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Information Literacy

as an
Essential Component
of Liberal Education



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The Association of College & Research Libraries, a division of the American Library Association, defines information literacy as “a set of abilities needed to recognize when information is needed, and to find, retrieve, evaluate, and effectively and ethically use information” (ACRL, 2000). It is an essential academic literacy and a basis for lifelong learning.

Information literacy is more than teaching the mechanics of how to “find” information – such as how to search a database for scholarly articles, or how to find a book in the library catalogue. It’s an entire information-seeking process. These skills are not just important for success at university; they are also important in life, both personal and professional. As information continues to be created at an exponential rate, being able to evaluate that proliferation of information is an important life skill. Everyone needs information, whether at work, for personal health reasons, or for a multitude of other reasons. As such, being able to discern the accurate and authoritative from the chaff is critical.

This may seem like an obvious skill to most of us; however, it’s not always so cut and dried, especially for undergraduates who often seem to take information they find at face value and lack the skills to critically evaluate the information they come across. Likewise, some of us are very familiar with the ways we find

and evaluate information in our own discipline, but may be totally unaware of the conventions of other subject areas. For example, a historian conducting solo qualitative research based on ideas involves library and archives research using books, often physically located in the library, and a lot of writing. On the other hand, scientific research is often done in a lab, and is usually a collaborative process with quantitative results; much of the “library” research is done online, or with preprints or conference proceedings.

You know best how knowledge is created, communicated, and understood in your discipline, so from that standpoint it makes sense that you also instruct your students on how and where to find this information, how to understand it, how to use it, and how to evaluate it. If each of us talks to our students about information from our own disciplinary perspective, they get a more complete picture of



how to find, use, and evaluate information in all areas of their life. This is the beauty of a liberal education – cross-disciplinary perspectives. Information literacy feeds into each pillar of our stated objectives for liberal education at the University of Lethbridge. Under “breadth across disciplines,” information literacy is a stated outcome. Within “ability to connect and integrate knowledge,” the importance of considering multiple viewpoints/across disciplines are outcomes – both that information literacy helps achieve. Under “critical thinking and problem solving,” the need for evidence-based reasoning, formulating good questions, learning to learn, and knowledge synthesis are stressed – all parts of information literacy. And within “education for citizenship,” the importance of evidence-based decisions and consideration of multiple viewpoints are mentioned – again, natural fits for information literacy. Information literacy is an overarching literacy that is seldom taught in any single class, but that is an integral part of each student’s education. And like the other liberal-education competencies we want to stress in order to integrate these concepts into each student’s liberal education, it has to be fully integrated into each class. Like any other literacy, it requires practice and repetition in various contexts.

The Association of College & Research Libraries recently released a new *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* that mirrors very closely many of the concepts we are trying to emphasize in our vision of liberal education at the U of L. Clearly, we all have very similar goals in educating our students.

While reinforcing most of the key concepts of information literacy – the ability to locate, evaluate, understand, and ethically use information – the new *Framework* re-frames them as threshold concepts and outlines a much larger, more complex, and comprehensive idea of information literacy in response to our much

larger and more complex digital and information landscapes. Information literacy is now viewed as one part of a multitude of literacies that we all need to achieve competence in to be successful students, researchers, and citizens in the 21st century. Ultimately, metaliteracy is the goal that we are moving toward – an integrated web of interconnected literacies that include digital, media, visual, academic, and new literacies.

Inherent in both metaliteracy and the new *Framework* is the acknowledgement that students are both consumers and creators of information, often simultaneously, and often within a collaborative and online information landscape. The emphasis has moved away from the utilitarian skills of searching and finding, to a much greater emphasis on the evaluation of information, understanding how authority is constructed and contextual, and understanding

that information seeking and creating (i.e., research) is an iterative, collaborative conversation. In other words, it's really about teaching critical thinking.

Librarians are happy to supplement information literacy instruction in your class by teaching a particular class on search skills, evaluation, and so on, but clearly we cannot be in every class, and we cannot cover the full scope of information literacy in one 50-minute session – or even several of them. It would take a whole course in itself (which we have in Library Science 2000). But even then those skills need to be reinforced within the context of different classes.

Students see you, their professors, as the authority and will listen if *you* say it's important. The concept of information literacy will become ingrained if it's reinforced in various classes, in

various disciplines. Like writing, reading, critical thinking, and many of the liberal-education educational goals, information literacy is a core competency that will be most successfully integrated into a student's knowledge base if it is reiterated in many classes, across the curriculum, and throughout a student's academic career.

References

Association of College & Research Libraries. (2000). *Information literacy competency standards for higher education*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association.

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