

The Quarterly Interview: Esther Grassian

UCLA

-Edited transcript-

LOEX: *You recently retired. Where did you most recently work? What was your most recent job title? How long were you in this position? What did you do during a typical week?*

Grassian: I worked in the UCLA College Library (undergraduate library) since 1969, most recently (2007-2011) as Information Literacy Librarian. I had a number of other titles over the years, including Electronic Services Coordinator, Instructional Services Coordinator and Interim Head of College Library.

In a typical week during UCLA's 10-week Quarter, I would do a couple of one-shot information literacy instruction (ILI) sessions for undergraduate classes, spend 8-10 hours at the reference desk and supervise an MLIS Reference Desk Assistant there. I would also attend various meetings, both in and out of the library, and manage various projects (e.g., an Expected Learning Outcomes instructional assessment project). In addition, I would also manage the UCLA Library in Second Life, and prepare a variety of publications and presentations for UCLA campus groups and beyond.

When did you first do instruction? How has it changed over the years?

I began doing library instruction in 1970 by working with Mimi Dudley in College Library as she developed her world-renowned self-paced Library Skills Workbook program. She began that program in collaboration with Elena Frausto, leader of the UCLA Chicano High Potential student support group. Mimi developed a program with 10 variations on 20 questions in different areas (e.g., almanacs, biographical tools, etc.). Those questions evolved into a multiple-choice workbook of 20 questions, arranged in search strategy order, illustrating active learning in a print reference environment: <http://www.archive.org/details/chicanolibprogram> and <http://www.archive.org/details/libinstructionworkbook>

Mimi's workbook program, imitated and adapted worldwide, lasted until 1981 when she retired, due to administrative pressure to remove her name from the program and eventually, to eliminate it. The new Head of College Library introduced 50-minute one-shot sessions requiring three library staff for each class of 25 students. Students listened to a 10-minute introduction, watched a short video, divided into three groups and moved to the reference area to complete three exercises, none of which were corrected. The one-shot IL session continues to this day in many libraries, partly because it mimics teaching in academic disciplines, and also because it offers closer personal contact and interaction with learners, both admirable goals. Yet, its scope remains limited, due to lack of sufficient numbers of librarians, lack of time for learning, and huge and varied learner populations. It may be that a blend of both F2F and self-paced hands-on learning activities would be most effective, though assessment would need to confirm this.

Attitudes have changed over the years toward ILI under its various names (library instruction, library skills, bibliographic instruction, transliteracy, etc.). Key issues now are how learners should best accomplish IL goals, how to assess the effectiveness of ILI efforts, and especially, who is best qualified to help them learn how to learn.

What would you say is your teaching philosophy?

Throughout my career, I have tried to adhere to the following teaching/learning principles:

- Do not make assumptions; instead, check for and respect prior knowledge and experience with information researching and critical thinking
- Assume intelligence
- Respect everyone's right to learn in his/her preferred manner
- Be warm, open, friendly and helpful in guiding learners so they accomplish on their own, build on what they already know, and are empowered
- Use simple, clear, concise and engaging language and active learning techniques to encourage critical and creative thinking, with the goal of instilling a questioning attitude regarding information and the tools used to access it.

Have you written an article or book that you are most proud of? Or is there another work (e.g., a project) to highlight?

I am so proud of the UCLA librarians who participated in the Internet Training Group (ITG) that I led from 1993 through 1995. I had been a reference librarian for over 20 years when the Internet started to become known and used publicly. In early 1993, I was put on a small team of 4 librarians who were to look into Internet training using Gopher software. I began by developing a basic Internet and Gopher training class, with rehearsals for library staff, seeking their feedback, and surreptitiously, looking for others to serve as trainers along with me. I developed a supportive train-the-Internet-trainer program, and brave librarians plunged into the dark and scary depths of Gopher and then Web training, with mobs of UCLA students, staff and faculty beating down the doors of every training session. Campus computer staff came to us to work with them in helping the campus community learn about the Internet, telnet, ftp and the new campus-wide email system. It was a glorious collaboration, and such a wonderful position for the Library and librarians.

I am also very proud of the graduate ILI course that Joan Kaplowitz and I proposed in 1989, and have taught many

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times since then in the UCLA Information Studies Department, as well as the textbooks that we have written for it. Information Literacy Instruction: Theory and Practice (now in its 2d edition) was awarded the 2004 ACRL IS Publication of the Year Award.

And I am happy to have taken the initiative to experiment with a variety of technologies to support pedagogy, including website authoring (e.g., [Teach Information Literacy & Critical Thinking!](#)), wikis, blogs, Twitter, and the virtual world of Second Life.

What books or articles influenced you?

1) Knapp, Patricia. 1966. *The Monteith College Library Experiment*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow.

- Empirical-research-based catalyst for the modern library instruction movement.

2) Agre, Philip. 1996. *How to help someone use a computer*. Retrieved from <http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/pagre/how-to-help.html>

- This hands-in-your-pockets, respectful approach to computer users offers common-sense advice to be patient and encouraging to newbies.

3) Also, ILI-L--I've learned so much from my colleagues there --as well as Sheila Webber's Information Literacy Weblog, and the people/groups I follow in my Twitter feed, also a rich source of new and creative thought and endeavors.

Additional readings can be found here, <http://bit.ly/z609AT>

You have spent some time over the past few years utilizing the virtual world Second Life. When did you become interested and what sparked your interest in this site? What do you hope to accomplish with it? Is there any group or people that you typically work with on the site?

In December 2005, I attended a 2-day online conference on educational gaming, including Second Life, hosted by the New Media Consortium (NMC). NMC decided to build a campus in Second Life and held a grand opening in April 2006, so I scrambled to get a free avatar in order to attend. As it turned out, other librarians were involved in SL and had set up Info Island, with a large library and a reference desk area. It was wonderful to see librarians from all types of libraries in various parts of the world, working together in SL, and learning from each other and from technologists.

I had been thinking about virtual libraries and avatars for close to a decade, so I jumped on the opportunity to establish a free UCLA library in Cybrary City, pending approval by the University Librarian (UL). Sarah Watstein, UCLA Library AUL for Research and Instructional Services and I developed a service plan for the library, approved by the UL in 2007, with the following main goals:

1. Building and enhancing library faculty partnerships
2. Building and enhancing research collections
3. Enhancing services and focusing on information literacy
4. Promoting our role as a vibrant enterprise within the academic research library and higher education communities

Since then I have helped English Composition Lecturers learn how to use SL, where they have taught several classes. I have also conducted information literacy sessions in SL focused on critical thinking about information resources and virtual world sites.

In addition, I have appreciated the opportunity to work with other librarians in ACRL and in other institutions and organizations worldwide, such as the Digital Library Foundation, to present and participate in numerous continuing education programs (e.g., Mellon Seminars in Digital Humanities), panels, and even an interactive IL workshop for librarians within SL.

Those are some nice accomplishments. What have been your biggest frustrations/challenges with SL (if any)?

I have found it difficult to get other librarians, faculty and administrators to experiment with newer technologies, like SL, and to recognize their value, for very little investment of time or money:

- Enormous, worldwide, potential reach
- Ability to meet with, teach, learn from, and interact with others (orally, visually, and through text chat or IM), without the need to travel
- Ability to explore the potential of a variety of technologies in support of pedagogy, as well as institutional missions and personal enrichment

Are there any projects in the library world in which you will continue to be involved in retirement?

Yes. I'm working on a co-authored book chapter with Rhonda Trueman (Northwest Florida State College) on professional development in virtual worlds. I've also been asked to teach an IL course in the UCLA Information Studies Department again, in Spring 2012. And I've been honored to be asked to be the keynote speaker at the next LOEX of the West conference in June 2012. In addition, I intend to continue involvement in the LILi (Lifelong Information Literacy) group I founded in 2005: <https://sites.google.com/site/lifelonginformationliteracy/>

Currently, I am also a member of the Planning Committee for the Georgia International Conference on Information Literacy, and hope to continue to be involved in that conference: <http://ceps.georgiasouthern.edu/conted/infolit.html>

I also hope to continue to experiment with new technologies in support of pedagogy. Finally, I am interested in teaching for other library schools, doing interactive ILI workshops for librarians, and ILI consulting.