment, understaffing, and failure to reach students at the point of need (Kirkendall, 1980, p. 37; Mensching, 1989, p. 9).

At Oakland University’s Kresge Library we have developed strategies to address these challenges when implementing our credit-bearing online library courses. Since 2008 we have offered a fully online, credit-bearing course to

our undergraduate students. The course went from two to four credits in the fall of 2009, and in 2010 was approved as both a “knowledge application” and writing intensive course in the university’s General Education program.

Library instruction at Oakland University takes several forms, all related to two distinct issues: for-credit and not-for-credit, stand-alone or course-related. Those options can be represented as follows:



Each scenario has benefits and challenges. At Oakland, as in many similar institutions, one-shot instruction is the most common form of delivery, followed by the credit course. We chose to develop a stand-alone credit course in order to address directly the growing complexity of the research environment. By offering a full course, the librarians would be able to emphasize critical thinking skills that are applicable across disciplines, rather than just focus on skills for course-specific

---

*Daniel* (Information Literacy and Reference Librarian) and  
*Kraemer* (Coordinator of Information Literacy)  
Oakland University [Rochester, MI]

assignments that may not be transferable.

This paper will examine two key strategies we used to ensure the success of the credit course: contextualization and university curriculum integration. We believe these strategies effectively address some of the most serious challenges librarians have faced in the past when implementing stand-alone credit courses.

## DESIGNING LIB250

Kresge Library's first credit-bearing course, LIB200, was two credits rather than four. We felt at the time that a smaller credit load would make the course more broadly appealing to students, and might also be more convenient for students to fit into their plans of study. However, once we applied for General Education consideration we learned that the credit load would have to increase in order for the class to be eligible for the "knowledge application" category of General Education. Because four-credit courses are standard fare at Oakland, we opted to align our credit load with the norm, thus the expansion of LIB200 to the four-credit LIB250 course.

LIB250 targets beginner to intermediate students. While the library reaches the great majority of freshmen through instruction integrated into the required composition course (WRT160), transfer students often get no exposure to library instruction. LIB250 is an attempt to reach the population of transfer students, while offering students who already took WRT160 an opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge they acquired in the brief library portion of that course. The main objectives of LIB250 are to make students aware of the need to approach information critically, to familiarize them with information resources and methods, and to help them evaluate and use resources appropriately in the academic setting. The LIB250 learning outcomes (see Appendix A) are roughly based on the ACRL standards but are adjusted to fit the course strategy of contextualizing information literacy, as we will show below.<sup>2</sup>

Stand-alone, credit-bearing information literacy instruction is often criticized for its lack of content and lack of integration; for example, Grafstein noted in a 2002 article, "The risk is that of isolating entirely information-seeking skills from knowledge, thereby losing sight of information-seeking skills as a tool whose ultimate goal is the synthesis of information into knowledge" (2002, p. 200). Similarly, in response to Owusu-Ansah's plea for an information literacy curriculum, Zabel asserts that the "...linkage between information literacy instruction and coursework is the basis of any meaningful instruction by librarians. Information literacy cannot survive in a vacuum" (2004, p.19). The "vacuum" argument encompasses the conceptual problem of disciplinary content as well as the practical issue of the free-floating IL course, unattached to any major or curriculum requirement. Kresge Library adopted two strategies to address these problems.

### Strategy One: Contextualization

The first strategy is to contextualize the practice of research tools and processes by introducing students to the

economic, political and social context in which information is produced, managed and used. The learning outcomes for LIB250 incorporate such an objective. This contextualization enables students to move beyond the mechanics of searching and to critically assess the information tools and products they use. It encourages the development of critical information literacy skills that students can transfer to other courses and beyond.

A central argument supporting credit-bearing information literacy courses is the issue of instructional time—both quality and quantity—that is afforded to librarians in a one-shot session. When collaborating with classroom faculty, librarians are often limited not only by time, but also by the parameters of a specific assignment. This generally allows only for an overview of specific tools and a description of library resources. Under these constraining conditions, note Webber and Johnston, a student "may gain a few tactics which enable him or her to negotiate some specific information sources," but this is a far cry from becoming information literate (2000, p. 385). Taking this approach only feeds the impression that it is normal for students to "just muddle through their research and perform with minimal skill" (Badke, 2010, p. 132).<sup>3</sup>

Student motivation is also a key issue. Students in a one-shot session are often only motivated to learn about library resources because of an impending course deadline; however, this approach, which relies on external motivation, offers no guarantee that students will truly understand or care about finding the *best* resources, as long as they find *some* resources. Furthermore it is not clear that students will know how to apply the skills they learned to other contexts. Transferring this tool-based approach to the semester-long framework of a credit course is not desirable or even possible. Devoting a full semester to the mechanics of searching or the discovery of specific resources would most likely turn students off. Instead, the span of the four-credit course provides the opportunity to offer content that will increase students' intrinsic motivation.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Owusu-Ansah declares, "Credit offerings command the attention of students, faculty, and administrators and serve as the key indicator of what an institution considers essential in the education of its students" (2007, p. 417).

We agree with the critics of the credit course that information literacy cannot successfully be taught in a vacuum. This is why LIB250 seeks to lead students to a better understanding of "the world of information" broadly defined. This strategy is encouraged by the proponents of critical information literacy instruction. Elmborg notes that there are two definitions of information literacy: instrumental and educational; while the former considers information literacy as a set of technical skills, the latter sees it as "a culturally situated phenomenon based in the way communities construct meaning and belonging" (2006, p. 193). Elmborg stresses that information literacy skills should not be reduced to universal standards deprived of a social and cultural context, and that information literacy is embedded in fast-changing cultural situations (2006, p. 195). Consequently, "[i]nformation literacy... is more than a set of acquired skills. It involves the comprehension of an entire system of thought

and the ways that information flows in that system. Ultimately, it also involves the capacity to critically evaluate the system itself” (Elmborg 2006, p.196).

In practice, this means that students need to learn the way information functions in various contexts—such as higher education, the workplace, or the family. But, as Elmborg puts it, “learning them need not involve an unquestioning acceptance of the accompanying world view” (2006, p. 198). In fact, students should also be encouraged to develop a critical perspective on what they learn.

Supporters of critical library instruction offer new approaches to traditional topics of library instruction (Elmborg, 2006; Franks, 2010). Teaching critical information literacy moves away from the prescriptive approach (teaching the “right way” to do things) toward an exploratory approach designed to stimulate critical thinking. This approach informs all modules of LIB250 (see Appendix B). As an example, in the module on the World Wide Web, the following points are covered: the Internet, the deep Web, how Google works, results manipulation (SEO and content farms), results personalization in Google, techniques to improve searches, and the evaluation of search results. The instructor relies on a variety of formats to give students some understanding of how search engines work; for example, students first view a video about “How Google Works” (Google, 2010), then read parts of *Blown to Bits: Your Life, Liberty and Happiness after the Digital Explosion* (Abelson, Ledeen & Lewis, 2008). While the Google video insists on the relevance and transparency of its search results, *Blown to Bits* demonstrates how results can be skewed. The comparison between the two sources encourages students to evaluate search results more critically. A series of brief activities is then offered to allow students time to experience ways that the concepts presented have an actual impact on searching. Students are asked to compare a search for “undocumented immigrants” and “illegal immigrants” and to explain the reasons for the different results. They are also presented with a number of search statements and asked to evaluate the quality of the search strategy. Finally, students participate in a discussion around the question: What are the benefits and drawbacks of results personalization in Google?

## **Strategy 2: Incorporate into the General Education Curriculum**

For-credit, stand-alone library courses are often accused of lacking curricular integration. Zabel argues that librarians should focus on embedding instruction in existing subject courses rather than spend time and energy creating new library courses. The difficulty of adding a required course to the curriculum and the burden it imposes on students are strong deterrents (Zabel, 2004, pp. 18-19), and if the library course is just an elective, students have no external motivation to take it.

We agree that integration is a necessity for library instruction, but it does not have to take the form of course integration, as Zabel argues. Rather, it can be integrated into the curriculum, either through a learning community (Johnson, Arendall, Shochet, & Duncan, 2010), or through the General

Education program (Cardwell & Boff, 2010). Owusu-Ansah notes that library instruction “has an important role to play in the general education of the undergraduate” (2001, p. 9). Integration into the general education curriculum demonstrates the relevance of information literacy and the library’s teaching responsibility to the core mission of the university – to give students a broad base of knowledge and transferrable skills which will allow them to thrive in their major.

At Oakland University we chose to incorporate LIB250 into the General Education curriculum. This was made easier by the fact that information literacy is already recognized as a cross-cutting capacity of the General Education program. It is identified as one of the necessary skills for success and lifelong learning: “Information literacy addresses the need for students to develop the skills to investigate problems on their own once they graduate” (Oakland University, 2012). We actually built upon this recognition of the role of information literacy when creating our library course to meet General Education requirements. We saw that such a course would fit well in the “knowledge application” category, which is designed “to encourage students to explore the ways in which knowledge can be applied in areas outside their own field of study.” We made the case to the General Education Committee that LIB250 met the knowledge application learning outcomes: that students demonstrate the ability to apply prior knowledge to solve problems across a range of disciplines, and demonstrate knowledge of the personal, professional, ethical and societal implications of these applications. We argued that LIB250 would help students make connections across courses.

Because our course was designed to show students not only how to find information but also how to use it, we decided the course could meet the General Education writing intensive requirement as well. We did so by requiring students to produce a major paper at the end of the course, with the steps of the research process broken into several small assignments throughout the semester.

After LIB250 gained these General Education attributes, enrollment reached 25, its maximum capacity, in the Fall of 2011. The course now operates in the framework of a program whose objectives and place in the curriculum students can easily understand. Furthermore the students can connect the library course to their previous coursework or major, as its content and assignments encourage them to apply prior knowledge to problem solving in a field of their own choosing. Student evaluations have so far been largely positive.

## **CONCLUSION**

Offering courses that are simultaneously stand-alone and integrated into the university’s curriculum is a novel initiative at Oakland University, and still a rare one at North American colleges. It allows the library to take its full place as an academic unit on campus, and the librarians to fully join the ranks of the teaching faculty. For students, however, stand-alone library courses are only one entry into information literacy training. At Oakland University, it is intended as a

first step toward the expansion of course offerings that would allow advanced students to acquire discipline-specific research skills, building upon the skills and knowledge acquired through LIB250.

The limitations of stand-alone credit courses remain obvious: only a small number of students can be reached, considering available library staff and resources, even if the online format and use of adjuncts to teach multiple sections may broaden the reach (Mulherrin, Kelley, Fishman & Orr, 2004). This is why credit courses at Oakland University are not intended as a replacement to course-related instruction. As Thompson points out, “there is no one solution to the problem of how to help students improve their research skills, library skills, or information literacy skills ... [a]cademic librarians may need to use a combination of approaches and, above all, be persistent in their efforts to aid students’ information literacy” (2003, p. 266). Ultimately it is up to each library to decide if the benefits of credit instruction outweigh the costs.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In 2008 fewer than 6% of respondents had a one- or two-credit course in information literacy *required* for graduation in their institutions, and fewer than 4% had such a course at the 3-credit level. There are probably many more *optional* courses, but no statistics are available (Primary Research Group, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> The learning outcomes and the syllabus are available online at <http://research.library.oakland.edu/sp/subjects/guide.php?subject=LIB250>

<sup>3</sup> For more regarding this disconnect between one-shot sessions and the achievement of information literacy, see Badke, 2008; Badke, 2010; Owusu-Ansah, 2001; Owusu-Ansah, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> For a review of external vs. intrinsic motivation see Xu & Jacobson, 2002, p. 424.

## REFERENCES

- Abelson, H., Ledeen, K., & Lewis, H. R. (2008). *Blown to bits: Your life, liberty, and happiness after the digital explosion*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Addison-Wesley.
- Badke, W. (2010). Why information literacy is invisible. *Communications in Information Literacy* 4(2), 129-141.
- Badke, W. (2008). A rationale for information literacy as a credit-bearing discipline. *Journal of Information Literacy*, 2(1), <http://jil.lboro.ac.uk/ojs/index.php/JIL/article/view/RA-V2-I1-2008-1>.
- Cardwell, C., & Boff, C. (2010). Creating the credit IL course in a university setting. In C. V. Hollister (Ed.), *Best Practices for Credit-Bearing Information Literacy Courses* (pp. 10-21). Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries.
- Elmborg, J. (2006). Critical information literacy: Implications for instructional practice. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 32(2), 192-199. doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2005.12.004
- Franks, S. (2010). Grand narratives and the information cycle in the library instruction classroom. In M. T. Accardi, E. Drabinski, & A. Kumbier (Eds.), *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* (pp. 43-54). Duluth, Minn.: Library Juice Press.
- Google (2010). How Google Works. Video retrieved from <http://youtu.be/BNHR6IQJGZs>
- Grafstein, A. (2002). A discipline-based approach to information literacy. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 28(4), 197-204. doi:10.1016/S0099-1333(02)00283-5
- Holder, S. (2010). History and evolution of credit IL courses in higher education. In C. V. Hollister (Ed.), *Best Practices for Credit-Bearing Information Literacy Courses* (pp. 1-9). Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries.
- Johnson, C., Arendall, T., Shochet, M., & Duncan, A. (2010). Integrating the credit information literacy course into a learning community. In C. V. Hollister (Ed.), *Best Practices for Credit-Bearing Information Literacy Courses* (pp. 53-63). Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries.
- Kennedy, J. (1971). Question: A separate course in bibliography or course related library instruction? In S. H. Lee (Ed.), *Library Orientation: Papers Presented at the First Annual Conference on Library Orientation, Eastern Michigan University, May 7, 1971* (pp. 18-28). Presented at the First Annual Conference on Library Orientation, Eastern Michigan University: Pierian Press.

- Kirkendall, C. A. (1980). Library use education: Current practices and trends. *Library Trends*, 29(1), 29–37.
- Mensching, T. B. (1989). Trends in bibliographic instruction in the 1980s: A comparison of data from two surveys. *Research Strategies*, 7, 4-13.
- Morris, J. M. (1980). A philosophical defense of a credit course. In C. Oberman-Soroka (Ed.), *Proceedings from the 2nd Southeastern Conference on Approaches to Bibliographic Instruction* (pp. 11-18). Charleston: College of Charleston Library Associates.
- Mulherrin, E., Kelley, K. B., Fishman, D., & Orr, G. J. (2004). Information literacy and the distant student. *Internet Reference Services Quarterly*, 9(1-2), 21-36. doi:10.1300/J136v09n01\_03
- Oakland University (2012). General Education cross-cutting capacities. Retrieved from [http://www2.oakland.edu/gened/cross\\_cutting.cfm](http://www2.oakland.edu/gened/cross_cutting.cfm)
- Owusu-Ansah, E. (2001). The academic library in the enterprise of colleges and universities: Toward a new paradigm. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 27(4), 282-294. doi:10.1016/S0099-1333(01)00215-4
- Owusu-Ansah, E. (2007). Beyond collaboration: Seeking greater scope and centrality for library instruction. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 7(4), 415-429.
- Primary Research Group. (2008). *College Information Literacy Efforts Benchmarks*. Retrieved from [http://www.primaryresearch.com/view\\_product.php?report\\_id=197](http://www.primaryresearch.com/view_product.php?report_id=197)
- Thompson, C. (2003). Information illiterate or lazy: How college students use the web for research. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 3(2), 259-268. doi:10.1353/pla.2003.0047
- Webber, S., & Johnston, B. (2000). Conceptions of information literacy: new perspectives and implications. *Journal of Information Science*, 26(6), 381–397. doi:10.1177/016555150002600602
- Xu, L., & Jacobson, T. E. (2002). Motivating students in credit-based information literacy courses: Theories and practice. *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 2(3), 423-441. doi:10.1353/pla.2002.0055
- Zabel, D. (2004). A reaction to “Information literacy and higher education.” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 30(1), 17-21.

## APPENDIX A: LIB250 LEARNING OUTCOMES

LIB250 learning outcomes	ACRL standards
1) Students will be able to discuss how information sources originate and operate in their broader socio- economic and political contexts	Standard 1: “The information literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed”
2) Students will gain interdisciplinary proficiency in seeking information via the World Wide Web and via electronic subscription databases and library search tools.	Standard 2: “The information literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently.”
3) Students will be able to explain how libraries use technology for information organization, storage, and retrieval, and adapt their search behavior accordingly.	Standard 2: “The information literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently.”
4) Students will critically evaluate information.	Standard 3: “The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system.”
5) Students will use successful strategies to incorporate selected information into the research process.	Standard 3 (summary, analysis and synthesis) / Standard 4 (citation)
6) Students will be able to give examples of information-related issues affecting libraries and higher education as well as society as a whole, especially ethical issues.	Standard 5: “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.”

## APPENDIX B: LIB250 COURSE OUTLINE

### Overview of the information age

- social and economic impact of information technologies, importance of information
- competencies and the role of libraries.

### The world wide web and search engines

- how the web was created, how it works, the difference between the open and deep web.
- how search engines work and how to use them successfully

### Types of academic sources

- scholarly publications and peer review
- different types of academic resources and their uses

### The research process

- the research cycle
- how to identify a topic and formulate research questions

### Search strategies

- keyword searching and known item searching
- bibliographic records and how to mine them

### The organization of information

- principles of organization of information, information retrieval and metadata
- call numbers, subject headings, tags

### Discipline specific resources and methods

- disciplinary needs
- primary and secondary sources

### Evaluation of information

- evaluation of websites and crowdsourcing
- understanding bias

**The packaging of information**

- gathering and organizing citations
- citation management systems
- creating bibliographies

**The ethics of information use**

- copyright and open access; plagiarism

**The future of libraries and digital technologies**

- recent trends and issues in libraries and information technology
- disintermediation in information discovery and the future role of libraries