

# **Let's Try This Again: Redefining the Content of Information Literacy for a Post-Google World**

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## **Abstract**

In this session, three teaching librarians led a discussion of future approaches to information literacy instruction. This discussion considered the value of information skills and knowledge to evolving professions and whether librarians are prepared to teach these competencies. Participants took part in a group brainstorm/backward design process, in which they reflected on their "on the ground" experience to determine some core concepts in information literacy instruction. They ignored ACRL's Information Literacy Competency Standards for an hour and sought to articulate the key ideas that students struggle with.

## **Introduction**

Library instruction is perceived by some as a growth area in library services. Librarians, through both their training and "neutral" position with the academy, are uniquely positioned to teach users to successfully navigate complex information landscapes. While we have adroitly reshaped our roles to keep pace with a rapidly changing profession, pedagogy has often lagged behind. Looking toward the future, we need to both enliven our curriculum and ensure its relevance.

## **Description**

Our session began with a short presentation of the discussion points including brief comments on the changing nature of librarianship and of the information landscape for information seekers across professions. There was also a brief introduction to «backward design,» a curriculum planning framework that turns the teaching process around, beginning with the desired learning outcome. This was then followed by a short analysis of the ACRL Information Literacy Standards and how they might be reframed as "big ideas," the essential concepts that live at the core of a discipline. The discussion was then opened to participants who worked in groups at each table to define their instruction goals in the context of their respective curricula (one-shots or for-credit courses). Groups were instructed to list three to five high priority concepts they wanted students to understand upon leaving the course/university. After several minutes, the entire room, as a group, sorted the discrete learning goals into big ideas, or «umbrella concepts». This was followed by a discussion of a big idea that was successfully taught in an information literacy course and how it was planned with the backward design process.

## **Key points**

During our session, there was a lively discussion as librarians from a variety of institutions shared their personal and institutional approaches to information literacy. Librarian teaching duties range from one-shots to unit bearing courses to entire programs. Having participants share their experiences offered access to a diverse range of contexts, experiences and opinions about information literacy.

The purpose of our initial discussion was to share with fellow librarians a new strategy for information literacy planning. Regardless of one's teaching environment, backward design offers a useful approach to course planning which necessitates a reappraisal of current content. This process refocuses pedagogy on learning outcomes instead of time-honored teaching practices that we sometimes grow to rely on too heavily. Consequently, the backward design model offers a way to refresh our approach to information literacy and move beyond the ACRL Standards. These standards, while useful, can overwhelm librarians with their comprehensiveness and obscure the question of prioritizing instructional content.

Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, authors of the book, *Understanding by Design*, lay out a three step backward design process. The first step is to "identify desired results," followed by, "determine acceptable evidence," and finally, "plan learning experiences and instruction" (2005, p. 18). The teacher begins by establishing a specific and achievable learning outcome for the student, as part of the aim of this process is to get away from the idea of content "coverage." for its own sake (McTighe & Wiggins, 2005). Backward design emphasizes the articulation of learning goals that can be realistically assessed, leading to the second step of the design process: "determine acceptable evidence." Evidence of learning is framed by asking what the student must achieve from an assessment perspective. This requires thinking about how evidence of learning will be documented and validated (McTighe & Wiggins, 2005). The last step in the process is to design activities that the instructor will deploy to realize the goals articulated in the first two steps. Ultimately, the aim of this design framework is to make clear to the students what they are going to learn, how they will demonstrate that learning, and how classroom activities will facilitate their achievement of understanding. As librarians increasingly take on more instructor duties, it's important to reflect on pedagogy and the content of what we teach under the banner of «information literacy.» Please see Appendices 1 and 2 for a planning template and the three-step process.

Information literacy, as defined by ACRL, seeks to articulate a curriculum framework for a vast number of libraries with a diversity of local limitations, goals, and cultures. As we rethink the way we teach, it might be useful to reconceive the content, the «what» that we teach, around the “big ideas” of information science. Big ideas are the «umbrella concepts» at the core of a subject that act as “linchpins.” Functioning as a type of «conceptual Velcro», they help students piece together previously learned skills and content into a meaningful whole (McTighe & Wiggins, 2005, p. 67). Big ideas are sometimes counterintuitive, and are often the places where students stumble or get stuck. Big ideas may also be described as timeless, since they often persist over time. Moreover, they may be difficult to identify because they often go unrecognized by expert practitioners.

Thinking about where our students are getting stuck in the library and in their research should prompt us to consider what might comprise our discipline's big ideas. One of the big ideas discussed during the presentation was the concept that format is the result of a process. In an increasingly digital world where students may never interact with the physical format (e.g., a print journal article) it is more important than ever that students understand the processes that go into the creation of any given format. Understanding the processes (editorial vetting, peer review) equips students to assess the authority, quality, and credibility of the source. As we move ahead in this changing information landscape, we should continually examine where are students are struggling and use what we find to articulate the ideas that drive our pedagogy.

### **References and Suggested Readings:**

Wiggins, G. P., & McTighe, J. (1998). *Understanding by design*. Alexandria, Va: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Meyer, J., & Land, R. (2003). *Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: Linkages to ways of thinking and practising within the disciplines*. (ETL Project Occasional Report 4). Edingurgh: Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses Project.

Lucas, U., & Mladenovic, R. (2006). *Developing new 'world views': Threshold concepts in introductory accounting*. In J.H.F. Meyer & R. Land (Eds.), *Overcoming barriers to student understanding: Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge* (pp. 148-159). London: Routledge.

## Appendix 1

### Core Concepts Brainstorm Exercise

**Task:** What three things do you want your students to understand or be able to do after completing your curriculum?

To guide your process, consider the following:

- If your class or program has established learning objectives, would you include them on your list?
- What are some consistent stumbling blocks your students encounter?
- Are there specific exercises, lessons or approaches you've used that have struck a chord with students?
- What ideas or concepts do you think students need to understand in order to become experts?
- Which of these concepts are transferrable beyond the university?
- When you think about libraries and academic research 20 years from now, what concepts do you think will remain?

## Appendix 2

<b>Desired Results</b>	
<p><b>Established Goals:</b> What relevant goals (e.g. content standards, course or program objectives, learning outcomes) will this design address?</p>	
<p><b>ACRL Standard One, Performance Indicator 2: The information literate student identifies a variety of types and formats of potential sources for information.</b></p> <p><b>ACRL Standard Three, Performance Indicator 2: The information literate student articulates and applies initial criteria for evaluating both the information and its sources.</b></p>	
<p><b>Understandings:</b> What are the big ideas? What student stumbling blocks are predictable?</p>	<p><b>Essential Questions:</b> What provocative questions will foster inquiry, understanding, and transfer of learning?</p>
<p><b>Format is a process.</b></p> <p><b>Students tend to see all source found online as the same format - "online" or "website"</b></p> <p><b>Students don't understand how understanding what format is and why it's important will make them better able to critically evaluate and use information.</b></p>	<p><b>What is the difference between a journal article and a website?</b></p> <p><b>Which is more accurate, an online or a print source?</b></p>
<p><b>Students will understand...</b> What key knowledge and skills will students acquire as a results of this unit?</p> <p><b>Students will understand that format is an essential indicator of the authority and purpose of information.</b></p> <p><b>Students will understand that format is the result of a process and is not divided into print vs. online.</b></p> <p><b>Students will understand that formats are evolving.</b></p> <p><b>Students will be able to identify the variety of formats that can be accessed through a browser.</b></p> <p><b>Students will be able to select and use appropriate formats in context.</b></p>	<p><b>Students will be able to...</b> What should they eventually be able to do as a results of such knowledge and skills?</p>
<b>Assessment &amp; Learning</b>	
<p><b>Performance Tasks:</b> How will students demonstrate the desired understanding? How will students reflect upon and self-assess their learning?</p>	<p><b>Learning Activities:</b> What learning experiences and instruction will enable students to achieve the desired results?</p>
<p><b>Students will take a low-stakes "name that format" quiz wherein they try to identify a variety of web-based formats.</b></p> <p><b>As students complete research activities throughout the course, they will be asked to identify the formats of the sources they find, as well as the sources their peers find.</b></p> <p><b>Students will discuss (in writing) the future of books and newspapers.</b></p>	<p><b>Students will complete two online tutorials about formats, one introducing them to the concept of "format as a process" and the second introducing them to formats on the web.</b></p> <p><b>Students will read articles about the future of books and newspapers.</b></p>