Keeping the "Literacy" in "Information Literacy"

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This is a story about a project at the University of Calgary that serves both to suggest an exciting avenue for literacy education and to provide a cautionary tale about the role of writing centre in an information age.

The University of Calgary, like many educational institutions, is in the throes of what we call "strategic transformation." As part of this attempt to rethink who we are and what we do, the university has adopted a list of "core competencies" which faculties are expected to ensure all graduates possess. You can guess what most of them are: written and spoken communication skills, logical reasoning, problem solving, creative thinking--the sort of competencies that are obviously central to any university's mission. Despite this centrality, however--or perhaps because of it, because its very obviousness has a "motherhood" quality for which no-one feels the need to argue--the list seems to have failed to capture the popular imagination and is rarely cited in recent strategic transformation documents.

But there is good news. One of the eight core competencies, "information literacy," has been taken up for action. The Information Literacy Group, consisting of committed and influential people within the library and the Learning Commons (the University of Calgary's teaching/learning support unit) is determined to go well beyond the standard motherhood statements to pilot-test a comprehensive curriculum-based information literacy program.

The definition of "information literacy" adopted by this group includes the following:

Within the context of lifelong learning and the broad information continuum which ranges from data to knowledge to wisdom, information literacy competency focuses on five broad abilities:

- to recognize the need for information
- to know how to access information
- to understand how to evaluate information
- to know how to synthesize information
- to be able to communicate information

An information literate person recognizes the different levels, types and formats of information and their appropriate uses. The ability to place information in a context

and an awareness of information access issues (copyright, privacy, globalization, currency of information, etc.) are essential to information literacy.

(Concepts from, in part, Isbell, Dennis and Carol Hammond "Information literacy competencies" *College and Research Libraries News*, June 1993 p.325-327.)

This, too, is fairly standard. What is not quite standard, however, is the group's vision of how these abilities are to be inculcated.

Traditionally, information literacy enters the classroom under the auspices of various forms of research assignment. In all but writing classes, the details of how such assignments are to be accomplished are typically left up to the student, who is assumed not only to know how the library works but also what to make of the information she finds and how to organize it into a coherent argument. On a wide scale, "library instruction" is frequently relegated to a hit-and-run tour of the library at the beginning of students' first year. This tour passes far above most students' heads because it is not integrated into a context of immediate need.

The Information Literacy project is designed to avoid this separation between skill and setting. Information literacy is characterized as a complex set of skills, only some of which are technological in nature, which are learned recursively in context. Becoming information literate, like becoming "literate" in the older, wider sense, is a lifelong project in which skills are gradually internalized through a combination of explicit and tacit teaching over a variety of projects that require their use.

Operationally, this means identifying a number of courses at various levels, from first to fourth year, in which information literacy instruction makes sense in terms of already existing course structure. Typically, these courses are those which involve some form of research assignment which can be refined to make the teaching of information literacy more explicit. Ideally, the hit-and-run library tour becomes a more prolonged partnership with library staff who work closely with the course instructor to design activities and guide students through the process of finding, evaluating, synthesizing and communicating information. Ideally, once the project is fully developed it should be difficult or impossible for a student to graduate without having taken several courses, at several academic levels, that feature information literacy as an explicit component.

Does this model sound familiar? Those of us who believe in a Writing in the Disciplines approach to literacy have long been dedicated to exactly these principles. Before committee after committee, we have argued that the remedial, add-on writing course, like the hit-and-run library tour, is severely limited by its outsider status and its lack of situatedness. Conversely, writing that is simply "done" in content-focused

courses is likely to be unexamined and unreflexive, learned by trial and error rather than by reference to articulated principles. The Writing in the Disciplines approach is an attempt to bridge these two extremes by using various strategies--first among them being a strong and well supported writing centre--to support writing activities that are both situated and reflexive.

In one respect, then, the Information Literacy project can be seen as Writing in the Disciplines writ large. The focus is expanded to include aspects of literacy (such as information finding) that can be under-represented when literacy instruction does not have research as its main focus. Yet once information literacy is situated in the flow of learning activities rather on the sidelines, writing must be seen as central to the process, for only the need to synthesize information and communicate it in writing gives purpose to the other aspects of the process.

This philosophy is built right into the ways in which technology is conceptualized in the library's new resource area, dubbed the "Information Commons.". Row upon row of new computers are being unpacked and deployed, not merely as data access devices, but as (in some cases perhaps oxymoronic) "productivity centres" equipped with full featured word processing software and printing capability. Students are being expected to treat finding material and writing papers as part of a seamless continuum, not as activities to be artifically divided between library and writing lab.

There are obvious advantages to a program that treats writing as a necessary but not sufficient part of a larger "information literacy." If one were merely to be cynical, it is obvious that "information literacy" has a cachet that "writing" generally lacks. It is far easier to rally political action behind a skill that sounds very twenty-first century than behind what is often considered a low-level skill that "should have been learned in high school."

However, there are other, less cynical reasons for being glad to have information literacy take on the role of foregrounding language competency across the disciplines. If done well rather than as a token effort, mounting anything across the disciplines is notoriously expensive in both dollars and human energy. This is one reason why cross-disciplinary writing programs are particularly difficult to establish and maintain in larger institutions. The sheer resources required to track the content of courses across the institution and to offer meaningful support seems to rise as some sort of ghastly exponential function as the size of the institution increases, requiring increasing levels of ingenuity on the part of struggling writing centre directors. Information literacy calls on the resources, not of the frequently struggling and marginalized writing centre, but of one of the largest, most respected and (usually) best equipped sectors of the university--the library. Despite being frequently underfunded (as all campus sectors usually are), the library is in a position to put

forward demands for resources on a scale that few writing centre directors more than dream of.

This advantage, of course, comes with concomitant dangers. Even in classes devoted to the study of writing, the "research paper" is frequently treated as a strange sort of beast that requires mostly instruction in the extreme ends of the process: finding material and documenting sources. The part in the middle, forging a meaningful argument using sources as support rather than decoration, frequently seems to disappear almost altogether (witness the "research paper" chapter in nine out of ten rhetoric texts.) The ascendency of information literacy bears witness to the fact that the common *topoi* of the academy have increasingly become databases rather than lines of argument. In this environment, it is even more likely that the extraordinarily difficult task of constructing an argument in which sources are genuinely internalized and used to advantage will disappear under the avalanche of instruction in bibliographic tools.

This is the challenge to writing centres: to continue to take an active role in information literacy. As the unit charged with filling the gaping hole in the middle between finding and documenting sources, the writing centre must continue and redouble its involvement in helping students understand how to find a voice in the deafening roar of information sources. If information literacy is to be integrated into a diverse cross-section of courses taught by people who may have neither the time, the inclination or the training to focus on writing, it will be up to the writing centre to support the old-fashioned rhetorical "literacy" that is still at the heart of information literacy.

For more information about the University of Calgary's Strategic Transformation initiative, see http://www.ucalgary.ca/UofC/Transformation/welcome.html

For more information about the Information Literacy project, see http://www.ucalgary.ca/UofC/departments/INFO/library/ILG

Official lists of the core competencies are alarmingly difficult to find on the UofC web site, but significantly the library has made such a list available as part of an information literacy slide presentation athttp://www.ucalgary.ca/UofC/departments/INFO/library/ILG/infolitcoord/tsld002.htm