Do Faculty Know "IL"?: Information Literacy Understandings and General Education Student Learning Outcomes

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Information literacy (IL) is part of the language of academic instruction librarians. Our day-to-day work lives are permeated with the overarching goal of creating information literate university communities. At URI we have advocated for years for IL through course-integrated sessions, credit-bearing library courses, and our service on faculty teaching committees. Thus, though not fully fluent in IL, our campus constituencies are recognizing its value. A new General Education (GE) program gave us the opportunity to further infuse IL instruction across campus.

In the Fall 2016 semester, the University of Rhode Island (URI) began implementing an assessment-based general education program (University of Rhode Island Academic Advising, 2016). The four-year program includes twelve student learning outcomes (SLOs) with a total of 40 credits and students must complete a minimum of three credits per SLO. The SLOs are grouped into four areas: Knowledge, Competencies, Responsibilities, and Integration, and each course addresses two SLOs. The IL SLO is included in the Competencies area, where it stated students must complete coursework that develops their ability to "independently research complex issues." (University of Rhode Island, n.d.).

This article will outline the development of the new GE program, explain materials being used for the approval process, and share the experience we have had applying the materials. Most importantly, this article will share what we have learned about the extent of discipline faculty's knowledge of information literacy, the guidance provided to them by the IL Review Panel, and the challenges and rewards of this experience. Finally, the article will discuss changes in perception, attitudes, and what we have learned throughout this process.

The Evolution and Implementation of the New GE Program

The University's previous GE program included Information Technology as an "Integrated Skill," meaning students learned how to use computers and evaluate websites as part of their course work. In Spring 2010, a librarian on the General Education Committee (GEC), with the support of other faculty on campus who saw the value of an approach not solely focused on technology, was able to change the skill to IL.

Then, in 2013, librarians at URI developed an IL rubric to both advocate for IL on campus and to show faculty how they were already incorporating IL in their courses, but it wasn't widely recognized or utilized across the curriculum. The rubric provided a formal definition of IL and made clear how it could be assessed.

The librarian who served on the GEC also served on the task force that planned the new GE program, and in Spring 2014, the URI Faculty Senate approved the set of twelve SLOs that, after some hard work and fine-tuning, became the core of the new University GE Program. Librarians have long sought to incorporate IL in a meaningful and effective way, such as through library GE credit courses and other programmatic information literacy instruction, but students would also clearly benefit from learning and practicing information literacy throughout their discipline-specific academic programs.

During development of the new GE program, the Libraries' Head of Instructional Services was asked to propose strategies for incorporating the IL SLO. Ideas included scaffolded one-shots through academic programs and courses, a graded information literacy tutorial, discipline-specific credit courses, and the University Libraries' own credit courses. The chair of the GEC was enthusiastic about all of the ideas, but the task force decided to use just the credit courses (discipline-specific and the Libraries'), as the other courses may have too many varying smaller elements to easily track and assess.

Once the program was approved, the Faculty Senate created a five-member general education steering team to work with all key stakeholders in the colleges and administration while the GEC approved new and revised courses and addressed myriad policy questions. There was a two-year window to implement the new program.

Given the hundreds of courses that would need approval for the new program, the steering team and the GEC created SLO Review Panels: expert faculty reviewers for course submissions under each SLO. Each panel included a representative of the GEC, a representative from the Curricular Affairs Committee (CAC), and an expert for that particular SLO. For IL, the SLO review panel consisted of the Libraries' GEC representative; the Libraries' CAC representative; and the Libraries' Head of Instruction as the outcome expert.

Reviewing proposals for the new General Education Program included learning GEC's course approval process—from proposal to approval. Faculty were asked to refer to SLO rubrics—designed by each SLO Review Panel for faculty to plan and design their courses—and then to submit their proposal package for the selected SLOs to the Faculty Senate office. Submissions included the instructor's course syllabus along with completed templates, which were designed by the University Office for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning. These templates map course pedagogy to the master rubrics. Each course proposal explained how the instructor would address each IL rubric element as a specific course outcome, where it would be taught in the course content, and how students would learn and practice the element.

The information literacy rubric developed at URI in 2013 was used as the model for all other general education SLOs (Kinnie, MacDonald & Finan, 2013) because it was designed and piloted by subject faculty across disciplines. The IL Review Panel modified the original rubric to fit the specific needs of the Gen Ed Program outcomes (see **here**). Following the

model of the AAC&U's VALUE rubrics, all URI General Education rubrics include framing language, definitions, as well as the competency-level assessment rubric.

In summer and fall of 2015 the steering team and the GEC held a series of workshops for faculty interested in proposing modified or new course proposals for inclusion in the new General Education Program. Representatives of each SLO review panel were available to answer questions and to consult with faculty. In Fall 2015, the work of reviewing course proposals commenced.

Approving the Proposals

Once the Faculty Senate office forwarded along the required documentation, the panel's first step in the review process was a close reading of the proposed course syllabus, followed by a detailed review of the IL Rubric, looking for a meaningful assignment as evidence that IL had been integrated into the course. The panel approved courses that met the requirements outlined by the framing language and the rubric elements.

Two successful examples were ENGLISH 368: *The Bible* (ENG 368) and HISTORY 146: *U.S. Women's History 1890-present* (HIS 146). The syllabus for ENG 368 outlined the IL outcomes clearly, and wove them into the research paper assignment so that students could see the connection between their work on the assignment and the broader IL concepts. Critically evaluating and citing sources, for example, were not just mandates, but were part of enhancing students' overall critical thinking abilities, and helping them to "support… ideas with evidence and revise those ideas in light of other evidence or other ideas" (Stein, 2015, p. 4). The other course, HIS 146, used a biographical oral history project as the basis for developing IL skills. To provide social and historical context for the interviews students would later conduct, students needed to locate relevant primary sources, consider the relevance, accuracy, and purpose of those sources, and cite them appropriately. Additionally, these IL skills provided the basis for further research into the roles of individuals in the political process and social change.

Alternately, an example of a course that was not approved had assignments that asked students to develop a glossary of terms or definitions from a foreign language dictionary. These are both useful for reinforcing content, but do not offer practice in IL skills and concepts. Other rejected courses included research assignments where students did not have a chance to develop IL skills before project completion.

The chair of the IL Review Panel was responsible for communicating the panel's decisions, comments, and recommendations to the course proposers. Responses to proposals that did not pass on the first submission included all of the following suggestions from the panel.

- Steps to take in order to enrich or strengthen the proposal, generally in the specific course outcome, but most often this dealt with evidence of student practice (before the final assignment was due).

- Recommendations to read the framing language and the

full-length rubric in order to put IL in the context of their specific course.

- Offers to meet with the IL Review Panel, or just one member, to consult on the proposal.

- A link to our *Information Literacy Toolkit* (Kinnie & MacDonald, 2013) that provides examples for both IL exercises and assignments

The IL Review Panel reviewed 56 course proposals overall. Most submissions were sent back for minor adjustments and clarifications. Other courses needed more significant modifications and, after these were completed, most were accepted.

The Post-Mortem

The IL SLO Review Panel completed its work at the end of the Spring 2016 semester. Future proposals will be handled by the full GE Committee, which is the traditional process for course approval.

Just as faculty learned more about IL during the submission process, the IL panel was struck by the number of different assignments faculty had created that were great examples of incorporating IL. In courses ranging from *Introduction to Costume History*, to *Volcanoes and the Environment*, and *Color Science* to *Vaccines and Society*, faculty typically submitted proposals with care and creativity.

We had confidence in the framing language materials and the IL rubric. What surprised us was that many of the proposals showed a lack of understanding of IL concepts, or did not identify the skills and tools necessary to bring the learning outcome to fruition. Some faculty are not familiar with the term or concepts of information literacy as a critical skill that needs to be developed. Many faculty assume that students naturally develop IL skills before they enter college. Faculty were also surprised that their brief instructions on how to use information sources in student assignments were not sufficient to support student success. Once they identified IL elements in their course, included IL skills practice, and developed an assessment, the course was ready for approval. As a result, faculty who revised and returned their proposals did so with a greater understanding of IL and were successful.

Our individual experiences with teaching credit courses were beneficial to this process when we submitted our own proposals. Two Library courses, *LIB 120: Introduction to Information Literacy*, and *LIB 220: Issues of the Information Age* were modified for the new General Education Program. A new course, *LIB 250: Information Research Across Disciplines*, was added to the offerings. Even with our in-depth knowledge of IL, following course proposal instructions was informative and eye opening, as our courses incorporated additional SLOs outside of IL (such as Write Effectively, Communicate Effectively, and Civic Knowledge and Responsibilities). For example, LIB 120 was put forward for the Communicate Effectively SLO; however, it was returned to the instructor as it needed evidence that students would learn active listening techniques and identify target audiences for the required presentations.

the event in advance. From spacing to scheduling to marketing, academic librarians will need to manage these activities in order to support this kind of collaboration. During the actual event, if there are many students requesting help, it may be useful to group students together to create a peer-learning environment and to alleviate the traffic.

In future sessions, the library at Fresno State will continue to partner with the Writing Center to host these activities but will expand it in a number of ways. One approach is through curriculum mapping: identifying course syllabi that require research or writing assignments in advance and informing the instructors about these events. The library will also encourage international students to attend the write-in since it can be a very helpful service for students who may not be familiar with U.S. academic writing (as shown by recent write-in events at institutions like Bowdoin and Swarthmore). Overall, the write-in event fostered new dialogue and opportunities for students, the library and the Writing Center at Fresno State. The write-in became a holistic service to students and allowed them to recognize how important the library and Writing Center can be for their academic needs.

What's Next

Future plans for librarians include participating in the GE Program through teaching, supporting, and assessing the new program. Additionally, the Subcommittee on Assessment of General Education (SAGE), has begun a pilot project for academic years 2016-2018 that will assess three SLOs per semester to test the submission process and to evaluate each rubric's efficacy. For the IL SLO, twenty IL courses are being assessed during the 2016-2017 academic year.

The IL panel's experiences revealed areas for rubric improvement. The following changes may prevent confusion and lay the foundation for a smoother process:

- Add specifics relating to the quantity and quality of information literacy practice in courses. For example, some proposals contained small, superficial, or isolated exercises that did meet most criteria, but were not challenging or integrated into larger projects.
- Clarify that information literacy does not mean being literate about the content of the course. Instead, it requires a deep understanding of how information to support and enhance course content is found, evaluated, and used.
- Rewrite the IL rubric reflecting the new ACRL Framework for Information Literacy. While the Framework was filed in January 2015, URI's General Education work was already well underway and many faculty were familiar with our 2013 rubric.

In closing, it is clear that information literacy at the University of Rhode Island is firmly integrated in the General Education Program. IL stands equally with STEM, Social Science, Arts & Design, Humanities, Writing, Communication, Diversity and Inclusion, and Civic Responsibility.

However, in retrospect, this process highlighted deep and important differences in how subject faculty and librarians see IL, differences that might not have surfaced if the process of making the elements of IL explicit hadn't taken place. Librarians see IL as entwined with the subject content, while faculty still often see it as a tangential subset of their course content. While understanding the vocabulary of a discipline can be an element of IL, it isn't in itself IL. Finally, the approval process opened new dialogues between faculty—who were eager but inexperienced in the area—and our experienced practitioners. It is our hope that in the future, students in an introductory course would no longer arrive at the Library looking for an article without an understanding of the greater context of the task; instead, they would be primed to conduct their searches more deliberately, think more deeply about the issues surrounding the information they have gathered, and cite their sources with a greater understanding of the scholarly dialogue. Knowing that IL supports students in all subject areas, we took many small steps—from advocating for IL in course-integrated sessions to connecting with like-minded faculty on committees—and those led to the current widespread integration of IL concepts in the curriculum.

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