Nedra Peterson

It came from Hollywood
Using popular media to enhance information literacy instruction

"Selling" information literacy to students can be a tough challenge. The very term *information literacy* implies that the students are coming to us illiterate—an affront to anyone's self image. As instructors, we are facing people who have grown up with the Web and consider themselves to be competent searchers. Add in the stereotype of the musty librarian . . . let's just say students need some serious convincing. Using clips from film, television, commercials, and popular music as part of classroom instruction immediately grabs students' attention. When "real people" (played by Hollywood actors and musicians) demonstrate information literacy in action as they go about their daily lives, our claims that information literacy is of immediate consequence and lifelong value begin to acquire some validity in students' eyes. The sale becomes less of a challenge.

The media has a tremendous influence on the development of people's subconscious ideas about cultural norms and practices. Films, television, and popular music often replicate the existing attitudes and beliefs of a society. Not only are cultural ideologies imitated in the popular media, it is generally acknowledged that the media also helps shape our ideas about gender, economic status, and other sociocultural classifications, and it follows that perceptions of information literacy practices would likewise be influenced.

With this in mind, as we watch films and television we can easily find myriad examples of skills and behaviors related to information literacy. We form impressions of how information literacy is perceived in our culture through observation of the ac-

tors in the settings with their expected social rewards.[1] For example, in an episode of the television series *The Simpsons,* a very brief scene featuring Lisa emphasizes a common perception of the library.

> *On vacation at the beach, determined to change her "square" persona, wandering the town looking for new friends, Lisa finds the library. Instinctively drawn, she then stops herself abruptly.*
> Lisa: A library! . . . No, I can't . . . that's the old, nerdy Lisa.
> *A bit later, after meeting some new "cool" friends, the kids lament the lack of skateboarding venues.*
> Lisa: I think I know a place you can skate that's virtually deserted.
> *Cut to the library, a couple of cool kids skateboard down the ramp on the side of the building.*
> Erin: So how'd you know about this place? You into books?
> Lisa: Unlikely! My goony brother's always going to libraries. I usually hang out in front.[2]

Just a couple of lines of dialogue within an established setting and the message is clear: visiting the library has a negative impact on one's social status with peers.

At the core of true learning is critical thought, which is manifest through changes

Nedra Peterson is director of library services at Woodbury University, e-mail: nedra.peterson@woodbury.edu

in behavior, attitudes, or beliefs. This requires deeper, multifaceted engagement with the material being taught. Incorporating popular media into the lesson plan can be more effective than pure lecture or hands-on only activities. Recreations of information literacy behaviors in the media draw students' attention, while enhancing learning. When material is presented both verbally and visually, recall and recognition are enhanced and deeper learning takes place.[3]

Emotional learning

Even more pertinent to the use of popular media in the classroom, Affective Learning theory posits that our brains perform differently depending on emotional arousal. Physical evidence of this is manifest as differentiated blood flow patterns in the brain, brought about by varied emotional states such as fear, sadness, and joy. A positive mood "induces a different kind of thinking, characterized by a tendency toward greater creativity and flexibility in problem solving."[4]

Emotions are integral to learning. They establish connections to memory, which strengthens information storage processes and provides trigger mechanisms for recall. One of the reasons individuals choose to engage with various forms of media is precisely because they elicit an emotional response. Movies, television, and music can make us laugh or cry; they can lighten our mood or facilitate wallowing in self-pity. Librarians can exploit this function to advantage by using media to help create emotional connections to the concepts we want students to learn.

The selection of examples from the popular media goes beyond simply choosing those that students will most likely enjoy and which will stimulate some kind of emotion. In the course at Woodbury University, where this practice is implemented, the content and learning objectives are directly tied to ACRL's "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education."[5] The examples illustrate specific elements of those standards and outcomes.

When introducing the media clips in class, each is treated as if it were a short story. Briefly describing the background, plot, and characters with enough detail to draw the students into the story invites them to develop some identification with the characters. This is important, as it lays a foundation for the emotional response that will be connected with the information. Also important is the brief description of the literacy behaviors that will be enacted on screen, so the students won't become so involved in the story they forget why it's being shown. For optimum effectiveness, include also in the class session a hands-on activity that builds on the same concepts during the class session.

Films for the classroom

Scenes from the film *High Fidelity* illustrate an element of ACRL Standard One related to the organization of information.[6] In this film, record store owner Rob Gordon and his friends frequently create "top five lists" as a basis for conversation among themselves—for example, Top 5 Dream Jobs or Top 5 Songs About Death. It's one way they internally organize for themselves the things they think are significant in their lives.

The scene begins with Rob talking about his top five relationship breakups, reminiscing about number 4: Laura. Anyone who's ever experienced such heartbreak will identify with our hero. Alone in his apartment, he is reorganizing his vast LP record collection when a friend drops by. The conversation about Rob's organizing scheme introduces several possible structures before settling on one that would be intelligible to only one person: Rob. He calls his scheme "autobiographical."

A bit later, Rob's friend describes a particular singer as "Sheryl Crow-ish, post-Partridge Family/pre-*L.A. Law* Susan Dey kind of thing" —cultural references that may be unfamiliar to many students.[7] Using a common vocabulary that illustrates their shared understanding of the attributes of the media figures mentioned, the friend communicates a mental picture that helps Rob know what to expect.

This brief two-minute sequence serves as a springboard for discussion about materials formats and permanency, organization and classification schemes, and vocabulary specific to a group or academic discipline.

A clip from *The School of Rock* can be used to introduce another element of ACRL Standard One, where "existing information can be combined with original thought, experimentation, and/or analysis to produce new information," as well as Standard Four where the student "individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose . . . applies new and prior information to the planning and creation of a particular product or performance; . . . (and) communicates the product or performance effectively to others."[8]

As a prelude to introducing this story, students are reminded that the research process is founded on the examination of others' ideas. Building on those ideas, researchers add their own original conclusions to the existing body of knowledge and then package the new, unique ideas in a format that best facilitates communication with their peers. A backdrop accompanying this portion could be the Google Scholar search page that references Sir Isaac Newton's statement, "If I have seen further [than certain other men] it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."[9]

In this comedy film, Dewey Finn is masquerading as substitute teacher at an exclusive private school. Having no formal education or training as a teacher, he falls back on the specialized knowledge that he does possess, rock musicianship, in order to develop a class project for the students to work on together: they will form a band, write songs, promote themselves, and perform live.

In a montage of their progress, we see the group process in action (brainstorming, building enthusiasm, incorporating individual strengths and interests), the use of multiple resources for research, and the access of information in various formats and subjects (music history, business, fashion, science, dance). The students in the film study past musicians and different types of music, using those examples for inspiration, while creating new, original sounds, and songs.[10] This scene mirrors the process that our students use with articles, books, and other sources to write a research paper.

The horror film *The Ring* can be used in the class session covering the research process. This is part of ACRL Standard Two, in which the student "accesses needed information effectively and efficiently . . . selects the most appropriate investigative methods or information retrieval systems . . . identifies keywords, constructs and implements effective search strategies, retrieves information online or in person using variety of methods, uses various retrieval systems with different interfaces and search engines . . . [and] selects among various technologies the most appropriate one for the task of extracting the needed information."[11]

In just under six minutes, all of these skills are illustrated as newspaper reporter Rachel puts the research process into action in an attempt to unravel the mystery of her niece's bizarre death. Starting with a peculiar videotape in her possession, she visits a studio to use vintage VHS equipment, moves on to a library, and then to her place of employment where she has access to a proprietary database for newspaper articles.

We see her refine and revise her online search strategy, add a search of the open Web, and then move on to the gloomy storage room housing back issues of the newspaper where she accesses and photocopies articles from bound print volumes.[12] Consciously or not, the filmmakers have demonstrated a classic research strategy using multiple formats. A death threat, a tiny bit of gore, spooky music, and a sense of urgency all elicit a certain emotional response and draw students into the story.

To introduce some active learning, students are asked to take notes during the viewing on how Rachel does her research, the keywords she uses, and the resources and materials she uses. They then provide the information to create the following table on the whiteboard in the classroom:

KEYWORDS	ACCESS POINT	FORMAT	NOTES
(start/view)	vintage professional-grade videotape player	VHS tape	
lighthouse	librarian/library	book	
Moesko Island	proprietary database, full text *(Seattle Post-Intelligencer)*	online articles	
Moesko Island Anna Morgan	proprietary database, full text *(Seattle Post-Intelligencer)*	online articles	*refined search; Boolean operators (implied)*
Moesko Island horses	proprietary database, index only *(Seattle Post-Intelligencer)*	online articles	*refined search again; full text not online*
suicide hallucinations	newspaper archives	print articles	*bound volumes*

Since the making of this film, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* has ceased printing newspapers, moving to an online-only publication with a drastically reduced number of staff.[13]

Merging fiction with real events, this presents an opportunity to ask students to speculate on the current status of those bound print volumes, and then expand the conversation to include new directions and developments in information dissemination, storage, and retrieval.

You may be thinking to yourself, "That's all well and good, but I have such a limited amount of class time and so much material to present . . . how can I possibly squeeze in film clips?" Well, *High Fidelity* is 3 minutes, *The School of Rock* is 6 ½ minutes, and *The Ring* is about 6 minutes. And which scenario is better? To present the maximum amount of material, or to have the students actually *remember* some of the material because it's been learned through the instructor's use of more than one medium of presentation? When we choose the former option, we run the risk of overwhelming students with content without the opportunity to attach real

meaning and understanding—the hallmark of true learning.

It would be extremely rare if a student were to come to us with no information literacy skills at all. To some degree one acquires a basic understanding of what information is and how to access it by progressing through the educational system. Students bring some measure of skill that has been formally learned, but they also bring some perceptions that have been acquired through immersion in the culture. While we can build upon the existing skills, it is these cultural perceptions under the surface that we have to address and sometimes counteract. Examples taken from the popular media provide engaging models of the information literacy behaviors we would like to student to practice. They introduce opportunities to discuss the relevance to life within, and, perhaps more importantly, beyond the academic community.

Notes

1. Bronwyn T. Williams and Amy A. Zenger, *Popular Culture and Representations*

enter an ISBN or DOI and retrieve a citation.

Researchers can organize saved citations into collections (like folders, but a citation can be in multiple collections), add tags, notes, and attach PDFs or images. All this information is saved to the Zotero library on the local computer, but Zotero 2.0 introduced the sync feature, which allows online storage and synchronizing the library among multiple computers.

Creating bibliographies

An optional word processing toolbar is available for Microsoft Word or OpenOffice. It allows the user to add citations to a document in any of several bibliographic styles. Zotero also creates a formatted bibliography, adding sources to the references list in the proper order as the writer cites them in the document. More than 1,000 styles are available for download, and Zotero can also import EndNote styles.

Zotero can also generate bibliographies without an existing word processing document. The user can right-click a collection or selected references and send them to the clipboard, a printer or an RTF or HTML file in the

desired style. Users can also simply click and drag references into any text window: handy for creating bibliographies in a Google Doc.

Groups and social features

Zotero 2.0 includes a new group library feature. Any Zotero 2.0 user can create groups with shared libraries. Group membership may be open or closed, and libraries may be public (visible on the Zotero Web site) or private. Shared libraries appear in the browser's Zotero window below the personal library and are useful for collaboration or classes. Copy a reference from a personal library to a shared one, or vice versa, by simply dragging it.

Zotero has also added a profile feature allowing users to (optionally) share all or part of their libraries on zotero.org and generate an RSS feed. A friends feature allows you to follow colleagues and your favorite researchers. CHNM also plans an Amazon-style feature to recommend sources based on the content of your library.

Free as in kittens

A third kind of "free" sometimes mentioned

---

of Literacy (New York: Routledge, 2007), 5–7.

2. "Summer of 4 Ft. 2," *The Simpsons: The Complete Seventh Season,* DVD, directed by Mark Kirkland (1996; Beverly Hills, CA: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2005).

3. Richard E. Mayer, "Cognitive Theory and the Design of Multimedia Instruction," in *Applying the Science of Learning to University Teaching and Beyond,* edited by Diane F. Halpern and Milton D. Hakel (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 50.

4. R.W. Picard et al, "Affective Learning - a Manifesto," *BT Technology Journal* 22, no. 4 (2004): 254.

5. Association of College and Research Libraries, "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education," ALA, 2000, ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/standards.pdf.

6. Ibid.

7. *High Fidelity,* DVD, directed by Stephen Frears (2000; Burbank, CA: Touchstone Home Video, 2000).

8. ACRL, "Information Literacy."

9. The Columbia World of Quotations, s.v. [Newton, Isaac] 41418, www.bartleby.com/cgi-bin/texis/webinator/66search?search_type=auth&query=Newton%2C+Isaac (accessed January 6, 2010).

10. *The School of Rock,* DVD, directed by Richard Linklater (2003; Hollywood, CA: Paramount, 2004.)

11. ACRL, "Information Literacy."

12. *The Ring,* DVD, directed by Gore Verbinski (2002; Universal City, CA: DreamWorks Home Entertainment, 2003).

13. Dan Richman and Andrea James, "Seattle P-I to Publish Last Edition Tuesday," *Seattlepi,* March 17, 2009, www.seattlepi.com/business/403793_piclosure17.html (accessed January 6, 2010). ✐