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A Reconsideration of Information Literacy

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REFLECTING ON THE STANDARDS [ARTICLE]

A RECONSIDERATION OF INFORMATION LITERACY

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ABSTRACT

This article is a reflection on the author's 2005 Chronicle of Higher Education article "Information Literacy Makes All the Wrong Assumptions." In it, the author argues that while library instruction is properly grounded in disciplinary norms, information literacy serves a vital institutional obligation as a means of assessing student learning. The content of library instruction thus serves the University's "vertical" disciplinary agendas, while information literacy serves its "horizontal" institution-wide agenda.

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The publication of my 2005 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article "Information Literacy Makes All the Wrong Assumptions" led to a long series of speaking engagements. In the question-and-answer period after one presentation, a woman asked me, "What do you have to say to those of us practitioners who face institutional obligations to teach information literacy as described in the ACRL standards?"

This was an excellent question. I responded: "My advice is that you do whatever is required of you. Those standards describe what you must do, but I'm talking about what we *should* do. I only mean to suggest that we re-think what our library teaching is for." The woman just shook her head, and the exchange ended there. But her question, and my wholly inadequate answer, rattled around in my mind for many months: What to make of the institutional obligations she faced, and what ought the library do about them? This paper is an attempt to frame a better answer to her question and so to provide a more nuanced view of information literacy.

For my purposes, information literacy is not a synonym for the academic library's instruction function. It refers instead to an approach to instruction as codified in ACRL's *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, as well as standardized tests such as those produced by Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (SAILS) and the Educational Testing Service, and as prescribed in requirements for the regional accrediting bodies. The word *codified* is key here, as information literacy is designed in part so as to allow for quantitative assessment, as, for example in measuring the library's impact on student learning.

The pressure institutions feel to document their impact on student learning is unrelenting, and teaching that fails to assess its results in these terms risks marginalization and declining financial support. In this climate, if information literacy didn't already exist, libraries would need to invent it. In a word, we do information literacy because we have to.

To leave it there, however, comes perilously close to the answer I gave in 2006. In 2008, I published a paper titled "The Geometry of the Academic Library" which attempted to provide a more nuanced view of the library's institutional obligations, including those relating to instruction. The *geometry* in the title refers to a way of characterizing a central tension between two university agendas: its institution-wide interests with their hierarchical locus of control (its horizontal agenda) and the deep/narrow disciplinary interests that flow from discipline-based controls such as accreditation (its vertical agenda). At bottom, the geometry metaphor might be a simple recasting of the traditional conflict between university administrators and faculty.

The metaphor works, however, if only by portraying this age-old conflict as something more illuminating than sheer cantankerousness. For example, this lens makes it clear that academic library services have evolved naturally so as to serve one agenda or the other, and sometimes both. For example, library facilities generally serve horizontal functions, whereas collection building is disciplinary and hence vertical.

The library's ability to serve both functions is no mean feat: It may be the only unit on campus that does not grant degrees and yet has a significant claim to disciplinary

identities. A university's central computing unit is an obvious point of reference: Nearly all of its considerable staff and spending serve enterprise-wide interests. Contrast this with the library's longstanding culture of subject specialists with disciplinary assignments that allow them to integrate with courses, curriculum, and research agendas as a matter of daily routine.

The horizontal and vertical agendas may be equally important, but the library has a crucial advantage in having a vertical identity. The library's claim to being an academic unit rests entirely in that identity, and the "Geometry" piece argued that the library should spare no effort to nurture and protect it:

> In any institution that attaches significant promotion and tenure rewards to faculty research efforts, the academic library should position itself vertically in every case that readily admits of it, and it should do so in part because it can. The library enjoys a privileged position among non-disciplinary campus units in that it has a direct and long-standing connection to the core academic mission of the university. (Wilder, 2008)

As I reflect on the *Chronicle* article, I see it as an argument for an emphatically discipline-based orientation for library instruction. If it has a single takeaway idea, it is that all knowledge is situated in a (disciplinary) context and is meaningless outside it. Thus, the library research knowledge we impart should spring from the unique discourse of each discipline and be fully integrated down to the class assignment level. As regards the content of our teaching, there is no room for a one-size-fits-all instruction program.

I stand behind the whole of the *Chronicle* piece, but I have come to have a better appreciation of information literacy as the only tool currently available for meeting our assessment imperative, the source of the horizontal dimension of library instruction. We do not have the luxury of simply going through the motions in pursuing this agenda; we must engage fully and successfully. The vertical subject expertise of librarians, so essential for how the library positions itself strategically, must now be balanced by librarian immersion in an institution's assessment culture, contributing in every way imaginable to conversations and initiatives designed to improve student learning outcomes. Doing so will require time and money and will constitute yet another item on the incredibly long list of requirements for modern librarians.

All of which begs the question of how to reconcile the vertical and horizontal functions of library instruction. I am afraid that I have no choice but to leave this question to those who have some expertise, as opposed to none at all, in the content, pedagogy, and instructional design in our sphere. It is certainly a formidable challenge, but it is one in which librarians have excellent company. There is an aphorism that is commonly used when talking about standardized testing: "You don't fatten a pig by weighing it." This is the challenge faced by teachers at all levels: How to facilitate learning, a process that seems resolutely resistant to measurement, while monitoring and improving its effectiveness. This pig requires both feeding and weighing. In our context, managing both will require patience, hard work, and a robust tolerance for ambiguity.

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