Who Needs Information Literacy Anyway?

By Judith M. Arnold

[Associate Professor Judith M. Arnold came to the University Libraries, WMU, in the fall of 1994. She was especially recruited to develop the Libraries’ instructional program for students and faculty, and to promote "information literacy" for all graduates. During the past six years, Judith has steadily enhanced the quality and quantity of bibliographic instruction offered by the library as well as defining and advocating "information literacy for all." Professor Arnold, to our great regret, has moved to Huntington, West Virginia, where she holds the position of Extension Services Librarian at Marshall University. This last article by her for Gatherings re-examines her philosophy.]

Throughout the country, university-wide initiatives for library instruction programs on campuses, such as the University of Washington and the California state university system, are pursuing the goal of information literacy for their graduates. Just what is information literacy and why is it valued as a desirable trait in a college graduate? The American Library Association (ALA) appointed a task force to define an information literate person. "To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed, and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information." (American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy, [Final Report] found at http://www.ala.org/acrl/nill/nilit1st.html.)

Information literacy is a goal that begins with libraries, but one that impacts the essence of a college education, and what it means to be an informed citizen, equipped with lifelong, information-seeking, and evaluation skills. To achieve the goal requires university-wide endorsement and participation. In their article, "Information Literacy as a Liberal Art," Shapiro and Hughes propose that information literacy, more inclusive than mere technical expertise, be viewed as a new liberal art that extends from knowing how to use computers and access information to critical reflection on the nature of information itself, its technical infrastructure, and its social, cultural and even philosophical context and impact - as essential to the mental framework of the educated information-age citizen as the trivium of basic liberal arts (grammar, logic and rhetoric) was to the educated person in medieval society. (Educom Review, 31, #2, March/April 1996, p. 33)

Information literacy conceived in this way clearly involves more than facility with the computer. Today’s students arrive with ever-increasing sophistication in using the computer, but do they know how to find complete, current, and reliable information and to use it effectively? To understand the significance of information literacy, imagine for a moment a world without it and how your life might be impacted.

You arrive at work and check your e-mail. A co-worker has forwarded a message that really worries you. The e-mail references a web page that describes how shampooos and other "sudsy" products such as soaps contain a harmful substance that causes brain damage in laboratory animals. The page warns that there might be similar effects on humans, and the Director of a major Health Sciences Library signs it. At lunchtime you run home and check all of your products. Every single one has the offending substance. You toss out over $50 worth of shampoo, soaps, and bath gels!

Following this you head for lunch at your favorite neighborhood restaurant. You are dismayed to see that the line for a table stretches out the front door. You are starving! While waiting in line you ask others why there is a line. Someone ahead of you says that the reservation system has just been automated, but that it has, ironically, slowed things down. When you finally reach the front of the line and ask for a reservation, the host asks for your automobile license plate number. You laugh and search your brain but cannot recall the number. You give your name but the person responds that the computer entry is by license number not name. You ask, "Why in the world would any system be set up in this way?" The person responds, "Oh, our new manager came up with the idea. He was doing a paper for his class and found an article about this reservation system." "Weren't there better ways than asking for a piece of information that no one remembers?" you respond. The host replies, "Oh, he wasn't looking for the best way, just the first one he could find."

Now you’ve developed indigestion from rushing around and then waiting so long to eat. You decide to stop off at your doctor’s office and ask for something to settle your stomach. After a quick check of her computer terminal, your healthcare provider tells you to take two aspirins and call her in the morning. You look at her in a puzzled manner. ”What’s the matter?” she asks.

"Is that really the best remedy for indigestion?" you ask. "It’s the one remedy that my online Medline suggests that was full-text. I didn’t have the time to go get the other articles in the library. Besides, that’s such a drag. Online articles are so much easier to use,” she replies.

Far-fetched? Perhaps. But some truth is at the heart of these exaggerations. Information literate individuals do not accept information unquestioningly. They evaluate their sources. They review available information and select relevant, current, and authoritative sources, not the first item that comes along. And, they investigate all information, not just the quick and easy Internet or full-text solution. In this information age when an overabundance of information is available, critical thinking and skillful searching are lifelong learning skills for today’s graduate. Such skills can be used in the workplace to handle professional goals, and in the personal realm when projects like buying a new car or learning about the treatment for a disease present the need to locate timely, reliable, and comprehensive information.

As a follow-up to a retreat on information literacy in early 1996, a University Libraries’ task force spent a year refining the ALA definition and defining competencies that comprise an information literate person. The conclusions are found in a document, "What is Information Literacy and Why Should I Care about it?" that is located at http://www.wmich.edu/library/insti/info-lit.html. The Libraries’
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Instruction Program is one effort to help students develop information literacy skills. The Labyrinth online tutorial used with University 101, a class designed to prepare beginning students for the college experience, presents some of the basic principles that help students to locate and select information. These principles are re-enforced and expanded in library instruction for ENGL 105, BIS 142, and IME 102, basic writing courses taught in the Colleges of Arts and Sciences, Business, and Engineering. With limited class time, the challenge to introduce resources, searching skills, and critical evaluation in 50-60 minutes is daunting if not impossible. Faculty knows that introductory sessions can be only a beginning. As is true of the University-wide concept of “writing through the disciplines,” information literacy is best developed through many courses, and at both introductory and upper division levels.

Beyond providing instruction in introductory level courses, librarians collaborate with faculty to introduce majors to the important research tools in the disciplines. Several departments are enthusiastic participants in courses such as HIST 190, WMS [Women's studies] 200, and JRN [journalism] 200. Many courses found in other majors could benefit from similar instruction. A Web-based Criminal Justice tutorial (http://unix.cc.wmich.edu/libweb/vander/cj/index.html) is a further example of librarian-faculty collaboration to enable students to learn how to find and evaluate information in their major disciplines. Still another initiative is the Subject Guides to Resources page on the Libraries’ Web site (http://www.wmich.edu/library/ss/index.html), a series of over 40 guides created by the Libraries’ subject liaison librarians. Important print and electronic resources are selected, described, and organized into gateways designed to serve as starting points for research. Course assignments that require students to utilize these gateways can further increase their effectiveness.

Since 1994, the Libraries’ instruction program has grown from 200 to over 500 sessions per year. Major increases in basic level instruction for ENGL 105 and the other freshman level writing courses account for a significant portion of this growth. The focus of every class must be to use the World Wide Web interface to find information in our own Libraries and “everywhere else.”

The Web is a wonderfully rich information resource, providing a wealth of governmental and business information as well as unique primary resources. Students are ready, willing and highly motivated to find and use resources on the World Wide Web. Today’s Web is the only way to access all of the University Libraries’ unique collections, as well as providing gateways and portals to the entire Internet. Helping students and all users to become information literate, to select appropriate Web resources, and learn to use important and indispensable library print sources and electronic databases are what information literacy is all about. Information literacy is a laudable, ambitious, and essential goal for all educational institutions. The University Libraries’ instruction efforts are only a beginning step. Collaboration with the entire University community to develop and re-enforce information literacy throughout the curriculum is absolutely essential if we, the educators, are to realize the goal of information literacy: a world where the first and the easiest information found is by-passed for the best available.

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Uses—Part III

By Miranda Haddock

Looking for an image to illustrate student papers and professors’ lectures has once again gotten easier. The Visual Resources Library, the newest branch of the University Libraries, located in 2213 Sangren Hall, started filling these needs on a University-wide basis in June 1997. In just three years, members of the WMU community have watched the Visual Resources Library evolve from a limited slide collection stored in the Art Department of the Fine Arts college into a comprehensive and modern collection located in a facility designed to meet the instructional needs of the University. The library began with slides from one discipline, added many more slides from others fields, incorporated a major picture file, and now promotes two significant electronic image collections. Let me introduce you in this article to our new electronic services.

During the 1998/99 academic year, the University Libraries took part as a beta-site for the AMICO Library. At that time, the Art Museum Image Consortium (AMICO) consisted of 25 museums in North America. This consortium created an electronic image and text catalog of 20,000 works of art from their collections. The catalog was delivered to test sites, including WMU, via the Web. As a beta-site, the University Libraries was able to examine AMICO and its capabilities as well as to make a contribution to the further development of the product. WMU Libraries’ contribution was a User’s Guide to assist patrons in using this electronic collection by suggesting uses for the AMICO library, search strategies, and...