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Information Literacy and the Academic Library: One Stop on a Life-Long Journey

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Abstract

Information literacy is often linked to life-long learning, but few colleges and universities reach out to the institutions that supply their students or admit their graduates. For this reason, Ventura County (California) educational institutions organized a summit to examine the state of information literacy, identify information literacy gaps within and across educational institutions, identify potential information literacy collaborations within and across educational institutions, and identify needed educational opportunities in the area of information literacy for educational institutions. Summit participants included librarians, faculty, teachers, and administrators from high schools, community colleges, and universities. The article focuses on summit content, format, activities, and outcomes. The summit's unique format to stimulate dialogue, rather than just show participants how to do information literacy, was extremely informative. It was clear that expectations did not match what was actually being taught, or even believed to be taught, at other institutions. It was also clear that particular participants were doing some great things, but had never stopped to talk about them with their colleagues let alone others outside their institution. As a result, the event has led to several successful collaborations as well as some unexpected benefits for the academic library that hosted it.

Introduction

Information literacy is something that academic libraries have been grappling with for some time. College and university libraries have focused on what information literacy means to their campuses, defining competencies, implementing programs, and assessing program effectiveness and student learning. These libraries have made assumptions about the skills and experiences that their students' possess upon arrival and from those assumptions developed clear expectations of what they want students to achieve while at their institution. The assumptions drawn and expectations created may be the work of a single academic librarian, a team of academic librarians, or a team of academic librarians and teaching faculty. Despite the fact that the term "life-long learning" is often associated with information literacy there is a surprising lack of dialogue between those developing information literacy programs at colleges and universities and the many other groups that are providers or benefactors of information literacy skills over a person's lifetime, including elementary and secondary schools, public libraries, and local employers.

In their 2003 article on the need for more information literacy collaboration between academic and school libraries, Carr and Rockman (2003, p. 52) state that "despite differences in their standards, school and academic librarians share similar information-literacy goals" The authors easily support this statement by placing the two sets of standards (American Association of School Librarians (AASL)/Association of Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) Information Power Standards and Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education) side by side in a table. Although the similarities are quite apparent and should help facilitate meaningful collaborations, little movement has been made to establish such collaborations and it is questionable that the

average school or academic librarian is even aware that these commonalities and differences exist. Even more worrisome is that the average librarian may not even be aware of how these standards have been integrated into their own school, college, or university curriculum let alone how the same or similar standards are being applied at other local educational institutions that may be admitting their graduates or supplying their students. Therefore, decisions are often made based on a set of assumptions and unrealistic expectations.

Assumptions and unrealistic expectations are nothing new when discussing skills that are associated with life-long learning. Educators, librarians, and other groups involved in this process are constantly blaming each other for not meeting one expectation or another. In one recent article, "Making the Leap from High School to College" the author clearly argues that incoming freshman are not meeting college faculty expectations in numerous areas related to information literacy (Fitzgerald 2004, pp. 19-24). The author goes on to state, "the expectations of these California faculty represent a highly credible kind of data, because these expectations exist whether reasonable or not. I believe the expectations to be reasonable, because professors envision what qualified college graduates should be able to do in their chosen discipline (Fitzgerald 2004, p.20)." As a faculty member I do not believe that we can assume these expectations are reasonable. University faculty and librarians may be able to identify reasonable information literacy expectations for college graduates, but many times these very same expectations are being applied to both freshman and transfer students. Based on informal conversations, the average high school, college, and university librarian and teaching faculty member in Ventura County is not aware of existing information literacy standards, their campus goals and expectations, other local institutions goals and expectations that impact on incoming and outgoing students, and their role in teaching and evaluating information literacy skills at their institution. Everyone thinks that their expectations are reasonable and that it is some one else's responsibility to teach these skills. Therefore, it is not reasonable to assume that incoming students will possess expected information literacy skills or outgoing students will leave with information literacy skills that meet the expectations of the next institution in the chain.

For this reason, librarians, administrators, and teachers from a variety of educational institutions must come together to better understand applicable standards as well as each other's goals and expectations before meaningful collaborations can be established and sustained. Efforts on a national level can only provide a framework to facilitate dialogue. It will take many more local collaborations to better understand how state, local, and institutional climates have impacted the application of the different standards, not to mention assumptions and expectations. Manaka and Snelson (2004, p. 430) discuss some interesting collaborations in "My First-year Student is Your Senior". Other local collaborations in California (Sonntag 2007), Ohio (Fatzer et al. 1988, pp. 76-78), and Illinois (Warren 2003, pp. 14-16) have also been successful in bringing together various partners in the life-long learning chain to foster meaningful dialogue on information literacy.

Opportunity for Collaboration
The impetus for our local collaboration was a talk on the information literacy and other basic academic skills of incoming freshman that the California State University, Channel Islands University Librarian gave at a regional school librarian conference. Following the conference, representatives from the Ventura County Superintendent of Schools Office approached the university library about working together to create a series of workshops on information literacy for local school librarians and their classroom teacher colleagues. A small group of people from these institutions came together to plan the workshop series, but quickly realized that apart from the information literacy standards used each group knew very little about the others'

assumptions and expectations in this area. All seemed to share the same concerns, no one group claimed responsibility for teaching the various skills, and it was unclear who might be best to supply an expert on a particular topic. Therefore, the group felt that before workshops could be developed there was real need to engage more stakeholders in the planning process in order to better explore different ideas about, and expectations for, information literacy at all levels of education in the county.

The initial group decided to establish a steering committee that included representatives from Ventura County Superintendent of Schools Office, California State University, Channel Islands University Library, local high school libraries, and local community college libraries. Expanding to local elementary schools and private colleges was suggested, but the group decided to think of the first summit as a pilot project and revisit this suggestion in the future. The committee felt it was important to focus on who would conduct the training, who needed training, and what that training would include. Again the problem of differing assumptions and expectations surrounding information literacy came up. After several meetings the group decided not to merely implement a series of trainings but rather design an event that provided background on information literacy, flush out assumptions and expectations, and gauge the desire for collaborations and training opportunities. The steering committee titled the event the Information Literacy Summit for Ventura County, and invited librarians and administrators from the Ventura County Office Superintendent of Schools, librarians and teaching faculty from California State University, Channel Islands, librarians, teachers, and administrators from the Oxnard Union High School District, and librarians and teaching faculty from the three campuses of the Ventura County Community College District.

The Information Literacy Summit for Ventura County
The Information Literacy Summit for Ventura County was a day long retreat held in the spring of 2004. 51 people from 11 different institutions attended the summit. Most participants came in teams that included at least one librarian and 3-4 teaching faculty. The summit centered around four goals: examine the state of information literacy, identify information literacy gaps within and across educational institutions, identify potential information literacy collaborations within and across educational institutions, and identify needed educational opportunities in the area of information literacy for educational institutions in Ventura County. The day started with a short program that included two keynote speakers. The first discussed the connectedness between the institutions in Ventura County and the importance of fostering dialogue between them. The second gave an overview of the different information literacy definitions and standards. A panel of three librarians and one information technology training specialist followed the keynote speakers. The panel addressed the state of information literacy at their institution, assumptions about incoming students' skills and experiences, any research done by the institution to evaluate students' skills and experiences, and expectations of graduates from their institutions.

The bulk of the day was spent on three group activities. Tables were assigned so that at least one person from each type of institution was represented in each discussion group. For the first activity each group was asked to discuss the question, are there gaps between the information literacy skills high school graduates possess and those expected of first year college students, and list specific examples of these gaps on a flip chart. For the second activity each group was asked to further discuss current information literacy efforts, activities, or programs mentioned by the speakers or were currently happening at their institutions and list the most interesting examples on a flip chart. For the third activity each group was asked to discuss how to begin to close the gaps and make suggestions for any needed collaborations or educational opportunities. After each activity the information summarized on the flip charts was reported out to all summit participants and time was given for further discussion among the larger group.

Throughout the day participants were encouraged to interact with others from outside their institution. The university provided continental breakfast, coffee breaks, and lunch to get people up and networking. As will be noted in the results section these informal discussions were extremely beneficial and appreciated. The day concluded with an individual activity that asked participants to list, on giant Post-It Notes around the room, the one or two information literacy concepts that they wanted to know more about and one or two information literacy concepts that they felt they were experts on. No one seemed to be in a hurry to leave and many participants stayed around to talk information literacy or to initiate conversations on assumptions and expectations in other areas, including study skills, writing, and different content areas.

Summit Outcomes

The summit provided a very clear picture of the state of information literacy in Ventura County. Some institutions found it easy to explain applicable standards and describe assumptions and expectations. Others were not sure which standards were applicable or had trouble summarizing assumptions and expectations. High schools, colleges, and universities in the same system did not always articulate the same goals. All agreed that teaching information literacy skills was a shared responsibility, but no one agreed on what type of institution should take on which skills or what level of the skills should be mastered by when. Although these results may sound discouraging, the realization that everyone thought information literacy education was someone else's responsibility elicited lively and useful discussion. Just hearing the different assumptions and expectations allowed the group to quickly realize the need, and more importantly build the support, for more information literacy education and collaborations in Ventura County. There is no doubt that the kind of support for information literacy generated by the summit could have been achieved by a series of workshops.

Participants perceived many information literacy gaps, misconceptions, and incorrect assumptions within and across educational institutions in the county. The specific question asked at the summit was focused on the transition from high school to community college or university, but the discussion emphasized the fact that the same gaps and misconceptions extended down to middle school and elementary school as well as extended up to the community college-university transition and undergraduate-graduate school transition, and beyond. The gaps mentioned again and again were:

- There are no common standards and until now no discussion of assumptions and expectations between educational institutions.
- There was a real gap in the tools and resources available to teach information literacy concepts and to engage in information literate practices between the educational institutions.
- Each level saw a dramatic difference between both computer and information skills that students thought they possess and that of those they actually possessed.
- Each level expected students to be able to articulate an information need and at least know how to start looking for quality information.
- Each level expected incoming students to understand how the Internet worked, was searched, and the need to evaluate all information found.
- Each level expected incoming students to know how to integrate information found and understand the concept of plagiarism.
- Each level was extremely concerned about plagiarism and all levels were creating assignments to hinder plagiarism that actually promoted incorrect assumptions about

information literacy since students were often times assigned topics, asked to use pre-selected sources, and not required to evaluate or cite sources used.

In addition to the gaps themselves, groups also shared real obstacles at their various institutions that made these gaps difficult to close. Many mentioned campus climate, the education budget crisis in California, and the current focus on certain assessments and tests that rarely touch on information literacy.

Participants identified many potential information literacy collaborations within and across institutions. The local high school teachers and librarians wanted to establish consistent information literacy expectations through the district as well as expanding partnerships between teachers, librarians, and administrators to achieve these expectations. High school representatives also expressed interest in having community college and university representatives come to their school sites and talk to both faculty and students about their expectations in the areas of information literacy, academic and study skills, and writing. These type of discussions would no doubt continue to illuminate the gaps that exist between graduating high school seniors and college freshman. Fieldtrips, observations, and joint information literacy training between institutions were suggested, since many believed there was a need to better understand the electronic and print resources available to students and ways in which we could pool resources to offer more. All participants agreed that it was important to continue dialogue begun at the summit as well as expand the dialogue to other high school districts, elementary school districts, public libraries, and other potential stakeholders. Last it was suggested that an evaluation rubric be created to see how existing expectations are being met and how information literacy instruction could be improved.

The discussion of potential collaborations also got participants thinking about existing collaborations and activities that did not currently involve information literacy, but might be good avenues to explore. Some collaborations identified were the advanced placement via individual determination (AVID), Upward Bound, International Studies Program, the University of California Santa Barbara partnership with local high schools, California State University, Channels Islands new student outreach, and Ventura County Community College District new student outreach. Activities discussed were working together across departments to build research assignments, using established committees to discuss standards and set goals, using existing structures to articulate skills between institutions, and make better use of library orientations and resources.

Lastly participants created a list of potential educational opportunities related to information literacy for Ventura County. Key topic areas for training included understanding information literacy terms, exploring information resources available in the county, effectively using new print and electronic resources, defining and combating plagiarism, using citation styles, and finding and evaluating websites. Several broader topics were also proposed for future forums or hands-on workshops, including techniques for facilitating topic selection, developing quality worksheets, interactive exercises, and assignments to teach a variety of information literacy skills, brainstorming ideas to get students excited about the research process and to sustain that interest when working on a extensive multi-part project, and producing conceptual models for helping students transfer past experiences and skills to new projects and subject areas. In addition, a need for similar summits and training on related topics emerged, including integrating sources, using word processing programs, and assessing writing.

Results

The steering committee was pleased that the summit was able to accomplish all four outcomes in a very short time. The state of information literacy in Ventura County was made clear not by a panel of experts, but those currently grappling with information literacy in a variety of institutions throughout the county. The participants were able to identify information literacy gaps within and across educational institutions as well as discuss real obstacles to closing those gaps. The participants were also able to suggest potential information literacy collaborations and activities within and across educational institutions and identify needed educational opportunities. Furthermore, summit participants were energized by, and extremely enthusiastic about the dialogue generated. Many expressed interest in keeping the ball rolling so that there was no loss of momentum, and using the summit format to tackle related issues such as computer and writing skills.

Summit participants were encouraged to make fieldtrips to other institutions in order to explore services and collections, and initiate discussions on their campuses to discuss standards, assumptions, and expectations. The result has been several successful collaborations to enhance information literacy awareness and teaching among both librarians and teachers. Three California State University, Channel Islands librarians have worked with local high school librarians to conduct mini-summits and in-services. These collaborations have varied in size, scope, and impact. For example, one event facilitated ways for high school English and History teachers to better incorporate information literacy into their research assignments, while another event provided an entire high school teaching faculty with definitions, standards, and lesson ideas for information literacy.   Relationships established at the summit have helped to place college level interns and students interested in exploring information literacy in different settings. One example is the pairing of undergraduate students in the Liberal Studies Capstone: Information Literacy class with local elementary, middle, and high school teachers and librarians. These students, mostly future teachers, are required to develop an information literacy portfolio, including a philosophy statement, exploratory essay, concept maps, reflections, school librarian interview, annotated bibliography, and five lesson plans. Each term the students have commented on how valuable it is to be able to learn about theories in class, and then meet with their librarian "mentor" in the field. Another success has been developing co-presentations for the Ventura County School Library Conference, which annually brings together over 80 school librarians from Ventura and surrounding counties. Last, contacts made at the summit as well as the format itself were used to foster a dialogue on English Placement Tests and writing assessment in the county.

Immediately following the summit, the steering committee favored planning for future summits and establishing on-going training sessions.   Members made recommendations to their individual institutions, but could not institute any formal timelines or programs due to personnel changes and lack of financial support. All institutions represented on the steering committee are state funded, and have been plagued by California's increasing deficit. In addition, information literacy education is often not seen as a priority since it is not explicitly written into the curriculum. Therefore, the steering committee decided to disband and focus on facilitating the growing number of informal collaborations between teachers and librarians that were being established. It has been over three years since the summit, and new collaborations and partnerships still emerge as a result of the summit. Some recent activities include summit participants speaking on college readiness and cross-institutional collection development and information literacy instruction for specialized programs.

Conclusions

The Information Literacy Summit for Ventura County not only accomplished the goals of the steering committee, but also allowed a community to explore what information literacy means to them and ways in which individuals can take responsibility and make a difference. Throughout the day participants mentioned how valuable it was to put their heavy workloads, state mandates, and budget worries aside and just engage in meaningful dialogue about information literacy assumptions and expectations. Participants liked that the summit did not focus on blame or what you have to do, but rather on what was working and what might be something to explore in the future. Participants also liked the idea of having a say in developing educational opportunities, instead of having a workshop or in-service imposed on them. Although the steering committee did not evaluate participant satisfaction, speakers and organizers received a number of positive emails and offers to become involved in collaborations and trainings. The enthusiasm generated by the summit has no doubt had a tremendous impact on local interest information literacy and desire to increase communication among institutions.

Knowing that a person is information literate at any stage in life is no easy task. Standards exist, but assumptions and expectations as well as factors like campus climate and state mandates of the different educational institutions involved make it difficult to know if the skills that students are coming in with, or leaving with, are actually meeting expectations. It is not likely that there will ever be a single definition of what it means to be information literate, a clear understanding of who is responsible for helping someone achieve that state, or a grid that lays out what skill levels should be achieved and when. The reality is that the typical college or university gets students from, and sends students to, educational institutions across the states and throughout the world. However, facilitating a dialogue among local librarians, administrators, faculty and teachers from different institutions can only help us to better understand applicable information literacy standards, assumptions, goals, and expectations in order to develop meaningful collaborations and strengthen our individual programs.

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