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ENGAGING THE ACRL FRAMEWORK THROUGH SHORT STORIES AND DRAWING

DAVID J. BRIER AND VICKERY KAYE LEBBIN

INTRODUCTION

When we were young, we drew. As children, we read stories with illustrations. We delighted in both the text and the pictures and learned much from both. However, as we got older, we drew less and read fewer illustrated stories. By the time we got to high school, we didn't draw at all and we didn't read any illustrated stories.

To our college teachers, our undeveloped drawing skills went unnoticed. Few, if any, asked us to think and communicate through drawing. Thus our stunted ability to draw at an elementary school level went unexamined throughout our entire undergraduate and graduate academic careers. If, however, these same teachers discovered a similar elementary school proficiency in our math, writing, or reading skills, they would have been shocked, indignant, and concerned about our ability to succeed in college and in life. Not so with drawing.

Like many other fields, academic librarianship is a picture-free profession. Consequently, teaching students to learn through drawing does not seem relevant to the study of information literacy. While many librarians love reading, stories occur elsewhere. They are not often part of the instruction librarian's toolkit. For many, stories provide entertainment and insight but are not a tool to teach information literacy. With so much emphasis in library literature and conferences on the best tech tools to teach, it is no wonder that low-tech and no-tech methods such as drawing and stories are not frequently considered. The privileging of high-tech methods encourages librarians to focus on the tools rather than what is learned. This is counterproductive when it crowds out other no-tech or low-tech teaching methods.

This article encourages librarians to have their students think and communicate in drawing and through stories. We argue drawings and stories offer a way to playfully explore the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2015). Although we have already written about using drawing and stories as methods to teach information literacy (Brier & Lebbin, 2004, 2015, 2016), we have written about them as separate teaching methods. Here we discuss combining the two methods. Our continuing experiments with drawing and stories in our library instruction sessions revealed new opportunities to design exercises that, as the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* calls, "foster engagement" with higher forms of thinking and the deeper meanings of information literacy. As we have pointed out in our previous article on drawing (Brier & Lebbin, 2015), we are not arguing for librarians to teach how to draw. The beauty and skill of the drawings is not important. Nor are we arguing drawing and stories should take up the majority of class time. We are encouraging librarians to supplement their lessons with drawings and stories.

THE WEAVING OF STORIES AND DRAWING

Over the past academic year, we have combined drawing and stories in a variety of classes. Below are some examples of how we used them to teach the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. All of the stories are contained in our 2016 anthology *Teaching Information Literacy through Short Stories*.

Authority is Constructed & Contextual

Before arriving to class, students in an undergraduate course on indigenous politics read “The Liberation of Rome” by Robin Hemley. This short story is about a student claiming to be a member of a lost tribe (the Vandals of the Roman era). She challenges her professor’s official (Roman) version of history.

At the start of class, students searched the library’s subscription databases for authoritative sources. After this, the students discussed “The Liberation of Rome” in regard to the Authority is Constructed & Contextual frame. The students then drew the moral of the story as it pertained to authoritative information. Figure 1 shows one group’s rendering of the story. In their accompanying explanation to the class, the students pointed out that when people have questions about believability (illustrated by the question mark) they often turn to those who speak from a credentialed position working at official institutions (depicted by the six light bulbs found in the second concentric circle) for answers. The professor in this story is an example of a light bulb in the concentric circle. With a doctorate degree and a job at a university, he—and others working in sanctioned institutions such as museums, hospitals, media, and government bureaucracies—are often considered trustworthy (represented by the other light bulbs in the concentric circle). Given these people and institutions work as a system (emphasized by their placement within the same large circle), they have greater opportunity to shape how we think about subjects. The students also explained that those not within the circle of credentialed individuals and sanctioned institutions, such as indigenous people (expressed as random circles and set outside the large main circle), are not perceived as reliable. They may be more knowledgeable (portrayed by the larger size of the light bulbs) about the subject than the credentialed authorities, but are often ignored or dismissed. The narratives of these people are usually not considered legitimate and do not typically find their way into academic papers and official accounts of events.

Figure 1: Drawing Illustrating Authority is Constructed & Contextual

After several groups of students briefly discussed the meaning of their drawings with the class, the librarian switched to a new exercise and demonstrated how students could efficiently find Native Hawaiian accounts of the protests on the construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope on the Island of Hawaii and Native American versions of the protest on the Dakota Access Pipeline from Twitter and Facebook. Students then found and compared official versions of these protests written by journalists appearing in the library’s digital subscription to *The New York Times* with the indigenous people’s accounts found on social media. The librarian and students discussed the differences in these accounts and the extent to which the aboriginal version of events could (or couldn’t) be used in their academic writing. References to the short story and the drawings were interlaced throughout the discussion. Conversation focused on the differences between academic and experiential authority. Pointing to the frame and linking it to the story and drawings, the majority of students concluded that there are “different types of authority” and academics must “maintain an open mind.” Thus they argued there was room in an academic paper for both the official, credentialed version of events as well as the unofficial, indigenous accounts coming from un-credentialed persons.

Research as Inquiry

After searching the library’s subscription databases at the start of class, students in a first year writing course read “The Fable” by Robert Fox. This short story tells the tale of a young man and woman that meet, fall in love, and marry on a train in a manner of minutes. After reading the story, the students reviewed the Research as Inquiry frame. Working in pairs, students then drew the important lessons in the story in relation to the frame. Like many stories, this one demonstrates its moral by showing us what not to do.

Figure 2 uses illustrations to tell the story. When explaining their picture, the students pointed out the absence of critical thinking displayed by the two main characters (represented by blindfolds). Referencing the frame, they argued the characters did not “determine an appropriate scope of investigation.” Further they pointed out that both characters seemed incapable of “formulating questions based on information gaps” (symbolized by the empty thought bubble attached to the young woman and the hearts and engagement ring in the thought bubble attached to the young man). The students emphasized the characters’ failure to ask “increasingly complex new questions whose answers led to new lines of inquiry.” Instead of an empty thought bubble, the students claimed it should have been filled with questions about children, politics, religion, sex, family, and other important issues. While recognizing the ways we find a husband or wife are different from the ways we find evidence for an academic argument, the students, again referencing the frame, emphasized how a sensible person looking for love or making a believable argument would “seek multiple perspectives during information gathering.” The students argued that the young woman’s momentary advice from her mother (shown behind the young woman) was insufficient to make a decision about marriage. Good research takes time; this couple did not take the time to make a sound decision. Finally, the students contended the couple had not likely drawn the correct conclusion and were bound for future problems.

Figure 2: Drawing Illustrating Research as Inquiry

Searching as Strategic Exploration

Figure 3 combines the work of a graduate and undergraduate student in a discussion session. The pair read the Searching as Strategic Exploration frame and the story “They’re Made Out of Meat” by Terry Bisson. This story features two aliens on a mission to contact sentient beings. When these aliens encounter carbon-based life they describe it as “thinking meat.” They refuse to believe that organic life is capable of sentience. Begrudgingly they give in but agree to not report their encounter with such beings.

After discussing the frame with the librarian and the application to the story, the students drew a picture juxtaposing two versions of the same story as it pertained to the frame. On the left side of the page, the aliens in the story (represented by a flying saucer) conduct research (portrayed by the computer) observe the meat planet (shown as a circle) and reject (conveyed with a large X) the possibility of organic life as sentient. When encountering carbon-based beings, the students pointed out that these aliens neither “exhibited mental flexibility” nor “pursued alternative avenues as new understanding.” While the aliens tried to evaluate the feasibility of thinking meat by comparing it to other species they encountered, their biases frustrated their discovery and led them to unsound conclusions and unethical behavior. Rather than “search and explore,” these aliens “found and ignored.” One student likened this to doing the bare minimum to complete a class assignment and ignoring relevant research because it was inconvenient.

Figure 3: Drawing Illustrating Searching as Strategic Exploration

Conversely, the alternative alien’s (pictured in the second flying saucer) search (illustrated as a computer) included increasingly complex questions and new ways of understanding (expressed by question marks and magnifying glasses). Thus when these aliens encountered beings of a different sort, they were open to the possibility of sentient organic life. Unlike their counterparts, they report their discovery of sentient life on the meat planet (drawn as a large circle with a plus sign). Their expanded view of sentient life (depicted as new magnifying glasses) guided the development of new questions (conveyed as yet another set of question marks). Applying this idea to scholarship, the students concluded that good researchers show similar skills and dispositions.

Information Has Value

Figure 4 features the work of an undergraduate and graduate student pair during a discussion session. They read the Information Has Value frame and the story “The Memory Priest of the Creech People” by Paul Theroux. The story describes the Creech society in which one person, the memory priest, is the holder of all Creech knowledge. Unbeknown to the memory priest, when he turns 30 years of age, he will be eaten by the Creech people. Creech history ends with his death and begins anew with the appointment of a new memory priest, an infant. He too will be eaten when he turns 30 and the cycle of the death and rebirth of Creech knowledge will begin again.

Figure 4: Drawing Illustrating Information Has Value

The pictograms on the left represent the Creech society and are compared to the pictograms on the right which depict contemporary Western society. As the students pointed out, although the concept of intellectual property plays a central role in the frame, it is not a meaningful concept in Creech society. The value of information for the Creech is not commercial but cultural. There is a benefit to starting over. By intention, the Creech transmit information orally (demonstrated by the combination of stick figure people receiving information from the memory priest wearing a mortar board) and store it for a limited time. The Creech people look forward to the predetermined death of the memory priest because the erasure of history enables individuals to start over with a clean slate. In contrast, Western society generates far more information (conveyed by the large book to the right of the less than sign), stores it in machines (shown by the computer), accesses it and builds on it (illustrated as a loop of magnifying glasses), and preserves it for future generations (indicated by the clock and infinity sign). By drawing and discussing the Creech’s unusual use of information, the students obtained an enlarged understanding that information is a legal and social construct that varies by cultures.

CONCLUSION

These examples introduce the possibility of combining stories and drawings to present the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. Each story and drawing acts as launching pad for more extended discussions about the frame. The librarian here acts like a conductor directing attention and discussion among the frame, story, drawing, class assignment, and application to academic and everyday life. This weaving enables students to see information literacy as something more than a mechanical activity to complete a course assignment.

The pictures selected for this article were picked because they were simple. Although some of our students are excellent at drawing and are sophisticated in their ability to think and communicate through it, many are not. Some students struggle expressing themselves in images. Fortunately, though, when paired with a partner they are usually able to draw some pictures, however rough and undeveloped. The important point is that they are visualizing the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*.

If one believes creativity is part of information literacy thinking and pedagogy, one must experiment with teaching methods that invite creativity. While they might not say it to librarians, some teaching faculty believe library instruction is dull. Armstrong (2012), for example, shares a quote from an interview with an English professor discussing collaborating with librarians: “there’s no way to make the actual process of library instruction interesting. Some are better than others, but it is boring...” (p. 41). If we limit information literacy instruction largely to finding and evaluating sources for academic assignments or teaching how to use particular tools to complete a scholarly goal, some teaching faculty will conclude that a trip to the library is useful but boring. For these instructors a library instruction session is like the taste of bad medicine, something one must endure because it will help students. There are numerous responses to this charge that would take us far beyond the boundaries of this paper. However, for this article, we argue one way forward is to experiment with methods that mix the mechanical and the creative.

Long before there was written language, people thought and communicated in pictures and stories. The Lascaux cave paintings are estimated to be about 20,000 years old and precede written language by thousands of years. While the first stories can’t be dated, they are thought to be the oldest method of teaching. Yet both of these basic and ancient ways of communicating have slipped away from many a teacher and student. As an increasing number of academic libraries provide technologies to visualize data, we call to reconnect students with drawing and stories to visualize information literacy concepts and to engage the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*.

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Images for Figures (Editor will put in body of the text later)

Figure 1

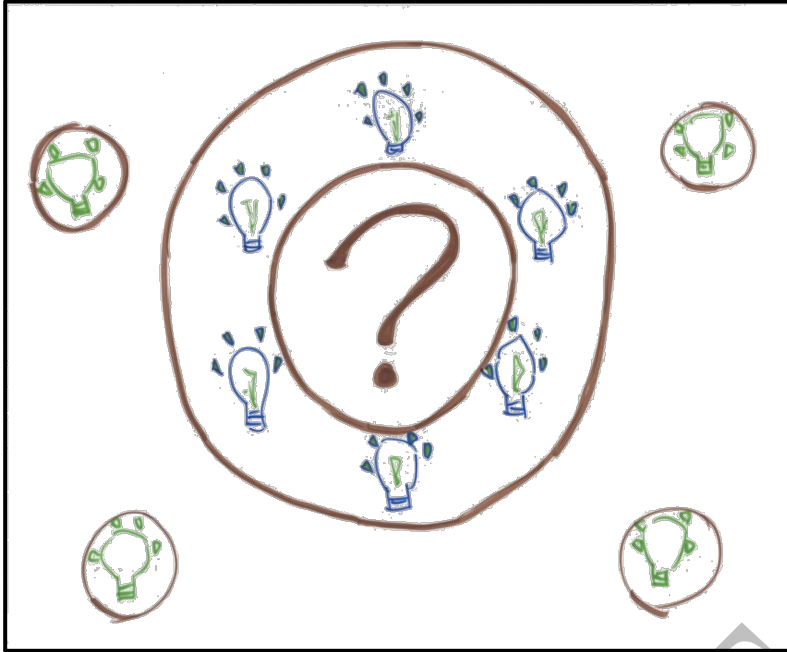


Figure 2

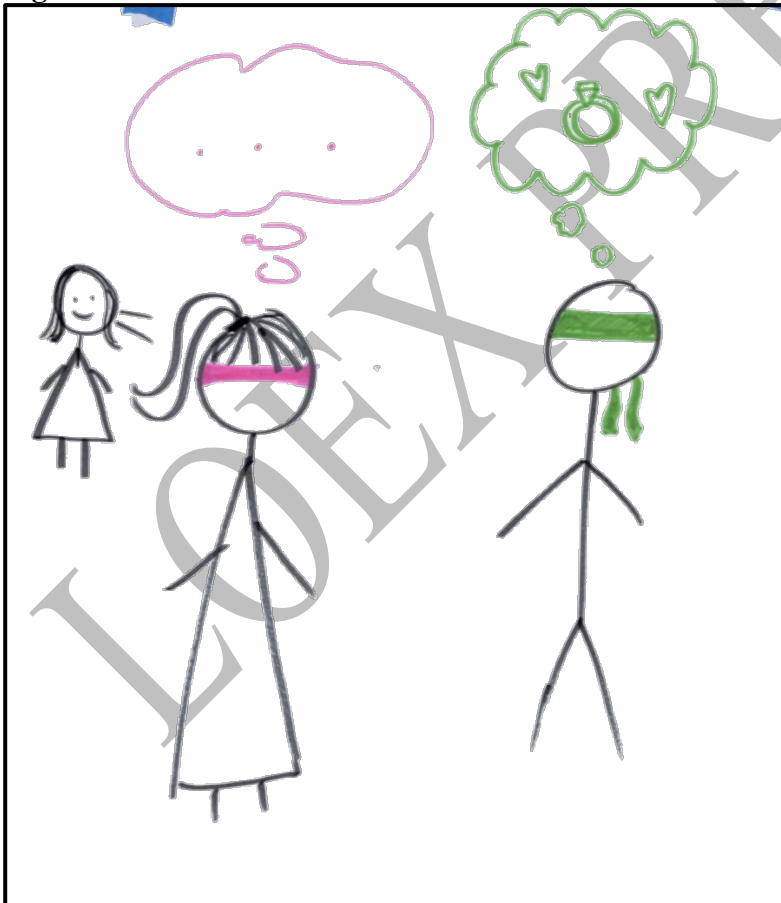


Figure 3

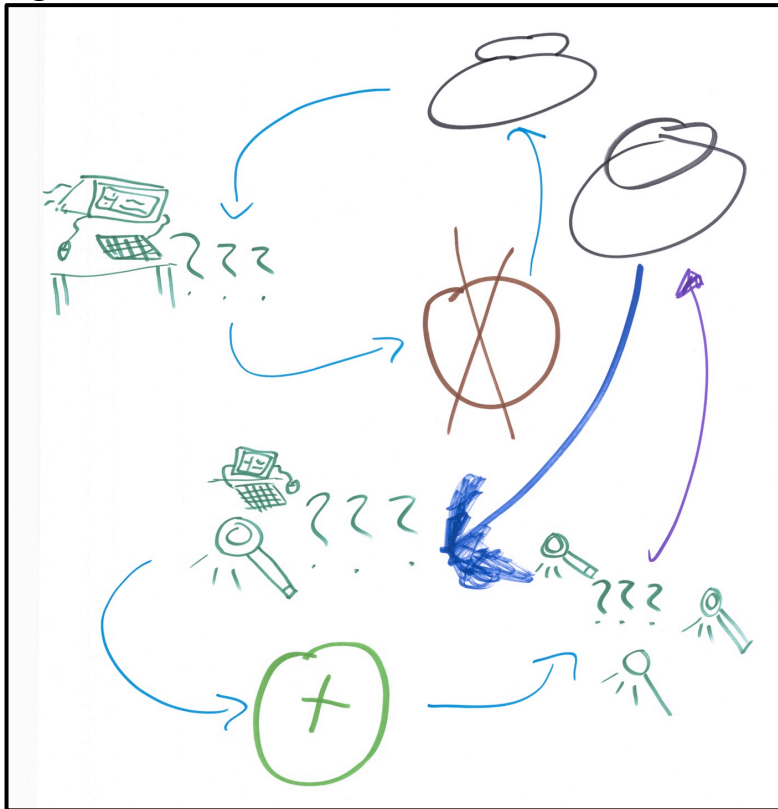


Figure 4

