Information Literacy Programming for Theatre and Dance Students at Western Michigan University

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The performing arts of dance and theatre present many information challenges for performers, directors, producers, and others involved in the field. For example, performing artists will need to obtain the rights to perform someone else's work, protect copyright for their own work, write justifications for grant applications, research various interpretations of a play or dance, share the cultural and historical context of the work with their audience, and so on. For this reason, academic programs should integrate information literacy into their curricula in order to properly prepare students for future professional work.

Although many colleges and universities in the United States have performing arts programs, there appears to be a significant difference in how the information literacy literature has developed within different departments of these programs. While music librarians have developed robust information literacy curricula and a body of scholarship, there has been very little research done by academic librarians on the application of information literacy for theatre or dance students. In fact, as of March 2017, a search of the databases *Library, Information Science, and Technology Abstracts* and *Library Literature and Information Science Index* found only two scholarly articles that addressed the substantive unique information literacy needs of students— and other practitioners—in theatre or in dance[1]. Faced with this gap in the academic literature, librarians at Western Michigan University (WMU), over the course of several years, developed on their own a new model to integrate information literacy across the theatre and dance curricula, while responding to the unique expectations and experiences of student performers and technicians. Like many efforts to integrate information literacy into academic curricula, connections between librarians and the faculty who teach courses in theatre and dance evolved over time. As WMU librarians began to work more intensively with these faculty and their students, they were able to use instructional design principles to reexamine the role of information literacy in each course, and to modify lessons so that the information literacy concepts taught in each course supported the others. This paper will describe the process of working with faculty to incorporate information literacy into each course, summarize the lessons and activities, and show how the current iteration connects to the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (hereinafter *Framework*).

Theatre

In 2009, librarians at WMU established a strong relationship with two faculty members in the theatre department who teach theatre history, production, and script analysis. These two faculty, believing that information literacy was essential for students to succeed in both their academic and professional lives, worked with librarians to integrate information literacy instruction into four courses. While the first course is only required for some students, the other three courses are required for nearly all students majoring in theatre. Since students typically take these courses in a predetermined sequence, this provides a ready collaboration opportunity for librarians and faculty to scaffold information literacy throughout the theatre major undergraduate experience.

The first course, THEA 1150 - Introduction to Theatre Production, must be taken by all Theatre Design and Technical Production majors during their first year. With tasks in these areas in mind, librarians developed a lesson to connect information literacy to the "real world" of these students; this lesson has since been linked to the frame "Research as Inquiry." Students come to the library for an information literacy workshop and are grouped according to their area of interest in theatre production and are given the first few pages of the script of a play (*Miss Julie* by August Strindberg, chosen in consultation with the faculty member for its setting and extensive stage notes), and are told to imagine that they are producing a historically accurate play (*Miss Julie* is set in a country manor house in 1880s Sweden). Students identify research questions based on ideas and physical items described in the play and then explore a wide variety of visual and textual resources, including some primary sources. Depending on their area of interest, each group investigates period-appropriate topics such as gas-powered lighting, weather and climate, embroidery patterns, furniture, dance, and fashion. Students complete a worksheet and share their results with the class. The librarian leads brief discussions of each group's work in which students are challenged to ask increasingly complex research questions based on their findings. This results in students not only identifying relevant research questions in a professional scenario (producing a historically accurate play), but also gaining familiarity with the types of resources needed to answer those questions. However, since not all theatre students are required to complete this particular course, we are currently exploring opportunities to work with other first year courses in the theatre department to integrate these information literacy concepts into their curricula. We are also careful to reinforce the concepts THEA 1150 in the subsequent courses.

In their second year, nearly all theatre majors are required take THEA 2700 - Script Analysis for Production. The assignment for this course that the faculty and librarians collaborate on is focused on visual research. The faculty member gives each student a setting for a staged production, such as "ancient temples in Mali" or "government office interiors" or "abattoirs." Students are tasked with creating a

collection of images —gathered from both online and print sources —which represent the play setting, evoke a particular theatrical mood, and show the setting with which the characters will interact. In a library workshop around the fourth week of the semester, librarians focus on the frame "Searching as Strategic Exploration" to introduce students to a variety of resources and techniques for searching for images. The lesson emphasizes the importance of brainstorming, breaking down and refining a topic, and using creative techniques to interpret a topic.

Students are encouraged to think creatively about the research process and their search terms, and to imagine ways that abstractions of topics, or component elements of topics might be represented pictorially. For the purposes of this exercise, they are directed to take into consideration images which inspire or evoke an emotion, in addition to depictions which might be more "accurate" from a literal perspective. For example, a production setting that students have researched in past years is "bridges and tunnels." In Figure 1, we see a literal photograph of a bridge. Figure 2 explores the world underneath a bridge, showing the tent of a presumably-homeless person who lives under the bridge. While there is no bridge physically present in Figure 3, this image adds to the characterization of a person who might live under the bridge in our hypothetical production.

Finally, during their junior year, theatre majors must complete a two-semester sequence of Theatre History, THEA 3700 and THEA 3710. The librarians and faculty have developed a schedule to integrate information literacy periodically throughout the two semesters. Students spend nearly eight months working on a substantial research project on a theatre or performance history topic, culminating in a 17-20 page paper. Students base their research on interpretation, analysis, and contextualization of primary historical documents. The librarians meet with the students several times: as a full class, in small groups, and individually. Librarians lead research instruction classes at the beginning of the two-course sequence, then later step back to a "consultant" role and work with students individually or in small groups. The faculty member also reinforces information literacy concepts in other class meetings. While librarians, of course, assist with locating research, these consultations often involve leading the students through the process of analyzing and synthesizing information, as well as workshopping thesis statements and arguments. The lessons build on work that students completed in the previous two years, and add new information literacy concepts from other Frames. Students engage with published scholarship on a focused historical topic, and explore the interactions between scholars who publish on related topics. They interrogate both complementary and contradictory arguments. After the publication of the *Framework*, we found that this aligned well with the frame "Scholarship as Conversation." Additionally, students address issues surrounding "Authority is Constructed and Contextual" through analysis of the social and cultural context of historical primary documents. Finally, students learn that "Information Creation is a Process" by tracing the evolution of scholarly arguments on a topic, as well as through ongoing revision of their own work as they develop their own arguments.

Figure 1   **Figure 2**   **Figure 3**
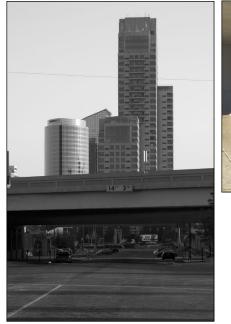
tings, students can also "flag" sections of the peer feedback with which they disagree thereby requesting review by the instructor. The instructor, upon their review, can add a comment about the feedback and if they concur that the original feedback was flawed, they can "override" the original response and it will be replaced.

Conclusion

Despite the potential benefits to student learning, setting up an effective and manageable peer evaluation system can be challenging. On a purely practical level, managing the process to ensure that everyone gives and receives feedback can be difficult, especially for large groups or classes. Because assignment submission, redistribution, and peer feedback with Peergrade are all handled online and largely automated, instructors can focus their attention on ensuring that students provide and receive high quality feedback, rather than on the administrative tasks typically involved in managing this type of assessment. In addition, Peergrade provides instructors with helpful analytics all in one place, such as how students performed both individually and overall (according to the peer reviewers).

In order for a peer review process to be successful, assessment criteria needs to be clearly defined, and students need to be coached on how to provide meaningful commentary. Since all assessments in Peergrade are rubric-based, instructors have the opportunity to clearly express the criteria and standards to be used when evaluating student work. Furthermore, the system is flexible enough to allow the creation of an exemplar assignment so that students can practice giving constructive feedback prior to engaging in the process with their classmates.

The effectiveness of peer assessment can by hampered by issues of bias (friends give friends good grades) due to peer pressure or fear of retaliation. In order for students to trust in the process, and provide accurate feedback, procedures need to be established to minimize these problems. Peergrade addresses them by randomly and anonymously distributing assessments to students for evaluation. Further, by allowing students to challenge feedback with which they disagree, requesting review and revaluation by their instructor, student confidence in the fairness of the process can be increased.

Although technology alone cannot fully address these challenges, the Peergrade system goes a long way towards mitigating many of the issues that instructors face in implementing a quality peer evaluation assignment. Give it a try, and I think you'll find that it is a useful tool for administering meaningful peer review assessments in support of student learning.

References

Peergrade. (2017). *Get started with Peergrade.* Retrieved from Peergrade: https://app.peergrade.io/courses?onboarding=1

Dance

Since 2014, the fine arts librarian has also offered information literacy workshops to several dance courses. Three of these occur at least annually and are requirements for graduation under both of the dance major degree programs at WMU. The current curriculum provides sequential information literacy instruction to dance majors as freshmen, as sophomores, and as juniors/seniors. In 2016, as was done with theatre classes, librarians aligned the lessons for each course with the *Framework*.

The information literacy session in DANC 1000 - First Year Performance, designed in collaboration with faculty, addresses the frames of "Searching as Strategic Exploration," and "Authority is Constructed and Contextual." The students come to the library for a workshop during their regular class period and are introduced to the task of finding high-quality dance-related video materials, reviews, and articles. Students learn how to search for materials that are important to the professional development of dancers, such as audio and video material, techniques for searching for reviews, and how to find guidance on creating citations according to MLA style. This is accompanied by a discussion of techniques for evaluating sources. As part of this one-shot workshop during class, students complete an online assessment of their knowledge of information literacy concepts and receive individual feedback from the fine arts librarian.

DANC 2450 - Ballet History, is usually taken during the sophomore year. Students write a short research paper on a ballet history topic that they choose from a list of pre-approved topics identified by their professor. This course, although it is taught by the dance department, focuses on topics of historical method and interpretation; for this reason, the information literacy concepts are similar to those commonly taught for other history courses. The information literacy session with the librarian helps students learn techniques for gathering and evaluating information to begin their research projects, addressing the frame "Searching as Strategic Exploration." The session focuses on teaching stu-

dents to explore multiple techniques for searching for information in different formats, and the best use of different search interfaces (including Library Search -- WMU Libraries' discovery tool, and specialized subject databases such as the *Performing Arts Periodicals Database*). They also learn different search techniques, including proper name searching using the database's controlled vocabulary. Before leaving the workshop, each student must locate and properly cite at least one such resource. This process of exploring discovery tools and databases to locate information resources engages students in a self-directed process of thoughtful, strategic, and iterative exploration. Although these information literacy concepts are not unique to dance, this course has provided an opportunity for librarians to engage with these students to ensure that they learn the information literacy concepts that are an important part of undergraduate education.

DANC 3450 - Twentieth Century American Dance, is a writing-intensive course typically taken during the junior or senior year. Students write a research paper for this course of 8-10 pages, using at least 10 scholarly sources as references to support their arguments. The information literacy session with the librarian for this course addresses the frames "Research as Inquiry" and "Information Has Value," and further develops students' competence in "Searching as Strategic Exploration." Prior to the library workshop, the faculty member directs students to individually explore the "America's Irreplaceable Dance Treasures" page on the Dance Heritage Coalition website (http://www.danceheritage.org/treasures.html) in order to engage with and explore topics that are potentially of interest to them. This website contains a collection of information about the major figures in American dance history. During the session with the librarian, students then learn some advanced techniques, such as Boolean searching, applying specialized limits in subject-specific databases, and using personal name authority records for finding and evaluating textual and media information through a variety of resources, including both general library discovery and specialized performing arts resources. Students also reinforce their knowledge of the importance of copyright and techniques for avoiding plagiarism, concepts which will be relevant regardless of their future professional plans.

Conclusions

Theatre and dance professionals will likely need to use information literacy skills to discover, reflect on, understand, and use information in their professional lives. While not explicitly named as "information literacy instruction," library instruction is a criterion for national accreditation of arts programs in the United States[2]. In addition, some regional accrediting bodies require information literacy or library instruction as part of undergraduate education[3], and

the Association of American Colleges and Universities has included information literacy as one of its Essential Learning Outcomes[4]. This emphasis on information literacy at the national level presents opportunities for librarians who work with arts programs to work with faculty to intentionally integrate information literacy into the curriculum.

The information literacy instruction programs for theatre and dance at Western Michigan University aim to reach students at multiple points during their studies, and to tie learning outcomes to the *Framework*. The programs are working toward a model that focuses on the application of information literacy beyond the academic classroom, in the unique professional world of the performing arts. Faculty have consistently demonstrated their belief that information literacy is a valuable addition to their curricula by routinely asking us to teach these sessions and conferring with us on way to adjust or expand the instruction to meet their and their students' needs.

The success of this program to integrate information literacy into the theatre and dance curricula lies in not only connecting information literacy to academic assignments, but also connecting it to the "real" work that students aspire to do professionally. Especially in the first two years, many performing arts students have difficulty connecting with work that is seen as purely academic. By introducing information literacy concepts through their professional applications, these programs are much more engaging—and occasionally even fun!

Footnotes

1   These two databases were chosen as core library and information science databases. The articles are Julia Furay, "Stages of Instruction: Theatre, Pedagogy and Information Literacy," *Reference Services Review* (2014) 42, no. 2: 209–28, doi:10.1108/RSR-09-2013-0047; and Jennifer Mayer, "Serving the Needs of Performing Arts Students: A Case Study," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* (2015) 15, no. 3: 409–31, doi:10.1353/pla.2015.0036

2   See II.G.5.a.(4) in the Standards for Accreditation in the Handbooks of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (https://nasad.arts-accredit.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2015/11/AD-Handbook-2016-2017.pdf), the National Association of Schools of Dance (https://nasd.arts-accredit.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2015/11/NASD_HANDBOOK_2016-17.pdf), the National Association of Schools of Music (https://nasm.arts-accredit.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/11/NASM_HANDBOOK_2016-17.pdf), and the National Association of Schools of Theatre (https://nast.arts-accredit.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2017/04/NAST_HANDBOOK_2017-18.pdf)

3   ACRL Instruction Section, "Information Literacy in the Disciplines: Regional Accreditation Standards." (2017)

4   LEAP Campaign, Essential Learning Outcomes: https://aacu.org/leap/essential-learning-outcomes)

Further Reading

http://libguides.wmich.edu/DANC2450

http://libguides.wmich.edu/DANC3450

http://libguides.wmich.edu/thea1150

http://libguides.wmich.edu/thea2700

http://libguides.wmich.edu/thea3700