

Remember when you were information illiterate?

Make sure students know the basics

by Jennifer W. Kimball

We as librarians forget that we spend an entire graduate program learning how libraries work and how to scientifically extract what we want from them. And then we get frustrated when we see that our students go through cursory library instruction and still don't grasp the concepts involved in finding material in the reference collection!

We're frustrated because of the wealth that remains untapped by the students, precipitating exasperated remarks about not finding enough, or even not finding anything, on their topic.

And, of course, it's frustrating to see them fail when we want them to learn and succeed. So it's back to the drawing board as far as lesson plans go: Should I revise? Should this part of the lesson be allowed more time? Should the assignment be more complex or is this one of those academic conquests that can only be made by repeated practice over the course of a few years?

Since most of us who teach also have reference desk hours, we know the last statement to be true. The library is a four-year course (at the very least). Our teaching occurs not only in classes, but also intermittently throughout a student's academic career via the reference desk. Information literacy does not happen in one-shot bibliographic instruction. It happens over

time, with diverse problems to be solved, with the accumulation of knowledge, and with repeated practice.

Begin where they are

In my third year as an academic reference librarian, I still err on the side of assuming too high a level of information comprehension, especially of first-year students. This semester I spent an additional class period with the first-year college writing classes, introducing them to Web site evaluation. A handful of carefully chosen URLs were examined by small groups within the class, and each group reported its conclusions regarding the validity of the sites for academic research. I had anticipated them having some difficulty in answering questions about currency, coverage, authority, and so on. I had not anticipated what surfaced as the first hurdle.

Several groups had trouble figuring out what the page was actually about. They could not understand the information presented. When they immediately skipped to the list of questions I asked them to examine in reference to the site, it was, of course, impossible for them to reach accurate conclusions, not having a grasp of the first crucial piece of knowledge: an understanding of the basic message of the Web page.

About the author

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The sites I picked were hardly obtuse; the vocabulary was not too difficult, the layout was uncluttered, the information was presented in a logical flow. Yet, too many students could not “read” it. The assignment would have been a complete failure if I had not worked with each struggling group to make sure the students comprehended the basic message presented in the text.

What were they missing?

In the well-known “Feline Reactions to Bearded Men,” a group did not pick up on the humor of the findings, or the tongue-in-cheek tone, much less the suspicious items in the bibliography. In a site reporting a movement to curb smoking in restaurants¹, some groups could not tell if the movement was for or against smoking; they had difficulty determining the separate entities of the reporter and the anti-smoking group; and finding out that the site author was pro-smoking confused them even further.

There are plenty of mistakes to be made in teaching. Forgetting what it is like to be a young college student should be one that we conquer. Remember when your professors, experts in a field, asked you to critique an article or book? Just barely introduced to the major themes of a topic, brand new to the names of favorite scholars quoted throughout the literature, and struggling to comprehend the message itself, we somehow were expected to summon the confidence to yea or naysay someone’s hard work (presented apparently eruditely, and even in proper publication format). Remember thinking, “Well, it got published, it must be worthy?”

Our students today, looking at Web pages, are no different. In the first year of college, students are at the beginning of a long road to information literacy. We can’t skip to the advanced skills before they’ve grasped the basic content. To teach successfully, we begin where they are. Only then will the lesson have a chance.

Notes

1. <http://www.improb.com/airchives/cat.html>
2. <http://www.speakup.org/plan.html> ■

Buying a turnkey system requires an investment of time and money and special requests, such as removing or reducing the prominence of the system’s logo, may well receive a response “on the lines of No,” Shane said.

An additional option now available is “Free Reserves.” This in-house system developed at SIUC, may now be downloaded free of charge. Written in Perl, it is customizable by individual libraries. Improvements must be sent back to SIUC so they can be shared by others using the Free Reserves system. As Shane said, “Take it, change it, eat it for breakfast.”

For more information visit the Web site at <http://www.lib.umn.edu/san/freereserves/>.—*John Tombarge, Washington & Lee University*

Getting down to “brass tacks” at ACRL

Session moderator Dane Ward and his colleagues from Wayne State University (WSU) presented an interesting and informative review of their efforts to incorporate the “Big 6” model of information literacy instruction into the undergraduate curriculum in their session, “The Brass Tacks of Information Literacy.”

The panel described a familiar problem: How do we define “information literacy” in a way meaningful to librarians and classroom faculty? and How do we promote the incorporation of information literacy skills across the undergraduate curriculum?

By the end of the session, attendees had been introduced to the instructional model chosen by WSU, had completed an engaging small-group exercise that asked them to brainstorm common activities in reference and instruction that might be “mapped” to the “Big 6” skills, and had shared exemplary practices with the entire session.

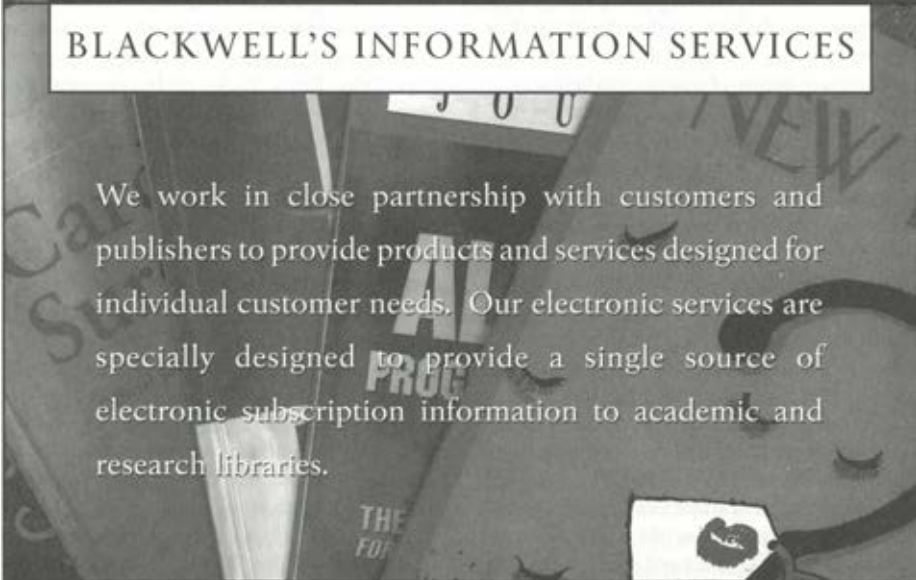
Session attendees left the presentation with an overview of the “Big 6” model of instruction, some good ideas about how their everyday activities might relate to the instructional model, and several helpful handouts—including a sample research assignment from an undergraduate seminar that demonstrated how “Big 6” skills and information literacy concerns were being successfully implemented in the academic curriculum at WSU.—*Scott Walter, University of Missouri-Kansas City* ■



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