THE WAY I SEE IT

The future of information literacy

Transforming the world

by Dane Ward

Ten years from now, information literacy will be obsolete—or at least our current conception of it. Of course, how our theory and practice evolve during this interval will depend on our actions and inactions. I cannot predict the future but know with certainty that the future of information literacy and librarianship rests in our hands. If we want to have lasting impact on the lives of our students, we must teach information research skills in a way that engages them with problems of the real world. We are being called.

Fifteen years ago, I worked as a Peace Corps volunteer in Senegal, West Africa, helping to improve English instruction in rural schools. Like much of Africa, Senegal is a land of limited resources and opportunities, though populated by people with concerns very similar to yours and mine. The difference is that in Africa, millions of people are dying because of insufficient food, jobs, inadequate health care, intergroup conflict—and information about how to move toward solutions.

As I see it, our greatest challenge is whether, as a profession, we will respond to the desperate need for our information literacy expertise. Not only are we being called in Africa, but also by our fellow Americans, and perhaps most identifiably, by our students. Will we step out of our comfort zone within academia to engage and meet the world where its problems really exist? For instance, our involvement with community information literacy projects would seem a step in the right direction, if by this, we intend to bridge the gap between classroom discussions and practice, and real life. I believe that one of our great tasks as teachers involves bringing our students into relationship with the world.

Information literacy is currently understood as embracing the ability to define a problem, find information to solve the problem, evaluate the information, and use it effectively. In theory, these broad competencies encompass the entire research process and, ideally, should be integrated across the curriculum. In practice, however, most librarians continue to teach one-shot sessions on locating information, and rarely find the time or opportunity to develop applications of the theory. In part, our difficulty in gaining rapid and widespread acceptance of information literacy results from our attempt to fit this revolutionary idea within a traditional teaching paradigm, which diminishes it.

Focusing on student concerns

An information literacy that focuses on teaching students to conduct research lays a foundation on which to build an edifice for more powerful learning. However, the walls of this

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structure, consisting of engaged and committed students, remain to be raised. Despite the inherent power of information literacy, students will not value it without strong proof of its importance to their lives. It is the same with other tools and concepts in disciplines across the institution—and it is a problem. You and I have seen too many students disconnected from their own education, passive observers in the classroom.

I see a new day when students will learn to use information skills to improve the world. It will be a day when information literacy instruction means teaching students about research while helping them to find value in the world and to participate in it.

As instructors, most of us appreciate the importance of active learning; it permits students to learn by doing. However, in itself, active learning remains an insufficient means to ensure the effective acquisition of skills and knowledge. Students do not learn only because they do something. They learn best when they find a reason to care. Teaching students to conduct research cannot be separated from helping them to discover their own reasons for being interested and concerned.

Consider a typical library session in which students learn to find articles on euthanasia. As typically presented, the topic fails to engage their interest, and they frequently perceive the session as simply an academic exercise that has nothing to do with their own lives. The students may practice a skill in finding information on the topic but probably experience little meaningful learning because they simply do not care.

Information literacy should begin and end with student concerns, even if it means teasing them out through time-consuming discussions. Students learn research better within meaningful contexts. In discussions with instructors about class research topics, we should raise this issue, making every effort to focus on topics that mean something to students. Of course, we cannot identify those issues without talking and listening to them.

Taking time to understand students may ultimately prove one of the most valuable discoveries about teaching. Students are not blank slates waiting to soak up what we have to teach about information skills. They struggle with amazing lives beyond the classroom that accompany them into every session. Their personal concerns reflect the messy and chaotic issues of the real world, and we miss an opportunity if we fail to work with them.

If we want to have lasting impact on the lives of our students, we must teach information research skills in a way that engages them with problems of the real world.

Rather than assigning a generic topic such as euthanasia, we should spend time at the beginning of every semester learning about our students. Why are they taking this library class? What do they want from their college education? Where are they coming from? Where are they going? On a more personal level, we may learn that one student's mother has cancer. Another worries about an alcoholic father. Many students suffer from subtle forms of discrimination due to factors such as race, religion, gender, weight, personality type, and learning disabilities. Most are unaware of how their social and academic environment can hinder their potential for success. Student issues are real-world issues.

Modeling participation in the world

The roof of our information literacy structure will be shingled with student participation in the issues of the world. Teaching research goes hand in hand with acting in the world. Can we really say that students are information literate if they succeed in finding information but fail to communicate their research or otherwise do anything with it?

We frequently talk about having a lasting impact on students' lives. Authentic teaching is about sharing what we know of the world and providing models of responsible action within it. Traditional classroom learning often lacks meaningful praxis; instructors talk objectively about an abstract world but fail to encourage students to act in it or advocate for it. Academia has been careful not to show that it cares too much, and teachers have been careful not to bring too much of themselves into the classroom.

Information literacy requires a different approach to pedagogy. As we teach stu-

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dents how to conduct effective research, we can model our passion for participation in the world. We develop community-based information literacy initiatives. We talk with community agencies and discover their information needs, showing students what it means to take information literacy into the world.

In a small way, I have undertaken this process in central Michigan. In response to a letter of inquiry, a number of service and nonprofit organizations have expressed enthusiasm for undertaking a collaborative project with me. As envisioned, the project will involve bringing actual research questions from one of these agencies into my undergraduate library and information literacy class. The County Health Department has been especially interested.

Next fall, my class will interview the Health Department director about a specific problem with which the Health Department needs help. We will conduct the research, synthesize the information, and provide the Health Department with reports and original documents. As indicated in my initial letter, this represents a win-win situation. My students will learn research skills by working on a community-based information need. At the same time, the agency will benefit from our research.

Students benefit when we model information literacy within community contexts. It demonstrates the power of information research skills and teaches something about our responsibility to each other in the world.

Teaching to challenge the unquestioned

Our new information literacy home will be a magnificent structure, built with walls of student engagement and a roof composed of student participation in the world. To cap it off, the building will sustain spires faced with students empowered to ask why.

I see a new day when our students will challenge the world, when they will question taken-for-granted assumptions and use their research skills to improve it. Until our students question the way the world works and recognize their relationship to it, they will fail to find a meaningful reason to participate. They will deny their responsibility, as many of us do. In fact, we are part of a shrinking global system, not apart from it. We are part of the problems we choose to investigate and act upon, as well as those we do not.

Information literacy is not optional. In this new millennium, it will become the foundational concept around which other competencies coalesce. Managing and using information effectively is a basic survival skill for us as individuals and as citizens in a democracy. Two hundred years ago, Thomas Jefferson argued that our nation and its experiment in government would succeed or fail based on its ability to sustain an educated citizenry. The information explosion and its consequences have added a dimension to this perennial threat to a citizenry empowered to shape its own destiny.

In an era when information can be generated, used, and manipulated with ease, democracy requires citizens who can critically evaluate both their information and their sources of information. Every piece of news contains a spin; objectivity is a myth. The current concern about the "digital divide" represents the tip of an information iceberg. At the same time, we are witnesses to a growing "manipulation gap" whereby those with critical skills shape the information and news the rest of us receive, thus impacting our ability to make informed decisions. Beyond providing access to information, our society faces a challenge that can only be remedied through an enhanced information literacy instruction focused on critical thinking.

Information literacy has everything to do with questioning the way things work and making them better. Students are not information literate if they simply accept at face value the news they receive in the media or find on the Web. As instructors, we can help them ask important questions about who benefits from particular interpretations of the news. Out of these discussions can emerge important research questions that may conflict with student views and values and may create teachable moments.

Our current conception of information literacy instruction focuses on teaching the objective and "safe" aspects of research. For instance, we typically help students focus their research on euthanasia; find books and full-text articles on the topic; distinguish between popular and scholarly sources; and evaluate Web-based information. However, we rarely have an opportunity to generate meaningful connections between this topic and the lives of students or help students question the nature of discourse that takes place.

In the future, information literacy programs will emphasize the whys as well as the hows. By focusing on the whole person, successful programs will begin with real student concerns and help students understand how their issues relate to the larger world. Second, they will emphasize participation in the community as a way to further facilitate meaningful connections. Third, they will encourage students to discover and challenge the unquestioned, taken-for-granted assumptions by which we all live. By necessity, these programs will focus on the advocacy of real-world issues as well as on methodology.

We are called to participate in shaping an information future that improves the world. We can play a crucial role in the future—if we choose to play. Certainly, others would don our apparel in this new age and disguise information literacy in a cloak of academic remoteness and objectivity.

However, that is past. The time has come to take risks in developing an information literacy that matters to students because it reaches out to the world to solve real problems, because it challenges our assumptions, because it changes the world. Time is passing faster than we know. Let us not miss our opportunity. The world calls us. ■

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and is an online "cousin" to the original National Atlas of the United States produced in the 1970s. Choose "Atlas Maps" to use the National Atlas of the United States produced in the 1970s. Choose "Atlas Maps" to use the National Atlas Map Browser to build, view, and print maps using a variety of information layers. There are a number of multimedia maps available at this site that combine graphical representations of data with animation as well as links for finding additional information. While there are a limited number of mapping options, users can download National Atlas map layers for personal use or find information on paper maps. *Access:* http://www.nationalatlas.gov/.

- **Wetlands Interactive Mapper Tool.** This site from the National Wetlands Inventory Center of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provides access to National Wetlands Inventory Maps in digital format. Select a county, city, zip code, refuge, or lat/long and submit your query. Where available, link to aerial photography from Microsoft's TerraServer or view a topographic map of the area. While these will not replace the detailed paper maps, the site is a nice place to start for wetlands information. Not all locations are available, so check out the Current NWI Status Map from the main page to find out if digital maps are available in your area. *Access:* http://wetlands.fws.gov/mapper_tool.htm.

Other sites for locating maps

- **Oddens' Bookmarks.** This is a classic in the world of geography not only for providing links to map resources, but links to the entire world of cartography and geography. Select Browse, then Maps and Atlases and choose the type you want to find. There are 5,914 Electronic Atlases and 149 in the Online Map Creating category. Long lists but some real gems can be found here. *Access:* http://oddens.geog.uu.nl.
- **Maps on Other Web Sites.** This is a nice listing of maps by categories available on the Web. *Access:* http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/map_sites/map_sites.html.
- **State Data Centers.** This site provides information for state data centers in all 50 states, but often provides canned maps that focus on socio-economic data or natural resources. Note that not all states provide Web sites, data, or maps. It is a good starting point when searching for maps/data of census information for a particular state. *Access:* http://www.census.gov/sdc/www/. ■