



What's a Phone Book? Teaching Information Literacy Skills to Digital Native Journalism Students

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Abstract

An innovative program developed by Stonehill College's MacPháidín Library and its Center for Teaching and Learning led to the creation of a semester-long partnership between a communication professor and a reference and instruction librarian. The goal of that partnership was to provide information literacy instruction to narrative writing students to help them meet the Association of College and Research Libraries Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, hone their online research and evaluation skills, and craft richer narrative pieces. Anecdotal evidence and student responses indicate the information literacy instruction delivered and the library aids created for this class not only helped students track primary resources and historical material for their assignments but also introduced them to search strategies and online resources with which they weren't previously familiar.

Introduction

We became co-workers in 1990, when we were young reporters toiling away in the newsroom of a midsized Massachusetts daily. The Internet was in its infancy, and we hadn't yet started using e-mail. If we needed a phone number, we used the phone book. When we wanted to access information online, we waited our turn to use the one newsroom computer that had a dial-up connection.

Twenty years later, we're colleagues once again, this time at a Massachusetts liberal arts college, working as an assistant professor in a communication department and a reference and instruction librarian, respectively. From our present perspectives as journalism and information literacy teachers, we believe that today's students have it a lot tougher than we did 20 years ago. They are faced with an information glut that overwhelms them with facts, figures, and opinions. That overabundance is hindering their ability to

find primary sources, eroding their skills in evaluating credible online content, and threatening their ability to write well-sourced, accurate, and balanced articles.

To help manage this information overload, we created a semester-long partnership incorporating information literacy instruction into a nonfiction narrative journalism class. We offered course-specific library instruction to the students and created an online guide (MacPháidín, 2011) to provide easy access to research tools that could supplement their own interviews. We used eLearn — the college's course management system — to offer research assistance. We also published the end-result narrative pieces on a class blog (Stonehill Narrative, 2011). Our goal was to encourage students to weave the results of their online research with their interviews and observations. The end result, we hoped, would be meatier and better-developed narrative pieces.

While doing this, we strived to meet our digi-

tal native students where they live, in the “Land of Google and Wikipedia.” Their preferred search tools are of value – as important resources during the initial information search and as stepping-off points to more sophisticated searches in subject-specific databases and repositories. We believe the initial use of these “comfortable” tools will help students build their research and evaluation skills over time and to a point where they will eventually, perhaps, meet the Information Literacy Competency Standards developed by the Association of College and Research Libraries (2000). Those standards, and their associated performance indicators and outcomes, detail increasingly complex information search processes that call for individuals to possess strong critical thinking and evaluation skills.

Why Should Journalism Students Meet the ACRL Standards?

Getting factual, unbiased information is central in journalism and so is knowing where to find it and how to assess its reliability and value. Those skills are precisely what librarians are trying to impart in their information literacy teaching.

Information Literacy is defined as a set of abilities requiring individuals to “recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (American, 1989). ACRL lists six Information Literacy Competency Standards:

- The information-literate student determines the extent of information needed.
- The information-literate student accesses the needed information effectively and efficiently.
- The information-literate student evaluates information and sources critically.
- The information-literate student incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base.
- The information-literate student uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose.
- The information-literate student understands the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally. (Association, 2000, pp. 2-3)

How are students doing in meeting the Information Literacy Standards? Not so well, according to their instructors. In a 2002-2003 survey of the faculty of programs fully accredited by the Accrediting

Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, only 3.8% of undergraduate faculty respondents believed all their students met the ACRL criteria, 42.2% stated they believed some of their students met the ACRL standards, and 23.4% reported that few of their students could be considered information literate based on the ACRL benchmarks. In that same survey, only 1.7% of undergraduate faculty said they believed the research skills of their students were excellent, while 33.8% said their students’ research skills were poor (Singh, 2005, p. 302).

More than a decade ago, Bolding (1996, p. 15) wrote that educating journalism students about traditional library resources and emerging information technologies is both practical and beneficial because well-researched stories can help prevent inaccuracies and avoid superficiality and overdependence on government sources of information, while improving the overall quality of the piece. In Singh’s ACEJMC study, more than half of undergraduate journalism faculty reported their students’ research process improved after receiving library instruction (Singh, 2005, p. 300). Bornstein (2003, p. 208) described such instruction as a librarian’s “fundamental social responsibility” to help educate “information competent” journalism students. MacMillan’s (2009, p. 139) longitudinal study of journalism students showed that students’ information literacy skills develop and strengthen over time. Her findings argue in favor of integrating increasingly sophisticated information literacy instruction within disciplines.

We believed we could help our students achieve information literacy in the changing information environment. An innovative partnership between the college’s library and its Center for Teaching and Learning provided the means to make it happen.

The Faculty Librarian Partnership Program

Stonehill College’s (2012) Faculty Librarian Partnership Program gave us access to the resources (particularly time to plan) needed to establish our professor/librarian partnership. Established in spring 2011 and administered through the College’s Center for Teaching and Learning and Stonehill College’s MacPháidín Library, the program offers faculty a stipend for launching a semester-long collaborative relationship with a librarian/partner. The program partners can imagine that combined work in any way they see fit. Components of the relationship can include ongoing library instruction specific to the class, the

creation of specific tools to provide students access to resources relevant to the class, and the participation of the librarian in the class course management space.

Boyle received a grant to participate in the FLPP program with her narrative writing class. Students in the course examined a wide range of narrative non-fiction pieces, ranging from the classic “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold” by Gay Talese and *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote to contemporary ones such as *Sam: The Boy Behind the Mask* by Tom Hallman, Jr., and *The Good Soldiers* by David Finkel. The students also wrote pieces drawn from personal interviews and observations, as well as from library research. The eight students in the course previously had taken the basic news writing and reporting course, a prerequisite for the nonfiction narrative writing class. The course provided instruction in how to research, how to conduct interviews, and how to write a news or feature story. However, it was clear from earlier experiences in the basic news writing course that students still did not know how to search for information properly to give their stories more depth and credibility—whether it was education data, crime statistics, government information, or something more basic. For example, one student in an earlier course did not know where to find the phone number for a business—or where to find a phone book. Many students who relied on online news or reports stopped their research there.

Others did not know how to conduct adequate Google searches to find information. Finding appropriate details and information for stories became a serious issue for some students. In narrative writing, details are what make a story sing and finding the right information to add was key. What we tried to do in this initiative was push students to delve below the surface to create richer narratives.

Coming Up With Our Plan

The FLPP program began with a two-day session during which faculty and their librarian partners discussed information literacy teaching, the specific information literacy deficiencies students had exhibited, and ways to address those problems through library instruction. The librarians demonstrated products that could be created to assist faculty and students. Those tools included online library guides, wikis, blogs, social bookmarking collections, and other resources aimed at improving instruction and access to information. Librarians also demonstrated using sub-

scription databases and open source resources.

At the end of those two days, components of the narrative writing partnership were identified and responsibilities were divvied up.

McPherson created an online library guide to present students with class-specific information. That tool gave access to sites providing information and statistics on federal and state government agencies, criminal justice issues, health, and education. Additionally, the guide provided students with links to some assignment-specific resources. For example, students were asked to write a narrative piece after interviewing someone about his or her recollections of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The course guide provided students with links to the Historical New York Times, the National Archives and Records Administration, and the American Presidency Project. Students were able to access the library guide directly from the library’s home page. We hoped by exposing students early on to the “right” types of sites, they would then seek out similar sites on their own for future stories. The lists of information sites could be viewed as modern-day electronic Rolodexes shared by the group, to be expanded and placed in the future as a “favorite” in personal search engine browsers. Additionally, we were confident the instruction students were given in advanced searching in Google would help them retrieve information from sites not listed in the guide.

Boyle created a class page in the college’s course management system, making the librarian a participant in the class. The librarian was able to receive all communications sent to students, keep apprised of assignments and due dates, and message students with suggestions or offers of assistance. Additionally, a link to the online library guide was provided on that page.

During the third week of class, McPherson delivered a bibliographic instruction lesson developed for the Narrative Writing students. That instruction included what we termed “Google 101,” a lesson in how to use the advanced search (Google, 2012) function in Google to retrieve more relevant search results. Additionally, students were shown how to navigate the course guide created for the class, how to use the library’s subscription databases relevant to their coursework, and how to access library resources from off campus.

Boyle created a blog on which students in the Narrative Writing class posted some of their work.

What the Students' Work Showed

The students in the narrative course wrote nine pieces, including three "traditional" academic papers on stories and books read for class. The bulk of the other pieces were independently researched nonfiction narratives, including one on the day of President Kennedy's assassination. The students interviewed a wide range of people for their stories and were required to conduct additional online or library research for the articles.

For the JFK piece, students were allowed to interview family members—the only piece for which relative interviews were allowed—and searched archival video, photos, and historic records about the assassination and the day. Some of the information included newspaper headlines, community populations, photos of buildings, and newscast footage. We developed a list of online sources for the students to use as a starting point to steer them to legitimate sources and get them in the habit of using these types of sources for future stories or coursework.

What we discovered—at least anecdotally with this class of eight—was students, when directed to a legitimate site, will continue to look in similar areas for information. For example, the Kennedy assassination pieces included information gathered from historical documents (such as those available at the National Archives and Records Administration website), news bulletins available on YouTube, details of the front pages after the shooting (accessible from the MacPháidín Library's newspaper databases), as well as census and government data (available in print and electronically). The same assignment given to an earlier class of 15—before the library partnership was developed—did not have any of those details and the students seemed to struggle to find supporting information and to understand why it was needed in a narrative piece.

For their final project, students picked their own topic but still used either the course guide links or broadened their search to locate details for their pieces. Those details included city and town populations, wildlife information, and education statistics. Some of that material was available from sites linked to our class page.

The students discovered they could use Google and Wikipedia as signposts to direct them to the information but not use the two exclusively as final destinations. Integrating Google and Wikipedia into courses is crucial, as research indicates that college

students turn to these resources to help complete their coursework. In a nationwide survey of Internet users, 52% with some college education report consulting Wikipedia (Pew, 2011).

Did Our Partnership Work?

Our anecdotal evidence suggests our partnership was successful. The students' narrative pieces, compared with an earlier class, were vastly improved. There was more "meat" in the articles and students appeared to develop a keen understanding about what is "good" information and where is the best place to find it. They learned how to find more information online and where historic data can be located. They appeared to be more confident in their search abilities.

This became clear through one of their last assignments, in which they were charged with writing a short, historic narrative about a New Hampshire murder based on two historic documents distributed in class. They found the information online; no personal interviews were allowed. The students searched online in class for school records, yearbooks, and photographs. They also searched for class photos, information about buildings, and town population statistics at the time of the slaying, as well as newspaper stories about the murder and subsequent court case. Students demonstrated they were developing the skills to find historic records needed to write stories.

As part of the class, the students posted two of their narratives – the JFK assignment and their final project – on a class blog, hosted by Blogger.

The students seemed to value the resources that were created for their use. Between the time they received their library instruction in September and the time the students handed in their final assignment in December, the library guide was accessed a total of 180 times (Table 1). The bulk of those visits came in September (78) and October (70). Classes ended in early December, when students were rewriting and making final edits on stories, and guide usage reflected that, with just two clicks onto the main page and none to the links.

From the library guide, students clicked into 14 of the 41 source links. The most popular links were to the sites of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library (used 11 times); the National Archives (used 10 times); *Primarily History* (McPherson, 2011-2012), a blog written by McPherson providing access to digitalized collections of primary source materials (used 7 times); the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*

(used 6 times); and the U.S. Census Bureau (used 6 times). The links were used a total of 56 times (Table 2). Additionally, we linked to the catalog records for two print resources in our collection – the Warren Commission Report and the paper copy of the Statistical Abstract. Each of those links received one hit.

It appears, based on the usage, students found the

guide helpful in gathering information for specific assignments, such as their narrative pieces on the JFK assassination. For that assignment, students were encouraged to include details, such as the weather and census data. The JFK Library site clearly was a major source of information for the students, but they searched other links and Web page topics. At the time

Table 1
Usage Statistics of JO 309A – Narrative Journalism Class Guide

Topic of Web Page Used in Library Guide	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Criminal Justice	6	3	1	–	10
Education	4	3	5	–	12
Federal Government	8	9	6	–	23
Health & Medicine	4	2	1	–	7
Image Resources	7	7	3	–	17
JFK	12	15	2	–	29
JO 309A Home	29	22	10	2	63
State Government	8	9	2	–	19
Totals	78	70	30	2	180

Table 2
Link Usage From Library Guide

Links Used of 41 Source Links in Library Guide	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Commonwealth Communities	1	3	–	–	4
GPO Access: U.S. Government Printing Office	–	1	–	–	1
John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum	3	8	–	–	11
*National Archives and Records Administration	–	4	–	–	4
*National Archives and Records Administration	2	4	–	–	6
National Center for Education Statistics	–	–	1	–	1
Norman Mailer	–	1	–	–	1
Primarily History	2	5	–	–	7
School District Profiles	1	1	–	–	2
State Data Center	–	3	–	–	3
Statistical Abstract of the United States	2	3	1	–	6
The American Presidency Project	–	2	–	–	2
Thomas	1	–	–	–	1
U.S. Census Bureau	2	1	3	–	6
usa.gov	1	–	–	–	1
Totals	15	36	5	–	56

*National Archives and Records Administration was linked from two library guide pages for 10 total hits

the assignment was coming due, students linked into Web page topics on the library guide, such as the Federal Government link (used eight times in September; nine in October). However, the students eventually looked beyond the library guide to get additional details, as evident in their stories. A number of students searched YouTube for news broadcasts and included dialogue from those broadcasts in their pieces.

As part of a larger assessment of the Faculty Librarian Partnership Program, students were required to complete a forced-choice survey.

The majority responded they either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the following statements:

- I found the library instruction session helpful. (8 agreed)
- The library guide created for this class helped me locate primary research to strengthen my narratives. (2 strongly agreed and 6 agreed)
- The library guide for this class helped me locate historical accounts/statistics to strengthen my narrative. (4 strongly agreed, 3 agreed, and 1 was neutral)

On two statements, students had a lukewarm response:

- The library instruction sessions taught me strategies for using Google that I was not previously aware of. (4 agreed, 2 were neutral, and 2 disagreed.)
- I used the library guide throughout the semester. (3 agreed, 4 were neutral, and 1 disagreed.)

The Future of Our Collaboration

Our partnership has produced positive results in the form of richer and better sourced stories. Students found the resources we created for them to be helpful, and usage statistics indicate that students accessed the library guide frequently.

But the responses and statistics also indicate we could do things better. The library instruction was loaded into the front end of the course, and, with the exception of occasional e-mails from McPherson to the students in which she offered assistance with assignments, contact was fairly limited. The frequency with which students accessed the study guide also dropped off as the semester progressed. This decline might be a result of the nature of the course assignments or, perhaps, students were finding the information on their own. But it also made us think that we might want to add additional content to the course guide throughout the semester to keep it fresh. In-

forming the students of those changes would focus ongoing attention on the class guide. Also, only one of the eight students went to the library, seeking a librarian’s help. We would like to create more opportunities for students to discuss their research needs with a librarian one-on-one, both inside and outside the classroom. An expanded guide might also be more helpful to students in the basic news writing and advanced news writing courses, in which students need to find a wide range of information quickly for more stories. We hope to incorporate these changes next semester when we continue our partnership and incorporate information literacy learning into the advanced news writing class.

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