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Teaching Literary Research: Challenges in a Changing Environment

Edited by
Kathleen A. Johnson and Steven R. Harris

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Information Literacy as Situated Literacy

Van E. Hillard

Since the 1930s, American college and university libraries have increasingly located their library research instruction for first-year students within the first-year writing course, a course that typically has provided an introduction to those practices associated with academic writing: namely, the use of primary and secondary sources in the construction of intellectual argument and analysis.¹ Though library and writing faculty often hold a common interest in demystifying research and research writing for students new to the academy, library/writing instruction collaborations, usually congenial and well-intended, have not always been as efficacious as the participants might wish them to be. These events are often marked by anxieties related to proper timing of the instruction, appropriate tailoring of the instruction to satisfy students' particular needs, the availability of resources, as well as what might be termed an artificiality that accrues from marginalizing research methods instruction as an event superadded to the writing course itself, what a colleague of mine calls *guerilla teaching*, as it involves a stealthily targeted hit and run pedagogy.

Working collaborations between library and writing instructors, especially those involving the teaching of transdisciplinary research practices to undergraduates, are best achieved with a measure of symmetry to both sides of the relationship. If the research methods instruction is simply appended to the *real* course, it will most likely be unfairly trivialized by students and instructors. If writing instructors figure their research methods instruction merely as that which lubricates the machinery of the writing course, both parties suffer. As one scholar has recently put this:

On virtually every college campus librarians and writing teachers can point to each other as classroom colleagues and curricular compatriots. Yet the conversation is often limited to this level—and thus dismissed as a matter of local lore and personal friendship. Our collegial rela-

tions tend not to be sustained by a broader, theoretically informed conversation between writing and information literacy as disciplines and fields of endeavor.²

The opportunity for librarians and writing faculty to reclaim an abiding intellectual alliance may be found as both partners reconsider and work to revive the latent implications of an elaborated notion of *information literacy*, understood as a social and cultural literacy that undergirds the workings of academic reading, writing, and research practices.³ I speak of *latent* implications as a way to make overt the possibilities that lie dormant within the notion of information literacy, and to recognize that (1) writing instruction has tended to undertheorize the rhetorical nature of the library as a site of intellectual work and (2) library instruction has often been held to an abbreviated notion of literacy as merely the acquisition of functional skills, delimiting the very idea of undergraduate research itself.⁴

The Associate of College and Research Library's *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* tend to figure research activities as skills disassociated from any particular context of application. They are generalizable skills, designed to be imported into any context of use with equal utility. Such an articulation of skills has been referred to as the "autonomous model" of literacy, which conceptualizes literacy "in technical terms, treating it as independent of social context, an autonomous variable whose consequences for society and cognition can be derived from its intrinsic character."⁵ In contradistinction to the autonomous model, Street posits what he terms an "ideological" model of literacy, which "signals quite explicitly that literacy practices are aspects not only of 'culture' but also of power structures."⁶ When applied to information literacy, Street's model holds the distinct advantage of explicitly defining research skills as learned behaviors particular to a distinct library culture, understood as a complex of social knowledges, distinctions, preferences, and values maintained and embraced by professionals (cultural insiders) who collectively set standards, develop and refine a specific research language, and invent the vast orders of classification schemes that enable access to its (even vaster) analog and digital archives. Students, at some moment in their undergraduate lives, stand as outsiders to this particular culture. If they are to become truly information literate, they must navigate its borders by developing a basic understanding of the elements making up the culture of the library.

I argue that this passage into understanding library culture can best be facilitated when we define information literacy as *situated literacy*, where literate practices shape and are shaped by social, cultural, political, and economic forces such that literacy events—a particular search for information, a specific occasion for composing an argument, a certain classification of a tradition of inquiry, the cataloguing of a monograph, the use and definition of a key term in writing—are understood as context-specific within the universe of social activities of knowledge production and reproduction. Situated literacy has been most prominently theorized and practiced by the New Literacy Studies group of social linguists, who examine literacy events as social, political, and material enactments, and seek to identify the ways in which literacy practices attain social value and distinction. Their work may help us to energize the efforts of research and writing instruction as it invigorates the important mandate of information literacy itself, guiding us to navigate a sharp social turn, writing instructors and library professionals together.⁷

Before turning to how information literacy may be conceptualized as a form of situated literacy, it may be useful to remind ourselves that the very name *information literacy* has fostered terminological troubles for librarians and writing instructors alike.⁸ A first sticking point comes with the choice of the term *information* to represent the stuff of catalogs and databases. It is unlikely that most first-year Composition courses define writing as information management or information production, and even less likely that such courses conceive of reading and research as information recovery or retrieval. Certainly, academic argument calls at times for the inclusion of various data and facts as evidence in support of its claims, but such information must be written into the argument itself, shaped and contextualized to suit the occasion of its use. To be effective *as* evidence, information must be solicited in the service of larger judgments, guiding ideas, and intellectual or disciplinary values. This is all to say that though the concept of information literacy seems to work adequately to describe the activities of academic research from the librarians' perspective, it will likely not describe the rhetorical practices associated with academic writing. Written argument and analysis are typically not understood as predominately informational in nature. It is far more likely that research writing will be addressed in very different terms: documents, texts, traditions of inquiry and scholarship, debates and disagreements, studies—even knowledge production—but rarely as simply locating information.

At stake here is no small quibble over words. The historical shift from bibliographic instruction to information skills instruction is not trendy; it is a decades-old cultural shift from librarianship to information management driven by particular philosophical and institutional preferences. It may well be that university faculty other than reference and research education specialists have neither attended to nor reckoned with the profession's shift, finding themselves unable to connect their own expectations about undergraduate research to the workings of information literacy as a liberal-educational mandate. To work cooperatively on the shared intellectual project of teaching research practices, non-librarians might do well to acknowledge (perhaps even honor) the fact that nowadays information is the chief operating metaphor to describe what libraries contain, bringing to mind the institutional, political, and epistemologic preferences that have led to the ascendancy of the information paradigm. Likewise, librarians might acknowledge the strengths and limits of the term so as not to take its currency for granted, and not to be unwittingly captivated by its dominance in the library profession.

Another set of nominal (and therefore conceptual) issues cluster around the choice of the term *literacy* to represent the activity of using the library's resources. As a term of art, literacy is perhaps readily valued by librarians and writing instructors since it carries with it an invigorated notion of the purposeful use of language and operates as a value-laden and status-marking term. Some of its power can be felt if we envision what it will mean to classify someone as information *illiterate*, a quite radical characterization, but one that undoubtedly will be applied to some students who have not mastered or are unsuccessful with the practices of information retrieval.⁹ Literacy is also a term that adumbrates a wide array of valuations of literate behaviors, ranging from the most functionalist and instrumental to the most critical and transformative. Interestingly, when linked to the term *information*, literacy operates on a number of points on a continuum of practices, from the utilitarian (as in the tool literacy of operating computers) to the political (as in analyzing sources and uses of information in order to critique some aspect of the status quo information environment). The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education" embraces a rather wide set of literate behaviors along this spectrum, maintaining that

An information literate individual is able to:

- Determine the extent of information needed
- Access the needed information effectively and efficiently

- Evaluate information and its sources critically
- Incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base
- Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose
- Understand the economic, legal, and social uses surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally.¹⁰

The abilities to project need, to act efficiently, to evaluate critically, to use selectively in light of purpose, with a measure of ethical and legal awareness, constitutes an ambitious instructional project. Certain literate goals (planning, selectivity driven by purpose, ethical awareness) speak to a literacy driven by both criticality and a sense of the social and cultural uses of information. Efficiency, though, seems to come from a different set of interests—pragmatic, but also quantifiable, even mechanistic. To be fair, few, if any, librarians would value efficiency in locating sources at the expense of a prolonged critical evaluation of them. Still, we can expect uneven instructional attention to the objectives. Some information literacy instruction will attend dutifully to each behavioral variant, or (more likely perhaps) some will emphasize certain of the behaviors over others, or even jettison the higher order objectives (the less teachable, or more difficult to teach) altogether.¹¹

The comprehensiveness of the ACRL standards also suggests a more troubling set of expectations insofar as they imagine information literacy as something that adheres to individuals, with full information literacy characterized as an achievement of independence in a user. This is not a social literacy, but a private one, a collection of learned behaviors that will provide the consumer an efficient and smooth experience composed of correct decisions. For, though *information* itself is understood as socially produced, as contextually significant, as contingent and partial, *literacy* is not. The ACRL document speaks characteristically in terms of *literate individuals*: Information literacy “enables learners to master content and extend their investigations, become more self-directed, and assume greater control over their own learning.”¹² Nowhere is literacy defined as a *social* event so that curiously, the library—a communal space that requires a measure of social interaction, a place characterized by a complex of reference conversations and interactions between professional consultants and their constituent clients—disappears in favor of an interface between an independent user and the vast orders of information.

If, in constructing the ideal information literate individual, we diminish (or abandon) the recognition of the library as a site of complicated social exchange, we run the risk of remaking the academic library into a vast informational self-serve supermarket, and abbreviate the social role of reference practitioners who, in directing and correcting the competencies of individuals, become consumer advocates rather than librarians. It is difficult to envision the idealized information literate individual as a viable participant in an intellectual culture since the ACRL's information literacy performance indicators name each behavior as something that happens within a single mind, save for the moment when the user "validates understanding and interpretation of the information through discourse with other individuals, subject-area experts, and/or practitioners."¹³ And this is a moment of authorization rather than real conversation.

Despite such limits, we should recall that the information literacy competency standards, like other such educational documents, are both a product of their historical moment, and a response to a genuine set of institutional needs. Numerous other academic literacies—reading and writing among them—have traditionally been coded as sets of autonomous skills to be mastered. Performance objectives are eminently assessable and teachable. They can be applied to vast and diverse populations of learners. From another perspective, we may appreciate the careful delineation of library research activities that the competency standards offer—starting with their ground-setting classification of a vast array of intellectual skills—and situate them against the social, historical, and political contexts in which they will be used. When placed in its rich contexts of practice, information literacy stands to become a powerful working concept for teaching research reading and writing.¹⁴

One starting place for such recovery comes with thinking of the library not as some vast storehouse of data, but rather as an elaborate house of argument, a site where users activate and reactivate conversations and disagreements across time and space, what one theorist has called "an enormous sculpture in paper of the structure of knowledge, a sculpture that is constantly changing because the parts grow at different rates."¹⁵ Classification makes the conversations possible, and provides the armature upon which the sculpture rests.¹⁶ Every time a student enters the library (physically or virtually) she, in effect, involves herself in a vast community of participants whose exchanges represent traditions of inquiry, public controversies, disciplinary disputes, and schools of thought. As rhetoricians

Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg define this activity:

[research is] a social, collaborative act that draws on and contributes to the work of a community that cares about a given body of knowledge... by the social definition of research, the solitary researcher is not at all solitary: the sense of what can and should be done is derived from the knowledge community.... his/her work of discovery is impossible without continuous recovery of the work of others in the community.¹⁷

In addition to recognizing the research act as collaborative in nature, bibliographies themselves can be read as social documents insofar as they provide a record of participants within specific conversations and provide a partial census of those who have shaped inquiry at a particular moment.¹⁸ Students awaken and orchestrate these conversations in their own writing, as they bring others' texts into connection with one another and their own work. Such valuations of the social life of information are vital to students positioning themselves as active rhetorical agents whose responsibility as researchers is to access, define, and enter ongoing intellectual discussions and controversies. By defining information as contextually significant, the ACRL standards go far in establishing such practices as normative to undergraduates' use of the academic library.¹⁹

Robust treatments of the conversational and intertextual nature of writing from sources are central to refiguring writing and research as social activities. Important discussions in its theory and practice continue to unfold.²⁰ However, we might go a step further and envision what it might mean to treat information literacy as a situated literacy so that each of the many activities associated with the academic library's functionality—its production of instruction and instructional materials, its means of sustaining reference work, its classification and cataloguing, its modes of acquisition and document processing, its publications, and all of the opportunities for students to interface with persons and with information—are seen as composed of identifiable social practices, implicated in institutional and power relationships that change over time and locale.

A situated literacy perspective treats literate behavior not as the enactment of a set of skills to be mastered by an individual, but rather as a series of events that draw upon cognitive skills, but more importantly, are social

and therefore richly contextual in nature. The study of situated literacy begins with the unit of a literacy *event*, the moment when persons enter and then negotiate (virtually or interpersonally, through reading or actual conversation) a communal occasion mediated by discourse. Literacy, then, is what one *does in practice* rather than what one *knows*, and unfolds as a set of behaviors adapted to the contingencies of any particular context of use.

As literacy scholars David Barton and Mary Hamilton put this, "*literacy events* are activities where literacy has a role. Usually there is a written text, or texts, central to the episodes which arise from practices and are shaped by them.... The notion of events stresses the situated nature of literacy, that it always exists in a social context."²¹ Within a situated literacy, library users—from novice to professional—rarely, if ever, enact a full mastery of research skills as the information literate individual is idealized to hold in the ACRL competency standards. Rather, each information literacy event shapes and is shaped by the contingencies of each particular occasion of practice. One's literate practices are performed against an elaborate backdrop of provisional factors: the user's status within library culture; the user's (partial) memory of past experiences of use; the nature of the user's social encounters with particular members of the library profession; the user's fluency with the languages of classification and the library's specialized vocabulary; the user's feelings and attitudes toward the library as place; the user's comfort with—or resistance to—the frustrations of searching; and the user's improvisations as the information literacy event unfolds.

The working assumption is that information literacy necessarily requires a measure of adaptation to the variables of lived context which are, by nature, differently valued by its participants, historically-specific, marked by differential power relationships, and mediated by (differently interpreted) discourses and texts. Though information literacy certainly involves higher order cognitive skills (critical detection, reasoned analysis, judicious evaluation, inference-making, and critique), its practice requires something more: what might be called *dispositions* toward emergent occasions, where the library user calls upon and continues to assemble a repertoire of intellectual and social practices that sustain the library's culture.

From my distance, I envision these as rhetorical dispositions because they involve more or less strategic uses of language and other symbolic means to meet desired ends. Such dispositions might include, but are not limited to: a tolerance for ambiguity and indeterminacy (as research is inevitably messy, recursive, even inefficient at times); a preparedness to enter

into and sustain conversations with others who, though relative strangers to one another, work to achieve mutually satisfying outcomes to their reference interactions; a readiness to revise procedures and modify principles to meet the exigencies of real-life situations (scant resources, dead end searches, unavailable materials, etc.); an historical sensibility, complemented by a political awareness that the library has evolved over time, and has both shaped and been shaped by the politics of knowledge-making (including the politics of classification; the partiality of cataloguers; the interests of those in acquisitions; as well as disciplinary and institutional pressures and agendas). But before we can codify such dispositions, we need to do our homework, to create a more fine-grained description of the specifics of research literacy as it is put to practice by students. We need, in other words, to attend first to the local.

Both library and writing instructors might collaborate to determine how to proceed with composing ethnographies of information literacy: How can we best observe and identify the complex of behaviors, attitudes, and social practices that constitute information literacy in use? What sorts of narratives of individual adaptation or improvisation might be uncovered? What characterizes reference conversations as discursive events? How is the physical place of the library perceived and valued? How is information literacy status conferred and encoded? How does the formal lexicon of professional terms of art coincide or differ from the ways in which conversations about research are managed in everyday situations? How does it feel to work within the library's system, and how do those feelings effect actions? Responses to such questions will almost certainly require of us a more careful humanistic study than we typically have engaged, one sponsored by close observation, the willingness to reconsider expectations and to revise our teaching of research and research writing practices in light of what our descriptions tell us. This is a project that undoubtedly will require time, energy, and resources.

We can assist our students in assuming their social roles if we treat research not simply as contact with information, but as participation within the professional culture we call the library. Since its coinage as a commonplace more than thirty years ago, the term *information literacy* has most often been viewed as a survival tactic: faced with the ever-growing, ever more confusing, omnipresent flood of information, how shall we train students responsibly and responsively to meet its power and force? A situated information literacy does not so much aim to tame that beast, but to

honor the fact that all of us are in this together, that we have an important opportunity to invite our students to become participants in research culture when we enrich the very accomplishments of literacy as it is practiced.

NOTES

1. A portion of this history is traced in Donald A. Barclay and Darcie Reimann Barclay, "The Role of Freshman Writing in Academic Bibliographic Instruction," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 20 (September 1994): 213-217.
2. Rolf Norgaard, "Writing Information Literacy: Contributions to a Concept," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 124-125.
3. In his "Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 2 (March 2006): 192-199, James Elmborg has turned to an enriched concept of critical literacy to nourish information literacy as a more politically and socially conscious construct.
4. Norgaard, 125, 126.
5. Brian Street, "The New Literacy Studies," in *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy*, ed. Brian Street, 5 (London: Cambridge UP, 1993).
6. Street, 7.
7. A comprehensive review of this literature (also grouped under the name of the "New London School") can be found in James Paul Gee's "The New Literacy Studies: From 'Socially Situated' to the Work of the Social," in *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context*, ed. David Barton, Mary Hamilton, and Roz Ivanič, 180-196 (New York: Routledge, 2000).
8. A brief history of the professional reception of the term *information literacy* is provided in Shirley J. Behrens "A Conceptual Analysis and Historical Overview of Information Literacy," *College and Research Libraries* 55 (July 1994): 309-322.
9. C.H. Knoblauch reminds us that "The labels *literate* and *illiterate* almost always imply more than a degree or deficiency of skill. They are, grossly or subtly, sociocultural judgments laden with approbation, disapproval, or pity about the character and place, the worthiness and prospects, of persons and groups." "Literacy and the Politics of Education," in *The Right to Literacy*, ed. by Andrea A. Lunsford, Helene Moglen, and James Slevin, 74-80 (New York: Modern Language Association, 1990), 74.
10. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2000), 2-3.
11. We should remind ourselves that research methods instruction, as it is typically structured, is severely constrained by time, resources, and other delimiting variables, making full actualization of the various information literacy goals virtually impossible.
12. *Information Literacy Competency Standards*, 2.
13. *Ibid.*, 12.
14. Norgaard echoes this: "A robust sense of information literacy has at its heart evaluative and integrative concerns; no mere look up skill, it concerns how we judge and evaluate information and integrate it into effective communication," 126.
15. O.B. Hardison, Jr., *Entering the Maze: Identity and Change in Modern Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 138.
16. Hardison discusses the role and importance of classification in *Entering the Maze*, chapter 8, "From Knowledge to Information," 136-153.
17. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, "Research as a Social Act," *The Clearing House* 60 (March 1987): 304; Barbara Fister elaborates upon the notion of research as collaboration in "Teaching Research as a Social Act: Collaborative Learning and the Library," *RQ* 29

(Summer 1990): 505-509.

18. Building on work by Ilse Bry, Charles A. D'Aniello suggests "that bibliography is value laden." He further states that "the study of bibliographic reference sources cannot be divorced from political and sociologic considerations." "A Sociobibliographical and Sociohistorical Approach to the Study of Bibliographic and Reference Sources: A Complement to Traditional Bibliographic Instruction," in *Conceptual Frameworks for Bibliographic Education: Theory into Practice*, edited by Mary Reichel and Mary Ann Ramey, 109-133 (Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1987), 109, 111.

19. Two performance indicators in *Information Literacy Competency Standards* speak directly to this: "The information literate student compares new knowledge with prior knowledge to determine the value added, contradictions, or other unique characteristics of the information," and "The information literate student understands many of the ethical, legal and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses the information ethically and legally," 12, 14.

20. From the library perspective, see Deborah Fink, *Process and Politics in Library Research: A Model for Course Design* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1989); Jeremy J. Shapiro and Shelley K. Hughes, "Information Technology as a Liberal Art," *Educom Review* (March/April 1996): 31-35; and Jean Sheridan, *Writing-across-the-Curriculum and the Academic Library: A Guide for Librarians, Instructors, and Writing Program Directors* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishers, 1995).

21. David Barton and Mary Hamilton, "Literacy Practices," in *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context*, edited by David Barton, Mary Hamilton, and Roz Ivanič, 8 (London: Routledge, 2000).