

Jane Hammons, Spencer Brayton, Audrey Gunn, Matthew Weirick Johnson, Melissa Mallon, and Mira Scarnecchia

Celebrating 50 Years of Information Literacy

A Presentation Series

The term “information literacy” dates back to 1974.¹ To celebrate 50 years of information literacy, Jane Hammons organized a series of webinars to bring together librarians to discuss key information literacy-related issues. This article provides an overview of the series, shares perspectives from several panelists, and considers what the popularity of this series suggests about the need for affordable professional development and venues for collaborative discussion among librarians.

Series Overview

The series consisted of seven free webinars, all organized by The Ohio State University Libraries and open to all:

- Celebrating 50 Years of Information Literacy: A Panel Discussion (April 2024): Symphony Bruce, Craig Gibson, Karen Kaufmann, Clarence Gibson, and Nicole Pagowsky shared perspectives on key moments or “inflection points” in information literacy’s history and the future of information literacy (300+ participants).
- Preparing Future Librarians for Instruction and Advocacy: A Panel Discussion (June 2024): Mira Scarnecchia, Eamon Tewell, Merinda Kaye Hensley, and Laura Saunders discussed perspectives on the challenges of preparing LIS students for instructional roles (200+ participants).
- AI Literacy and Information Literacy: Considerations for the Future (June 2024): Michael Flierl discussed essential questions that librarians need to consider related to artificial intelligence (450+ participants).
- Information Literacy and Related Literacies: Exploring Relationships and Future Directions (July 2024): Melissa Mallon, Spencer Brayton, Audrey Gunn, and Sarah Morris shared views on the intersections between information literacy, digital literacy, and media literacy (200+ participants).
- Teaching Information Literacy: Considering Current and Future Approaches and Models (July 2024): Bill Badke, Matthew Weirick Johnson, Heidi Julien, and Jane Hammons shared their perspectives on different models for teaching information literacy (400+ participants).

Jane Hammons is associate professor and teaching and learning engagement librarian at The Ohio State University, email: hammons.73@osu.edu. Spencer Brayton is director of library services at Waubonsee Community College, email: sbrayton@waubonsee.edu. Audrey Gunn is research and instruction librarian for natural sciences and English at St. Olaf College, email: gunn4@stolaf.edu. Matthew Weirick Johnson is director of research and instruction at the University of South Florida Libraries Tampa campus, email: matthewjohnson@usf.edu. Melissa Mallon is associate university librarian for teaching and learning at Vanderbilt University, email: melissa.mallon@vanderbilt.edu. Mira Scarnecchia is OER librarian at Columbus State Community College, email: mscarnecchia@csc.edu.

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- **Teaching Information Literacy: Exploring the “Teach the Teachers” Model (July 2024):** Jane Hammons outlined the faculty-focused model of information literacy instruction (200+ participants).
- **Information Literacy as a Concept and Practice: Where are We Going (July 2024):** Clarence Maybee, Sara Miller, Veronica Arellano Douglas, and Logan Rath discussed future directions for information literacy (450+ participants).

In total, more than 1,600 unique individuals attended at least one presentation. Participants came from almost every state and a range of institution types, from community colleges to large research universities. In the following section, several panelists will share their reflections on their participation in the series.

Participant Reflections

Spencer Brayton

Over the past decade, much of my work as a librarian has focused on the intersection between media literacy and information literacy. A major part of my philosophy as a librarian is to make connections between different literacies, departments, and services across campus to support students, believing that librarians are natural facilitators and connectors across these different areas. Media literacy became more permanent because I found a colleague who always wanted to grow and refine their work to better support students. This collaborative work has led to a powerful journey and model for librarians to think about as the profession continues to push against outdated notions of what libraries do and how librarians are educators. For this reason, I wanted to participate in the “Information Literacy and Related Literacies” panel.

I enjoy shining a light for those outside of libraries on all that librarians and libraries can do to support their communities. Media literacy was one way to do this, both in the classroom and in conversations at conferences outside of the library world. I have found there is much connection and overlap between media literacy models and definitions, and information literacy models and definitions. Yet, in the academy, there remain opportunities and challenges (many of which may have to do with the lack of respect and outdated thoughts about libraries). I have also found that academics from different disciplines who focus on media literacy are strongly in support of collaboration, especially with librarians, and who understand information literacy. But the opposite can be true, with academics viewing librarians as intruding on their turf and with little respect for what they bring to supporting learning through different literacies. (I mean no disrespect to different epistemologies.) However, I have always thought that librarians are not trying to “own” information literacy but share it in a variety of ways as educators in support of student learning. I encourage librarians to collaborate with faculty intentionally in different disciplines, be absorbed by another area of study, and represent what we do at other conferences to tell our story and value.

Audrey Gunn

It was such a pleasure to collaborate with Jane and my co-panelists on the “Information Literacy and Related Literacies” panel. This topic—of how information literacy intersects with other literacies, such as media, data, and maker literacy—is one that librarians and technologists at St. Olaf College have been contemplating for several years. In 2023–2024,

our team undertook a grant-funded project in which we identified and defined the key literacies we teach, then developed a “Literacies Framework” to help us visualize the connections between these literacies.

In the panel, I presented our work with a couple of goals in mind: to gain insights from peers beyond our institution and to showcase how collaboration with technologists can deepen our conversations about the intersection of information literacy with other literacies. St. Olaf is unusual in that our instruction librarians and instructional technologists are all part of the same department – a structure that has encouraged closer collaboration on numerous projects, including our literacies framework. The opportunity to share our framework was invaluable, and the comments of my fellow panelists and attendees have deepened my thinking about literacies. In particular, the discussion of information literacy instruction at the K–12 level has motivated me to learn more about the experiences our students have had with these concepts before college. This panel emphasized just how many educators play a role in teaching information literacy, and I look forward to seeing how conversations beyond the library – and the academy – will continue to enrich our teaching.

Matthew Weirick Johnson

I am incredibly grateful to have been on the “Considering Current and Future Approaches and Models” panel, and it was amazing to share space with Bill, Heidi, and Jane. I think our current predominant one-shot library instruction model contributes to the high levels of burnout that we see among academic teaching librarians, so I found this discussion important both for considering the nature of information literacy instruction and academic library work.

I found the discussion in our panel valuable to consider the strengths and weaknesses of new (or just other) approaches to teaching information literacy. Jane and I have both done teach-the-teacher programs with faculty, and Heidi, as a teaching faculty member, pointed to potential pitfalls in those models that serve to improve and expand our thinking. Bill talked about working to scaffold research assignments, using them as a teaching tool for information literacy, and embedding that thinking into teach-the-teacher programming for faculty. There is no single perfect model for doing library instruction, which I think was clear from our discussion, but that also highlights a key flaw in the dominance of the one-shot model. We need innovative and context-specific approaches to library instruction, and we need to be able to try new approaches with support from library administration, teaching faculty, ourselves, and our colleagues. The panel helped me expand and reflect on my thinking, and I hope it leads to more discussions about the future of library instruction and library work.

Melissa Mallon

I have spent my career in academic libraries involved in information literacy initiatives, both advocating for the library’s role in information literacy on a variety of college campuses and engaging in professional conversations with librarian colleagues in online courses, committee work, and through publications and conferences. After a chat with my sister, who teaches 5th grade, and other K–12 educators, I suspected that I was missing a piece of the puzzle. I realized that as the information landscape gets increasingly more complex and our students are arriving at college with disparate skill sets, focusing only on *information* literacy was doing a disservice to students. We need to increase emphasis on teaching the

“other” literacy skills necessary for both academic success and an informed citizenry; digital, media, and algorithmic literacy are just as important as the research and critical thinking skills we refer to as information literacy.

I had the great fortune of joining the “Information Literacy and Related Literacies” panel with Audrey, Sarah, and Spencer. (I would like to give an extra shout-out to Spencer, one of the first librarians with whom I had the opportunity to dive into discussions about media literacy.) I loved hearing about the unique approaches of my colleagues, each bringing different perspectives and passions to the conversation about how we, as librarians, can be more creative in the ways we partner with faculty to further student learning. I remember one of the questions was related to whether we should deemphasize the term “information literacy” in favor of “digital literacy” or some other literacy. The panelists and participants engaged in an animated conversation about the *either/or* dichotomy. Sarah Morris noted that we should not pigeonhole ourselves by getting caught up in semantics, letting this messiness get in the way of doing the important work of advancing students’ information and media (etc.!) literacy development. I still find myself reflecting on this conversation and am excited to continue the dialogue and partnerships across our profession.

Mira Scarnecchia

I participated in “Preparing Future Librarians,” and I provided an early-career librarian perspective. My MILS coursework covered the theoretical background related to information literacy, but I did not have experiential learning opportunities. I was heartened to learn that my fellow panelists, who are instructors in iSchool settings, are implementing strategies for providing their students with practical and theoretical instruction.

I have relied on experienced colleagues and professional development opportunities to gain the necessary skills to teach information literacy. It would be beneficial to provide MILS students with connections to local professional organizations and LIS professionals during their programs, so that they have these resources available when they are new to the workforce. LIS professionals must understand that gaining knowledge on these topics is an iterative, career-long process, especially considering the constant evolution of information literacy. I appreciated that this series provided the chance to discuss major topics with academic librarians from diverse institutions and geographic locations. As an early-career librarian in a community college context, challenges including cost and travel can be prohibitive to attending in-person events where this type of networking and communication traditionally takes place. Our session had 218 participants, which was possible due to the free and virtual format. I would be excited to be involved in similar programming in the future, and I feel that it is essential to the advancement of our field.

Conclusion

While librarians do have options for collaborative discussion of key issues within the field, it can be challenging for some to take advantage of these opportunities. As Mira noted, conferences and travel can be prohibitively expensive, and webinars through ACRL or other organizations often require payment. By offering these presentations for free and opening them to all, we were able to engage participants from across the country. The strong interest in each discussion, demonstrated by high attendance and engagement, indicates a continued need for low- or no-cost options to allow librarians to come together and

engage in conversation. To build on the need for affordable information literacy-focused professional development, in fall 2024, the Ohio State Libraries' Teaching and Learning Department began piloting a free Teaching Information Literacy Certificate program. More than 50 librarians have already completed the certificate program, and more than 130 are enrolled in the program for spring 2025.

As we think about the next 50 years, it is important for librarians to continually engage in discussions about how we want to move forward in our efforts to support information literacy. The Celebrating 50 Years of Information Literacy series is an example of how one library and many librarians contributed to this conversation. *~*

Note

1. Zurkowski, Paul G. *The Information Service Environment Relationships and Priorities. Related Paper No. 5.* (Washington, DC: National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, 1974).