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“I Have Ten Peer Reviewed Articles. Now What?” How Political Science Research Methods Textbooks Teach Students About Scholarly Context

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the treatment of one aspect of information literacy—establishing and understanding the scholarly context of research—in political science research methods textbooks. This important information literacy skill speaks to the ability of students to synthesize and engage with information. We analyzed how the most commonly assigned research methods textbooks addressed how to understand and use scholarly research and how these discussions compare to national standards and performance indicators for information literacy. We find that there are substantial discussions of how to establish and understand the scholarly context, at least in some of the textbooks. These discussions tend to focus on teaching students how to write a literature review for their research projects, stressing the importance, one hand, of reading and understanding the scholarly literature, and, on the other, understanding the key debates and concepts in the literature. Only a handful of textbooks provide concrete advice to undergraduates about how to go about this process. We conclude with some suggestions about how instructors and librarians can work to do more to integrate the lessons from these textbooks into assignments and also course and curriculum design.

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The “signature assignment” for undergraduate social science students is the argument paper, which requires students to “conduct scholarly research about a topic and present clear and sound evidence that advances a proposition or proposal” (Head, 2008, p. 433). As information literacy efforts have increased at colleges and universities, professors and librarians have focused on helping students find reliable sources of information, particularly in the context of proliferating and varied online resources.

Finding information is not the only information challenge students encounter. They also struggle with how to understand and use the information they find. This is an equally important part of information literacy because it speaks to the ability of students to synthesize and engage with information. Advanced scholars, such as professors and librarians, have trained to do this at an expert level. Students, particularly undergraduate students taking a sophomore- or junior-level research methods course, are novices. This difference in perspectives and abilities

is one that instructors often have a difficult time overcoming in order to teach undergraduate students to interpret and integrate information.

In this paper, we investigate how political science undergraduates are taught to synthesize and engage with information by establishing and understanding the scholarly context of their research. We believe this part of the research process is a common stumbling block for students, instructors, and assignment guidelines, resulting in a situation in which students accomplish the tasks of finding “good” information, only to be perplexed by what to do with it.

To investigate how students are taught to understand and establish the scholarly context of their research, we analyze political science research methods textbooks. How do methods books help students establish and understand the context of their research? We find that there are substantial discussions of how to establish and understand the scholarly context, at least in some of the textbooks. These discussions tend to focus on teaching students how to write a literature review, stressing the importance of not only reading and understanding the scholarly literature, but also understanding the key debates and concepts in the literature. Only a handful of textbooks provide concrete advice to undergraduates about how to go about this process. We conclude with some suggestions about how instructors and librarians

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can work to do more to integrate the lessons from these textbooks into assignments and also course and curriculum design.

ESTABLISHING AND UNDERSTANDING IN POLITICAL SCIENCE INSTRUCTION

Information literacy is concerned with the ability of people to find, evaluate, manage, and use information effectively (Bruce, 1997; Jacobs, 2008; Marfleet & Dille, 2005; McNicol, 2015). Higher education accrediting agencies, colleges and universities, and disciplinary associations agree that information literacy is important for students' current and lifelong learning abilities, although significant debate and confusion exist over the definition of the term, and how, as well as by whom, it can best be taught (McNicol, 2015; Saunders, 2012). Many definitions of information literacy discuss the practical skills needed to find and select information and the use and understanding of information. These definitions also reference the social, political, economic, and legal contexts of information (ACRL, 2000; Saunders, 2012). Some argue that information literacy should be conceived more broadly as developing students' capacity for critical thinking (Thornton, 2010; Weaver & Tuten, 2014) or "informed learning (the kind of learning made possible through evolving and transferable capacity to use information to learn)" (Bruce, Hughes, & Somerville, 2012, p. 522). In this vein, Marfleet and Dille offer an excellent summarization from the perspective of political science educators of the goals of information literacy: "Information-literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how information is organized, where to find and how to use it" (2005, p. 176).

Information literacy is a central concern for academic librarians who have developed national standards and who do the majority of publishing on information literacy (Saunders, 2012; Sproles, Detmering, & Johnson, 2013; Stevens, 2007). According to the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)'s "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education," which have been incorporated into the information literacy and general education goals of many colleges and universities, 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." These standards specify that "the information literate student:

1. Determines the nature and extent of information needed.
2. Accesses needed information effectively and efficiently.
3. Evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system.
4. Uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose.
5. Understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally" (ACRL, 2000).

Recent revisions to these standards have resulted in a "Framework for Information Literacy" that defines information literacy as a "spectrum of abilities, practices, and habits of mind that extends and deepens learning through engagement with the ecosystem" (ACRL, 2015).

Saunders (2012) finds that faculty members often view information literacy through the narrow lens of "library skills." This is not surprising, in part because the dominant role of librarians in information literacy publishing and instruction, but also because information retrieval and initial evaluation—what a colleague calls "how to library"²—form the base competencies of most understandings of information literacy and are among the initial steps of the research process. But, as the definitions of information literacy above illustrate, information literacy encompasses more than information retrieval and certainly includes engaging with and interpreting scholarly research. For example, standard three of the "Information Literacy Competency Standards" states that "the

information literate evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into one's knowledge base and value system" (ACRL, 2000). Performance indicators and learning outcomes for this standard include skills such as selecting and restating main ideas from texts, analyzing arguments, recognizing relationships among concepts, and drawing conclusions. One of the central concepts articulated in the "Framework for Information Literacy" is that scholarship should be understood "as conversation." The Framework describes scholarly research as a "discursive practice in which ideas are formulated, debated, and weighed against one another over extended periods of time" (ACRL, 2015). According to the Framework, "learners who are developing their information literate abilities" will display several knowledge practices, including that they

recognize that they are often entering into an ongoing scholarly conversation, not a finished conversation;... identify the contribution that particular articles, books, and other scholarly pieces make to disciplinary knowledge; summarize the changes in scholarly perspective over time on a particular topic within a specific discipline; and recognize that a given scholarly work may not represent the only—or even the majority—perspective on the issue at hand (ACRL, 2015).

Political scientists have increased their attention to issues of information literacy, and several scholars have described successful examples of the incorporation of information literacy into political science courses (Cook & Walsh, 2012; Marfleet & Dille, 2005; Stevens & Campbell, 2008). Collaboration between librarians and political science faculty is a recurring theme (Cook & Walsh, 2012; Cope & Flanagan, 2013; Stevens & Campbell, 2008; Williams, Goodson, & Howard, 2006), as is the use of social science methods to assess growth in students' information literacy capacities (Cook & Walsh, 2012; Marfleet & Dille, 2005; Williams & Evans, 2008). The political science-focused information literacy literature emphasizes developing students' capacity for critical thinking, especially in the context of an abundance of online information (Cook & Walsh, 2012; Cope & Flanagan, 2013; Thornton, 2010). Researchers focus on helping students assess the credibility and bias of information (Cook & Walsh, 2012; Cope & Flanagan, 2013), as well as on helping students make sense of competing perspectives (Cope & Flanagan, 2013).

The studies of information literacy within the political science context consistently find that information literacy instruction improves students' performance on information literacy outcomes assessments (Cook & Walsh, 2012; Marfleet & Dille, 2005; Williams & Evans, 2008; Williams et al., 2006). Student improvement in information literacy skills is associated primarily with seniority and progression in school rather than with particular courses, such as research methods (Marfleet & Dille, 2005). While particular political science courses may not improve information literacy outcomes more than others, Williams and Evans (2008) argue that information literacy is content sensitive and discipline specific because of the nature and needs of information change across fields. Thus, problem-based information literacy instruction within the political science curriculum appears to be particularly promising (Cook & Walsh, 2012; Cope & Flanagan, 2013).

Political science research on information literacy has focused on information literacy broadly, considering all or several of the information literacy standards in their assessments. Few studies have focused on how students are taught to understand and establish the scholarly context of their research. Researchers in political science, library science, and composition, however, note that students struggle with the use and integration of information sources in their writing (Stevens & Campbell, 2008; Cope & Flanagan, 2013; Rosenblatt, 2010; Project Information Literacy, 2011). This can be true even when students demonstrate proficiency in another aspect of information literacy. For example, students in Rosenblatt's (2010) study performed well in terms of retrieving appropriate sources, but encountered difficulties synthesizing information and incorporating it into their overall work. Instead,

² With thanks to Randy Hensley for this description.

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