Having been an instruction librarian for over 14 years, I see how library instruction can positively impact student research behavior. When students leave a library instruction session with a stack of printed articles in their hand, saying they found what they needed, I feel encouraged...to a certain extent. Students may have been successful at finding sources, at that specific time, for that specific research paper; however, seeing many of these same students needing help in the future, when faced with a more challenging topic or major research paper, led me to question how much students actually learn in instruction sessions and to reflect on how I can teach more effectively.

Research on student information-seeking behavior confirms my own anecdotal evidence that students experience difficulties with the research process. In a self-assessment completed by students in Rachel A. Milloy’s first-year writing classes, 57% claimed to be overwhelmed by conducting research (Milloy, p. 236). In a 2010 Project Information Literacy study, half of the undergraduate students surveyed reported “nagging uncertainties with concluding and assessing the quality of their own research efforts.” Over 80% reported having specific difficulties with getting started on research, including defining a topic, narrowing it down, and filtering through irrelevant results (Head & Eisenberg, p. 3). Undoubtedly, many students we see in our library instruction sessions are need of research assistance.

Several factors in an instruction session can impact student learning. Variations in student learning styles, readiness to learn, as well as limited time with students in the classroom, are known obstacles. Additionally, two issues specific to how and what I teach affect my own teaching effectiveness. The first concerns how I teach information literacy concepts (e.g., evaluating sources, distinguishing between scholarly and non-scholarly sources, etc). On many occasions, I presented information literacy concepts as if they existed in a vacuum, separate from other critical skills, such as writing. Because I did not provide sufficient context, I did not effectively show how to critically engage with sources. The second issue relates to what I focused on. By emphasizing the searching part of the research process, I reduced the goal of research to merely finding sources. As a result of teaching in these ways, I limited my impact on student learning and understanding of the research process.

Turning to the library studies literature to explore these two issues, I found an intriguing approach that calls for teaching information literacy within a rhetorical context. A September 7, 2012 posting on the blog Information Literacy, Rhetorically Speaking (http://infolitrhetorically.org) by Joel Burkholder cites Norgaard (2003), who argues for an information literacy shaped by writing, writing theory, writing instruction, and writing practice:

Much like process-oriented models of writing and writing instruction, information literacy can itself be conceived of as a recursive process that is one important dimension of the way we all make and negotiate
meaning. In this sense, information literacy is less a formal skill linked to textual features than an intellectual process driven by engaged inquiry. It is less an outcome or product than it is a recursive process, something to be drafted and revised-by students and by ourselves. Any literacy is an active and engaged literacy only in so far as it is practiced, and only as it is practiced. Work in rhetoric and composition can help inform that practice. (p. 127-128)

Situating information literacy in a rhetorical context would also make it more relevant to the college curriculum (p. 125).

The rhetoric-based model places less emphasis on the finding part of information literacy, and more on the overall research process, which Norgaard describes as a recursive process (p. 128). Head and Eisenberg (2010) recommend "reframing instruction sessions to emphasize the research process over the finding of sources" (p. 39). Barbara Fister (1993) goes a step further in connecting the acts of research and writing, and encourages librarians to teach research as a way to enter into conversations with writers: "Rather than describe the search process as a matter of finding information--which sounds like panning for solid nuggets of truth--librarians should describe it as a way of tapping into a scholarly communication network" (Recasting the Research Process section, para. 1).

I became more interested in teaching information literacy rhetorically and critically after reading the 2013 book The New Digital Scholar: Exploring and Enriching the Research and Writing Practices of NextGen Students. Like Norgaard, the authors, most of whom have a background in writing instruction, see writing and research as interconnected processes. This book was especially interesting because it considers the unique characteristics of NextGen students, or what the editors call "NextGen digital scholars." I would like to meet students where they are, in terms of their technological expertise and familiarity with the Web, in delivering instruction. For example, this semester I used the online tool Padlet for the first time with an International Studies honors thesis class. Students shared their feelings about doing research by writing or uploading images on a virtual "wall" that the entire class and I could see.

The idea of research as a process mirrors my vision of my proposed leave as an exploratory process. During my leave I would like to continue my research of teaching information literacy rhetorically, inquiry-based instruction, and research as a conversation teaching models, as well as NextGen student information-seeking behavior. With a better understanding of these teaching techniques and student research strategies, I hope to apply my new knowledge in creating practical lessons and learning activities for Rhetoric and Language classes; if I have time, I will design discipline-specific lessons for my liaison areas of Sociology, International Studies, and Asia Pacific Studies. My main goal is to find new ways to teach difficult parts of the research process that I've identified as content areas below. I selected these content areas based on research I've done and my own experience working with students. Secondarily, I would like to dedicate part of my leave to looking for engaging learning activities and tools for selected instruction "events," as defined by Robert Gagne
While I do not include all "events" in my instruction sessions, I try to incorporate them selectively, especially if I know a suitable activity will enhance learning. Over the years I have tried a variety of teaching methods in the classroom. Although I never labeled my instruction as "teaching information rhetorically," in effect, I do emphasize critical thinking. It is my hope during my professional development leave to further explore ways of engaging students in the classroom and more fully integrate inquiry-based approaches.

References


Goals:

- Research these teaching approaches and their theoretical underpinnings: information literacy through a rhetorical lens, research as a conversation, inquiry-based instruction, and critical thinking in information literacy.
- Find examples of successful integration of these approaches in classroom instruction.
- Learn more about the research behavior of NextGen digital students
- Apply the above teaching approaches to create lessons for the following content areas:
  - Getting started (e.g., presearch)
  - Selecting and narrowing a topic
  - Choosing appropriate keywords that yield relevant results
  - Finding credible sources and determining credibility, especially given the variety of digital writing genres, such as blogs, Twitter exchanges, online presentations, etc.
  - Selecting relevant sources (e.g., text analysis)
  - Avoiding plagiarism and patchwriting
- Search for existing learning activities for selected Gagne instruction events: icebreakers to gain students' attention, activities that "stimulate recall of prior learning," feedback methods, "learning guidance," and quick assessments.
- Consider developing a future project that investigates the research behavior or learning of USF students in instruction sessions.
- Share teaching approaches and learning activities with colleagues.

Timeline:

Weeks 1-3:

- Research and study the literature on the above teaching approaches and NextGen student research behavior.

Weeks 3-5:

- Apply teaching approaches to create lessons for selected information literacy content areas.
- Search for existing learning activities for selected Gagne instruction events.

Weeks 6-7:

- Add selected activities to library instruction resources wiki (http://libraryinstruction.wiki.usfca.edu) or create a new wiki/web page.
- Write leave report.
Value:

This professional development leave would foremost benefit the students I engage with. It would also be a tremendous benefit to me, as an instruction librarian. Time away from my normal duties would allow me the opportunity to explore new teaching methods and techniques, and to develop my toolkit of learning activities for classroom instruction. With these new techniques and a better understanding of student research behavior, I hope to become better informed about how to help students become confident and critical researchers. My instruction librarian colleagues may also benefit, as I plan to share research and specific teaching strategies I discover.

I fully expect to use the knowledge gained during my leave to support the Library and University. As a member of the Library Instruction Assessment Task Force, I hope to offer new insight into the task force's work of assessing student research papers, in partnership with the Rhetoric and Language Department. With the new WASC information literacy requirements on the horizon, increased collaboration with academic departments, especially Rhetoric and Language, will be critical. This new requirement is an opportunity to embed information literacy and critical thinking throughout the curriculum, and I look forward to participating in conversations supporting this effort.

Funding:

No funding is requested at this time.