

Eastern Michigan University

DigitalCommons@EMU

LOEX Conference Proceedings 2020

LOEX Conference Proceedings

2022

Can't Teach Information to ALL Students? Why Not Teach Their Instrutors?

Heather Snapp

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.emich.edu/loexconf2020>

CAN'T TEACH INFORMATION TO ALL STUDENTS? WHY NOT TEACH THEIR INSTRUCTORS?

HEATHER SNAPP

INTRODUCTION

In an ideal world, all university students would receive instruction in every aspect of information literacy so they fully understand and can successfully perform the research process before being assigned their first research assignment. In reality, however, this is not likely. Students need to be *taught* how to conduct research, and just assigning a research project—or even having a one-shot instruction session or consultation with a librarian—is not going to fill in all the gaps; students need to be supported through learning the research process with resources, instruction, and guidance along the way. And as William Badke points out in “A Letter from a Librarian to Professors Everywhere” (2016), students often know less about the research process than their instructors realize: “Just because your students grew up with digital media does not mean that they have any real grasp of research” (p. 64). Helping students learn information literacy skills can be even more challenging when *instructors* are also not sure how to best teach these skills to students.

THE IMPETUS: INFORMATION NEED VS. SOURCE REQUIREMENTS

Too often, students seek help at the reference desk on an assignment in which the information needed to fulfill the task does not match the requirements of the assignment. A classic example is when students are expected to find a print journal located physically in the library; equally as problematic is when students are asked to find basic information on a topic but required to use only peer-reviewed sources while doing so. The instructors in these situations mean well—requiring credible library resources is a worthy criteria—but aren't fully thinking through *why* or even *if* these restrictions are best for the information need.

Once a student is at the reference desk with assignment in hand (or, more likely, on a device), it is a delicate time to approach the instructor who has assigned it to let them know it doesn't hold up from an information literacy standpoint. Telling instructors their assignment is not sound could leave them feeling offended or upset. So how do librarians communicate information literacy best practices to instructors? Educate them.

GETTING IN FRONT OF FACULTY

Through a Faculty Fellowship at my university (Florida Gulf Coast University), I attempted to get in front of as many faculty members as possible to educate them on information literacy best practices and help them integrate more intentional and appropriate information literacy objectives into their assignments and courses. The message took the form of 15- to 60- minute presentations or workshops, one-on-one consultations, online resources, and a five-session Faculty Learning Community for a deeper dive.

All formal sessions started with a discussion of Badke's previously mentioned letter, in which he tells instructors, “You are uniquely suited to develop, through a mentoring process, significant research abilities in your students, thereby enabling them to become more than content absorbers and instead to develop into practitioners” (2016, p. 65). The article helped to break the ice and started a frank discussion on what students do or don't know about the research process—and what instructors do or don't know

about teaching it. And it allows Badke, rather than the session presenter, to be the one telling them how to do this part of their jobs and best incorporate research skills into their assignments).

Next, participants were asked how they would define information literacy before a formal definition is shared; this got the discussion going and reminded everyone of what they know before getting on the same page and sharing some common language: “To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (ALA, 1989). Then the question: Where in the research process do students typically start?

Allowing Students to Exercise ALL Their Information Literacy Muscles

Students often skip over *identifying* their information need and dive straight into the research process by looking for sources. They’ve been told, after all, the type and number of sources that are required—and perhaps some that are forbidden. They’ve either been given a topic or, if allowed to choose their own, have often not sufficiently refined it, thought about key terms, or read background information needed to fully develop the topic. When the work of *identifying the information need* is done for them, or they are not encouraged to—or worse yet discouraged from—doing it, students are not being allowed to exercise their information literacy muscles in this area, and therefore not learning the full research process.

To illustrate this point, I provide to faculty a seemingly exaggerated example of students being assigned to create a patient brochure about HIV with basic facts including a definition, symptoms, prevention, and treatment. It is then revealed that students are required to find three peer-reviewed sources—a task difficult for anyone to do well given the parameters, not just for a novice researcher. Participants are shown what types of results come up in a search for peer-reviewed articles versus a government health website and electronic reference books. Good discussion typically ensues. And the assignment? Not just an exaggerated example, it is an actual assignment that has been given to students.

Another example is then given about the prevalence of concussions among high school football players, and participants are invited to discuss how the resulting essays—and therefore student learning experiences—would be different based on types of sources students were required or allowed to use. Participants are encouraged to think about what *they* know about concussions, high school football, helmet requirements, etc. Where would they start searching? Instructors often assume that if a student does not know the basic information about a topic, they will seek it out. But if they have never been instructed, told, or encouraged to do so, they won’t. Even worse yet is when students reveal they are *not allowed* to use an encyclopedia or reference source.

Putting Faculty in Students’ Shoes

Faculty participants in the room are asked who thinks they have the most technically sophisticated sounding research agenda. A science or engineering instructor typically “wins” and shares a topic that is over the heads of most in the room who are highly educated but in different disciplines. Those new to the topic are asked where they would start researching such a topic. Invariably, the answers are the internet or an encyclopedia to find out what it even is. Participants are asked what it would be like if they were first required to read peer-reviewed articles on the topic, and they admit it would be difficult. But students are asked to do this all the time. Even if it is a less technical and commonly known topic, such as gun control or climate change, students still aren’t experts on these topics and likely need some background information to make sense of all the information they will encounter.

In her article “Desperately Seeking Citations,” Gloria J. Leckie suggests that professors have become “expert researchers” familiar with their own research and where to obtain information through “personal contacts and citation trails” and forget that students “do not think in terms of an information-seeking strategy” (1996, p. 202). Allowing students more autonomy in choosing the types of sources they use and giving them resources, support, and guidance to understand how and when to incorporate these sources will help them be more successful with the current assignment and future endeavors.

Empathizing with Instructors

The discussion of encyclopedias and reference sources is a good time to empathize with instructors and let them know that you realize they don’t want students at the college level to rely on an encyclopedia, quote it heavily, and turn in what amounts to a sixth grade book report. But students need to be taught, supported, and guided on when and how to use such sources—so they can exercise their information literacy muscles and apply those skills to future assignments, professional work tasks, or personal situations.

Emphasis should also be given to the idea that integrating information literacy into a course should not mean creating extra work for everyone—assignments for students and grading for instructors; nor should it be seen as unconnected from the work of the course. Information literacy objectives can be folded into course content.

Scaffolding Assignments

Scaffolding research assignments is also recommended instead of assigning a large project at the beginning of the semester that is due at or near the end with no further engagement in between. Scaffolding the project into smaller, low stakes assignments gives students the opportunity to learn information literacy skills along the way while receiving feedback on gaining confidence in the research process. According to Badke (2016):

You need to break down projects into components that you can assess along the way. If you are guiding students by grading each step of their assignment as a separate submission, your comments become highly relevant. Students know they have to pay attention to what you are telling them in order to do well on the next segment. (p. 65)

A list of potential smaller assignments is provided for faculty participants to consider incorporating into their own research assignments:

- iSearch paper
- Annotated bibliography
- Assign students to bring in their research question to be evaluated by peers. (Think peer review but for a research question.)
- Hold a brainstorming session—in person or through an LMS discussion—on topic narrowing.
- Assign students to bring ~2 sources to class to share with a group. What information can they get from the source? What is the purpose? What gaps are missing in their research?
- Provide a variety of sources on one topic: reference source; book; magazine, newspaper, and journal articles—discuss differences in content, authority, creation process, purpose, and value.

FACULTY LEARNING COMMUNITY

The five-session Faculty Learning Community (FLC) started with the previously mentioned content for the first session, which proved to be a good starting point for discussion of issues that librarians see with information literacy in assignments and that instructors have with students' lack of research and information literacy skills.

Structure and Content

The rest of the FLC sessions were structured around the book *Teaching Information Literacy Reframed* (2016) by Joann M. Burkhardt. The book includes an overall discussion of the Association of College and Research Library's (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy* before each subsequent chapter discusses one of the six frames followed by approximately 10 exercises for teaching concepts in that frame. The book's structure served the FLC well because the readings were short and focused and included practical, ready-made activities that instructors could implement into their courses, modify, or take ideas from. Readings were completed by participants prior to each session. The structure and content of the FLC was as follows:

Session 1:

- William Badke's "A Letter From a Librarian to Professors Everywhere"
- Chapter 1: Decoding the *Framework for Information Literacy*
- Presentation of information literacy definition, best practices, and tips

Session 2:

- Chapter 2: Scholarship as Conversation
- Chapter 3: Research Inquiry

Session 3:

- Chapter 4: Authority
- Chapter 5: Information Creation as a Process

Session 4:

- Chapter 6: Searching as Strategic Exploration
- Chapter 7: Information Has Value

Session 5:

- Chapter 8: Creating Exercises, Rubrics, Learning Outcomes, and Learning Assessments
- Sharing of new/modified assignments integrating information literacy and wrap-up

Sessions included a brief presentation by the facilitator, questions to spark discussion of the reading, large and small group discussions, individual reflections, think or write/pair/share, and time to work on individual assignments. Some of the questions discussed included:

- **All Sessions:**
 - What were your take-aways?
 - Which of the exercises might you use (or modify for use) in your course?
- **Session 2:** What aspects of information literacy do you find students struggle with in your course(s)? How would you like to include information literacy components into an assignment or course?
- **Session 4:** Have you incorporated any new information literacy aspects into your assignments? How could you in a future assignment or course?
- **Session 5:** The bigger picture: In order to make information stick and to transfer learning to real life, students must have a variety of practice. How can information literacy be incorporated across your discipline/major? What would it take to make that happen?

Although time was built in for participants to have workshop time to create or modify assignments for their courses, participants expressed that they were more interested in having more discussion with their colleagues and completing the individual work once away from the FLC. More in-depth assignment modification happened later, however.

ONE-ON-ONE CONSULTATIONS

Some participants preferred to use what they learned in the FLC to modify assignments once the term was over and their focus was on creating their syllabi for the next semester. They then requested one-on-one follow-up consultations with the librarian to work through modifying their assignments, from a simple modification of required sources to a complete assignment redesign.

One of the assignments completely redesigned was a source evaluation assignment for a Composition course. Previously, the assignment required students to evaluate online articles using the well-known CRAAP test (for Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose), and the instructor reported that students did not perform well on the assignment or grasp the concept of what makes a source credible as a result. Students were to find an article that did pass the criteria as a credible source and one that did not. Students struggled with the assignment, especially differentiating types or levels of authority—any author who knew more than the student was deemed a credible source.

The assignment was completely redesigned to focus on the frame Authority is Constructed and Contextual. An Authority Table was created that included a variety of instructor-chosen source types on the same topic. Students were asked to look critically at the credentials of the author and publisher, along with their bias and main purpose for writing, and justify their answers. They then completed a quiz that asked them to synthesize the concept of Authority, with an average score of 80%. Students were required to think critically, and answers and understanding of evaluating sources were much improved. There is a plan to share the assignment with all Composition instructors.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that teaching students good information literacy practices takes careful planning and time. However, when done correctly, it can be integrated into course content and is important to helping students be successful for current and future assignments, in addition to other applications in their personal and professional lives. The most difficult part might be getting to reach and then do in-depth work with a number of faculty members; the efforts described above reached approximately 30-35 faculty members, and only 8-12 of them could be considered in-depth scenarios, depending on the measurement. Currently, a collection of resources and blog posts are being created to reach faculty on their own time frame, with the offer to connect for further discussion. With some perseverance, we might not end up with all students being “expert researchers,” but we can come closer to helping more of them succeed through their research-heavy college years and beyond.

REFERENCES

- American Library Association. (1989). *Presidential Committee on Information Literacy. Final Report*. Chicago: American Library Association.
- Badke, W. (2016). A letter from a librarian to professors everywhere. *Online Searcher*, 40(4), 63-65.
- Burkhardt, J. M. (2016). *Teaching information literacy reframed: 50+ framework-based exercises for creating information-literate learners*. Chicago: ALA Neal Shuman.
- Leckie, G. J. (1996). Desperately seeking citations: Uncovering faculty assumptions about the undergraduate research. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 22(3), 201.
- Saunders, L. (2012). Faculty Perspectives on Information Literacy as a Student Learning Outcome. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 38(4), 226-23.