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## Teaching in the Margins

Barbara A. Quarton

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### Abstract

This paper describes systemic problems in the traditional model of information literacy instruction in higher education and proposes a new model. Librarians must teach students not only information retrieval skills but also a conceptual framework for thinking about information. Without such a framework, college graduates' ability to be agents of change in a competitive world is compromised. This paper introduces a student-centered, co-curricular program of information literacy instruction that helps university students grasp the social nature of information and recognize its critical role in their coursework and in their lives. Includes curriculum map.

*Keywords:* critical information literacy, workshops, librarianship, relevance, framework, logistics, co-curricular, scaffold, one-shot, WASC

Research is a fundamental component of a university education. In the process of conducting research, college students develop a knowledge base for their future professions by exploring and critiquing the scholarship, ideas, and practices of their chosen field. Before they can engage in this kind of critical study, however, students of higher education in our

information society should be enlightened about the political nature<sup>1</sup> of the information processes they will be interacting with (Anderson, 2006; Seale, 2010). It makes sense that students, who upon graduation will participate as educated citizens in civic discourse and action, should be aware of and able to negotiate the information hierarchies that shape our country's global influence. Academic librarians, because of our disciplinary knowledge, can give students this social framework for thinking about information and help them develop a degree of critical consciousness. "By developing critical consciousness," says James Elmborg, "students learn to take control of their lives and their own learning to become active agents, asking and answering questions that matter to them and the world around them" (2006, p. 193). Regrettably, in most traditional public universities, academic librarians do not have an opportunity to teach students about the social nature of information in an explicit, scaffolded way. Thus, students are not given a framework for how information flows, or how the evolution of ideas relates to their lives, or how information shapes and reshapes our society (Kapitzke, 2003). Instead, most students learn only mundane skills about how to use online resources to find information that is relevant to their university assignments. The reason for this startling educational vacuum about something as powerful and ubiquitous as the social nature of information is that administrators, faculty, and librarians in academia are wrestling with competing assumptions about information and struggling with their own and each other's roles in an era of technological and social change. In this essay, I describe an unusual program of information literacy instruction that could reform how and what university students learn about information and consequently could transform the way they think about and use information in their university courses and after they graduate.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I use Deborah Fink's definition of politics as "promoting a particular interest" (Fink, 1989, p. 21).

In order that readers understand the unconventional nature of this program, it is necessary first to explicate the complex environment in which most traditional academic librarians on university campuses work. Our colleagues—faculty, staff, and administrators—speak respectfully about the library as the titular heart of the university, but many of them act as if it is a thing apart, an entity disconnected from the academy and peripheral to student success in college. Librarians are often considered to be irrelevant because of the Internet. We labor under our campus colleagues' archaic notions about who we are, what we know, and what we do. Some of us who work on campuses where librarians have faculty status are recipients of, at best, personal gratitude from faculty for helping their students and, at worst, an undercurrent of professional disapproval because we are not obliged to have Ph.D.s and many of us do not teach academic courses. We are, therefore, isolated in the academy, and our disciplinary knowledge is invisible. Further, the academic librarian's teaching role is undermined by the fact that most faculty, like their students, are unclear about information's theoretical foundations and tend to minimize their importance to research practices. For some faculty—who are disciplinary experts and often take research for granted—information is a thing to be managed: they use common technologies and the Internet well enough to accomplish what they need to accomplish for their work. With some exceptions, they teach their students to do research in the ways they learned to do research in their own post-graduate programs. For example, most faculty insist that their students use credible information sources—typically, scholarly journal articles—yet they seldom explain the contextual purpose of this requirement or, even more rarely, the politics of peer review (Doherty, 2007) or how this influences the directions of scholarly conversations and, ultimately, social progress. Faculty, understandably, have no time in the semester or the quarter to teach students the conceptual foundations of information even when they are aware of them:

their first allegiance is, necessarily, to their own disciplinary content. Unfortunately, most of their lectures and assignments consequently lack rhetorical context about information, and most required research is seen as a means (information retrieval) to an end (a paper) rather than a variable in the process of critical thought. In this scenario, librarians are only needed at the reference desk or in one-on-one research consultations scheduled as problems arise in students' search for information.

Professional library associations long ago recognized the threat of the Internet to the library profession (Tyner, 1998) and worked hard to reframe librarianship from the gatekeeper model—wherein the librarian, by virtue of having specialized knowledge, wisely chooses and stores and then accesses and evaluates information for those who seek it—to the instructional model—wherein the librarian uses that specialized knowledge to choose and store and then teach others how to find the “best” information. In reframing the librarian’s professional role, however, library leaders preserved their professional control over information (Kapitzke, 2001; Pawley, 2003; Simmons, 2005). They embraced the business-born term “information literacy,” and in 2000, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) adopted the strict standards<sup>2</sup> against which a student could be judged to be information literate or not. Academic librarians are expected to teach information literacy according to these standards, known officially as the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (Association of College and

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<sup>2</sup>The information literacy standards are: (1.) The information literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed; (2.) The information literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently; (3.) The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system; (4.) The information literate student, individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose; and (5.) The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally. (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000, p. 8-14)

Research Libraries, 2000), and to collaborate with faculty to integrate information literacy across the higher education curriculum (Rader, 1995). On the vast majority of traditional university campuses, this professional imperative is most often accomplished (Oakleaf, Hoover, Woodard, Corbin, Hensley, Wakimoto & Iannuzzi, 2012) by librarians offering “one-shot” library sessions (Vance, Kirk & Gardner, 2012), whereby a professor requests a one-time, one- or two-hour library session and a librarian uses the time to show the students how to search and find information for the assignment at hand. These one-shots, because of their brevity and their specificity to the professor’s assignment, are primarily procedural rather than conceptual, and can provide students little framework for understanding why or how the information they find impacts and is impacted by daily life and social forces. One-shot sessions have the side effect of reinforcing faculty’s misconception of the academic librarian’s work as skills-based rather than as a disciplinary practice based on theoretical foundations. Finally, the one-shot instructional model is contingent on the motivation of the individual faculty member to request the session, rather than on the developing research needs of the students. Even with these fatal flaws, as a result of the information literacy rhetoric crafted by library leaders in the last twenty-some years, information literacy has won the endorsement of accrediting bodies such as the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, which named it a “core learning ability” of a Baccalaureate program (WASC Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities, 2008, p. 14). This is cause for celebration among academic librarians because it appears to legitimize our work, but the standards upon which students’ information literacy are likely to be assessed are mechanistic, and the primary teaching model of information literacy instruction is a logistical nightmare for faculty and librarians alike. Faculty, because it takes one entire class session away

from their time to teach their content, and librarians, because the number of specialized one-shots needed to teach 25,000 or more students across the curriculum is unsustainable.

Beyond the library, there is an ongoing struggle between faculty and administrators about power, money, and position that negatively impacts the integration of information literacy into the curriculum. Faculty, in many cases, must defend their academic principles to administrators who have espoused the business model of education that is anathema to faculty. Academic tenure and academic freedom, the institutions that safeguard freedom of inquiry and drive innovation, are problematic for many administrators who see themselves as trying to run a business, and some faculty are rightly suspicious of their motives. This mutual distrust between faculty and the administration feeds a climate of unease on most traditional university campuses that makes it difficult for those involved to adapt to any kind of change, either good or bad. Academic librarians with faculty status are part of this mix, representing a very small contingent of the faculty, with little authority on campus except in relation to the library itself. Library funding is approved (or not) by campus administrators who, like the faculty, have a blurred sense of the library's connection to learning and its importance to the academy. In this environment, most faculty understandably do not relish collaborating with librarians (whom they consider to be nice but irrelevant and who many do not consider to be professional equals) in order to integrate information literacy (which most of them do not understand, value, or have time to teach) into a curriculum that many believe is being watered down by administrative edicts.

Amidst this maelstrom, academic librarians fight for meaning. Our faculty status does not always give us the freedom to teach academic courses in our own discipline. We are expected (by academic library leaders and some library deans) to help faculty craft assignments that require their students to do research and use the library's resources. As noted above, however,

there is an inherent problem with this directive: most faculty are unconvinced about the scholarly value of the library and information literacy instruction and naturally are wary about collaboration that could infringe on their academic freedom. Lacking a viable system by which to teach our disciplinary content, then, many academic librarians have become salespeople for the library and its resources. Instead of teaching students about the conceptual framework of information and how it influences what they know, the ideas they generate, and the world they live in, most of us teach students how to use specialized databases and the library space itself. Our disciplinary knowledge is hidden, and because of this, students learn only how to find information for a specific need rather than how to *think about* information. The endorsement of information literacy by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), considered by some academic librarians to be a boon to the profession, is to others a threat. If assessment of information literacy is based on skills-based standards, librarians will be compelled to teach to them; we will be confined to teaching students an operational approach to information that is heavily library-centric. We will be unable to "...be explicit about the moral and political commitment to flattening rather than reinforcing current information and literacy hierarchies" (Pawley, 2003, p. 448). Our academic freedom (like that of our faculty colleagues) will be further eroded. And if the procedural one-shot continues to be the primary mode of information literacy instruction, not only will the conceptual foundations of information be lost to students, faculty will resent librarians for squandering their time teaching students database functionality and the "evils" of Wikipedia. Worse, as WASC requirements for teaching and assessing information literacy begin to be enforced, online assessments based on the old standards will be produced and sold to campuses desperate for a fast, simple solution to the information literacy conundrum. In the confusion, librarians' work will be further devalued and information's social



roots, its political and historical context, will be left for others to champion. The content and structure of the traditional model of information literacy instruction is fraught with problems and must be reconsidered.

### **One Library's Approach**

Our student population is roughly two-thirds Hispanic and African American. Eighty percent of our freshman class is comprised of first-generation college students. Most of our students have part- or full-time jobs, and 70% attend school on a scholarship. Our students are economically disadvantaged. They come to college with cell phones and social media accounts and the hope that a college degree will pave the way for a better life. Most of our students graduate with degrees in psychology and criminal justice and nursing, aiming for professions in which they can contribute to the social good and move up the socio-economic ladder. They will graduate into a global work force where competing for a good salary depends on their ability to interface with complex social issues deftly and diplomatically, most likely in bureaucratic settings. In order to be egalitarian problem solvers, they must have a mental model of the problem zone—the information field relative to the issues they face—and the understanding that “each stage in the cycle of information processing is susceptible to political influences” (Fink, 1989, p. 21). If our students are not fully cognizant of the social, political nature of information and its processes, they will be disadvantaged in the workplace and, more importantly, their ability to be agents of change in a competitive world will be compromised.

Given the challenges our students face in college and upon graduation, is it any wonder that we despair of simply teaching students how to use databases and how to evaluate information sources according to standards that “emphasize control rather than freedom”

(Pawley, 2003, p. 426)? We should teach students about the economics of information, the politics of peer review and how that relates to social policy, and the historical and social value of attribution in an information society so that they understand the power of information in the world. A liberal education will make sense to our students (most of whom just want a good job) only if we are intentional about how and why these theoretical underpinnings of information practices matter to their daily lives. Instead of trying to control students' information habits, which the information literacy standards developed twenty years ago attempt to do, we should be helping them to think critically about the purposefulness and interconnectedness of all information. With an authentic framework for how information is socially constructed, students will know that different information sources exist and have different purposes, and they will know how to judge when and why various sources are useful in different life situations. Sometimes a scholarly journal article, for example, really is more relevant to an information need than, say, a blog post. This is valuable knowledge not only for thinking critically and writing papers in college, but also in our students' lives, especially when they graduate. Public policy, city planning, civil engineering, the law—the structures of our society—are founded on scholarly research and principles of peer review. Scholarship is a discreet part of society, and it should be made explicit so that people recognize that the world around them is not driven by chance, but by debate, consensus, power, and position. If students strive to be agents of change, to “make a difference,” they must be able to recognize this dynamic about information so they can either work within it to succeed, or work within it to change it. If they are not motivated to be agents of change, if what they are looking for is a job with a salary that will afford them a comfortable life, it is even more important that they understand that politics is at work in information processes. Why? Because everything they do is affected by the social nature of information. When they

watch different television shows that seek to influence how they think about the world; when they surf the Web and get their information from thousands of websites with competing “truths”; when they read or listen to various versions of the daily news or global events: if they do not recognize the underlying social influences on the way information is created and evolves, their personal power and their ability to think for themselves will be diluted.

“It is a fundamental responsibility for us as educators,” according to Dane Ward, “to embrace a commitment to a more holistic information literacy that can make a difference in the world. The world cries for it. But how do we teach it?” (2006, p. 398). The new instructional model we use in our library is a direct result of our frustration with the de-contextualized information literacy standards that prevent students from learning about the social nature of information as well as the collegial but complicated campus climate that underestimates the significance of the social forces driving information. Our program is influenced by the literature of critical information literacy, which seeks to “highlight how information works” (Pawley, 2003, p. 448) and that “pushes students toward self-reflection, interpretation, understanding, and ultimately action” (Swanson, 2004, p. 264). Library scholars such as Elmborg (2006), Jacobs, (2008), Franks (2010), and Kapitzke (2001) write eloquently about the social nature of information and the broad potential of the critical information literacy paradigm to higher education. Swanson (2004) describes a series of librarian-led instruction sessions integrated into a first-year composition course that “reflect[s] how searchers actually search for information and mak[es] information literacy applicable to students’ lives” (p. 259), and in recent years, academic librarians such as Silkenson & Lingold (2010) and Torrell (2010) have begun infusing their seminars and library instruction sessions with social themes to animate discussions about the political nature of information. We have not found any evidence in the literature, however, of a

comprehensive program that introduces students to foundational information concepts (such as social interpretations of the deep Web, the fluidity of the information cycle, the subjective nature of credibility, and the value of attribution) in a scaffolded, transparent way. Such a program, we believe, would prepare students to think about, search for, and critique information with a balanced perspective. Our library has developed a stand-alone program to fill this gap: it is specifically designed to help university students grasp the social nature of information and recognize its critical role in their coursework and in their lives.

### **What Our Program Looks Like**

Our co-curricular instruction program consists of a beginning information literacy workshop series in the freshman year and an intermediate information literacy workshop series in the junior year. There are four workshops in each series, and the program's purpose is to teach our students how information works by presenting them with a blend of the theory and practice of information literacy as it applies to their information needs in college and beyond. We began our freshman series in the fall quarter of 2011. We expect to introduce our junior series in the fall quarter of 2013. Our information literacy program is written to align with the current assessment-driven language espoused by WASC and professional library associations because we recognize the importance of working within the system. Thus, we have created student learning outcomes<sup>3</sup> fashioned after the ACRL standards but that are, we believe, more relevant to our students' lives and research needs. Our program helps students to

1. distinguish search engines from proprietary databases, recognizing the economic and research implications of both;

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<sup>3</sup> According to the WASC handbook, student learning outcomes "set forth the anticipated or achieved results of courses or programs" (WASC Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities. 2008, p. 58).

2. create and use effective search strategies in order to engage actively and confidently in recursive research processes;
3. distinguish popular discourse from academic discourse, with the awareness that each has its own distinct purpose and audience;
4. evaluate the credibility of information by its source and through investigation of its rhetorical and social context;
5. use information ethically, recognizing the essential value of attribution in an information society.

Figure 1 shows the program's curriculum map. Note that outcome 2 spans all workshops, and represents the practical application of each workshop.

All of our workshops follow the same general design. Students are encouraged to adopt a meta-cognitive approach to information. The librarian facilitating the workshop introduces the concept under examination and creates situations in which students practice associated ways of working with and thinking about information. Students engage in activities and discussion rather than suffer through a “narrative” (Freire, 1970, p. 71) or observe drawn-out demonstrations of the use of sources. Our assumption is that students are comfortable with search technology and inclined toward discovering things on their own. Students work in pairs or in small groups to negotiate research scenarios and express their questions and ideas. Each session concludes with a free-write opportunity—our assessment piece based on content analysis—in which students reflect on the conceptual knowledge they addressed during the session. Most important: there is always a practical take-away<sup>4</sup>. Students leave our sessions having experimented with a new way of thinking about information that relates to the world as they know it and that helps them to do research for their classes. The following sections overview the student learning outcomes and rationales of each workshop in our program.

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<sup>4</sup> See our curriculum map, attached.

**Workshop #1: The Web.**

Student Learning Outcome: “Students will distinguish search engines from proprietary databases, recognizing the economic and research implications of both.”

Rationale: The overarching goal of the first workshop of both series is to introduce students to the deep Web, where much of the information that influences social progress lives and grows. In most cases, our students are unaware that there is information beyond that which they can access using public search engines. Freshmen are introduced to the free vs. fee paradigm and how it impacts their search for information in their college courses. Juniors will learn about the power dynamics of deep Web content and how this dynamic influences the information they find in college and in the professions.

**Workshop #2: The Information Cycle**

Student Learning Outcome: “Students will distinguish popular discourse from academic discourse, with the awareness that each has its own distinct purpose and audience.”

Rationale: The overarching goal of the second workshop in both series is to teach students about the different spheres of information—popular and scholarly—and how these two spheres are related to each other and to their lives. Freshmen experiment with the information cycle and make distinctions between the editorial practices and purposes of popular and scholarly information in order to distinguish the social value of both spheres. Juniors will delve into the scholarly realm and discover the differences among the various disciplines, finding that different professions approach issues in different ways. This lays the foundation for understanding credibility in the next workshop.

**Workshop #3: Credibility**

Student Learning Outcome: “Students will evaluate the credibility of information by its source and through investigation of its rhetorical and social context.”

Rationale: The overarching goal of the third workshop of both series is to help students focus on context and make determinations about relevance. Having learned about purpose and audience in the previous workshop, freshmen are now prepared to make choices about where to find and how to analyze information for relevance to their particular assignments. Juniors will explore the scholarly literature in more depth, focusing on finding and analyzing the genres of the various fields, which will prepare them to work with these genres in their upper-division courses and in their future professions.

#### **Workshop #4: Attribution**

Student Learning Outcome: “Students will use information ethically, recognizing the essential value of attribution in an information society.”

Rationale: The overarching goal of the fourth workshop of both series is to help students see that knowledge production is a continual process that involves many voices, and that every voice along the way is important. Information comes from people with ideas who build on others’ ideas before them. Attribution maintains the lineage, preserving the integrity of information for future study both personally and professionally. Freshmen learn the purpose of citations, and juniors will use citation information to trace a scholarly conversation and consider the significance of gaps in the literature.

#### **Reactions to Our Workshops**

Our freshman workshops have gained a following among faculty teaching First Year Composition and Communication Studies as well as those teaching University Studies courses. Students register online and attend our workshops on their own time. The students who come to

the workshops receive attendance confirmations to give to their professors, who often give extra credit for their participation. Feedback from professors has been very positive, for example: “I think the workshops have helped my students...for my freshmen comp class and probably throughout the rest of their undergraduate careers.” They also report on students’ excitement about their new knowledge and students’ recommendations that other students attend the workshops. The post-workshop free-writes are encouraging; students describe their surprise and their curiosity about the new ideas they have encountered. For example, in the free-write, one student wrote, “I did not know that scholarly articles are usually written long after the event has happened. I guess it is common sense, but I don't think people usually think about it. Also it was nice to see the changes in diction as the sources went from popular to scholarly.” They also point out the usefulness of the workshops to their course work: “This workshop...it really opened my mind to research.” Finally, we are elated that students respond positively to the workshops. They participate in group discussions freely, they engage in the activities enthusiastically (we actually saw this comment in one of the free-writes: “I loved this workshop, it was really fun!”), and they ask probing questions and make cogent points. We are working with our Office of Institutional Research on a longitudinal study to assess participants’ information literacy as a result of our program. We are committed to authentic assessment of learning in our program, however, and will avoid assessing library-centric skills that students will not need when they graduate.

For our part, because we have committed ourselves to being transparent about our knowledge and practices, explicit about the social structure of information and its relevance in our lives, and forthcoming about the shifting sands in the information landscape, we are hopeful about the future. We take our students’ feedback seriously and rethink our workshop activities as



needed. We know that as technology and social change move inexorably forward, our workshops must evolve to keep pace. It is exciting to ponder.

## **Conclusion**

Social and technological change, our own professional angst, and the complexities of the higher education system collided and challenged us to reinvent ourselves and our teaching mission. We chose to create an information literacy program that is separate from but supportive of students' coursework at critical stages of their university career, that neither squanders faculty's time nor infringes on their academic freedom, and that affords us a measure of control over what and how we teach. More importantly, we chose to connect our disciplinary knowledge and practices to students' experience: our workshops are student-centered and focused on helping students develop their own informed way of thinking about and using information in their coursework and in life.

We have been approached about offering faculty workshops and establishing a faculty learning community on the topic of information literacy and/or the social nature of information. It may be that our work will lead to a culture shift about information literacy on our campus. Perhaps this will be the beginning of an authentic integration of information literacy: faculty, librarians, staff, and students working together to develop a shared language about what information literacy is and how it fits into their lives. I propose that the library's program could provide students a basic framework for how information works in our society, and that faculty could build on this foundation in their courses according to their disciplinary perspectives, making tacit information processes explicit in their lectures and assignments. The library's course-related instruction sessions would also play a strong role in this organic collaboration.

Because students would have learned a basic information literacy framework in our program, librarian subject-specialists could offer students in specific courses not only skills-based guidance for particular assignments but also more advanced conceptual knowledge. We believe that our co-curricular information literacy program can “mak[e] a specific contribution to the learning process, one which complements other parts of the learning process occurring in classrooms, residence halls, and other parts of an academic institution” (Snaveley & Cooper, 1997, p. 12). The drive to help students become information literate is an undertaking that must be shared across the university campus. As the five colleges in our university consider re-accreditation requirements for information literacy, the library’s workshop program can serve as a foundation for and a natural complement to other university-wide efforts to enrich our students’ information literacy.

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Figure 1. The Library's Curriculum Map

## The Library's Information Literacy Student Learning Outcomes

1. Students will distinguish search engines from proprietary databases, recognizing the economic and research implications of both;
2. Students will create and use effective search strategies in order to engage actively and confidently in recursive research processes;
3. Students will distinguish popular discourse from academic discourse, with the awareness that each has its own distinct purpose and audience;
4. Students will evaluate the credibility of information by its source and through investigation of its rhetorical and social context;
5. Students will use information ethically, recognizing the essential value of attribution in an information society.

<b>Freshman Series</b>	<b>Workshop 1</b>	<b>Workshop 2</b>	<b>Workshop 3</b>	<b>Workshop 4</b>
	Concept: The Deep Web	Concept: The Information Cycle	Concept: Credibility	Concept: Attribution
	Skill: Keyword Searching in the Deep Web	Skill: Determining Purpose and Audience	Skill: Uncovering Relevance	Skill: Recognizing Parts of a Citation
<b>Junior Series</b>	<b>Workshop 1</b>	<b>Workshop 2</b>	<b>Workshop 3</b>	<b>Workshop 4</b>
	Concept: How the Deep Web Gets Its Content	Concept: What is a Discipline and what is the Literature	Concept: Different Ways that Disciplines Make Knowledge	Concept: Knowledge is Continually Being Produced
	Skill: Identifying Scholar, Producer, Vendor	Skill: Subject Searching	Skill: Finding Genres in the Literature	Skill: Finding and Acknowledging Alternative Voices