Intentional Informationists: Re-envisioning Information Literacy and Re-designing Instructional Programs Around Faculty Librarians' Strengths as Campus Connectors, Information Professionals, and Course Designers

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This article adds to the recent literature that questions, and hopes to redefine, the information literacy notions and practices in academic libraries and their institutions. The authors draw on research in the area of social justice to express the need for academic libraries to explore new avenues to insure their institution's graduates are not merely competent consumers of information. The authors put forward the notion of the intentional informationist, who they define as having the contextual, reflective and informational skills to identify information opportunities, tackle complex information problems and pitfalls, and provide solutions or considerations that do not just meet her individual needs. In addition, they pose questions and detail opportunities, partnerships, and examples of curricular and co-curricular integration to engage students beyond the library, instruction sessions, a single course, or graduation requirement.

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BACKGROUND

California State University, Channel Islands (CI) was the first four-year public institution to be established in Ventura County, California. This year the university will celebrate its tenth year, and offers 22 undergraduate degrees and six graduate degrees. The university's mission places students at the center of the educational experience, and provides undergraduate and graduate education that facilitates learning within and across disciplines through integrative approaches. CI's mission emphasizes experiential and service learning, and graduates students with multicultural and international perspectives. The university community is passionate about this mission, and the university is fortunate to draw amazing students from a diverse and supportive community. The average age of our freshman class is 21, and the average age of our transfers is 27. Over 75% of our students come from the surrounding community to attend the university, and continue to work and/or care for family throughout their studies. Our students choose our university, and not the other way around. Our students have access to higher education, but access alone is not enough. We believe that it is our responsibility as librarians and faculty to provide them with an educational experience and opportunities that challenge them to reflect, engage, and act.

Although social justice is not mentioned anywhere in the university mission, elements of its many definitions are evident in planning, implementing, and assessing university goals, programs, services, and events. Many aspects of social justice are operationalized within and beyond the university. Two prime examples of this commitment are the hours that faculty from across disciplines have spent on the development of the upcoming Freedom and Justice Studies program, and the community dialogue on Social Justice and Education that the School of Education hosts annually in the university library. No matter what their background our students are asked to bring what they know, utilize past experiences, and engage beyond their personal experience, chosen discipline, and courses in order to enhance their educational experience. The campus is proud that around half of our seniors take part in some form of collaborative research or creative activity, that our students place in system-wide or discipline-based research competitions and exhibitions, and that they present on travels that combine learning and a service project in places such as New Orleans and Japan. These campus-wide expectations embody the general tenets of social justice, and are elucidated for the students in the campus mission and CI's General Education Goals and Outcomes. The third of seven general education goals is for all graduates to be information literate. This goal has three outcomes, two of which are interpreted in line with the Association of College and Research Libraries Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education: students will access needed information effectively and efficiently, and students will evaluate information and its sources critically. The third outcome, students will explain the economic, legal, social, and ethical issues surrounding the use of information, has been pondered, implemented, and assessed much differently at CI as a result of campus social justice discussions.

Literature on social justice no doubt informs our unique information literacy program at CI. Ten years of campus conversations with

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social justice at the core have made it easy to operationalize our information literacy activities and seek partnerships, but makes it very difficult for us to define social justice or even point to one social justice theorist on which we draw upon to guide us. If we had to pick one person who aligns with our information literacy program vision, values, and expectations, it would be Ira Shor. Shor writes that "critical literacy challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for social and self-development. This kind of literacy – words, rethinking worlds, self dissenting in society – connects the political and the personal, the public and private, the global and the local, the economic and pedagogical, for inventing our lives and for promoting justice in a place of inequality" (Shor, 1999, p. 1). What is more transformative than discovering context for information presented, seeking other perspectives, delving into information creation and policy, and developing new inquires to buck the status quo? Does this not ask librarians to question how they define and teach information literacy? If information is a big part of everyday life and librarians are intimately familiar with the interests and inequalities in the information realm, shouldn't we as a profession work to integrate social critique with pedagogical techniques that help students reflect, advocate, answer, and develop information related questions and issues that impact our students' everyday lives? More importantly, what might this look like in action.

PURPOSE

Our librarians' call to action started with CI as a pilot campus for the ETS ICT Literacy test. This experience, and similar experiences in areas such as critical thinking and writing, soured those involved in administering the tests to their students and swayed those leading campuswide assessment efforts away from standardized tests. The results of these tests helped us to determine if we had literates and illiterates in these critical literacies based on the pre-determined and artificial outcomes of the test creators, but gave us no idea how to improve our programs or if these skills and experiences were valuable, transformative, or even memorable to our students. As a result, librarians brought the question of what it meant to be information literate to the committees on which they served, including Curriculum, General Education, and the Characteristics of Graduates Task Force. CI adopted language on information literacy in its Characteristics of Graduates in 2004, and as part of its general education goals in 2006, which included three specific outcomes for information literacy. The library faculty then created a series of workshops with composition and other faculty across disciplines to develop rubrics to assess these outcomes. We found that the rubrics developed to assess composition papers and upper-division research papers were quite effective at assessing two of the three information literacy outcomes. The library faculty worked with discipline faculty to create reflective assignments to make sense of personal and group information seeking efforts and evaluation. However, the library and discipline faculty felt unable to adequately assess the third information literacy outcome; the information literate student explains the economic, legal, social, and ethical issues surrounding the use of information (Hoffmann & Wallace, 2008). The inability to effectively assess this outcome was incredibly frustrating since this was seen as more transformative than the other two outcomes, as it related directly to our university mission, and was viewed to be much more than a student's ability to properly attribute and cite a source in his/her paper.

This frustration led to productive dialogues. Should we be teaching undergraduates concepts and skills in order to simply function in the information age, or should we be equipping students with the theoretical framework and critical thinking skills to define, consider, solve, embrace, and champion the ethical, political, social, and cultural opportunities and dilemmas that are presented to them? We agreed that undergraduate students needed to be equipped with more than mechanics to be successful, not only as students but as informed citizens. All of this could have been seen as the daunting task described by Jacobs

in her article on information literacy and reflective pedagogical praxis (Jacobs, 2008). We could have also taken the traditional route and tried to explore theories in disciplines with which we had previously partnered. However, using existing signposts is a difficult sell in a university that has only been around ten years. Instead, our librarians decided to look no further than the interdisciplinary field of library and information science to gather inspiration. Instead of saving all the interesting discussion for library and information science graduate students, why not open it up to our undergraduates, secondary, and primary school students, and communities. We have found our students can't get enough of Christine Bruce, Dan Schiller, and Karen Fischer. Furthermore, we found a need to push the envelope beyond our traditional partners in rhetoric, composition, and critical thinking by exploring partnerships with programs like business, economics, education, and media studies. Not just to maximize skills-based instruction, but to create opportunities and courses that truly explore information issues and dilemmas across disciplines.

CI librarians have always had lofty goals beyond the physical and virtual walls of the library. We wish to develop a society full of intentional informationists rather than the society of conspicuous information consumers so horrifyingly described in Johnson's *The Information Diet* (Johnson, 2012). The typical undergraduate has not, and probably will not, receive an introduction to information theories on the ethical, political, social, and cultural opportunities and dilemmas surrounding its creation and use. This is not to say that colleges and universities have not incorporated information literacy, media literacy, and critical thinking requirements into their undergraduate curricula. Even the most progressive offerings in this area, however, still focus on introducing concepts via other disciplines or interdisciplinary questions with a heavy emphasis on the mechanics of information seeking and the correct and incorrect uses of information. Many libraries employ standardized assessment measures to insure that basic competencies have been met before graduation. These measures may help determine if a student can use a library catalog to find a book on a particular topic, utilize social media to promote themselves to future employers, or identify bias in political advertising, but do not assess a student's ability to critically reflect on the ethical, political and social implications of information, nor do they allow students to incorporate new questions and perspectives in a meaningful way into their lives and communities. Our definition of an intentional informationist is simple: she is a person that has the contextual, reflective and informational skills to identify information opportunities, tackle complex information problems and pitfalls, and provide solutions or considerations that do not just meet her individual needs.

In his book *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, Shor concludes with a powerful call to action: "the consciousness developed in a liberatory course lays a base for transcendent change which will have to be fought for and won in multiple arenas" (Shor, 1987, p. 270). This article will introduce undergraduate courses as well as opportunities taken outside the classroom at CI to create occasions for reflective and critical learning in relation to our culture of information. These courses are taught by faculty from the library, communication, business, economics and education programs, and ask students to ponder key theories, opportunities and dilemmas, instead of merely meeting information seeking, evaluation and use competencies. These formal partnerships and opportunities have allowed the library to facilitate more informal means of engaging in discussions that relate to the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information. The greater hope is that our communities, policy makers, entrepreneurs, and workforces will have the contextual, reflective and informational skills to identify information opportunities and tackle complex information problems and pitfalls.

We needed to be realistic. Only limited critical thinking and reflection is going to happen in a fifty minute library session, and efforts will not be effective if they are relegated to the library. They have to be woven into the backbone of the university, its curriculum. As Shor underscores in the afterward of *Social Justice Pedagogy across the Curriculum*, there is an urgent need to identify common ground and