Information Literacy and Liberal Education: Form and Substance

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Frankfurt, October 2004

What is *New* About Information Literacy?

Information Literacy and the Information Age

- Term first introduced in 1974 by Paul Zurkowski, but began to receive considerable attention in the LIS literature in the 1990s

- Literature typically motivates the urgent need for IL by pointing to the emergence of the *Information Age*

Characteristics of the Information Age

- Rapid growth in rate of production of new information

- Appearance of new formats, both for the production and storage of information

- Growth of information available over the Internet

- Appearance of World Wide Web and rapid increase in access

Water, Water Everywhere…

- Information age seen as posing new challenges:
  - How to retrieve needed information in the face of a glut of disorganized "noise"
  - How to identify appropriate information sources
  - How to evaluate the quality of information retrieved

From BI to LI

- Prompted change in terminology from Bibliographic Instruction to Information Literacy

- Change reflects shift in focus:
  - BI focuses on use of *library resources*, usually taught in discrete sessions
  - IL more broadly focused on the *research process*, and taught cumulatively, rather than as discrete events

Water, Water Everywhere…

- Electronic information seen as posing new challenges:
  - How to retrieve needed information in the face of a glut of disorganized "noise"
  - How to identify appropriate information sources
  - How to evaluate the quality of information retrieved

Does A Imply B?

- What is the extent of the nexus between the information explosion and the need for information literacy?

- Does one necessarily imply the other?

- Would the need if information literacy exist independently of the information explosion?

Techno-hype

- New technologies lead to revolutionary predictions:
  - TVs would replace print media
  - Cinemas would disappear with the spread of VCRs
  - Use of computers for word processing and data storage would result in the "paperless office"
  - E-books will replace books

Deconstructing the Hype

- Consequences of technological innovation are not inevitable
- Have less to do with the possibilities unleashed by the technology than with how a society chooses to deploy it
- The characteristics of the Information Age to not *by themselves* create a need for IL that had not previously existed (Hesse 1996)

The serious-minded student with a syllabus, guidance, and the library can now do a great deal better than spend fifteen or more hours a week going to class to review a textbook or notes from his professor's lectures. I fear we sometimes have fancied that a liberal education consists of acquiring a great many facts and details, and we have too often resorted to drill, memorization, and routine processes…An education…cannot be 'poured in' or 'plastered on'; it must be 'rooted out' for oneself. Any education worthy of the name must be self-education…Leaners not learners result from spoon-feeding.

The laboratory must be the student's main source of knowledge if he is to evolve it himself. He must make his own discoveries, test his own theories, experience for himself the power and drudgery, the striking successes and the constant failures of experimental investigation…To learn a subject from within is to live it; to live science is to do research—in a laboratory.

Novelty vs. Continuity

- What has changed?
  - Concern with critical thinking, active learning, lifelong learning are not new or unique to our current environment
  - The networked environment *is* new
- What are the implications of the network for education?

The New Information Environment

- "Lick and flick" method of information retrieval largely passé
- Much research can now be done from a PC located anywhere
- Plethora of easily located information—of uneven quality–available on the Web—be it the "free" Internet or library databases
- Much of this information is unmediated

What Endures?

- Core of the research process:
  - Developing hypotheses
  - Formulating thesis statements
  - Finding support using appropriate sources
  - Drawing warranted conclusions

Information Literacy and Technological Literacy

- A growing response is to incorporate IL and TL (see Warnken 2004)
  - Library instruction provided as part of computer literacy (Fenske 1998, Fratus and Woodock 2003)
  - Information literacy becomes a *subset* of more general computer literacy

The library component of the computer literacy program provides "a solid basis for information literacy" and through it, "students will acquire the necessary skills to become confident lifelong users of information retrieval systems and computer technology*"* (Fenske 1998)

Is this an accurate statement of the goal of IL instruction?

Conflating Qualitatively Different Skills

Information Literacy

- Identifying need for information
- Formulating research questions
- Finding and evaluating supporting evidence
- Developing coherent arguments
- Drawing conclusions from evidence

Technological Literacy

- Ability to use a computer for
  - Information retrieval
  - Utility software (word processing, spreadsheets, presentation packages…)
  - Internet (browsing, downloading, emailing…)

- Computer skills are necessary to function effectively
- They are *enabling* skills for information seeking, but are not involved in the evaluation of information
- Computer skills can be—and are—*trained* in discrete workshop settings
- IL skills are at the heart of the mandate of higher education
- IL skills are not *trained* but develop cumulatively over the course of an *education*

Emphasis on Electronic Sources

- We emphasize the importance of critical thinking with respect to material found on the Internet
- We encourage students to focus on library databases
- We teach them to look for peer reviewed or scholarly journals
- **Does critical evaluation end here?**

Toward Information Skepticism

- Peer reviewed articles by university faculty report on pharmaceutical research funded by pharmaceutical companies

- A psychologist publishes articles in *Nature, Mankind Quarterly, Educational Psychology Review,* etc., based on suspect research, about racial differences in intelligence and morality

Are We There Yet?

- The criteria we teach about evaluating the authority of research are just a beginning
- Do our IL programs teach students to ask
  - Has this research been paid for?
    - By whom? For what purpose?
  - What if any are the researcher's agendas?
  - Are the conclusions justified by the arguments and data presented?

IL: A Concept Come of Age

- Librarians have brought IL into the academic discourse
  - In the US, IL figures in the criteria of regional accrediting bodies
  - Is starting to appear in the mission statements of colleges and universities
  - Libraries are increasingly being recognized as playing an essential role in the educational process
- How do we use our maximize our success?

Directions for the Future

- Move away from treatment of IL as a unique specialty (Mutch 1997)
- Work towards a shared discourse with department faculty (Leckie & Fullerton 1997)
- Advocate a critical evaluation of argumentation
- Recognize that the uncertainty resulting from skepticism is not always "good business" for institutions