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Building a Solid Structure: Blueprints and Tools for a Sustainable and Strategic Information Literacy Program

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INTRODUCTION

In a perfect world, all post-secondary students would receive information literacy (IL) instruction from their library on a regular basis, perhaps once per semester, with each session building on the previous one. Unfortunately, limited resources force libraries to make hard decisions about where to prioritize their efforts. At Seneca College in Toronto, Ontario, the Seneca Libraries' Literacies Team has built a strategic instruction program that has evolved over the years. This program is based on a suite of tools and processes that allow the team to efficiently and strategically serve the hundreds of programs at Seneca. The College has over 30,000 full-time students annually, including 7,000 international students who come from more than 150 countries. The programs range from one-year graduate certificates to four-year honours bachelor degrees.

Seneca follows a liaison model, with each School or Faculty served by one or more librarians, some of whom focus exclusively on IL instruction, while others do both collections and instruction. The IL team is made up of ten Liaison Librarians and three Literacies Technicians.

The Seneca Libraries instruction program is based on the evidence that traditional IL instruction is generally effective at improving students' IL skills. For example, Bryan and Karshmer (2013) found that one-shot sessions had a positive impact on students' library skills, Bowles-Terry (2012) found that students who received upper-level instruction had a higher GPA, and Stonebraker and Fundator (2016) found that students who completed two IL courses improved their IL skills more than students who completed only one IL course. At Seneca, Bordignon et al. (2016) found that both online learning objects and traditional in-person IL sessions had a positive impact on students' IL skills. The Seneca IL team uses this evidence as a starting point for IL initiatives.

Seneca Libraries is by no means alone in developing an instruction program that targets program-specific classes and attempts to scaffold IL classes across a program in a strategic manner; there are many examples of such systems. Seneca's instruction program focuses on instruction that supports specific research assignments, and various tools are used to map and record IL involvement. This work is similar to the curriculum mapping projects undertaken at other institutions. Buchanan, Kavanagh Webb, Harris Houk, and Tingelstad (2015) demonstrated various ways that curriculum mapping can be used to illustrate challenges and opportunities, and found that this could support strategically integrating IL instruction. Archambault and Masunaga (2015) used curriculum mapping to help determine which classes to flag for information literacy instruction and concluded that the process helped them be more strategic in their IL instruction program, as well as create opportunities for new partnerships.

At Seneca Libraries, the focus of IL instruction is on classes that have a research assignment, and that take place at key points within the students' academic careers. The tools discussed in this paper are designed to help keep the instruction program running smoothly, and to aid library staff in forecasting and preparing for classes.

History

The Seneca Libraries instruction program focuses on providing information literacy instruction that is relevant to students' fields of study; the goal is to educate students in a way that can be applied to both their current program and their future careers. To reach that goal, library staff focus on providing instruction that supports student assignments, and that occurs primarily in program-specific, rather than general education, classes. This approach has been in place for several years and marks a significant shift away from the previous model.

Prior to 2011/2012, Seneca Libraries staff spent a significant amount of time providing orientations to students in general education classes; the majority of IL instruction was delivered to students in introductory writing and communications classes. There were a number of drawbacks to this model. Some students would receive similar library instruction in multiple courses, creating unnecessary duplication. The ability to track the impact of the instruction program was also limited, as details on the students being reached were largely unknown. Lastly, this system reduced the opportunities for students to develop program-specific research skills, as requests for IL instruction in general education classes overwhelmed the library staff capacity.

The system was flawed, so the IL team collected data and developed a new method for delivering IL instruction more meaningfully and systematically. The new approach shifted away from providing general library orientations, and instead actively targeted classes with a research component in order to embed library instruction and scaffold IL across a program.

As an interim approach, a series of videos and online learning objects on general and introductory IL topics were created to replace in-person instruction in general education courses. In-person instruction remains a key part of the system, but with a new emphasis on delivering instruction in courses that are unique to each program's subject area. Under the new approach, in-person instruction sessions are customized to support a specific research assignment that students will be completing, and IL instruction covers databases and topics that are relevant to the assignment and class. The intention of this system is to provide instruction that is relevant to the students' fields of study and to create opportunities to strategically map instruction throughout the program.

After refocusing IL instruction efforts on program-specific workshops, the goal of more recent projects has been to improve the tools and workflows that help the instruction program run effectively. These initiatives, which are explored in more detail in this paper, have included revising mapping spreadsheets, improving the instructional repository, and establishing a philosophy of instruction to guide IL activities.

Philosophy of Instruction

Many academic libraries craft and publish a teaching philosophy. This type of statement can be a focal point for defining the library's instruction program and can serve a variety of audiences, including teaching faculty who want to request a session as well as library staff who need to remind themselves of why and how they do what they do. It may come as a surprise that Seneca Libraries did not have any kind of philosophy statement until early 2020, but it was thanks to the strength of the existing tools and processes that things were running smoothly without a philosophy. The Literacies team decided to put together a statement for two main purposes: to put into words the library's commitment to the ACRL Framework, and to demonstrate its alignment with the College's Strategic Plan. The Seneca Libraries Philosophy of Instruction is still in draft form and not publicly available as of May 2020, but it is a key element of the latest iteration of the instruction program. The Philosophy is structured around three values (selected from the five values of the College's Strategic Plan): Excellence, Innovating, and Community.

IL Forecaster

The instruction planning phase begins with an overall IL mapping spreadsheet, dubbed the IL Forecaster. This is an Excel spreadsheet that provides a visual map of where and how IL instruction is embedded within each program. In this spreadsheet, basic details about the program are recorded, including program length, intake terms, faculty, and school. This information is found on the College's public-facing website. The IL Forecaster spreadsheet also is used to record information about IL instruction within each program, including which classes receive IL instruction, whether the instruction takes place in-class or through an online learning object, and in which term the class typically occurs. Beyond providing a snapshot of where IL instruction is embedded, this spreadsheet also helps librarians identify gaps and redundancies in the instruction program.

Coupled with enrollment data, the IL Forecaster informs the instruction schedules created by librarians each semester. It helps librarians determine which classes to schedule and prepare for, and whether the students in those classes have previously

attended an IL session. These schedules form the basis for the instruction work that each IL librarian does, by guiding which classes and faculty to reach out to, and including details on student enrollment and class scheduling, etc.

The current IL Forecaster spreadsheet is a modified version of a previous spreadsheet, which captured information on the instruction program, as well as information about the program that was not related to information literacy or the task of forecasting. This additional data made the spreadsheet unnecessarily complicated, and duplicated information captured elsewhere. A recent project was undertaken to create a more streamlined and purpose-driven version of the spreadsheet. As with other tools and workflows in support of the Seneca Libraries instruction program, revisions and improvements are incorporated as the need arises.

INSTRUCTION REPOSITORY (OCPAC/CIDAR)

Another essential item in the Seneca Libraries IL toolkit is the instruction repository, known as the OCPAC, which is an acronym for the boxes on each page: Outcome, Curriculum, Pedagogy, Assessment, and Criteria for Evaluation, adapted from a model developed by Gilchrist and Zald (2008). The OCPAC provides a central location, built on LibGuides and accessible by all library staff, to store and retrieve information about classes that have received, or will receive, IL instruction. The core boxes are:

- Outcome: contains a link to the official course page on the Seneca website, which includes the learning outcomes for the course.
- Curriculum: contains learning outcomes for the IL session and indicates the level (Beginner, Intermediate, or Advanced) at which the outcomes are targeted. These IL learning outcomes are selected from a list, and each outcome is tied to one of the six Frames of the ACRL Framework.
- Pedagogy: provides a space for IL staff to upload materials from the session; this typically includes slides and in-class activities.
- Assessment: contains information about any assignments in the course that require IL skills.
- Criteria for Evaluation: indicates the weight of the IL-related assignment as a percentage of the overall marks for the course.

In addition to the boxes that make up the acronym, there are the following boxes:

- IL Staff: indicates which staff have provided instruction for the course in the past.
- Faculty/Sections: lists the names of the instructors and how many sections of the course each had.
- Reflections: provides a space to leave any notes that might be useful for future sessions. Reflections could include comments on how things went with the instructor, or how things went with the students.

The OCPAC is useful in a number of ways. First of all, it keeps the IL team organized from year to year. When preparing for a new semester of teaching, team members often think, “did I visit this class, or a similar one, last semester?” and the OCPAC serves as a useful memory aid. Of course, library staff are typically expected to be organized enough to keep track of their own work, but this leads into the second benefit of the OCPAC: having this repository available to all library staff means that anyone delivering instruction in a class that someone else has visited in the past will have access to all past materials and notes. For someone taking over a new portfolio or filling in when the usual staff member is not available, the repository can be a major time saver. And finally, the OCPAC helps with reporting. If someone needs to report on which classes received instruction in a given semester, this is certainly not the only source of information, but it can be an important supplement. At Seneca, part of the quality assurance process includes whether or not there is an OCPAC page for the classes that receive instruction.

In fact, the OCPAC is on the brink of a transformation. During a recent review the IL team determined that selecting learning outcomes tied to specific Frames from a predetermined list, for inclusion in the Curriculum box, was not providing much value; it had essentially become an exercise in checking boxes. The new repository will be functionally very similar to the OCPAC, but with a new acronym. CIDAR stands for Course Outline, Instructional Materials, Directions, Assignment, and Reflections. The main change will be that instead of a Curriculum box with IL learning outcomes, the Directions box will include information on how to plan for and deliver the class. For example, it will indicate the time required for the session (as well as the time required for individual activities) and whether a computer lab is required. There will be no mention of the ACRL Framework in CIDAR, but IL staff will be guided by the Philosophy of Instruction, which highlights the team’s commitment to the six Frames.

QA/REPORTING

The tools used to track Seneca Libraries IL involvement are important for staff planning and delivering instruction, but are also essential in the quality assurance and reporting process. Various reporting tools are used to capture data about IL instruction and to inform quality assurance practices. The collected data helps inform future plans and initiatives and helps library staff make evidence-based decisions.

The IL Forecaster spreadsheet reports on which programs do, and do not, have IL instruction embedded or mapped within the program. LibInsight (formerly LibAnalytics) is used for recording data on individual IL workshops, including classes, sections, and enrolment numbers. This furthers the ability to track and modify IL involvement across programs and schools. The data from each of these tools is cleaned and summarised, and forms a key piece of the decision-making process.

CONCLUSION

While the success of the Seneca Libraries instruction program would not be possible without the hard work of many talented librarians and library technicians, these outstanding individuals would not be able to do their best work without the tools and processes underlying the program. The forthcoming Philosophy of Instruction will put into words the team's commitment to a strategic, scaffolded instruction program, structured around both the ACRL Framework and the assignment-specific learning outcomes and needs of students. The Forecaster allows IL staff to make high-level plans for the future by considering where IL instruction has been mapped into each program. The repository (OCPAC/CIDAR) helps staff stay organized at the course level, housing course-specific information and materials. And finally, the quality assurance processes assist with planning and allow staff to make evidence-based decisions.

The Seneca Libraries instruction program has evolved considerably over time, and it is currently set up to encourage further improvements. As post-secondary education continues to transform thanks to technology, changing demographics, and other factors, the IL team will be well-positioned to keep up with the pace of change.

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