

Sharon Weiner

Information literacy

A call to action

2009 marked the 20th anniversary of the seminal report of the ALA Presidential Committee on Information Literacy. Since then, there have been many studies conducted to understand information-seeking behaviors. The newest report from Project Information Literacy, "Lessons Learned: How College Students Seek Information in the Digital Age," is a landmark study that confirms and expands on the results of other reports.

It affirms what we know from experience in working with students daily in library instructional settings and reference. At the same time, these results are quite troubling. Students think of the information-seeking process as a rote process: they use the same small set of information resources no matter what information question they have. They rely first on course readings and Google to find information for course work; they rely on professors as "research coaches" for identifying additional sources. They use Google and Wikipedia for research about everyday life topics. They tend not to use library services that require interacting with librarians, preferring to use online library resources. They learn about a small set of these resources during their first-year orientation, but they don't expand that set of resources or consult with librarians as they continue their education. And although they begin the research process engaged and curious, they become frustrated and overwhelmed as it unfolds.

We know that these behaviors affect the quality of the academic work that the students produce and, ultimately, their ability to find and use information competently once they graduate. However, these research findings

should motivate action, not despair. We can no longer ignore the growing body of evidence that there are deficits in college students' information-seeking behaviors. What should we do with this knowledge? How should we, as academic librarians, respond?

Information literacy is included in the standards for most regional and many programmatic accreditation agencies. President Obama declared October 2009 to be National Information Literacy Month; California's Governor Schwarzenegger issued an executive order in 2009 to establish an ICT Digital Literacy Leadership Council. These are levers that should ensure that information literacy is a universal student learning outcome.

So, why is information literacy not yet fully integrated in educational programs?

"Lessons Learned" raises questions about whose responsibility it is to integrate information literacy into college curricula. If it is a jointly shared responsibility between faculty and librarians, then how can we accomplish this in a systematic, comprehensive manner? Why have our efforts fallen short? What are the necessary conditions that generate success? The elephant in the room is that the report could lead short-sighted decision-makers to question whether there is even a need for reference and instruction librarians, given heavily strained budgets.

Most of all, this report should stimulate action. The evidence is clear. The way that

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things have been done in the past is not working. With this information, librarians can use their connections on campus, in the greater educational community, and in the policy world. We can lead initiatives that will make use of existing research and propose further studies that identify practical interventions that will develop information literacy competency. We can influence scientists and vendors to develop technology solutions that better synthesize, filter, and organize the volume of information available. We can create new organizational models for our libraries that make best use of our resources to more effectively accomplish the information literacy

agenda. We can partner with faculty, graduate students, and others who have teaching roles to coach them on teaching information literacy competencies.

Let's use this study to motivate new, nontraditional ways of thinking about the problem. Continuing to address information literacy issues of this magnitude in the same ways is not going to change the result.

Note

1. "Lessons Learned: How College Students Seek Information in the Digital Age" can be viewed at http://projectinfolit.org/pdfs/PIL_Fall2009_Year1Report_12_2009.pdf. 

("Old wine in new skins," continued from page 351)

be useful to group items as international, federal, state, etc.

Annotate

Annotations needn't be extensive. In fact, if they are, they are unlikely to be read. Write your annotations to answer the question, "Why would I want to visit this site?" You might also note the sponsorship or authorship of the Web site if this is not obvious from its title, as well as any limitations or restrictions on the site (e.g., "requires registration").

Keep it short

Long, multiscreen lists are not attractive. Trained by Google, users will focus on the first few links and give decreasing attention to those farther down the page.

Remember to weed your guide. Just as in the stacks, some materials become outdated and new materials become available. If you only add to your guide without subtracting, you will soon have a sprawling mess. As you review your guides, ask not only "Is this still relevant?" but also "Is this still the best?"

If you can't keep it short, make it modular

If you find that despite strict adherence to your collection development policy and vigilant weeding, your guide still sprawls,

your next option is to split up the guide into multiple pages. By splitting your guide into more narrowly targeted units, you make it easier to navigate and more attractive to patrons.

Keep a consistent look and feel

Ideally, authors of subject guides should be free from the burden of page design. While a basic knowledge of HTML is increasingly common among librarians, there is no reason for every subject specialist to be a Web author. There are specialized content management systems available, notably SubjectsPlus (open source) and LibGuides (commercial), which will allow librarians to construct subject guides by simply adding resources and annotations to a database. This approach offers a number of benefits: it separates the tasks of content authorship and design, it facilitates updating of sources by letting multiple guides point to a single entry in the database, and it ensures consistency among all of a library's Web guides.

But make it unique

The dark side to consistency is boredom. If your system allows, it's a good idea to add something so that your guide doesn't look

(continues on page 373)

Inseparable: A Faculty-Librarian Teaching Team," *Research Services Review* 23 (1995): 51-62, 53.

3. James K. Elmborg, "Libraries and Writing Centers in Collaboration: A Basis in Theory," *Centers for Learning: Writing Centers and Libraries in Collaboration*, ed. James K. Elmborg and Sheril Hook (Chicago,

IL: American Library Association, 2005), 1-20, 11.

4. Leslie Foutch and others, eds. "How to Embed a Librarian," *Proceedings of the 35th National LOEX Library Instruction Conference*, San Diego, ed. Brad Sietz (Ypsilanti, MI: LOEX Press, 2009), 51-56, 52.

5. *Ibid.*, 52. ¶

("Old wine in new skins," continued from page 357)

exactly like all the others. Adding a graphic can provide a mnemonic signpost for repeat visitors: "Oh, yes, *this* is the page that I found that on."

Conclusion

A thoughtful and well-maintained subject guide can be a valuable resource for library users and an excellent marketing tool for the institution. The rules above can serve

as guidelines to keep your guides relevant and informative.

Note

1. The URL "whitehouse.com" is alleged to have once pointed to a pornographic Web site. This made it an illustration in early information literacy materials of the importance of domain names. ¶

("Lessons from the fiction desk," continued from page 359)

we used some of the "experimental" budget on board games that can be checked of the library. Each of these is an inexpensive way to improve the image of the library while fostering the college's emphasis on community building.

The public library is academic library "prep school." While academic librarians are interested in their patrons' high school experience with databases and research papers, there is little discussion about incoming students' use of their local public libraries before entering college. Because some high schools do not have librarians, a first-year student's primary experience might very well be their public library.

Prior to my volunteer experience, I was surprised when new college students presented me with lists of titles to look up for them. I was happy to take the time to teach them, but assumed that if they did not know the online catalog was available to all patrons, it was because they had little to no library experience. While this could be the case with some, my volunteer experience taught me that the student might have had a great deal of experience at a high-

service library such as AHML. Academic librarians will now teach them how to find resources on their own, but their positive experiences at public library service desk certainly played a role in their willingness to ask for help.

Volunteering at a public library offered me a broader and very reassuring look at libraries and librarianship. It also provided free lessons in creative marketing and collection management.

While public libraries' top priority may not be scholarly research, the positive impression of libraries they offer their patrons could be even more beneficial to academic libraries in the long run. They create users who view librarians as helpful individuals who create engaging, dynamic environments.

Once a specialty I avoided, I now equate public librarianship with linking patrons to cutting-edge collections using high-quality service, and innovative marketing. By building relationships with our public library counterparts, academic librarians can learn how to better serve our patrons and predict their expectations. ¶