



## Ten Reasons to Teach Information Literacy for Credit



The rarity of for-credit information literacy instruction in higher education is a disgrace.

**I'VE** long advocated putting information literacy into the university curriculum and teaching it for credit. The best way to do this initially is to lodge a credit information literacy course within the core of each university major. Credit-bearing modules within existing courses through the curriculum can also be successful. In my humble opinion, the rarity of for-credit information literacy instruction in higher education is a disgrace.

Thus, following the great tradition of how-to gurus and late night talk show hosts, let me present you with 10 reasons why we have to teach information literacy for credit.

### **INFORMATION LITERACY IS CRUCIAL TO A FULL EDUCATION**

We teach public speaking, phys ed, even gaming and dance, all of which are viewed as credible academic subjects. But information literacy? Academic administrators tend to see it as remedial, not something that actually belongs in the mainstream curriculum.

Yet, when we consider the elements of information literacy, they are foundational to our very definition of "education." Where does information come from? How is it produced? What makes this piece of information better/more reliable/more relevant than that piece of information? How do I formulate a thesis or research question? How do I gather the right data to address the issue? How do I evaluate that data and turn it into a useful resource for problem solving? How do I address the ethical use of information?

If this is not all foundational to what we mean by education, then I'm not sure what is. Why wouldn't we teach it for credit and give it the credibility it deserves?

### **STUDENTS NEED THE SKILLS TO ENABLE LIFELONG LEARNING**

Academia has long since given up the idea that students' brains are empty pots and the goal of a university education is to fill them. There is simply too much to know, and our knowledge environment changes much too quickly. Higher education today is much more in the mode of providing basic information along with the skills needed to pursue lifelong learning and keep up with our changing world, if possible.

The ability to acquire and handle information is at the core of lifelong learning. But if students lack the information literacy to find and apply the right information for the right purpose while evaluating it effectively, how can we possibly foster lifelong learning?

### **SKILLED RESEARCH IS A CRUCIAL PART OF MANY CAREERS**

This is the information age. A large amount of the day-to-day work of many people involves acquiring and using information to solve problems, advance knowledge, and so on. Yet enormous numbers of hours are wasted every day by workers who lack the sophisticated skills to get to the right information when they need it and to use it effectively when they have it.

We could tell horror stories of terrible mistakes that have been made in business, science, and medicine because of errors in information seeking and use. In many such cases a better trained information researcher could have avoided the problem. But perhaps we need only look at the dollars lost by companies redoing (badly) the readily available research already completed by others.

### **STUDENTS ARE NOT LEARNING GOOD RESEARCH SKILLS WITH EXISTING METHODS**

The most glaring mistake in higher education today is the belief that students learn to do research by doing it. This is absolutely not the case, as countless studies of student research ability have demonstrated.

There are dedicated and knowledgeable information literacy librarians in many of our institutions. Yet even while our senior undergraduate and incoming graduate students continue to have high opinions of their research skills, they fail miserably at most tests of even moderately sophisticated information literacy. Why? Because the task of making them literate with information is bigger than generic one-shot instruction or even a session or two in a real course can accomplish. There is simply too much to learn and too large a learning curve on the way to becoming skilful.

Imagine that we took only 2 hours in the school year to teach first-grade students how to read. The result would be disastrous. And so, sadly, are many of our efforts with information literacy in higher education despite the knowledge and zeal of those who teach it.

### **THE COMPLEXITY OF THE NEW INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT PROVIDES SIGNIFICANT MATERIAL FOR CREDIT INSTRUCTION**

There was a time, not too many decades ago, when the information environment could be explained in 5 minutes. You had your popular literature, your trade literature, and your academic literature. That was pretty much it.

Now we have a whole generation growing up in the cradle of an information world gone wild, where much of the material for research papers comes via Google and hardly anyone even knows for sure what a journal is. We've let this generation find its own way through the information fog, neglecting to teach them even the basics about the nature of the knowledge sources available to them, let alone how to navigate the data that swarms through their lives.

Just knowing what information is today—where it comes from, how it's published, how to evaluate it—is enough con-

tent for credit instruction all by itself. When we add skill development in optimizing the tools of research, we have a powerhouse of a course available to us.

### **WE ARE PAYING A FORTUNE FOR RESOURCES NOT BEING USED TO ADVANTAGE**

A student came to me with a grin on his face. He'd taken my three-credit undergraduate information literacy course while still a sophomore and he wanted to tell me about his interaction with a fellow student. "The guy was in his fourth year and he'd never used a journal database." He might as well have added, "What a rube."

Problem is that there are far too many rubes. Our library's database usage stats, for a school of about 3,000 students, show an average of only about 800 sessions per month on even our most popular database. That's one-quarter to one-third of students using a popular database in any given month, though likely the more avid users account for multiple sessions, lowering the average usage per student even more.

We could cure this gap over time by convincing faculty to demand that journal articles appear in bibliographies, even at undergraduate level. But students would still gravitate to the easy and familiar databases, neglecting the specialized and complex ones. Why? Because their skills have been built on Google, they have not been trained in sophisticated searching, and the highway of choice is the easy path when a research paper is due.

From a sheer cost-benefit point of view, we should either ensure that our primary users are actually searching our expensive specialized research tools or we should stop subscribing to them.

### **THE TOOLS OF RESEARCH ARE COMPLEX**

The grand deception of academic research is that we are dealing with a Google generation so all we need is a search box to throw words at. But our databases don't work well that way. It's like driving a car around the block in first gear and failing to understand that a bit more sophistication in handling this automobile could have you racing down the freeway.

I see it on a daily basis. Students have to do some research and someone suggests they need journal articles. After asking where the journals are shelved and being told that most of ours are electronic, they open a database. What's the first thing they do then? They Google it. They throw some words into the search box and bring up results that are usually too many, too diverse, and too irrelevant to bring any satisfaction. True, they might find a "Narrow by subject" link and get a bit more on track, but they fail to understand the wonders of the tool they are using. They fail to grasp that it could almost walk on water for them if they'd only give it a chance.

### **SIMPLIFYING OUR TOOLS FOR A LOWER LEVEL OF SKILL IS NOT WORKING**

What's so bad about the status quo? Why not let students Google databases? In fact, we could federate our

databases and give them a real Google-like experience, with no bells or whistles.

The problem is that students need training even to use Google well, let alone academic databases. For search of any kind, these days, our students are playing bumper cars when they should be racing along superhighways. Simplifying the tools both eliminates the options that make for precise searching and fails to produce better search results for students than using more sophisticated options. Student happiness with simpler tools may be there, but at what cost? Is an uninformed, happy student a better person than a skilled but challenged student?

#### **TO LEARN RESEARCH YOU MUST DO RESEARCH IN A TRAINING MODE**

Learning assessments from one-shot sessions consistently show a slight development in the knowledge portion of information literacy, but little in the practice of research. The very obvious reason for this is that much of what we define as information literacy is only learned through a combination of instruction and on-the-job practice, doing real research and getting an extensive critique of it.

Credit instruction offers the opportunity for students to do genuine research projects, from topic selection to finished product, and to be critiqued all along the way regarding research questions, outlines, data acquisition, quality of sources, use of sources, and development of arguments in the final project. Over the past 22 years I have seen my credit courses, containing extensive assignments, lead to consistent and relatively permanent attainment of both knowledge and skills that match the ACRL standards for information literacy.

How, outside of credit instruction, can we demand that level of work from students?

#### **INFO LIT IS A CREDIBLE ACADEMIC SUBJECT**

A comment from a professor at my institution typifies the criticism of info lit for credit that I hear from others: "We don't need yet another skills course." The implication was that information literacy is a matter of learning how to use databases, with little if anything of an academic nature being communicated. It was only when I explained how truly "academic" this subject is that the professor changed his mind.

Information literacy is the study of information—what it is, where it comes from, how to acquire it, how to evaluate it, and how use it effectively and ethically. The subject matter is information itself (though that can be nuanced by putting the course within a particular subject discipline). Thus there is ample theory that comes from considering the forces that produce the information we have, the gatekeeping processes we use (or the lack thereof), and the sociological and ethical implications of our new information age. Tied to this is, indeed, skill development, but within an environment in which students understand what they are working with and both acquire and use information with finesse.

### **Ten Reasons Why We Have to Teach Info Lit for Credit**

1. Information literacy is crucial to a full education.
2. Students need the skills to enable lifelong learning.
3. Skilled research is a crucial part of many careers.
4. Students are not learning good research skills with existing methods.
5. The complexity of the new information environment provides significant material for credit instruction.
6. We are paying a fortune for resources not being used to advantage.
7. The tools of research are complex.
8. Simplifying our tools for a lower level of skill is not working.
9. To learn research you must do research in a training mode.
10. Info lit is a credible academic subject.

#### **WHY THIS IS SO IMPORTANT**

You can see that I'm passionate about getting credit information literacy instruction onto our collective agenda. The reason seems obvious to me, but I'll spell it out. It is simply this: *Our information age is too complex and too important to all of us for half measures.* We can't keep sending out graduates with limited understanding and skills that are inadequate to handle the knowledge that is going to remain at the center of their careers.

We are dabbling, not because the information professionals (mainly librarians) have been lax, but because academia as a whole has not been paying attention to the problem. That enormous blind spot is going to bring great harm to a future increasingly determined by our ability to handle information well.

Information literacy can be taught successfully within credit-bearing vehicles—substantial portions of existing courses or stand-alone courses which are best lodged within subject disciplines. After 20-plus years of teaching such courses, I know that they work.

---

*William Badke (badke@twu.ca) is associate librarian at Trinity Western University and the author of Research Strategies: Finding Your Way Through the Information Fog, 3rd. ed. (iUniverse.com, 2008). Comments? Send email to the editor (marydee@xmission.com).*



## COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Ten Reasons to Teach Information Literacy for Credit  
SOURCE: Online 32 no6 N/D 2008

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited.