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PEER REVIEWED



Teaching Government Information in Information Literacy Credit Classes

By Emily Rogers

Information literacy courses are a fixture of the instruction programs of many academic libraries. While the single 50- or 75-minute “one-shot” session offers little time to introduce a range of resources, the for-credit information literacy course, usually taught by librarians, is a prime opportunity for students to develop their information literacy skills and familiarity with tools for research. A major goal of information literacy instruction is to enable lifelong learning, through which individuals continue to locate and apply information from appropriate sources after they graduate. Because government resources offer data that students will have access to once they graduate, unlike subscription resources, government information tools are a vital part of information literacy instruction for lifelong learning. If our desired learning outcomes include building research skills beyond the classroom, teaching government information resources within the term-long environment is vital for developing students who can independently access authoritative and available information.

Introductory instruction sessions are unlikely to include more than a cursory look at government information sources. If reference, instruction, and information literacy librarians are committed to assisting students in developing lifelong research skills, then government information research should be a vital part of advanced learning opportunities, such as the for-credit course. Yet for a number of reasons, government information, if included at all, often appears in a for-credit course almost as an afterthought, once students have become acquainted with other skills and sources. Even though I have had a career-long interest in

government documents, I too have failed to take full advantage of this teaching opportunity. For me, government resources often fade to the background when I am teaching a for-credit information literacy course. I focus on them only after introducing other types of resources: encyclopedias, other reference tools, databases, and web searching. Given the wealth of subscription resources, and librarians’ enthusiasm for sharing them with our patrons, I suspect many of us unintentionally short-change freely available government information resources.

This paper briefly reviews the background on credit-bearing information literacy courses and on government information instruction. I have polled colleagues who teach credit-bearing information literacy courses and in this essay present their responses, focusing especially on the ways they include government information resources in such classes. I then argue that understanding how to find and use government information is necessary for achieving lifelong information literacy competence. A focus on government information as critical thinking and subject access tools, rather than as unique documents collections or formats, can help remove barriers for researchers, particularly in classes that allow students an entire term to develop skills. In addition, librarians will develop ways to teach students to use these resources within a meaningful context for their research. The ability to find, evaluate, and effectively use government information resources will empower students to become lifelong learners and seekers, whatever their post-graduation information needs may be.

Literature Review

The literature showed a recent increase in articles and books treating for-credit information literacy classes. First, Nancy Goebel and Paul Neff (2007) distinguished information literacy from traditional bibliographic instruction by the former's "coverage over a longer period of time" and "emphasis on critical thinking and evaluation skills" (p. 8). Craig Gibson's (2008) history of the development of information literacy efficiently traced the development of curriculum-based information literacy. Sara Holder (2010) concisely reviewed the evolution of the rationale for and development of for-credit library skills courses, which can serve as the platform of an entire information literacy instruction program, as at the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta (Goebel & Neff, 2007). Since ACRL's 2000 approval of the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, the for-credit information literacy course has become a wide-spread means of incorporating information literacy into curricula. Christopher V. Hollister's edited collection *Best Practices for Credit-Bearing Information Literacy Courses* (2010) demonstrated the range of for-credit classes: discipline-specific or interdisciplinary; online, hybrid, or face-to-face; librarian-taught or collaborative; and in settings from the freshman writing program to graduate disciplines.

Perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of the content of credit-bearing library skills courses, at least as presented within the course syllabus, is Paul L. Hrycaj's analysis of 100 online syllabi for such courses (2006). His study traced how the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education are reflected in the content of for-credit library research course syllabi. According to Hrycaj's data, only 38 of the 100 syllabi he reviewed specifically mention government documents among the course topics (2006). Hrycaj admitted, however, that his study demonstrated only what each syllabus mentions explicitly, so this number is unlikely to

reflect adequately the extent to which government information appears even within this selection of classes.

When it is included, government information is often taught in isolation, as a unique collection or format, but librarians with an interest in documents have also explored other approaches. Judith Downie (2004) lamented that government information sources often fail to receive any attention during librarian-taught sessions and called for additional training of teaching librarians to address these sources. Since 1979 the Pennsylvania State University Libraries have offered a regular credit course on federal and legal information resources. Such focused courses not only build students' skills for their college work; this instruction also serves to cultivate "life-long learners of their government, its policies, and its practices" (Sheehy & Cheney, 1997, p. 327). Further recognition of the value of including government information for life-long learning comes from the Political Science Research Competency Guidelines (2008). These guidelines identify understanding government information sources such as statistics, Congressional hearings, and government policies as vital for competence in conducting political science research, achieving information literacy, and developing long-term skills. Emphasizing critical thinking skills, Karen Hogenboom (2005) argued for the teaching of government information in a variety of instruction settings for these sources' value as evaluation and rhetorical analysis tools that likewise can serve learners throughout their post-college years.

While documents librarians might dream of having an entire semester course devoted to government information research, more common teaching experiences include reference desk interactions and one-shot sessions; similarly, for-credit courses usually need to cover a variety of formats and potential subjects. Three models for presenting government information include 1) a

traditional explanation of government organization and the processes of creating, distributing, and retrieving these resources; 2) an emphasis on the information cycle or timeframe of publication; or 3) a critical thinking approach (Hogenboom & Woods, 2007). Noting that “government information is one area that touches all disciplines,” Downie (2007) called for government information specialists to collaborate with other librarians to show that government publications inform a range of disciplines and instruction opportunities (p. 124). Thura Mack and Janette Prescod (2008) also called for government information to move beyond collections to the public service and information literacy contexts.

Based on evidence of little change in social scientists’ citation of government resources from the 1980s to the early 2000s, Debra Cheney (2006) argued convincingly for teaching government information within the context of subject disciplines collections. Cheney called for a new model in which librarians “integrat[e] government information into a library’s collections and services in a manner that is meaningful to today’s researchers” (p. 304) and emphasized how the disciplinary expertise of subject librarians can enhance researchers’ understanding of ways to locate and apply government information. Further, this disciplinary approach is actually more compatible with the last decade’s emphasis on information literacy and critical thinking than a focus in the past on government structure, format, and collections in reference and instruction (Cheney, 2006).

What is actually going on in credit-bearing information literacy classes? When librarians are teaching about government information, how are they presenting these sources? This exploratory qualitative report, based on a 2011 questionnaire, reveals some teaching patterns and attitudes about government information resources within the credit information literacy course setting.

Methodology

This questionnaire was distributed to subscribers to the very active Information Literacy and Instruction (ili-l) listserv. This list is the one most likely to reach librarians who teach for-credit courses in information literacy and/or library skills because it is run by the Instruction Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries, a division of ALA. The questionnaire included questions about the types of institutions served, how recently the respondent completed the Master’s in library science degree, and length of time respondents had taught IL/LI credit courses. Many of the remaining questions focused on the content of the IL/LI courses, especially on the extent to which librarians included government information, and on the respondents’ government information training. For the purposes of this research, most interesting were how the courses were organized, where government information fell within the course schedule, which, and to what extent, government information sources found coverage, and the extent that these teachers feel comfortable covering government information resources in these courses. This questionnaire also asked if the respondents teach government information as a unique unit and, if so, for how much time during the semester.

One shortcoming of this questionnaire is that it is impossible to determine the number of possible respondents; the questionnaire focused upon not the 5000+ members of the ili-l listserv, but the subset among subscribers who also teach information literacy and library instruction courses. The 69 responses clearly do not represent a significant portion of these possible respondents. The report of these responses serves instead as a snapshot for identifying current IL/LI teaching practices with government information within the for-credit course and to provide some background for proposing an alternative teaching method.

Findings

This questionnaire gathered responses from a range of academic librarians teaching IL/LI credit courses. The majority of respondents (60.9%) teach at colleges or universities offering undergraduate and graduate programs, with 20.3% teaching at four-year undergraduate institutions, 15.9% at two-year schools, and 2.9% at other institutions (in these cases, for-profit educational institutions). Most (42%) had received the library science Master's degree more than 10 years ago, with 21.7% within 2-5 years; 20.3% within 6-10 years; and 11% fewer than 2 years ago. The majority of respondents have at least two years' experience teaching credit IL/LI courses: 33.8% have taught the courses for 2-5 years; 32.4% for less than 2 years; 17.6% for 6-10 years; and 16.2% for more than 10 years. Other demographic questions about the respondents and their institutions include whether or not the library is a member of the Federal Depository Library Program (59.4% were), and if the respondent's library has a government information specialist (65.6% did). These responses show that most of the respondents are well-initiated into the information literacy credit course teaching experience.

These respondents most commonly organize the content of their information literacy or library skills courses based on types and formats of resource, such as reference books, newspaper articles, peer-reviewed journals, etc., as in my own previous experience with these courses. Only a few presently organize these courses by disciplinary subjects such as literature, education, and the sciences. The most frequently mentioned other method of organization is by steps in the research process: from identifying a topic through finding, evaluating, and documenting sources. Several respondents structure the course around concepts such as the information production, distribution, and evaluation process or by the ACRL Information Literacy Standards.

Do government resources usually appear as a distinct unit within the for-credit course? This practice seems most common, with librarians devoting one week or one class period, or one module in an online course, to government information resources. Almost all of these teaching librarians postpone covering government information until the second or final third of the term, which increases the likelihood that government resources might be skipped altogether. In fact, several librarians among these respondents do not focus on government resources at all. (I wonder here if they do teach individual government reference books such as *Homicide in the United States*, or web sites such as the National Center for Education Statistics, without emphasizing to the students that these tools are government information sources).

Even if not taught as a unique unit, government resources are popular for use in teaching evaluation, according to these respondents. Teaching about government information as evaluation can be as limited as training students to recognize and search within the .gov domain. In addition to finding authoritative web sites from the federal government, students in these classes also encounter government information when they evaluate web sites, search engine results, or sources more generally. Other means of including government information within course material include as part of reference or ready reference sources, as part of a broader unit or as examples within other units, as well as alongside fee-based resources. Several respondents mention that they incorporate these sources into the research process and include government resources in class work on documentation and citation.

Types of sources - by format and by jurisdiction - vary according to ease of availability. In cases where government resources are available both in print and online, respondents overwhelmingly prefer to present the online versions, though some still choose to present both print and online government resources.

None of these teachers presents print-only format when online is also available.

Jurisdiction coverage likewise seems connected to online availability, with federal, state, international, and local resources receiving attention, in that order. Some teachers also identify tribal resources and distinguish United Nations resources from international resources. Individual sources presented in classes include the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*; USA.gov; Census resources such as American FactFinder and the Economic Census; Congressional resources such as Thomas.gov; health resources such as CDC.gov, PubMed, and Medline; the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*; Science.gov; FDsys/GPO Access; major statistical sources such as the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Uniform Crime Report; the Library of Congress; the National Archives and Records Administration; the Congressional Research Service; and United Nations data and the CIA World Factbook. Many of these resources have applicability for particular disciplines, and one respondent focuses directly on federal and state web sites that support students' majors.

Most interesting for purposes of this paper are the subject-specific ways some teachers identify for including government resources in their courses. Government resources are regularly taught within units about education, medicine, and statistics. One librarian's broader unit on governmental policy issues such as open government, the Freedom of Information Act, the Patriot Act, and copyright also offers a setting for introducing government resources. Other responses include using government information as important sources for statistics, career and job tools, and primary sources. One unique response identifies teaching government resources as a means for "evaluating truth." Another teacher specifies introducing government resources according to students' research needs as based on their research questions. This last response also suggests some demand for greater subject-

specific awareness of government information sources.

One of the strongest arguments for refocusing how information literacy courses cover government information is the lack of confidence many librarian teachers feel when they need to address government resources in their information literacy courses. While only a few of the respondents depend on an outside specialist to present government materials to their classes, many admit to feeling less than confident teaching these resources. Even if most teachers include government resources material within their classes, they do not necessarily have strong training. A number have almost no training in this body of information, though most have had MLIS program courses or professional development encounters with government resources. These librarians have also gained government information expertise through graduate school or paraprofessional positions in library government documents departments, undergraduate research courses in legal and government sources, and past or present experience managing government documents collections.

Despite having experience with teaching and in some cases working with government resources, respondents reported a wide range of comfort levels with teaching government information. While few are very uncomfortable with this material, few report a high level of confidence. No matter what their level of comfort, most respondents feel they would benefit from additional training in or experience with government information. The top options for such training are surveys or lists of the types of information available and publishing frequency of various sources, free or inexpensive online introductory workshops or webinars, and targeted webinars for specialized resources such as American FactFinder or subjects such as Education or Health and Human Services.

Discussion

As the responses to this questionnaire show, there is no one standard method for teaching about government information resources in for-credit information literacy classes, and teachers vary widely in their training and confidence. Often government information appears almost as an afterthought, as another type of resource to pursue mainly for statistics or web site authority, once a class has become familiar with the traditional reference sources, subscription databases, journals, and print and electronic books that are usually taught early in a course. The full potential for teaching about government information has not yet been realized in these credit courses, and the varied methods for presenting government information further dilute the potential strength of these resources. It is not the purpose here to suggest that information literacy courses need a uniform approach to presenting government information. But reconsidering how librarians present these sources can offer another method of teaching and learning about government information that serves both teacher and student. The traditional means of teaching government resources as evaluating source authority or as organized by the processes of government leaves too much valuable material unaddressed, especially in an era when we aim to teach information literacy and library skills for life, not just for the college years. A new organizational strategy, focusing on disciplines such as biological sciences, hard sciences, social sciences, and humanities subjects, rather than on levels of government, can make government resources more accessible for both teacher and student, especially in lower-level courses.

Many reference and instruction librarians, especially those providing traditional on-demand service at a reference desk or virtually, must respond to questions in almost any subject area, even if these librarians also function as subject specialists for liaison or collection development duties. Because most

teaching librarians and potential teachers of information literacy credit courses are not government information specialists, another method besides a focus on government resources as federal, state, local, or international sources seems overdue. Other than questions that directly involve the processes of government, which might be addressed as easily by a political science specialist as by a government information librarian, many questions that can draw upon government information sources fall within a wide range of subjects: education, health, labor, the environment, criminal justice, population, geology, finance, and many more. Librarians accustomed to dealing with a variety of subjects, both in reference and instruction settings, might feel more confident considering government information by subject than by source or format of the information. It is easy, for instance, to sort the list of most commonly taught resources from above—some of which overlap with the FDLP's Essential Titles list for Federal Depository Libraries—into a subject arrangement, along with search tools such as USA.gov and FDsys.

A revised information literacy course could cover multiples types of information resources grouped by subject instead of format. For instance, a unit on business resources might include newspapers such as the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Financial Times*, Hoover's, Edgar, and the Economic Census. Science and technology resources could include sources such as Science.gov, EPA reports and online data, NASA, and the U.S. Geological Survey along with fee-based databases such as Environment Complete and GeoRef. The major education database is still ERIC, a government resource, and familiarity with the free online version along with commercial versions would benefit graduates once they no longer have subscription database access. Even those resources such as hearings and laws that seem to fall outside of typical subject units will often be most accessible through subject searching,

especially in online catalogs for cataloged documents collections.

Such grouping of government information resources alongside other major information tools by subject will help teachers resist the temptation to try to cover all government resources in one class period or unit, or the tendency to relegate government information to late in the semester—or out of the course altogether. As long as teachers point out the open access resources, students will learn about freely available resources in the context of how they are most likely to need information: by subject, rather than by branch of government or as a confusing gathering of government information sources all at once on a wide variety of subjects. While librarians might be aware that much information is available by subject by going to specific federal agencies, it is less important that student researchers know that they seek Census or weather information from the Department of Commerce. What is vital is that students know they can access reliable and free information on most subjects and that they do not lose authoritative resources when they are no longer students.

The importance of emphasizing the subject over the format or type of source makes me recall my early, pre-librarianship teaching career. I once required a freshman composition class to include a variety of print and online resources, including a government source, in their annotating bibliographies and research papers. My novice teaching role and limited knowledge made this task an exercise in frustration as students struggled to locate government sources for the sake of the citations. One student who had witnessed how hospice care had helped ease the pain of her grandmother's terminal illness, however, avidly researched the availability of hospice treatment. Among books and scholarly articles in psychology and health, her references included congressional hearings featuring the testimony of physicians, social workers, and family survivors. None of these

sources had to be forced to “fit” her subject. She located them through keyword and subject OPAC searches; the fact that they were government publications was peripheral to the value of the information they contained.

This student reminded me that the source must suit the information need and the research subject. Format is far less important than content. While knowledge of the variety of formats and venues for books, periodicals, and other sources is important, the topic should drive the research. The for-credit information literacy course is a prime opportunity to introduce students to a range of sources and help them interact with them more than superficially. Often for-credit instruction courses focus on a type of format or source per week, but we should now apply other structures to this content. In a discipline-specific course, such as one for the sciences, the librarian teacher could present resources in biology one week, then agriculture, then geology, emphasizing major resources within each subject, including available government information. Discovering that AGRICOLA, for instance, is useful for both biology and agriculture, or that ERIC can work for education, psychology, and communications research, allows students to develop subject and interdisciplinary awareness and locate authoritative and topic-specific information without turning intellectual somersaults to make the format fit the assignment.

In part, these examples demonstrate some of the barriers to teaching government resources in these courses. Some librarians, uncomfortable presenting government information resources, are willing to reassign that course duty to the documents librarian. Recreating a subject-focused course that introduces government information resources throughout the term requires rethinking the structure of the course itself. Students usually learn more successfully from within the context of a subject or a need, however, so such reworking is worth the effort. As Debora

Cheney (2006) argued, “social sciences researchers need instruction services that are less source-oriented, less government-oriented, and less collection-focused” and that focus more on “critical thinking within the context of a discipline” (p. 307). Such a disciplinary focus would benefit researchers in other fields in addition to the social sciences.

Calling for librarians to move beyond acceptance and collaboration, Stephanie Braunstein and Mitchell Fontenot (2010) described Louisiana State University’s for-credit LIS 1001 course as an example of information literacy instruction that intentionally incorporates government documents into the class. Fontenot’s enthusiasm for documents grew out of awareness that he, like many librarians, had neglected government information sources when he taught LIS 1001, but a “transformative” learning experience challenged him to rethink his approach and devote more time each term to government information. Stressing the “philosophical foundations of free government information” helped students learn about government publications for “both academic and personal research,” especially as “government information is available to them at any time in their careers and lives” (p. 152). Although her focus is not upon government resources, Lisa O’Connor (2009) likewise argued for a holistic approach to information literacy that develops not just skills for efficiency and job performance, but contributes to an educational system that can build an informed citizenry and civic engagement. Her critique of early conceptualizations of information literacy seeks to “affirm the need for such habits and abilities that empower people as they select and use information in their everyday lives” (p. 88). As a key to lifelong information literacy skills, government information is likewise another means of engaging learners, to which effective teaching of government information will contribute. I would argue that all source use, not just reliance on government information, should be organic and integrated, but an

awareness of government information sources over a variety of subjects offers the potential outcome of helping to develop well-informed, skeptical, and empowered citizens.

Conclusion

It is time for this change of emphasis to spread not only within services provided at the reference desk and in instruction sessions, but also within the planning and structure of credit-bearing information literacy courses. I call for us to advance the credit-bearing information literacy class beyond merely including or assigning one or two class periods to government information resources. We need to integrate government information resources fully into our course throughout the semester of instruction. We can and should seize the opportunities offered in the semester-long course for credit. If we limit our presentation of government information to pointing to a group of shelves, or a computer, and declaring that “the documents librarian can help you,” or to mentioning the .gov domain as a sign of authority, we diminish the use of valuable resources as well as our students’ development as independent life-long users of information. I further assert that a subject and interdisciplinary focus on government information best serves lifelong learning—one of the main goals of information literacy—and, indeed, citizenship.

The current research environment of keyword and federated searching and electronic publication does not facilitate presenting government information in isolation. After graduating, citizens and residents are unlikely to think of answering a question or satisfying an information need as “I need a book” or “a newspaper article,” but “I need information about this subject,” whatever the format. If we base our presentation of government information as subject resources throughout the term, we will enhance their value to researchers and their use. Because they offer ways and reasons to evaluate authority,

audience, and bias, government information resources can not only provide lifelong access to information, but also help us cultivate the inner resources to question and evaluate the nature of information. The ways we teach about government information resources in the information literacy course should reflect the

multidisciplinary ways such information appears in the world around us.

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