The Evolving Role of Information Literacy in Higher Education: A Case Study

Linda Poston
Nyack College

The Christian Librarian is the official publication of the Association of Christian Librarians (ACL). To learn more about ACL and its products and services please visit http://www.acl.org/

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl/vol49/iss3/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Christian Librarian by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.
Passionate vision in the midst of challenging circumstances produces creativity.

The desire of librarians at Nyack College, like other academic librarians, is to play a significant role in the development of effective research and critical thinking skills in the community we serve. But the challenges of having no room for a 1-credit required course in the core curriculum, cultivating faculty and student ownership of a campus-wide information literacy program, the integration of information literacy skills at the discipline, course and assignment levels, and development of appropriate assessment tools for measuring the effectiveness of the information literacy program seemed daunting.

The first window of opportunity came in the fall of 1999 when a new 2-credit freshman orientation course (Foundations for Excellence) was being designed. The librarians requested one class session in the library and customized a presentation regarding the research assignment required in the course. In addition, a worksheet that reinforced the skills taught in the session was developed and counted as part of the grade for the course. The teaching librarian graded each worksheet and returned it to the professor to be included as part of the course grade.

In January of 2000, ACRL published Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, and we began exploring ways to implement the standards, performance indicators and outcomes. During the spring we identified three additional required courses and determined a specific emphasis for each course. We approached the heads of the departments for these courses and discussed having a library session for all sections of the designated courses. In the spring, the librarians brought a proposal to the faculty meeting and it was approved. We implemented the four-course IL Program over the next several years.

An additional opportunity came when faculty expressed concern over the quality of the 30-page research papers required of all interdisciplinary majors their senior year. When we approached the administration about the library’s involvement in this, we were asked to design a one-credit course that would be required of all interdisciplinary seniors prior to the semester they write the 30-page paper. We have taught this course each semester since fall 2000 and each semester seniors are grateful for “discovering” an abundance of resources on their topic using effective research and critical thinking skills. They state that they think this course should be required of all freshmen. Thus we have found that students appreciate these skills at the point of need, such as facing a 30-page paper, and often find such teaching irrelevant at the beginning of their first semester.

Students, the teaching librarian, and teaching faculty all assess the sessions taught in the four required courses. At the end of each session, a “One Minute Survey” is given to each student that is customized to the ACRL standards targeted for the specific session. The first four questions provide self-perception by the students by asking “As a result of this session are you able to …?” The second set of questions contains corresponding multiple choice questions to demonstrate understanding of the IL standards taught during the session. A worksheet is designed to implement the IL skills covered in the session and relate specifically to the course research assignment. The worksheet is assigned point value by the reference librarian and returned to the teaching professor to be included as part of the course grade. In addition, the teaching professor assigns a level of competency for each student on one or two appropriate IL standards when grading the research paper. The evaluation sheet is returned to the librarians for assessment purposes.

Good information literacy skills require an open mind and a willingness to admit that our current methodologies, information, and habits may be wrong.

Linda Poston
Nyack College
Nyack, New York
Several things have been done to develop ownership of the information literacy program by faculty and to encourage “information across the curriculum”.

These include:

• Proposal and approval by faculty of an Information literacy mission statement and definition
• Formation of an Information Literacy Faculty Taskforce with representatives from each school meeting once per semester to discuss campus-wide information literacy endeavors
• Requirement (initiated by librarians and the Assessment Task Force) for one of the student learning goals on each syllabus to be an information literacy goal, which is assessed when course assessments are done at the end of the semester
• Development of an information literacy “profile” for graduates of the undergraduate programs, and distinct profiles for each of the graduate programs
• Identification of a required course from each major to integrate discipline-specific information literacy skills
• Development of two rubrics for assessing information literacy aspects of a research assignment in any discipline

One of the biggest challenges is to motivate students and demonstrate that information literacy skills are essential to their education and to the development of life-long skills.

At the end of last year, I tried a new approach with an upper level course. My husband was teaching a course on Islam with several very specific research paper topics for his students. We began the session by breaking the class into teams of two and having them choose one of the research topics for the class. The assignment was to take ten minutes to find the “best” resource (book, article or website) on their respective topic. They had a one-page “research log” to fill out, which asked them to note which resource they went to (Google, the online catalog, a library database etc.); whether they found “enough” relevant resources; and if they found too much or too little, how they refined their search. At the end of the ten minutes they had to print out the citation or website of their “best” resource. When the class regrouped, each pair shared a short summary of their research strategy and what their best resource was. The resource was then evaluated and given a rating of “fair”, “good” or “excellent” by both the teaching professor and the librarian leading the IL session. This was a chance to “model” critical thinking, and to give specific examples of what made a resource “fair”, “good” or “excellent”. The last part of the session was a short demonstration online by the librarian, who conducted searches on the same topics the students had just searched, showing additional strategies to find quality resources. Instead of tuning the librarian out, the students were much more engaged because of their prior involvement.

As we enter the 7th year of our information literacy program, what further endeavors are we exploring?

• Discuss with directors of graduate programs concrete ways to assess information literacy profiles for the graduates in their respective programs
• Meet with each department to discuss discipline-specific information literacy skills needed for their students, and design a library session that the teaching professor leads and for which the librarian provides library service and resources support
• Offer an assignment design workshop for faculty, demonstrating that the ability to develop effective research strategies and critical thinking skills in the students begins with the formation of an effective assignment design and description. In addition, providing a rubric for the research assignment that communicates expectations to students regarding types of resources to use, and incorporates principles of critical thinking will promote the development of information literacy skills and will provide an effective assessment tool in grading the research assignment.

• Implement an assessment template to compare raw data and narrative analysis of the information literacy program over a period of several years

• Implement greater student involvement in the “teaching” of the information literacy sessions

• Propose a 1-credit information literacy course to be required of all in-coming students

• Market our resources to faculty by departments and get them excited about what kinds of resources the library has to offer their respective disciplines as well as discussing “term-paper alternatives” that would incorporate information literacy skills and avoid the tendency toward plagiarism that arises so easily with the typical “summary” term paper

• Constantly re-evaluate the content and format of our information literacy sessions to be able to assess current student research strategies, provide hands-on experience related to the specific assignment, and demonstrate additional approaches to find quality resources

In conclusion, the evolution of information literacy at Nyack has involved going from a generic bibliographic session for College Writing I students in 1999, to a campus-wide initiative involving four required courses with distinct information literacy goals tailored to the course and assignments, while partnering with heads of graduate programs, undergraduate department heads, and all teaching faculty as they develop information literacy student learning goals for their syllabi. It has been a journey of being proactive, getting outside the library into faculty offices, listening to faculty representing the various schools on the IL Taskforce, and thinking creatively as library faculty as we meet every month to plan and assess the current IL program. The reward is in seeing the community as a whole become excited about the world that opens up to them as they understand and continually develop more effective research strategies and critical thinking skills.

REFERENCES


The reward is in seeing the community as a whole become excited about the world that opens up to them …