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Political Literacy as Information Literacy [Invited Editorial]

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ABSTRACT

This paper contends that political literacy and information literacy are compatible concepts that are inextricably linked and should therefore be taught and stressed simultaneously to students in the classroom. Improving the information literacy and political literacy skills of students will allow them not only to perform better academically, but also empower them to become better citizens who form opinions and make decisions based on appropriate and quality information.

Introduction and Information Literacy at North Georgia

Since 2003, I have been a faculty member in the Department of Political Science at North Georgia College & State University (NGCSU), a mid-sized, comprehensive, Masters-level institution located about an hour north of Atlanta in the Appalachian foothills. Unlike some of my colleagues who bemoan the deficiencies of our students, I feel positive about their abilities and preparation coming into the

institution. The vast majority of our student body hails from rural north Georgia and the northern, suburban Atlanta counties with the remainder coming from throughout Georgia, other states, and a few foreign countries. Roughly 65% of our students are commuters and most work either full- or part-time. We have a strong liberal arts tradition and are known internationally as the Military College of Georgia because we are one of only six Senior Military Colleges in the United States. Therefore, roughly 13% of our 5,500 student

body comprises a Corps of Cadets. So, while we have certain traditions which make us unique, our student body is otherwise typical of any other similar-sized state university. That is, some of our students are outstanding, the majority is average, and some are poor.

NGCSU is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of College and Schools (SACS). As such, we are required to implement a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). Our QEP addresses the topic of information literacy (IL). In addition to serving as an Associate Professor of Political Science, I also serve as Co-Director of the QEP. Our SACS reaffirmation visit occurred in March 2007; we began implementing our QEP in fall 2007; and we received SACS reaffirmation in December 2007. Our QEP implementation is a five-year process, continuing until 2012, at which point we hope that information literacy will be fully integrated into the curriculum.

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) defines information literacy as, "the ability to know when information is needed and to access, evaluate, and use information effectively and ethically" (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000). This is the definition we used in the design and implementation of our QEP as well. We chose information literacy as a focus for our QEP because it was identified as a deficiency of our students by several stakeholders and groups (faculty, staff, employers, etc…). Many other SACS schools have chosen information literacy as a topic as well, often referring to it as information fluency or using some other related term. In fact, we have modeled our QEP to some degree after that implemented at the University of Central Florida (http://if.ucf.edu/index.php). The central theme is the integration of information literacy throughout our curriculum at the general education level, in the majors, and even in the co-curriculum.

We developed and adopted five NGCSU Information Literacy Learning Outcomes (standards) to guide the overall implementation

of information literacy efforts on campus, including five shorthand references used by NGCSU, noted in parentheses below:

1. The information literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed. (Know)
2. The information literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently. (Access)
3. The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system. (Evaluate)
4. The information literate student, individually, or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose. (Use)
5. The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally. (Ethical/Legal) (ACRL, 2000)

These five concepts addressing information literacy and its application and integration— know, access, evaluate, use, and ethical/legal— are stressed throughout the university in many places—in the classroom, in co-curricular activities, in the library, and in workshops and seminars. There have been some roadblocks, but thus far the implementation of our plan has been relatively smooth.

Information literacy is serious business at North Georgia and buy-in has been impressive. Of course, some individuals have been resistant to change, but the SACS mandate carries significant weight. We have received substantial support from the administration and are making significant progress toward our goal of complete curricular integration by 2012. A more thorough and exhaustive description of the NGCSU QEP can be found at http://www.il.ngcsu.edu/.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROBLEM

Because NGCSU is a teaching-focused university, faculty members teach four courses each semester. Therefore, I have the privilege of teaching students in survey courses, major courses, and graduate courses every semester. I would argue that our political science majors (roughly 250 strong) are solid students who generally write well, can conduct research using appropriate sources, and express themselves effectively in both written and oral form (but I am a bit biased). I learn just as much from them as they do from me and it is a pleasure to interact with them. Some of the students in the survey courses are another matter.

I teach one survey course in American Government every semester. In most cases, this is the only political science course that these students will take, so I take my task of offering a political education to them very seriously, even though I can only cover so much material in a single semester. My goal is to give them a broad overview of the American political system, make them more informed citizens, and empower them to respect opinions that differ from their own.

I have noticed an alarming trend in my ten or so years as a university professor with regard to students in survey-level courses. Their level of political literacy is deplorable and therefore, their information literacy skills are severely lacking as well. I contend that political literacy and information literacy are inextricably linked and impossible to separate. I often have students in my American Government course who performed well in high school, consider themselves relatively well-informed, and who may excel in college-level work, but who are unable to distinguish the Constitution from the Declaration of Independence, name even one of their U.S. Senators, identify the Vice-President of the United States, locate Iraq or Afghanistan on a map, know the century in which the Civil War occurred, or know whether the President of the United States is a Republican or Democrat. I am not exaggerating. It would be simple for me to blame public education in the State of

Georgia, their parents, the media, Facebook, Twitter, cell phones, text messaging, reality television, or a host of other distractions, but that would be unproductive and lazy. My task, as I see it, is to help them become more politically literate, more information literate, and therefore better students and citizens. I am working toward this goal by integrating information literacy into all my courses, beginning in the survey-level, American Government class. For me, political literacy is information literacy and vice versa.

POLITICAL LITERACY

Even though we focus on information literacy in general education classes such as Composition II, we encourage others to incorporate it into their survey-level classes (as several professors have done). Therefore, I have begun stressing IL in my American Government courses for several reasons, including the significant deficiency of information literacy and political literacy among Freshman- and Sophomore-level students, and because I value the concept. I believe that IL can and should be stressed in every class, not only when it is mandated or required. Below is a description of ways I have used to empower students in my survey course to become more politically and information literate, stressing the IL Learning Outcomes outlined previously.

The first, and perhaps easiest to address, obstacle to political literacy for young college students involves the sources of their political information. Too often, their opinion of certain politicians or of particular issues is obtained anecdotally, second-hand, or from very poor sources. They may rely too extensively on only one outlet for information. For example, on our very conservative campus, many students (and some faculty) rely solely on FOX News for information. When we discuss the media, media bias, and alternative sources of information, I assign an exercise in which they must read, listen to, and watch a variety of media sources (at least ten). They then review each source for content, bias, and quality of information. I explain to them that some outlets have

conservative bias, some have liberal bias, and others are just plain poor. Therefore, they need to consider information as they would select a healthy diet, with many "food groups" represented. Hopefully, this will allow them to develop lasting habits of obtaining information from diverse sources including print, broadcast, and online media. Ultimately, I hope never again to hear, "my uncle heard from his barber's wife that Obama is really a Muslim and not even an American," or some other ridiculous comment.

My second assignment dealing with political and information literacy involves expecting my students to be able to distinguish popular from peer-reviewed sources. This is an exercise that our teaching librarians do extensively, but because they are often over-booked, I try to do as well. I require my students to select a topic germane to the class and to find three popular articles or stories and three peer-reviewed sources that relate to it. They must then discuss how approaches to the topic differ, how or why some are more reliable and authoritative than others, and describe the process of obtaining sources. I have the students share their findings in small groups. Hopefully, this exercise will give them experience accessing quality sources not only for my class, but also for the upper-division classes in their respective majors requiring extensive research projects and papers. This assignment is not quite as sophisticated as a full-scale annotative bibliography (which I employ in my upper-division courses), but is similar.

My third strategy involves the use of WebCT Vista technology. This online courseware allows students to interact electronically in a relatively controlled environment. They must be enrolled in the class to have access to the Vista template for the course. I have found that while some students participate in class discussions wholeheartedly, others are too shy or feel overwhelmed by the presence of other students. Therefore, this medium allows them to discuss issues and offer opinions in a different environment. I have also found that to operate effectively, discussions need to be

relatively structured. That is, I give the students a specific task and set of expectations as a guide.. I do not need to respond to every posting myself, but I do weave in an out of the discussion to make corrections, offer encouragement, and clarify arguments. Usually, I require students to find a specific article(s) online, read it, address specific questions, and offer a minimum of five substantive postings over a limited period of time. I find that these exercises empower students to identify appropriate sources, evaluate them, and apply their arguments in an innovative setting.

Because this is a Freshman-level survey course and most students have not yet completed either Composition I or Composition II, I do not assign a formal research paper. I do require research papers in all of my upper-division political science courses in which the students are better prepared and more advanced. I believe that the aforementioned political and information literacy exercises accomplish several goals. First, they empower students to access, evaluate, and use appropriate sources of information. Second, they improve the political literacy of students so that they can perform better academically and become more informed citizens.. Third, the exercises in my survey course expose students to alternative and diverse opinions, ideas, and points of view so that potentially they become more respectful and aware of opinions that differ from their own. Fourth, I hope that the exercises in this course spur students to become more politically interested and involved, motivated to take additional political science courses, and perhaps even major or minor in the discipline.

CONCLUSION

This essay has attempted to establish a link between information literacy and political literacy. Both concepts are integral to student development and success academically as they mature into informed and involved citizens. To the extent that these two concepts are compatible, we should stress them simultaneously, deliberately, and often, beginning in the general education curriculum.

By re-structuring courses like the one just described, we can empower all our students to become more information and politically literate.

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13