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INFORMATION LITERACY:
A COOPERATIVE LEARNING PROCESS

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Academic libraries have traditionally delivered bibliographic instruction, covering the basics of how to locate books and other material in the library collection for research purposes. With the Information Age however, library instruction has taken on an elevated importance as libraries have been charged with the mandate of ensuring students are information literate. This added element of instruction is crucial because the extent to which a person is information literate will determine his or her ability to locate the best information available, evaluate and apply it, both in the workplace and in their personal life. Information literacy therefore, not only enhances a student's quality of research, but also improves the quality of his or her life after their formal education is completed. This paper examines how successful information literacy programs require a collaborative partnership between administrators, faculty and library staff. It also recognizes the significance of students in this cooperative process and looks at the constructive shift from traditional instruction to student based learning.

In providing traditional bibliographic instruction, libraries have primarily delivered the instruction within the library itself. However, information literacy involves a more complex set of skills and it is preferable that the instruction take place as an embedded component of the curriculum, both in the classroom and in the library. This requires that faculty and library staff work together to design programs across the disciplines. Not only must they design and evaluate the curriculum together but they must also work in cooperation with each other as students will need ongoing instruction and clarification from both faculty and library staff. Such a curriculum should take into account the development of information literacy skills from the lower through the upper levels, with more being expected of the student over time.

However, while key players of an integrated program involve faculty and library staff, the Association of Colleges and Research Libraries (ACRL) points out that a successful program must first begin with the academic administrators. Their contribution in providing leadership and support is crucial to the smooth running of such a program in that they are instrumental in "helping create a supportive atmosphere and practical opportunities for cooperation among librarians, classroom faculty and information technologists" (ACRL Information Literacy for Faculty and Administrators, 2003). This is particularly significant because faculty and librarians have not always agreed with the vision of how to incorporate information literacy instruction into the curriculum. Some faculty feel that librarians need to be aware that they do not "own information literacy and information literacy is not always described in the terms that librarians would use" (Oberman, cited in Lampert, 2003). On the other hand it has been noted that there is "no widespread acceptance of the librarian's role in curriculum planning and course-integrated instruction. Teaching faculties are appreciative of the support given by librarians; however, librarians are not universally recognized as playing an integral role in course planning and teaching" (Winners, cited in Arp, 2006). This issue was demonstrated when in 1994 Anita Cannon conducted a survey of the faculty at York University in Toronto. It revealed that only half the faculty was supportive of librarians delivering in-class lectures or demonstrations. Cannon suggests that "faculty and librarians have quite different interpretations of what it means to deliver information literacy in a collaborative fashion" and she suggests further research be conducted to address this issue (Cannon cited in Leckie, 1999).

Despite these challenges, ALA stresses the importance of faculty and librarians collaborating to provide information literacy instruction saying that it is “fundamental” and should be “based on shared goals, a shared vision, and a climate of trust and respect. Each partner brings different strengths and perspectives to the relationship” (ACRL Collaboration, 2006). Campus administration can be instrumental in providing the vital unifying factor within the educational system. Patricia Breivik describes the process of how significant changes in attitudes can be

facilitated by a positive institutional climate. The success rate will depend partially on whether presidents and academic vice presidents provide an active model of partnership with librarians while encouraging active partnerships between librarians and faculty in the instructional process (Breivik, 1989, p. 43).

In designing information literacy instruction that applies across the curriculum, there are a number of approaches that can be utilized. Each requires varying degrees of library staff involvement. These approaches include: embedding, integrating and supplementing. In the embedding process, information literacy is incorporated into the course through specifically designed learning objectives, assignments, activities, lectures and assessment. In the integration process, librarians deliver instruction to students in the classroom. In the supplemental process, students are provided with opportunities outside the classroom by the means of tutorials, workshops, experiential learning, and web sites. These approaches reinforce contextualized and recursive learning in that students receive “multiple, developmental, intentional, strategic opportunities to develop information

literacy abilities" (Bell, 2006). With each of these approaches the success of the program will be determined by the extent to which a unified, cooperation has taken place between faculty and library staff. Additionally, it is beneficial if student's are required to participate and if they receive credit or are graded for their participation (Allegri cited in Young, 1999, p. 29).

Information literacy instruction however, is not confined only to the efforts of faculty or library staff. Students also play central roles in the process as they are the recipients of such learning. The success of the instruction will be exhibited in the students. Students however are not passive receptors in the process. They must "assume responsibility for their own learning and master information-literacy skills" (Breivik, 1989, p. 29). A student who engages in the learning process and actively becomes information literate reaps benefits beyond the classroom.

It is essential when designing a program, to look at the issue of information literacy through the eyes of the students, to understand their current usage of technology, and to assess their competency level in information literacy. By understanding the issues from the students' perspectives, the curriculum can be designed so that students will be more apt to find relevancy and will engage more readily in the learning process.

In January 2001, the Task Force of the Instruction Section (IS) of the ACRL determined that information literacy encompasses more than good information-seeking behavior. It incorporates the abilities to recognize when information is needed and then to phrase questions designed to gather the needed information. It includes evaluating

and then using information appropriately and ethically once it is retrieved from any media, including electronic, human or print sources (ACRL Objectives for Information Literacy Instruction, 2001).

These abilities can not be automatically assumed but must be taught. In spite of the fact that many students may be adept with technology and are proficient in Googling, instant messaging and other applications, their ability to filter and evaluate information sources may be lacking. They often tend to think of themselves as tech-savvy and may be overconfident; consequently, unable to recognize their need for information literacy instruction (Brown, 2003). This adds another layer to the issue that faculty and libraries must address when ensuring students become information literate.

'Net Generation' is the term used to describe the generation of students who have grown up with computers and who generally feel proficient in their use of technology. In reality, for many their searching may be limited to Google and Wikipedia. Carrie Windham describes herself as a 'Net Gen learner' and says that she and many other college students turn to the web not only for information on movies and the weather, but also when conducting academic research. The web is her starting point. She suggests that useful information literacy instruction should include practical in-class exercises where students are given the tools to understand how to evaluate different information sources. She also makes a compelling point when she states that while libraries and educators tend to accommodate Net Gen learners by providing more resources online, information literacy instruction should also continue to include topics on how to access traditional sources of information as Net Gen learners are unfamiliar with these (Windham, 2006).

No matter what a student's proficiency with technology, or what skill level they have acquired in information literacy, the student must see the relevancy of the instruction of information literacy. They need to understand how it can be applied to real life situations beyond the educational setting because "transferability is the essence of information literacy" (Breivik, 1989, p. 47).

In instances where faculty and libraries have shared their expertise and cooperated in designing and delivering course-related library instruction, the consequences have been profound, with both the student and faculty members impacted. William H. Harvey, a biology professor at Earlham College describes the experience saying that,

Enthusiasm is a highly contagious disease and it appears that our enthusiasm has paid off; for our students are not only motivated to use our libraries, which of course is the key to it all, but they do so with enthusiasm and skills that I certainly never acquired at the same educational level. It goes without saying that the faculty member is also learning a great deal in the process (Breivik, 1989, p. 50).

And this may perhaps be the most significant point of all - that while administrators, faculty and library staff work together to produce information literate students; they themselves are in the process of continually learning. That no matter what the status or level of a person's information literacy, there is always more to learn.

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