

# FOSTERING LITERACIES FOR ADULT LEARNERS

## FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS AT A FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITY

### **What is information literacy?**

Sources are vague on when exactly the teaching of information literacy became a priority for academic librarians, but the ALA published its first report on information literacy in 1989. It focuses on the need for critical thinking about resources in general and across educational levels, noting that at the time of writing, most people had information pre-packaged in textbooks and the media without being taught how to critically evaluate the information (The Importance of Information Literacy to Individuals, Business, and Citizenship, para. 3). The report concludes that the entire educational system needs to change:

To respond effectively to an ever-changing environment, people need more than just a knowledge base, they also need techniques for exploring it, connecting it to other knowledge bases, and making practical use of it. In other words, the landscape upon which we used to stand has been transformed, and we are being forced to establish a new foundation called information literacy. (Conclusion, para. 2)

Multiple authors point to a growing need to develop critical thinking skills in the early 1990s. In a history of the teaching of information literacy, Ariew (2014) cites a 1992 chapter written by Rader & Coons that notes the value of graduating students "who understand the importance of information and who have the competence to locate, evaluate and manage it," (p. 209). And Belshaw (2009) points to the growth of the Internet and self-published information throughout the 1990s as the underlying factor for this need for the evaluation and assessment of information.

The Association for College and Research Libraries, a sub-section of the American Libraries Association, has published two key guidelines on information literacy: *Information literacy competency standards for higher education* (2000) and the *Framework for information literacy for higher education* (2016). Their definition of information literacy in the earlier *Standards* document echoes the points made by Rader & Coons (1992) and cited by Ariew (2014): Information literacy is "a set of abilities requiring individuals to 'recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information,'" (p.2). The newer *Framework* builds on this idea within the changing technology and information ecosystem of the modern world.

The focus of the ACRL *Framework* (2016) still rests in the ideas of location, evaluation and synthesis, while acknowledging the technical skills necessary for finding resources, as well as the need for "metacognitive understandings of information use and creation," (Head, 2017, p. 81). The central tenets of the *Framework* are as follows:

- Authority Is Constructed and Contextual
- Information Creation as a Process
- Information Has Value

- Research as Inquiry
- Scholarship as Conversation
- Searching as Strategic Exploration

These ideas connect to the creation of scholarly work, how it is packaged in databases, and the skills needed to find the most fitting resources, while allowing the space for one's research topic to grow and change during the research process. They also encourage students to consider themselves as scholars contributing to ongoing conversations.

### **Why information literacy is important for first-year college students**

As previously noted, many first-year students on college campuses do not have critical analysis experience from high school. Dixon (2017) observes that these students lack experience with the evaluation of resources and the scope of academic library resources (p. 32), and Insua et al. (2018) documents the challenge of helping students get from where they are in high school – choosing between answer A and answer B – to the more fluid ideas of scholarship as defined by the ACRL *Framework* (2016).

Head (2013) highlights the early 20s as a key time in shaping a person's development of their cognitive and critical thinking skills (p. 472). Her research underscores the weaknesses incoming students have in their research skills. As she discusses the results of the research done by Project Information Literacy, Head explains, "Many students have difficulty understanding what the search process entails; many default to using Google and a few other familiar sources," (p. 476). In addition, as noted by many others, she points out their lack of ability to find context and connections between found resources, a key component of information literacy. If students cannot do such analysis in a lower-level, first-year class, it will be more difficult to complete higher-level research assignments as they delve deeper into their fields of study.

### **Barriers to information literacy for first-year college students**

Woitte & McCay (2019) document a number of barriers faced by first-year students new to academic learning, including library anxiety and overconfidence in their own searching abilities (p. 317). For Mabee & Fancher (2020) and their students struggling with poverty, they would add financial and food insecurity as additional barriers to creative research and critical thinking.

Misperceptions about information literacy and the role of the library in research can be even more difficult to overcome, as librarians will be trying to change students' perceptions. Hinchliffe, Rand, & Collier (2018) studied these misperceptions in order to help librarians understand them when planning instruction for first-year students. After analyzing the results of a survey of first-year student experiences, and discussing their findings with fellow librarians, the authors had the strongest agreement with these misperceptions by students:

- First year students believe that every question has a singular answer;

- First year students believe that research is a linear, uni-directional process;
- First year students believe that Google is a sufficient search tool;
- First year students believe that freely available internet resources are sufficient for academic work;
- All library resources are credible. (p. 11)

These findings, supported by follow-up work by Keba & Fairall (2020), point to the necessity of instruction in the location and evaluation of resources through the library. These are skills that students need to learn before – or at least alongside – delving into the more complex ideas of authority and scholarship as conversation. As Woitte & McCay (2019) conclude, "Do not expect to measure critical thinking in a student's first year of higher education," (p. 317). It is better for librarians to work with first-year instructors to introduce these concepts, partnering with students throughout their undergraduate education to broaden their understanding of research, scholarship, and information literacy, with the aim of embodying the ACRL *Framework* (2016) by the time they graduate.

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