

Disturbing the Sediment: Dusting off the Information Literacy Competency Standards

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Abstract

As we approach the 20th anniversary of the inception of the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, librarians must ask ourselves, "Is it time for revision?" Not only have libraries changed but also the nature of information and information seeking has changed dramatically in the past 20 years. The standards have been effective at giving librarians and other educators a common language through which to discuss expectations for students at all levels of higher education, but many see changes that need to be made. Participants used the World Café model to discuss these changes and the process that could be used to make them. The World Café model gave the participants the opportunity to discuss these issues in rotating discussion groups.

Introduction

After using the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education in classrooms and programs throughout the past twenty years, librarians must ask ourselves, "Is it time for revision?" Not only have libraries changed but also the nature of information and information seeking has changed dramatically in the past 20 years. Some librarians have wondered if these standards are at all representative of what librarians are actually doing in the classroom. During the past twenty years, the ACRL Standards have been effective at giving librarians and other educators a common language through which to discuss expectations for students at all levels of higher education. But no one ever expected them to be perfect. Now that we've been working with them for years, we can take a step back and discuss what they will mean to us as we go forward. Can we update them? Revise them? How are individual librarians already doing this? In some extreme cases, librarians may even be ignoring them because they don't see the connection between the standards and their daily practice. During the half-day workshop, attendees participated in small discussion groups to discuss the potential for adapting or reinterpreting the standards. The World Cafe model allowed attendees to participate in rotating discussion groups and give people the opportunity to experience many different perspectives. The discussions culminated in new ideas and suggestions for next steps.

World Café model

Our discussions were conducted using the World Café model. This model is intended to encourage meaningful conversations among people with the wisdom within them and creativity to confront the challenges that face us. Margaret Wheatley, a renowned leadership consultant, describes the model in this way:

“The World Café process reawakens our deep species memory of two fundamental beliefs about human life. First, we humans want to talk together about things that matter to us. In fact, this is what gives satisfaction and meaning

to life. Second, as we talk together, we are able to access a greater wisdom that is found only in the collective” (Brown & Isaacs, 2005, p. ix).

We drew on this collective wisdom to confront the challenge of information literacy in the new millennium. The intention in using this model was to encourage all participants to engage in rich discussion about the topic at hand: revising the information literacy standards.

The World Café model uses structured questions to drive small discussions at conversation tables. The questions are intended to help the attendees reach a new level of understanding. After much deliberation, the planning team decided on the following questions to drive the discussion:

- Round 1: What are the dilemmas/opportunities in this situation?
- Round 2: What assumptions do we need to test or challenge here? What's our intention here? What's the deeper purpose (the big "why") that is really worthy of our best effort?
- Round 3: What's taking shape? What are you hearing underneath the variety of opinions being expressed? What's the next level of thinking we need to do?
- Round 4: What's missing from this picture so far? What is it we're not seeing? What do we need more clarity on? What would it take to create change on this issue? If our success was completely guaranteed, what bold steps might we choose?

Each table spent 20 minutes discussing each question before moving to a new table with a new set of people. A table host remained at each table while other guests moved around. This process allowed the guests to engage in more meaningful conversations than if they had stayed with the same four guests for the entire workshop. The four rounds of discussion lasted three hours, and the last 30 minutes were used to wrap up the conversations and discuss the five bold steps each group had collectively agreed upon. What follows are key points derived from the conversations prior to determining the five bold steps:

- Get buy in. There are many constituents to consider when discussing information literacy: students, faculty, discipline-specific professional organizations, K-12 organizations, national education organizations, and industry. Additionally, subject specific information literacy standards should be considered as well.
- It is hard to implement the standards in 1-shot classes.
- We want to make informed people, not just students.
- Flexibility as an issue comes up again and again. There needs to be a recognition of levels of information literacy in academic institutions: undergraduate, graduate, graduate students and faculty; for different classes, groups of students; community college, scaffolding to 4-year institutions.
 - How do we address all these levels in the same session? Teaching to a diverse group all at once.
 - One size does not fit all.

- Clearly written; common academic language to make sure that the standards are understandable outside the library. Literacy means remediation to some faculty – change the terminology.
- Too many competencies, not enough time in the classroom. Scalability. Can we really cover them all? But are there too many standards in general? If so, how do you choose what to cover in a one-shot, multi-shot, 1-credit or 3-credit course?
- Opportunity in new technologies. Information literacy versus other literacies: computer/technology, media, visual and digital?
- Librarians as subject experts: information literacy is a discipline; but also the opposite sentiment that information literacy spans the disciplines. Process (librarians) versus product/content (faculty)
- Marketing and promoting information literacy to faculty and students; WIIFM?
- Critical thinking
- How do we ensure information literate students when entire groups of students never set foot in the library (disciplines)?
- Do the standards really do what we want them to do? Specific skills (searching the catalog) instead of big picture/conceptual things (evaluating information).
- Problems assessing the competencies.

After the end of round three, guests were invited to return to their home tables where they had begun in the afternoon. At this point, each guest had participated in three rounds of discussion with as many as twelve different guests. Having been exposed to a multitude of perspectives they returned to the home table to summarize their discussions and work on the next steps.

Each table was asked to come up with five bold steps that were condensed into the following two main points: 1) revise and promote the standards; and 2) collaborate with professional organizations, faculty, and industry to achieve this dual aim. Moreover, it was agreed that the revisions should include standards applicable to new media (currently absent from the present standards), and that the standards should be a living, breathing document (possibly a wiki, or some other easily modified website), that uses a language common among all academics, not just librarians. Lastly, the participants decided that the California instruction librarians as a group should band together and send a letter to the ACRL Instruction Section committee that is responsible for revising the standards.

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References

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