Innovative practices for student success at EOU: Library and Information Literacy Instruction

At Eastern Oregon University (EOU) we are finding that student academic success is enhanced via exposure to information literacy concepts. These concepts are introduced to students in a variety of settings, thus ensuring that there is a good chance a student will have some familiarity with information literacy by the time they graduate. The most innovative of these practices is the explicit incorporation of information literacy concepts into the First Year Experience (FYE) program via their inclusion in the curriculum of the three credit UNI course (see Appendix).

The academic literature clearly shows a connection between library use and student success measures such as GPA, retention, and completion (see Appendix). To encourage more effective library use, librarians have developed a multifaceted information literacy instruction program that aligns with the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Guidelines for Instruction Programs in Academic Libraries. The library instruction program includes library orientation, credit bearing library courses, discipline-specific course integrated instruction, and FYE integration. Library faculty continually revise and build upon this program based on evaluation and assessment, and shifts in the field in order to retain and graduate students with the skills, competencies, and experiences necessary for success. Program components are also informed by best practices and trends in higher education including the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) High Impact Practices.

As our online information environment becomes more complex, it is becoming increasingly recognized outside of the library that information literacy skills are very important for students. One manifestation of this recognition is that AAC&U has included Information Literacy (IL) as an Essential Learning Outcome. The AAC&U Essential Learning Outcomes are intended to serve as a guiding vision and practical approach to prepare students for twenty-first century challenges.

EOU’s strategies for ensuring that students are exposed to information literacy concepts fall into three broad categories:

- Students have the option of taking one or more credit bearing Library courses (LIB 127, LIB 307, and LIB 317). Content in these classes is scaffolded to more easily develop student research capabilities and information literacy understanding.
- The FYE program, already considered by the AAC&U to be a high impact practice, explicitly includes a heavy emphasis on information literacy.
- An emphasis on IL has been woven into the fabric of EOU’s General Education requirements and EOU’s foundational composition courses.

When feasible, the impact of these initiatives has been measured, and we are finding a correlation with student success. In the case of the LIB classes, a longitudinal study has shown that students who take a LIB class achieve timely completion at a significantly higher rate than students who do not take a library course. Specifically:

- First-time fulltime freshman students who take a Library course are more than twice as likely to graduate within six years than students who do not take a Library course.
- Transfer students who take a Library course consistently graduate at higher rates than students who do not.
First Year Experience programs are designated as a High Impact Practice by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). AAC&U states that “the 5 highest-quality first-year experiences place a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students’ intellectual and practical competencies” (AAC&U, 2008). Library faculty ensure that these elements are incorporated into the components of FYE: UNI 101, SCI 207, HUM 105, and CORE classes.

UNI 101, the flagship FYE class, is a three credit course co-taught by librarians and academic advisors. It is held in the Library classroom and librarians are responsible for approximately one third of the content, but commit to attending every class session so as to get to know the students. This establishes more solid relationships with the students. As students start seeing the Librarians as friendly and helpful, and the library as a familiar and comfortable space, they become more likely to come into the library for help during their academic careers. (In fact, increased library gate counts have been documented since this program was implemented).

The Library unit focusses on information literacy and the evaluation of information, and is structured on the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. It is intended to establish a foundation of critical thinking skills and source evaluation, and to address deficiencies in these areas that faculty were complaining of, such as recognition and use of scholarly sources, citation, and reading comprehension. With these things in mind, the pieces of the ACRL Framework that are specifically explored are Scholarship as a Conversation, and, Authority is Constructed and Contextual. Students learn to distinguish between different types of sources, they become familiar with the characteristics of scholarly and peer-reviewed articles, both through hands on searching, reading articles, and hearing about the research and publication process from published faculty members in the disciplines. Students also create a product similar to an annotated bibliography, and read the work of their classmates, which gives them the experience of seeing a topic approached from several different points of view. Through this experience they are exposed to many facets of complex problems, which broadens their perspectives on searching for information to answer research questions. This process also highlights the ACRL Framework piece Searching as Strategic Exploration.

The specific learning activities used in the library portion of the class can be found in the Appendix for the UNI Course. Student learning outcomes were assessed each term through the class activities. Assessments from a three term period show that 80% of the students were able to select and evaluate a scholarly source for a research assignment, 50% of students were able to format citations with a high degree of accuracy, and 95% of students selected appropriate subscriptions databases (as opposed to free web sources) for their research. In addition, students were surveyed at the end of each term about whether they felt the course outcomes were met, and what they found the most and least valuable. The library unit has been cited as the most valuable part of the class by the majority of students in every year surveyed.

EOU faculty have incorporated information literacy into criteria for our General Education Outcomes for Critical Thinking and Communication. For Critical Thinking, the pertinent General Education criterion reads: Evaluates sources and supports positions with evidence to reach conclusions. For Communication the two criteria read: Presents convincing evidence, and, Employs graphics, media, and source materials appropriately and ethically. Academic Program Learning Outcomes are aligned with our General
Education Outcomes and so EOU can track, through our learning outcomes assessment program, student IL proficiency across the curriculum and vertically as students move from first-year to completion.

It is exceptionally helpful that most of our first-year students are simultaneously taking their UNI or CORE courses (which comprise the FYE program) with their first-year composition courses. Writing instructors work closely with librarians to incorporate information literacy concepts into the curriculum, and librarians spend several class sessions teaching these concepts. The recognition of IL traits in academic prose encompasses a host of advanced literacy capabilities, which can be of particular value to first generation and adult learners. At the same time, faculty want to see all students master those proficiencies in order to take their place in scholarly dialogue. The courses that most heavily emphasize IL are our first-year composition courses, Writing 115 (WR115): Introduction to College Writing, and Writing 121 (WR121): Expository Prose, not to mention WR 123: Research Writing.

The First-Year Composition Workgroup recently revised the WR 115 course outcomes to focus on academic summary. In many ways, the academic summary is the coin of the realm in higher education. Focusing on it provides the opportunity to work on essential IL features, including critical thinking, analytical reading, ethical use of sources, documentation style, and of course academic prose itself—all challenging aptitudes to develop for most of our students. Furthermore, the IL emphasis in WR 115 is then reinforced in WR121, where the foundation established previously is built upon to effectively incorporate sources in academic essays.

In summary, there is broad spectrum of library and information literacy instruction at EOU. Students are exposed to these concepts in their composition classes, in the LIB classes, and most importantly in the FYE UNI class. With library faculty, student advisors, first-year composition faculty, and academic program faculty across the curriculum working collaboratively on information literacy, it has become central to EOU’s academic mission as our students matriculate and move toward completion.
A selection of learning activities from UNI 101

*Information Creation and Source Types*

In this lesson, students will start to become familiar with publication processes for newspapers, magazines, journals, books, and encyclopedias. They have an interactive activity with print periodicals, specifically a popular magazine and a scholarly journal, in which they identify differing characteristics between the two. We also start the conversation about author expertise.

*Finding Experts: Encyclopedias and Google Scholar*

Students learn what distinguishes traditional encyclopedias from other types of information sources, and begin to identify encyclopedias as good sources for background information. They work in pairs to navigate a multi-volume print encyclopedia and answer targeted questions about the editorial and review processes and encyclopedia author expertise. They then look up encyclopedia authors in Google Scholar to evaluate their authority. In the majority of cases, the authors of encyclopedia entries will have hundreds or thousands of citations to their work in the Google Scholar index. There are several objectives to this activity beyond learning about background information and assessing authority:

- finding a book on the shelf in the library (most are not familiar with call numbers)
- using a print index to locate information (most have never done this before, and it prepares the class for later conversations about database and search engine indexing)
- using Google Scholar
Background Information

Students are introduced to several search tools for gaining background knowledge about a topic, and the value of background research is discussed. They use Credo Reference, USA.gov, and Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center (Gale) to learn more about their chosen real world problem and begin to write the background section of their research projects. While many discipline faculty do not allow encyclopedias or pro/con sources as sources for research papers, the library faculty believe that setting context through these types of sources is appropriate for first-year students, especially when we are not doing this work within the context of a specific discipline.

Finding Popular and Scholarly Sources (Databases)

We devote just one class day to the mechanics of searching periodical databases and explaining what a database is and what purpose it serves. Students learn keyword searching, limiting, and sorting. More advanced searching skills will be learned in the context of a Writing course or in the major at the upper division. Through curriculum analysis we have found that in many majors students do not conduct library research for a paper or project until their junior or senior year. While library research is covered in first-year composition classes, students often do not retain the necessary skills since they are not using them. For that reason we have kept our introduction to databases very basic in UNI 101.

To reinforce the distinction between scholarly and popular sources, in this lesson students use SIRS Issues Researcher (Proquest) to find a popular source on their topics, and Academic Search Complete (EBSCO) to find a scholarly source. They then compare the two in terms of characteristics (rather than content).
**Critical Thinking and Bias**

This lesson has gone through several iterations, but ultimately the objectives are that students recognize that they have biases and that these may influence source choice, as well as influence judgments and decision making. We discuss some different types of bias and how it may play out in the research process.

**Scholarship as a Conversation and Citing Sources**

In order to better illustrate what *Scholarship as a Conversation* looks like in different disciplines, we show a video that library faculty produced in which five faculty members from different discipline areas discuss citation practices in their fields and the concept of scholarship as a conversation. In the video, faculty discuss how citations are a way of tracing ideas or showing where you are in a particular “conversation” rather than providing evidence alone and simply giving credit where credit is due. We pair the video with a worksheet and follow with a group discussion to emphasize key points.

**How to Read a Scholarly Article**

UNI 101 has several faculty guests throughout the term in order to introduce new students to different disciplines and get to know some professors on a more personal level. We have placed one of these visits in the library unit to help us further discuss *Scholarship as a Conversation*, and help students understand the nature of scholarly research. First students are introduced to the purpose of research in the Sciences, Social Sciences, and Humanities, and we discuss how research studies and scholarly work may look different in each. We talk about the
formal structures of scholarly sources, and the key pieces of information to look for when reading them (e.g. hypothesis or research question, methods, conclusions). Then librarians lead a guided reading exercise of a published paper from our faculty guest.

The guest comes on the next class day and discusses their research. We ask them to include a discussion of how they decided to research the topic, how they identified gaps in the literature, and the role of the literature review. We draw comparisons to the types of research activities undergraduate students will do. The faculty member also usually talks about their background and how they became interested in their field or research focus. Having a researcher talk about their own published article, after we have read it, helps fill in gaps in understanding and makes the content seem more concrete and more relevant. It breaks down some of the barriers students have about actually reading scholarly literature when they have the scholar present to explain difficult parts.

Involving discipline faculty in this way has also helped them to promote their programs to new students and has won over some to the concept of a first year seminar, which has been a positive outcome for us.

Group Work and Research

Our last class day in the library unit is an opportunity to review assignment instructions, let students check in with their teams, and get one-on-one searching assistance before the first part of the assignment is due. Students must turn in their individual source annotations first, and make them available to their teammates for reading and reflection. They use Google Slides for this, so their material can be easily shared with one another and with their instructors.

The final piece of the assignment is a reflective statement answering these prompts:
• Each of your teammates has approached the problem from a different angle, based on their Strengths. Does that help you gain a more holistic understanding of how to address or solve the problem? If so, how? If not, what is missing?

• Are there angles of the topic that you had not considered when you were researching on your own?

• What did you learn about this topic that you did not know before?

• How does working with a diverse team add value to your final product, or make it more challenging?

The reflections reveal metacognition about the research process, though metacognition is an outcome we do not currently track formally.
Bibliography: Articles connecting academic success to library usage.


