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The Problem and Prospect of Getting Information Literacy into the Academy:

Keynote Address for the Annual Conference of the Association of Christian Librarians, June 11, 2013

ACL was most fortunate to listen to a distinguished thinker in the field of Information Literacy at the 2013 Annual Conference. William Badke, who hails from Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia, is a librarian and a professor who has been thinking well about the conundrum of teaching and learning information literacy since 1985 when he began teaching this subject. He shared his most current thoughts about getting information literacy into the academy with the Association of Christian Librarians assembled at Point Loma Nazarene University on June 11, 2013.

Why Information Literacy?

Academia is all about a profound discontent, about a quest to discover more, about a burning desire to solve society's problems and make a better world. Research is at the heart of this academic yearning ... In the world of Christian librarianship, our passion for information literacy arises from the fact that we are a "faith of the Word." We believe that the Word came from God to give us understanding of our Maker's claims upon us. As such, the ability to discern the Word in a world of many words is essential to navigating a path of truth. So we, as much as, or even more than, other information professionals need to be fostering the abilities of our students in the area of handling information with skill. (Badke, 2013b, p. 67)

Bill Badke's definition of information literacy is "the ability to clearly identify a problem, determine what information is needed to find a solution to the problem, acquire and evaluate that information efficiently and effectively, and apply the information well to

the stated problem ... Information literacy is quite simply the ability to handle information well in the context of research and problem-solving" (Badke, 2013a). It is a term that was first coined in 1974 by Paul Zurkowski, a leader in information technology who proposed an ambitious plan to make the United States substantially information literate within 10 years. At that time he estimated that only about 20% of the population was information literate (Zurkowski, 1974, p. 27). Badke estimates that in the information landscape of today's society, "Twenty percent of the population is information literate. The bottom line is that we do not seem to be making many gains ... Today's students, whether undergraduate or graduate, are no more skilled in information literacy than were students 20 or 40 years ago. In some senses, they may be less skilled" (Badke, 2013a).

Students and Information Literacy

Mr. Badke referred to ample social scientific evidence that indicates our students are doing terribly at the tasks of information handling. He cited two recent streams of research specifically: the ERIAL Project and Project Information Literacy. The ERIAL Project did detailed surveys of students, teaching faculty, and librarians in higher education in the Chicago area. Its findings: "Almost without exception, students exhibited a lack of understanding of search logic, how to build a search to narrow/expand results, how to use subject headings, and how various search engines (including Google) organize and display results" (Asher, Duke & Green, 2010). Project Information Literacy (2013) is a longstanding program to assess young adults in their information handling experiences and

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abilities. Alison Head and Michael Eisenberg of Project Information Literacy, using data from thousands of university students, point out, “Frustrations were exacerbated, not resolved, by their lack of familiarity with a rapidly expanding and increasingly complex digital information landscape in which ascertaining the credibility of sources was particularly problematic” (2009, p. 9).



Study after study finds the same thing that most of us are seeing behind a reference desk: students doing research are lost. They don't understand the information world in which they are supposed to function and have little experience using libraries. They don't understand the assignment. They don't understand what the professor wants from them. They are

told to develop a thesis statement, but they don't understand what a thesis is. They can find information but not the best or most specific information. They don't understand what the critical thinking skills are that they are supposed to employ in the research process. They say they evaluate their resources, but they don't know the best criteria to use in doing so. Indeed, they don't understand the point of research itself (Badke, 2013a).

Today's students are flush with technology and can run circles around most adults when it comes to searching Google and filtering through tons of data. If students have a problem, it's that we've made our academic databases too challenging for them, when they should be as simple as Google. Yet, given a bit of time our students supposedly can master any research task we throw at them. They must have picked up on their own the information abilities they needed. Or haven't they? If anecdotal evidence were sufficient, Badke claimed during his presentation, librarians would have enough to push most professors into a depression.

Professors and Information Literacy

Professors, in turn, remain frustrated with the low ability levels they see in student research. The result is that some professors are dumbing down their requirements, asking for fewer items in bibliographies and generally assuming that what they are getting in student papers is the new normal. Badke seldom finds that professors, despite their frustration, believe that students can be trained to become excellent researchers.

William Badke feels uneasy whenever he writes or speaks about our struggles with making information literacy a genuine and strong element of academia. He thinks most professors don't grasp the concept of information literacy. It seems so obvious that professors would grasp information literacy that it is almost inconceivable that they wouldn't. But it startles him repeatedly that they don't. What exactly don't they grasp? According to Badke,

1. They are unable to bundle up into a teachable package the idea of research as a *process* of identifying a problem, gathering relevant materials, evaluating those materials and using them effectively to address a *problem*.

Sure, they have an intellectual understanding of this; they know it intuitively, but they don't seem either able or willing to communicate the process to their students. Instead, they instruct students to have a thesis statement, use critical thinking, and have a required number and type of citations in their bibliographies. Students don't really understand what any of this means. In fact, the most common complaint of students is that they don't understand their professors' assignments. Head and Eisenberg (2010) found that, though struggles grasping what a professor wants from an assignment were dominant among student frustrations, few professors offered the specific types of guidance students needed. “Professors fail to recognize that this is alien territory for students who have only a vague idea what research is for beyond assuming that they are required to study up on a topic and report what they found” (Badke, 2013a).

2. Professors tend to view the challenge of student research ability either as remedial or as an insurmountable problem – sometimes both.

They believe it possible through brief instruction to get students to overcome some barriers to research, but they fail to see how to teach students to become good researchers. Professors' own efforts are to demonstrate what to do. They are subsequently disappointed that students failed to do so. The average professor eventually concludes there is no ultimate solution to the abysmal level of student research. Librarians see the huge gaps in actual student ability and know that the problem is more than something requiring remedial attention (Badke, 2013a).

The result is librarians' efforts to increase the levels of information literacy on campus are met with the following typical responses by professors:

- Give librarians an hour, no more. Teaching research skills is a worthy task, but there's no room for it in the curriculum.
- Just allow librarians to show students the databases. Since that seems to be their main problem, let them figure out the rest on their own. It's their responsibility as students, after all.
- The professor sees his/her role as a subject specialist, whose responsibility is to teach his discipline. Librarians are not subject specialists, most don't hold a Ph.D., and professors don't expect librarians to be able to solve their problem with student research.

Badke explained to the gathered ACL librarians, "We can do one-shot sessions, even two-shot sessions if we are blessed, but we still see the same challenge – students who are floundering in their research efforts, hating research, and disappointing their professors, some of whom believe students these days are just unmotivated."

Professors and Librarians in the Information Literacy World

Bill Badke has been thinking and writing about the disconnection between librarians and professors over information literacy for a long time; he understands the problem in his mind, but not in his heart. "We are all seeking to educate, but librarians say that education must include information literacy, while professors don't see information literacy as a priority or even as particularly on their radar. This makes no sense to me" (Badke, 2013a). He shared an experience that probably seems familiar to many librarians who have taught information literacy for years:

I'll sit down with a professor and discuss the mutually experienced fact that he or she is getting terrible research papers from students. We'll both look sad about that. I'll share some of my successes with improving student abilities, and the professor will perk up and even begin discussing the possibilities. But the conversation will generally end in one of three directions. First, the professor may ask me to drop in on a class and share my insights (briefly) with the students so that they can get on to information literacy themselves. Second, the professor will say that information literacy is a nice thought, but today's curriculum is too full already. Third, the professor will appear to grasp the importance of information literacy and suggest that we discuss this again. But we won't. It seems like librarians are talking to a stone or to someone who doesn't speak our language. That second option is pretty close to the truth. Librarians and professors speaking about information literacy are not speaking the same language. (Badke, 2013a)

Badke then detailed some communication challenges we face:

1. Professors have forgotten how difficult it was to develop their own research abilities. Perhaps they selectively forget their early blunders and poorly researched undergraduate papers, so they can't see why their students should have so much

"... though we are rather timid people, we are going to need to make more noise."

– William Badke

trouble with it. The result is that they come to assume that developing research skill is learned simply rather than the learning of a complex process (Badke, 2012, p. 57-58).

2. Many professors assume that student skills develop over time simply by doing research. Students have lots of technological skills, so they are bound to figure it out sometime (Badke, 2012, p. 58-60).

Librarians know that this rarely happens in any significant way and that many students repeat old patterns again and again. As long as students are sent out of the classroom to do their research, they will not advance in information literacy, since they are cut off from instruction from their professor that could guide their skill development.

3. Faculty members think in terms of content, specifically content within their own disciplines, rather than in terms of process and skill development that can be transferable to a wider range of subjects. There is scarcely enough time to cover course content, which is their primary goal. Librarians tend to emphasize process – this may well be a significant reason why professors give so little time to librarians to help their students with information literacy. A librarian’s suggestion that the teaching of research processes needs to come alongside the teaching of content means less content would be taught. For faculty members whose focus is on content, such a suggestion is not likely to get much of a hearing (Badke, 2013a).

... the growing hunger among academics and students for someone to lead them out of the fog provides librarians with opportunity to be heard and understood.

What Do We Need?

Badke posed a question: If we were to develop significant information literacy in our students, what would we need to teach, and what would they need to learn? Given that we are convinced that this is more than a remedial issue, we are looking at a long-term process of instruction and guided student practice. Sure, we can take opportunities for one-shot instruction as they are offered, but we cannot delude ourselves into believing that one-shots create information literacy.

During the keynote session, Badke described five elements of what students require to become information literate:

1. A substantial understanding of the current information landscape

For example, ask students the difference between a journal and an article. The majority of undergraduates and even graduate students just don’t know. To answer why, think about how often students today actually see a physical journal. Their articles are delivered electronically through databases without the journal packaging being made visible except in citations. In fact, most students speak of journal citations in databases as if they were websites. They lack a conceptual framework to see articles as part of a larger publication program. Another example is students who were told to use only scholarly literature, but they couldn’t determine what was scholarly and what was not. Even if we describe scholarly literature as having footnotes and bibliographies, that is indistinguishable to them from Wikipedia articles having footnotes and bibliographies. But they were told they couldn’t use Wikipedia, thus leaving them confused. Students do not investigate the author or publisher of information to determine their qualifications for producing the information they have made available. The information landscape today is highly complicated, and students are not getting the guidance they need to navigate it intelligently. Badke explained, “As more information is appearing without peer review and is being made more accessible, students themselves need to become their own gatekeepers, yet they lack the basic skills or even simple criteria to do so. Thus, being able to navigate intelligently through the increasingly mixed bag of knowledge in our information age needs to be taught intentionally and well.”

2. To understand the purpose of research and have the skills to design it well

Undergraduates and even beginning graduate students think professors assign research papers because they want their

students to do independent study of a particular subject. That is, students see research as a learning process in which they read up on something and report back their success to the professor by writing a summary of what they learned. What they end up with is a reading report, not a research paper. “The distinction between data compilation followed by synthesis (which is not really research), and research is that it enlists information as a tool to *solve a problem*. Many students lack the ability to formulate a concise problem statement (research question or thesis) that transforms their research into a *problem-solving exercise* with a clear goal. They easily fall back into the compilation model unless they have a lot of guidance” (Badke, 2013a).

3. To know how to move beyond Google thinking in information acquisition

It is a revelation to students that only a small percentage of the world’s knowledge is available through a Google search. Google may appear easy, but when it comes to precisely relevant results, academic databases do a much better job. Students treat academic databases like Google; they throw keywords into the first box and take the first few results as the best for their purposes, relevant or not. Libraries have even encouraged this kind of behavior by purchasing expensive discovery tools. When students discover library catalogs and databases, however, they generally perceive them as clunky and difficult. Students need guidance to enable them to appreciate that databases using metadata and faceted searching can actually work better than Google to reveal high quality and highly relevant results. They need to learn the database features that can expose such results.

4. To develop solid skills in evaluating information

This involves us helping them with criteria for both quality and relevance to use for whatever research problem they are dealing with and giving them a lot of practice.

5. To join the academy as participants

Students begin their studies as outsiders. The professor is the expert. They are not. Thus they are on the outside of the discipline, not participants in it. They need to become participants, practitioners of the discipline rather than spectators. The only way to do this effectively is to enable them to learn the culture of the discipline – what it values, how it does research, and what its discourse sounds like.

Bill Badke shared a wonderful story to illustrate this point:

We had a graduate student in Old Testament who was involved in an oral defense of his thesis. Two of the three examiners were external experts. After a couple of preliminary questions, I observed something absolutely amazing. These experts were not examining our student. They were picking his brain for insights into research *they* were doing, because his particular theory of narrative indicators of the pleasure or displeasure of God was revolutionary. How did this turn into a conversation among colleagues when it was supposed to be an examination of a student? It happened because the student had demonstrated himself to be a colleague. He thought like they did; he talked like they did. He had things to offer them.

We have a long tradition in academia of delivering content to students in a way that is intensely alienating. Students learn *about* the professor’s subject. It is not their subject even though they struggle to understand it and learn its content. They are outsiders looking in. When it comes time to do a research project, students are sent *out* to do the research. They are offered what seem to them to be inadequate instructions to figure out what the professor wants, and do whatever that is. Their main motive is to get a good grade. “The best way to turn observers into practitioners is to teach them right in the classroom how to become good researchers. Information literacy within disciplines is the way to create active, participating learners” (Badke, 2013a).

Prospects of Reaching the Faculty

If we know the essence of our communication problems with faculty, and we have a clear vision of our goals for information literacy, then getting the rest of academia on board with a comprehensive information literacy program should be easy, right? Wrong. Can we realistically adopt any expectation that information literacy can be solidly lodged within the educational processes of our institutions, beyond what we already have in random one-shots and other basic orientations? If, as Bill Badke (2013a) believes, this is a problem that is going to have to be resolved in much larger ways through the curriculum, getting it on the academic agenda is not going to be simple, nor quick.

The place to begin has to be with faculty, according to Badke. Many are overworked and hard-pressed to deliver the content they need to get into students, and they are truly blind to the opportunities of information literacy. But librarians can connect better with faculty than we are doing currently. How? Librarians can help meet faculty needs by offering support for the faculty's research. Librarians can provide updating sessions for discipline specific databases, using those sessions to point out how important it is to optimize search features and how seldom students use such features. Librarians can help faculty receive contents notifications for journals they follow. Librarians can alert them to information or innovations in their fields. Above all, getting to know them as well as possible and offering whatever services they require is crucial if we are going to communicate with them effectively on their own turf.

Beyond our natural desire to support our faculty, there is an ulterior motive: we need to remove the stigma that librarians aren't real academics but are somewhere between professor and clerical support. The more we enable faculty to meet their own research needs, the more we get a chance to show them what we can do. Badke says, "I know you probably cringe at the idea of trying to impress your faculty with your abilities, but it's for a good cause – to gain a hearing for a larger agenda in information literacy" (2013a).

Bill Badke continues, "It does mean, however, that, though we are rather timid people, we are going to need to make more noise." He differentiates between good noise and bad noise. Bad noise trumpets, at every opportunity, that faculty members are failing their students by not supporting their information literacy to the expectations of librarians, and such lecturing will fall on deaf ears. "Good noise is the kind that gets alongside faculty and administrators with a clear message that we librarians, who have supported our own faculty in their research, understand that student research is not what it could be, and we have ways of helping" (Badke, 2013a). He suggests ways to come alongside faculty to enhance information literacy of students by initiating dialogue with anyone who teaches writing (professors in writing courses, first year English, etc.). He has been amazed at how often such people grasp full well the information illiteracy gaps in their students and are longing for help. Librarians are the ones who have solutions, so coming alongside these teachers to provide instruction or, even better, to show them how they can do it themselves is key in moving forward with the initial steps of information literacy.

William Badke calls himself a great believer in research and writing courses that are required within the cores of various majors. Librarians can get a better hearing in the planning and development of such courses by talking to professors and academic administrators about "writing." The point here is that many academics view the problem with information literacy (which is process) as a problem with writing (which is the product). If an academic department values the ability to write well within its discipline, then a writing course specific to that department is a solid way to express that value. This is where librarians can point out that writing is not isolated from research skills. Both are necessary to create good writers.

A Final Word

Ultimately, information literacy has to move into the foundation of every course. Process and content must both be seen as essential to becoming an educated person. This brings us back to the reality that when

... students are made to feel alienated by being sent out to do research, the message they hear is that they are responsible to learn the process of doing research on their own with minimal instruction. They also hear that the doing of research itself is not a high priority in their education, because the professor didn't teach them how to do it. Finally, they hear that, if the professor has sent them out to do research, and they are faltering at it, either they are really incompetent (that is, this must be easy or the professor would have taught them how to do it), or this is just another example of an impossible task expected of them by professors who really don't understand what their students are going through. Students blame themselves or their professors, but the one thing that they are certain about is that they hate research. (Badke, 2013a)

Professors need to understand that when they assign a research paper, get it from the student at the end of the term and grade it two to four weeks later, students have no opportunity to apply feedback to improve research skills. "Students often don't even read the comments on the paper, because reading comments doesn't get grades and tends to bring on a gloomy mood," Badke (2013a) explains. "So we now have a common component of student requirement that is simply not helping those students to grow in their ability to do it."

The solution is faceting assignments. Encourage professors who support the goals of information literacy to break their research assignments down into four or five smaller assignments, each of which incrementally builds research skills on the previous one. Each is evaluated by the professor, perhaps in conjunction with review by a librarian, and students get a chance to resubmit if the work isn't up to par. Strategic librarian instruction in class, focusing on use of catalogs and databases, is crucial at each stage requiring such skills. In the final incremental assignment students submit the final paper. Several key factors are involved here. First, professors must learn to focus on process as much as on content when they evaluate student research. Thus they need to look at *how* students carried out

their research (method) as well as *what* they produced (content). Second, professors can really use the help of librarians in developing faceted assignments and in having librarians come into class for instruction at key points. Third, students need to recognize that the only way to get good grades is to read the professor's comments and revise any assignments that are not up to par. Faceting provides an opportunity to develop student researchers, skilled handlers of information, especially if it is done through the curriculum (Badke, 2012, pp.145-147).

Conclusion

Bill Badke left those assembled at the 2013 Annual Conference of the Association of Christian Librarians with hope. He thinks we are on the verge of an information literacy revolution. As the world of information becomes more and more confusing, and as databases become more and more complex, the growing hunger among academics and students for someone to lead them out of the fog provides librarians with opportunity to be heard and understood. He believes our day has come. Bill Badke is an optimist about getting information literacy into the academy and fulfilling Paul Zurkowski's vision, if perhaps not exactly in Zurkowski's overly optimistic timeline. †

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