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Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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Information Literacy: Imperatives for Faculty

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As information resources, especially electronic ones, continue to proliferate and become more complex, faculty's frustration seems to be growing in parallel fashion. What used to be standard assignment formats now seem to require a level of planning and of complexity that we, as faculty, are not accustomed to. It used to be so simple: assignments requiring any level of resource research would indicate the quantity and type of bibliographic sources students should access, how those sources should be utilized, and how they should be cited. Students would walk into the library, and with the help of knowledgeable librarians find the pertinent tomes or journals. This is no longer what's involved in "library research." With the advent of the internet, electronic databases, and scholarly electronic publications, even faculty have a hard time keeping up with the amount of new information, with credibility issues, and with modes of citing such resources. Information literacy is now required in order to make sensible and informed choices and avoid major pitfalls.

What is Information Literacy?

As defined by the American Library Association (1998), information literacy (IL) is a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate,

and use effectively the needed information. Six IL Standards were developed to help define what information literate individuals can do. They can:

- Determine the extent of information needed;
- Access the needed information effectively and efficiently;
- Evaluate information and its sources critically;
- Incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base;
- Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose;
- Understand the legal, social, and economic issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally (including proper citation, paraphrasing, and related skills).

For a detailed description of specific skills and abilities associated with each standard, please see the ALA's expanded outline at <http://ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.htm>.

These standards are at the heart of the academic learning process. They are not new. What is new is the complex environment in which they are to be learned and eventually practiced. A complicated factor embedded in the definition of an information-literate person is the assumption that such a person is also library-literate, computer-literate, and Internet-literate. These embedded literacies are all necessary for the successful accessing and use of new information.

Student and Faculty Challenges

The new information landscape requires that faculty reconsider and re-configure ways of teaching that have been standard for a very long time. Rather than the traditional highly structured and well-defined approaches to interactions with information, students and faculty are now required to use multi-layered and nuanced methodologies. Consider, for example, the oft-assigned term paper. Traditional

pedagogies have the instructor take one of two basic approaches. The first approach involves an assigned topic or a selection of topic by the student from a limited list of topics, followed by the actual development and submission of the completed paper at some deadline, usually toward the end of the academic term. In this model, the instructor's expectations are that (1) students know how to structure and write a term paper, and (2) that the bulk of skills required are focused on developing ideas in writing. A second approach to term paper assignments is one in which the instructor participates in the process in a developmental role. In this model, students are required to follow prescribed steps such as topic selection, bibliography development, and thesis statement in drafting the paper, moving to each subsequent step after receiving constructive feedback from the instructor, and sometimes from classmates. In both models, the research component is seen as one of the basic and straight-forward tasks--"identify three bibliographic resources" or "use at least two scholarly journals and one reference book" are typical guidelines provided for gathering bibliographic information.

The greatest challenge that faculty face in assigning a term paper and students face in preparing one is that two commonly held underlying assumptions are no longer practical. The identification and accessing of information is not a simple, streamlined process; and neither instructor nor student can assume with any certainty what resources will be found and where they will be found.

Integrating Information Literacy into College Courses

Information literacy competencies are closely related to emerging practices in college teaching. As we have been moving from teacher-centered to learner and learning-centered instruction, articulating learning outcomes, focusing on understanding and capabilities rather than fact acquisition, and realizing the importance of preparing students for the application of knowledge in non-

academic settings, we have set an agenda that has information literacy at its core.

Academic courses provide ample opportunities for the integration of information literacy at all levels of learning: acquisition, usage/practice, mastery, and application. The curriculum as a whole and specific assignments in particular, are rife with possibilities. The following are some ways in which such integration can happen:

- Connect desired course learning outcomes with information literacy competencies, and include them in the course syllabus.
- Identify areas of the course's curriculum in which information plays a key role. Rather than provide students with the information, have them either locate the information themselves or assess the validity and veracity of information accessed by fellow students.
- Structure assignments to highlight the process of information searching, assessing, and using, and make this process the key element of the assignment.
- Enable students, through the use of such channels as journals and process maps, to reflect on the process of information acquisition.
- Partner with an instructional librarian to re-fashion assignments.
- Create or re-focus assignments to reflect real-world tasks. For example: instead of a topical term paper in a business course, have students structure it as an annual report, or in a history course have the assignment done as a first-person diary.

- Invite the instructional librarian to conduct a session on search strategies for a specific topic.
- Include diverse types of assignments. Examples include:
 - “compare the bibliographies in a couple of published works, possibly with differing points of view, on the same subject”,
 - “create annotated bibliographies”, or “use resources from multiple databases”.
- Describe with some specificity resources to be used. Examples include an opinion piece, a report of scientific research, and an historical perspective of the issue(s). Have students compare and contrast them with attention to the source, its credibility, its point of view, etc. (These are all sentences or multiple sentences to each bullet, and they would be better with periods rather than semicolons.

Components of Information Literacy-Based Assignments

Many types of assignments can enhance information literacy competencies. Such assignments are beneficial when they:

- Include library research;
- Present opportunities to explore the literature of the discipline;
- Include opportunities to compare types of publications such as trade, scholarly, or popular journals and magazines;
- Emphasize the process of research as well as the product;
- Require students to present information as evidence;
- Expect students to evaluate information for reliability and relevance;
- Teach citation and paraphrasing skills.

Imperatives for Faculty

Information literacy provides a beneficial set of skills for both faculty and students. Faculty benefits include increased productivity in

scholarly activities, enhanced curricula, reduction in instances of plagiarism (as proper citation and paraphrasing are an important part of information literacy), and compliance with accreditation requirements. Students benefit by improving learning skills, becoming discriminating seekers of information (consumers/critics of knowledge production), preparing for life-long learning, and enhancing preparation for the professional careers.

References & Resources

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For more information, visit:

<http://ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.htm>

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