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From BI to IL: The ACRL Institute for Information Literacy

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I am a faculty member at the Immersion Institute for Information Literacy. I spent five hot, sultry days in August 1999 in upstate New York near Lake Champlain observing this institute and then spent five lovely summer days in August 2000 teaching in the Institute at the University of Washington. Five librarians teach. About 100 librarians participate, either in Track One which concentrates on the teaching session, or Track Two, centering on managing a library instruction program. Both tracks focus on transforming bibliographic instruction into information literacy. Librarians came from all over North America, and a few came from well beyond our borders to learn about information literacy theory, assessment, leadership and management, learning theories, and performance and pedagogy. It's a wonderful, intense time where all we talk about is teaching—the philosophy of teaching as well as its theory and practice

At the very first reception in Seattle, one of the participants said to me: "I'm a librarian, not a teacher." I've thought about this comment ever since. It sums up nicely the dilemma apparent to our profession. Libraries have always been about order. Ever since classification systems were invented, order has prevailed. Order and rules. We knew where those books were placed, we constructed a controlled vocabulary which made sense to us, we created cards for locating the books, we insisted upon silence. We were the guardians of our collections. The industrial age and its ideology focused upon efficiency of operations, e.g., the assembly line. This made sense to libraries. Throw in a real passion for service and bringing culture to the masses, and you have a sense of who librarians were.

Teaching was not particularly part of our makeup. Today, in this postmodern era where technology and speed rule, libraries are changing in profound ways. Many librarians now teach or train. Often how we teach becomes confused because we only teach in short sessions, sometimes with content related to the course, but more often in a way that seems contrived and must focus on a tool. The tools of bibliography were easier to grasp 25

years ago. Collections were inside a building; students used what the institution owned. Now, students gravitate toward the Web on computers, and are often more at ease with the technology than librarians.

Indeed as Mark Pesce points out in *The Playful World*, traditional-aged students have grown up with computers. This is not a technology for them. It continues to be for most librarians. And, we librarians cannot easily control the computers or the Web or the students. We are accustomed to providing controlled access to information. We cannot do that anymore. Students below the age of 25 walk into a library or a lab, or sit at home in front of their computers and tap into a search engine that will probably not access anything inside a library. How students use and manage information today differs a great deal from how we use and manage it in libraries.

What the ACRL Institute provides is a sense that information literacy, or critical thinking as I prefer to call it, is a way to connect students with information through a process that is not about the RIGHT way to do research. Rather it teaches students to think about—to create meaning—from the information they find. Students in high school and college today perceive these computers as mere tools. They do not need lengthy instructions; they do not want to know the "perfect" search strategy. They want information. Information literacy, when done well, points to the center of how people use and create meaning from information. As Barbara MacAdam says in a recent article: "Bombarded with constant graphic and information stimuli, they expect the unexpected. The predictable, systematic and orderly appears unrealistic and unnatural to them" (MacAdam, 2000). We librarians want the predictable universe, the right way to do the research process.

Moreover, teaching is messy and in the moment. There are few straight lines. The conversation, which takes place in an engaged classroom, can veer off into any number of directions. As we construct more interactive computer labs for library instruction, we need to think about how


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this will change how we teach. Teaching content in short spurts mixed with active learning seems to make more sense in such a setting. Simplifying our content also makes sense. Why do students need to know all that we know about how to make a catalog work well? Most students cannot even tell the difference between an index and a catalog. As we progress in teaching evaluative skills as well as navigational skills, we must think clearly about how to ask the questions so that students can build upon the experiential knowledge they already possess. If they have nothing to build upon, the newly heard information will disappear with their next latte.

Information literacy and this Institute focus upon breaking the process of teaching down into manageable pieces for librarians and their students. How do you design a class session so that students will learn one concept? What is the one concept that you want to get across in this session? Why is this important? How do you measure their learning? How do you build class by class into an information literacy program which works for the campus? The moral of the institute is "think large, but start small" and realize that this all will take time. And remember that one librarian cannot do this by herself.

The only concern I have with the Institute is that we librarians are talking with librarians. We need to be talking beyond ourselves. Much like the writing across the curriculum movement which had to convince faculty outside of the English Department that everyone on a college campus teaches writing and hence thinking, so we librarians need to focus more on working with faculty. How do they use information? How do they expect their students to use information? I am convinced that if we only talk amongst ourselves and teach within the library, then information literacy will not take. The faculty ultimately teach the content. We librarians fill in around the edges. I think it would be wonderful if each librarian participating in this Institute would be required to bring along a faculty member, or better yet, a Dean.

And when we do teach, we need to think less about the right way to do research, the right databases. We need to think more about who we're teaching. Ask them what they think they need to know for this course. Ask them why they think they're here for this 50-minute library class. Listen to their responses. Be ready to shift gears if necessary. Flexibility and the ability to listen and then respond are the hallmarks of good teaching. Students crave meaning for their lives. I am convinced of that. Beneath the baseball caps lurk human beings who

are figuring out their lives and are on their way to adulthood. We librarians need to focus upon the people we teach and remember that the far more fascinating questions to ask are the why questions, rather than the how questions. Why is this piece of information credible? Who says? Why is it important that we think about information? If *we* think that this is important, then the students will catch our sense of passion. I think that teaching is a succession of minor epiphanies. That's the essence of information literacy. It cannot be accomplished in one session or in one year of education. Build upon those epiphanies! 

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