Finding a Public Voice: Using Barbara Fister as a Case Study

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Clearing Up Mixed Messages in Library Instruction

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Introduction

Librarianship has long been interested in how to formulate messages that “stick,” for populations it serves. Recent ALA President, Camila Alire, focused her term on helping librarians, at all levels, develop messages that help them become better advocates for their libraries. Marketing practices have become central themes in library literature, and in discussions about the skills that new librarians should possess. Learning to package essential information, coherently is important in nearly all areas of our profession, and academic library instruction is no exception. In fact, some discussions integral to determining best practices rely heavily on how well librarians articulate messages about what we do, the realities of the current information environment, and how students learn.

The ACRL “Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators” stress the role of communication and clarity. For example, an instruction librarian must effectively communicate with various faculty and administration to integrate information literacy (IL) standards.¹ Com-
munication is again emphasized in standard 9.4, emphasizing the specific importance of using appropriate terminology and "avoiding excessive jargon" for various student levels. These are only a few of many proficiencies that focus on the teaching librarians' role in communicating with students, instructors, coordinators and others. Laura Leavitt's discussion of skill sets required for instruction librarians in the 21st century reiterates this idea, citing "applied skills of critical thinking, collaboration, communication and creativity" as essential.

Considering the continued emphasis on librarians' responsibility to clearly communicate messages, it seems that discussions about how those messages are perceived are warranted. This chapter takes a broad look at some of the overarching mixed messages librarians send to three groups: non-librarian teaching faculty, students, and amongst ourselves. We focus particularly on those messages that affect student learning.

Barbara Fister has addressed a number of these themes relating to the messages librarians are sending, and, more broadly, about instructional challenges related to communication issues. For this reason, we draw heavily upon relevant conversations in her writings. Fister and others recognize the importance of developing clarity and cohesion in our teaching. The complexities of the information landscape and the learning process, as well as the challenges to finding unity in the profession's instructional goals contribute to the "mixed" nature of our messages. Our messages are constantly in flux as evolving technology changes the way we teach, use and organize information. As we continue to evaluate and improve our messages, we will get closer to reaching our goals and strengthen our ability to facilitate real learning.

**Mixed Messages with Instructors**

As instruction librarians at Utah State University (USU), one of our most important responsibilities is to build collaborations with faculty that allow us to embed library instruction into the curriculum. Like so many teaching librarians, we are eager to gain entrance in the classroom, and if we are lucky, to have opportunities to shape assignments so that they meaningfully address IL.

Working with non-librarian faculty is rewarding, and challenging. Much has been published in library literature about these relationships, including issues of tenure and faculty status amongst librarians; institutional support for libraries and teaching librarians; and the feminization of the library profession and its effect on perceptions of librarians. All of these issues impact the collaborations we build with faculty at our institutions.

However, other factors can impede these collaborations, including mixed messages given and received by teaching librarians and partnering faculty. One area of confusion can stem from the research assignments faculty create for their students. Occasionally librarians are given the opportunity of collaborating on the creation of the research assignment, but more often than not, the librarian collaborates with an instructor on an already prepared assignment. Consequently, the most important learning goal for the teaching librarian can get lost in the specifics of an assignment. Fister encourages librarians to think more broadly about how to tie our instruction to an entire course, beyond linking it directly to an assignment. She writes, "If you want to engage students in seeking and using information, rather than tie it to a paper, you might have students do research on the fly in ways that contribute to the course. The more impromptu and driven by curiosity these research tasks are, the more it will convey that inquiry is a normal part of everyday life."

Fister emphasizes how library instruction can be integrated into a course, or even a major, reducing the resistance that students may have to library time as "busy work," and linking library work to their course and to lifelong learning. These goals go beyond simply showing tools, and providing research tips. Head and Eisenberg also allude to some of the messages instructors send regarding research through their handouts. According to their study, nearly all of the handouts collected emphasized the particulars of the assignment (page length, number of sources, etc), but neglected
to inform students how to formulate a research question or strategy. These types of handouts can send a misleading message about the most important aspects of research papers. Librarians can unwittingly support the same messages, focusing on less important matters such as mechanics and structure, rather than critical thinking and usage aspects of research.

Additionally, librarians are responsible for sending unclear messages as they market their services to instructors. When librarians approach (or are approached by) instructors for course-integrated library instruction, they often invite the instructor to bring their class to the library. This, in itself, can be a mixed message: library research and learning only happen in the library. Instructors often ask librarians to do the rote tasks they recognize that librarians do: demonstrate databases, show the library catalog, discuss the rules of the library, etc. Many librarians fail to take advantage of the opportunity to convey a larger message about IL, or about a librarian's abilities to facilitate learning activities that focus more on critical thinking, usage and evaluation throughout the research process. As Davidson, McMillen, and Maughan indicate, librarians need to work on better articulating strategies for communicating our IL goals, such as the "ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards" to faculty: "Librarians need to be able to negotiate with faculty about the IL goals for any given assignment. Then they must be able to help tailor the assignment to better support the mutually agreed upon outcomes." By increasing the awareness of IL goals on campus, we will be better positioned to advocate our goals/learning objectives more widely among the faculty we work with.

Our Response
At USU, our response has been to create instruction maps that identify classes whose curriculums best align themselves with teaching IL; we look for departmental or course learning goals that complement our IL goals. Once the most appropriate courses have been identified, librarians can work with instructors to integrate library instruction at the assignment level. This leads to fewer mixed messages amongst instructors and librarians: librarians have a clear understanding of the instructor's goals for assignments, and for the course. And this clarity provides the librarian with opportunities to articulate and integrate lesson plans that lead to real learning in the areas students need most.

We have also found it helpful to join instructors in their classroom the day the assignment is introduced. This enables us to be even more aware of the messages instructors are sending students, and how we, as librarians, can work within the assignment structure to help students succeed. Also, if we are more familiar with the assignment and the teacher's learning goals, we are more able to integrate instruction that focuses on larger goals instead of solely focusing on the particulars of an assignment (i.e. finding five scholarly articles on a topic versus learning real-life principles of credibility and researched support). Finally, we try to limit the odds for students to feel they are receiving conflicting messages from the library and their instructor.

In order to accommodate library sessions that address learning goals relating to evaluation and usage, we started moving basic skill instruction to online forums, creating videos and tutorials that can be embedded in library guides or into a learning management system. We recognize that many students still need to know basic pieces of information, such as "where is the full text of this article?", "what is a database?" and "how do I search the library catalog?" to name a few of many introductory questions. However, considering the preciousness of in-person library instruction, moving much of the demonstration information to video is a viable way to free up class time. Jeremy Donald suggests a similar model that enables librarians to promote authentic student learning by spending more valuable in-class time on higher-level concepts, such as critical thinking. Shifting from the more traditional lecture-based models to concept-based teaching allows us to help students understand IL in more demanding and practical contexts.

Mixed Messages with Students
Message reception is particularly complicated among students, mostly because they come from such varied backgrounds and have different expertise levels. Clearly communicating with students can also be difficult
because we send countless messages to students about our roles as librarians; the research process; and the “right” way to do a range of research-related tasks.

Leading students through the nuances of research is laden with landmines. Some students understand what the message “be selective with Google” means; others will interpret that as meaning “Google is bad.” These sorts of didactic messages, whether intentionally or unintentionally sent, are misleading, and can lead to a lot of false assumptions. Because Google links directly to many library collections, making generalizations, without allowing for critical thinking regarding use and purpose, can be confusing for students. We are inadvertently sending students mixed messages by making broad statements about the search tools they have come to rely on. Fister agrees that we are taking it too easy on students by sending these types of superficial messages: “we are not really teaching students to think, we are teaching them to judge books by their covers.” As librarians, we tend to make blanket statements about the dangers of using Wikipedia and Google, but we often fail to discuss today’s information landscape in practical, honest ways.

Librarians also send mixed messages to students each time we instruct them on finding information for a research paper. Many of us fail to communicate the larger purpose of a research paper in an undergraduate career, and lose opportunities to engage students in conversations about where information comes from, and why it matters. Failing to communicate the purpose of an assignment or lesson can often cause students to feel disinterested. Communicating this is not the only issue—the debate continues over the intended purpose of these assignments. Fister enters this debate, speculating whether it is more important to teach students about tools of the discipline, or help them form research questions and building evidence-based arguments. These varied purposes, while not antithetical, can be confusing to students, especially if librarians and instructors are not united in their answer.

Mixed messages are amplified by students’ perceptions regarding their own research skills. Students come to the classroom with preconceived notions about how research works—because it has worked for them in the past—and many feel they already possess the skills they need to conduct research successfully. Becker points out “computer literacy does not naturally equate to information literacy.” While it is important to recognize the technological and information seeking skills many students possess, these same skills can be less relevant in the context of library materials. And, while many students use Google frequently, the process is often hindered by the same barriers they encounter in library databases: a lack of understanding of how search engines work, and a lack of evaluation.

There are other contradictions in students’ experiences with “successful” research, and many face difficulties when they switch from using old methods—such as Google—to library resources, including databases that produce vastly different results and require new techniques. Librarians’ inability to make the connection between the landscape students recognize and the library information landscape can cause students to negatively perceive library information as unattainable or difficult to find. Interpreting and navigating vast library resources can be daunting prospect for a student researcher, especially since many of our databases are poorly designed. According to Alan Jacobs, “...there’s one vital issue [librarians are] neglecting: research databases have the worst user interfaces in the whole world.” Librarians may assure students that library databases will produce better results, but when this does not occur, either because of search strategies or simply because databases do not contain the desired information, students are less willing to listen to other messages from librarians, including those that address the nuances and complications of using library databases.

The language students, instructors, and librarians employ when discussing research is also implicated in mixed messages. Holliday and Rogers discuss the importance of using language that emphasizes learning from information, rather than finding sources. “Finding sources” is often the service that
librarians are associated with; this is a message sent by instructors, librarians and students. They write, "we are now highly conscious of the limiting nature of 'finding sources' and the need to shift our discourse and activities towards 'learning more about'". The shift in terminology is evidence of a shift in pedagogy. Research is not about simply finding a pile of information—plenty of students have proven they can do this easily. It is more difficult, and integral to the research process, to learn how to "learn more about" something, which follows naturally from reading and synthesizing information, rather than just collecting it.

Our Response
During our instruction sessions, we try to first establish that we recognize the information landscape students come from. Questions like, "Where do you start when you do not know anything?", usually leads to important conversations about how and when to use Google and Wikipedia. Students still expect to be given checklist type messages like "do not use Wikipedia", so beginning a session by acknowledging that there are legitimate uses for the resources they are comfortable with is a good way to get students thinking about usage and purpose, and to validate what students' knowledge and experience.

Asking students for their definition of "research" is another good segue into the conversation about a research paper's purpose. This can lead to discussions about where to find information, and why evaluation of sources matters. USU librarians have incorporated active learning strategies to help students recognize the role of inquiry in research. We have even experimented with having students investigate academic or professional discourse communities to expose them to the ways different disciplines communicate information.

We also encourage students to spend the library instruction session with one goal: to find one resource that can inform their understanding of their topic. Students usually welcome the opportunity to have free printing in our instruction rooms, but printing off twelve articles that may or may not be useful to them does not make their research process easier. Fister writes, "for librarians, the implications are rather more stark. We tend to think more is always better, that helping students do research means exposing them to a huge banquet of options." Instead, we encourage students to be discerning with their time and their research by encouraging them to find one good thing that interests them and furthers their understanding of the topic, students have a workable goal for that library session. Their research becomes more deliberate. The objective is to allow for actual reading and synthesis of information to take place, which often becomes clouded by emphasis on finding and searching.

Once students have begun to read relevant research that informs their topic, we spend the consecutive instruction session encouraging them to use that information to find more related information. It is a simple notion, but one that is a foreign idea to students who are used to simply clicking from a list of Google results, or even results from a scholarly database. Focusing on how resources "converse" with other resources emphasizes scholarly discourse, rather than the source itself. It also takes the emphasis off the database. It does not pit Google against library databases; it simply encourages students to connect information together, wherever it exists. This leads to a better understanding of a topic, and to a stronger likelihood that students will develop and use their own voice to enter a conversation, rather than simply reiterating what they found in their sources.

Although we haven't addressed all the mixed messages we send to students, by constantly assessing our classroom efforts we can continue to respond to these problems with practical solutions.

Mixed Messages among Librarians
As librarians, our primary goal is to help students become critical thinkers, and ultimately lifelong learners. But as we traverse the changing information landscape, this can feel like a daunting task, especially when the profession sends conflicting messages about what we are trying to achieve. The literature is ripe with opinions on how to best spend the time
we get with students, especially when that time is allocated in 50-minute segments once or twice a semester. Because we have so much material to cover, many of us resort to “canned database lectures” rather than designing lesson plans tailored to the class’s learning objectives. Yet teaching librarians must rethink and reevaluate our educational mission so we can help students understand research in more challenging and practical contexts.

Deciding which IL skills to emphasize can be difficult when planning a library instruction session. There is an ongoing debate about which learning goals should be included typical library instruction session, and about who should teach specific objectives. Some believe the librarian should teach basic research skills to students, and disciplinary tools/concepts for upper-divisional classes should be taught by faculty. Others believe we are doing a disservice to the profession by focusing so heavily on generic IL skills, and insist we must push for a more “comprehensive view of information literacy in higher education.”

It is also challenging for librarians to strike the right balance of how much information to provide during library instruction sessions and research consultations. Our instinct is to turn students into what Fister calls “mini-librarians,” instead of equipping them with higher-level critical thinking skills. She writes, “there is no reason that we have to teach navigating the library, evaluation of sources, close reading, organizing ideas in written form, citation rules, and how and whether to summarize, paraphrase, or quote directly from sources all in a single, high-stakes assignment.” Attempting to cram all of those goals into one, two, or even three sessions is difficult and often deteriorates into quick “show and tell” methods, and can create mixed messages. Many library instructors fail to rely on learning activities that teach difficult concepts like synthesis and evaluation for usage, perhaps because these lesson plans take more time and skill. It can be challenging to veer from traditional formats like demonstrating and lecturing to promote authentic student learning, especially since most librarians lack formal teaching backgrounds.

Librarians also generate mixed messages about how to define our information literacy goals. In this way, complete reliance on the ACRL Standards to measure how effectively we are teaching can be problematic. Although the standards provide an important benchmark to ensure librarians teach the same concepts, they tend to emphasize discrete skills. It can be unrealistic to design our teaching around these goals, particularly if we want to broaden the scope of IL in the academy. And simply relying on these standards to communicate our messages about what IL is, and what role it should play in our classrooms and on our campuses, is not sufficient.

The lack of unity in the profession about how to define, teach, and explain information literacy directly affects our ability to leverage crucial support from faculty and administration. To ensure that IL instruction is woven throughout the curriculum, we need to work on conveying the importance of IL within our academic communities. However, many librarians have not developed strong negotiating strategies to communicate IL’s relevance and importance, sometimes because we are uncertain about IL best practices. This means faculty and administration are not familiar with the learning objectives, assessment strategies, and pedagogies we believe should be included in most IL courses. As we bring more clarity and cohesion to the messages our profession transmits, gaining buy-in for IL programs and reforms from our institutions will become easier.

Our Response
At USU, we have a highly course-integrated IL program and strong relationships with many of our departments. We have largely stopped doing long demonstrations, and instead incorporate active learning techniques into each session, which stress critical thinking skills. We are able to do this by cultivating relationships with each faculty member we work with, and making the time to have conversations about their learning goals for each session, while also articulating our own objectives. We have also embedded ourselves programmatically wherever possible. For example, in the writing department, we collaborate on the first-year composition curriculum. The integration of a librarian into every section of first -and second-
year composition classes is heavily supported by the Director of the Writing Program. When IL strategies need to be revised or clarified (based on formal and informal assessments), sharing our data and observations with the director helps us garner support from the writing instructors we work with. Having his buy-in first, and having him share our goals, allows us to present a more cohesive message to writing instructors, and allows greater potential for real change. Open lines of communication with administration, and carefully honed messages supported by shared research and assessment, allows us to have a stronger instructional impact. As we attempt to articulate a broader vision of IL, this close collaboration reduces mixed messages between faculty and administration.

When conducting a session, we have found that selecting one or two ACRL Information Literacy Standards most relevant to a class assignment is more manageable than attempting to “cover everything.” According to the Project Information Literacy survey, students already know how to find information, and other surface-learning activities, so we have refocused our instruction efforts to Standard 4, which states “the information literate student, individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose.” Students tend to struggle most with synthesis and integration of sources, so to use our limited time most efficiently, we try to focus on this standard, rather than demonstrating a database. Teaching students how to use and evaluate information is difficult; we are constantly attempting new learning activities to more closely focus on research strategies/tactics/elements that students struggle with the most. Despite the difficulties, we continue to try to gear our instruction efforts in that direction.

In an attempt to make our library collections more user-friendly and reduce our mixed messages to novice researchers, we redesigned the library website with the end user in mind. Many librarians fail to design their collections with novice researchers in mind, and instead add to their collections each year, making the database list more unwieldy, and overwhelming students even more. Librarians tend to err on the side of providing too much information instead of arming students with strategies to find the best resources for their paper. As Fister points out, “the means undergraduates have developed of reducing the aperture, of focusing their attention to a manageable set of options, is a survival strategy that we should consider as we design library collections.”

Although we want to help students at with their immediate needs, sometimes our efforts can backfire when we give students too much information, particularly when they are still grappling with the whole idea of a research paper and still learning about their topic. Promoting discovery tools is one approach that gives novice researchers a more manageable set of options to work with. Situated prominently on the USU library’s front page is the discovery layer, “Summon,” allows students to search books and articles simultaneously. Librarians at USU have encouraged students to begin their search process there, in the hope that students will get a cursory but helpful look at information written on a particular topic. We hope to minimize students’ confusion, and to give them a single point of entry for their research.

All of these responses represent our attempts to address some of the controversies within the librarian community, and to become more unified in how we have decided to address them at our university.

**Conclusion**

The organizational culture at USU’s Merrill-Cazier Library encourages constant experimentation with best practices. As teaching librarians, we endeavor to implement and experiment with ideas that focus on student-centered active learning. Nearly all of these attempts require close collaboration with faculty, and with librarians willing to do more than demonstrate a database.

Most of our responses, as described in this chapter, are attempts at clarifying best practices for garnering support for embedded librarianship, and for spending class time in ways that meet the most important learning
goals. These goals are impacted by all three groups discussed above, and integral to so many discussions occurring in library instruction.

We certainly do not claim to have resolved all the mixed messages between instructors and the embedded librarians they work with, between students and librarians, and between librarians within our own profession. Such conversations are ongoing, and essential to continuous improvement and growth in these areas. We focus broadly on a number of mixed messages relating to library instruction, but further research and expansion is needed in each of these areas.

By examining our behaviors and our verbal messages closely, we can determine if we are sending accurate messages that articulate our most important goals—those that lead to authentic student learning. If we communicate our higher learning goals without clearly conveying where and how IL should be woven into the curriculum, it is likely that we will continue to perpetuate the stereotype that librarians are the “gatekeepers of information.” Those outside of the profession will continue to see us as people who only peripherally show their students library resources, and not as professionals who can help students and faculty with the complexities of the research process. By being clear and reflective about the messages we send and how they are being perceived, we will be better prepared to serve our institutions and to further our impact in the area of library instruction.

NOTES
2. Ibid, p. 574.
REFERENCES


Swimming in the Matrix:  
A Dialogue on Teaching Undergraduate Research

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As instruction librarians at small liberal arts colleges—and therefore as two librarians in jobs very similar to Barbara Fister’s—we have learned a great deal from and with Barbara over the years. Her writing and her conversations often reveal fully articulated versions of ideas that we have just begun forming ourselves, which is validating and humbling. But even more than that, her deep and fundamental respect for undergraduates and their learning process, combined with her ability to speak out forcefully and constructively, have put her in the position of being an informal mentor for so many of us who “want to be Barbara when we grow up.”

One key theme woven throughout Barbara’s work is the importance of finding and having a voice, and of honoring the voices of others. For undergraduates, this means finding their own voices while also incorporating the voices of others into their ever more robust knowledge constructs. They cannot download knowledge from one brain to another, but they can engage with ideas and use that engagement to foster knowledge building.
The same is true of other learners. Even librarians!

Like undergraduates, librarians, also learn by engaging with ideas, either through direct conversation or through the drawn-out conversations between articles and blog posts and conference presentations. What follows is just such a conversation. Each of us will present our individual ideas on how instruction librarians can work most meaningfully with undergraduate researchers, and then we will engage in a dialogue about those ideas, helping each other clarify and expand our understandings of the topic. Ultimately, we hope to come to a deeper understanding of our fundamental goals as instruction librarians, share a few ideas about how to translate those goals to the classroom, and do it all in a way that celebrates Barbara’s conviction that knowledge is born of engaged interaction.

**Iris on Undergraduate Research: This isn’t Stamp Collecting!**

Librarians and undergrads have one thing in common: we are obsessed with the “finding things” definition of research. When I was in library school, everything—from designing databases to bibliometrics to cataloging—had “finding things” as its driving motivation. Ask anyone what a librarian does and we are likely to say some variation on “find things.”

Meanwhile, undergrads are similarly primed for focusing myopically on finding things whenever research projects appear on the syllabus. They want a couple of sources that back up their thoughts, point-by-point, and they want one hopelessly laughable source that can serve simultaneously as counterargument and whipping boy. As students see it, their job is to gather together something akin to a brief on the topic of choice: patch together the useful parts of the good sources; flay the bad source alive; and arrive at what John Bean calls an “all about” paper\(^1\) designed to show a professor that the student is capable of informing a hypothetical reader “all about” the important things to know about a topic. In an ongoing research project I am part of, the Information Literacy in Student Writing (ILSW) project, this shallow understanding of research shows up all over the place in the form of “patch writing”\(^2\) and over-citation.\(^3\) “See?” says the student through the wide margins next to block quotes, “I did it! I found out everything you need to know about global warming and condensed it for you into a digestible five-page essay!”

So here we all are, pulling for the same goal, over and over, and constantly disappointed with the results. Librarians train students in the fine art of finding things, students are bored but find things anyway, librarians feel undervalued, classroom faculty are underwhelmed, and our ILSW project keeps revealing patch-written “all about” papers. Maybe our goals need to be adjusted.

“But finding things is what we do,” some librarians might say. “If we adjust that goal, are we not becoming something else?” Not at all. “Use information effectively” is one of the ACRL Information Literacy Standards,\(^4\) so there is nothing in our Information Literacy contract that forces us to draw the boundaries of our expertise well within the “finding things” part of research. In fact, doing so may actually be a disservice for our students.

Of course, this doesn’t mean that we should all go become writing instructors. Imagine, though, the impact of teaching parallel to disciplinary faculty, rather than off in a cul de sac on the side. All of a sudden, the disciplinary faculty and librarians become tracks the students can trolley along, each reinforcing the other, and each track guiding students toward more effective work. And, as Barbara Fister has pointed out over and over again, librarians can fulfill their part of the bargain relatively easily by remembering and making explicit that research is part of a fundamentally rhetorical act. As she says, “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.” And later, “Placing research skills in a rhetorical framework will make the search process more meaningful and the evaluation of sources more natural for students. And more important, it will help students to situate their research findings in a text of their own that uses evidence in a more sophisticated and successful way.” The emphasis,
then, is on the connections between ideas and the conversations that these connections enact. It is not all about "finding things." It is about igniting students' imaginations. It is about revealing how students can engage with outside knowledge to build their own well-grounded ideas and to communicate those ideas effectively.

**Steve on Undergraduate Research: From Curators to Creators**

I often find library instruction unsatisfying. My complaints are familiar: my time with the class is too brief, my relationship with the students too tenuous, my lesson too isolated from the rest of the course. But, like all academic instruction librarians, I am hopeful and diligent, and with each class I teach, I look at the students' research assignment and try to carve out a piece of that project to call my own. In the past, this piece almost always amounted to searching for sources in library-approved databases and full-text collections.

But when I taught that way, when I pulled out "searching for sources" as my sole contribution to a class I got to see once for an hour or so, I found that I was reinforcing a problematic attitude toward research. Students would speak of their research paper as if the "research" was something wholly different and divorced from the "paper." Like tying your shoes before you play basketball, or putting gas in the tank before going for a drive, students seemed to know that research was necessary, but also seemed to expect it to be quick, preliminary, and mostly a technical barrier to the real work of writing. When I got in front of them and pulled out canned searches of my own devising to demonstrate the features of the article database, I was reinforcing this view of research as a technical or even bureaucratic skill. I was reinforcing a way of researching and writing that too often ends up with students writing generally about a topic, rather than creating and supporting a compelling argument.

I suspected there was something more, an approach perhaps implied by the multi-faceted ACRL Information Literacy Standards, but not fully articulated there as a pedagogy. I was attracted to the writing center on our campus, where it seemed to me that student tutors and clients alike took their writing far more seriously than their research. I wondered, what, if anything, could make those students as engaged with research as they were with writing: how could research feel as personal, as necessary, as high-stakes as writing did? I began to change the way I taught from being a "specialist" who passed on highly specific tips about this or that library database, to being more of a coach or even a counselor. I tried to first draw the class out with questions about their work and their ideas, and only once I'd established this context—this need for sources or evidence—would I turn on the classroom projector and start talking about searching.

Whenever I have a good idea about teaching and learning in libraries, I always find out that Barbara Fister has beaten me to it. Sometimes she's only ahead of me by a few days, posting a fully developed column online while I am still mulling over the implications. But just as often—as in this case—it turns out that Barbara is a decade or more ahead of me. In 1990, or about twenty years before I started thinking about this problem in earnest, Barbara wrote about how students are too likely to see themselves as "hunters and gatherers" who use sources simply as collections of facts which they report back on in their papers. Librarians are not the only source or cause of the students' misconceptions, of course, but through our teaching we can help students develop a view of themselves as creators of knowledge, and less as collectors and curators of knowledge. If we're successful, knowledge "is not something that grows by accretion of new discoveries (that can be written up, set on the library shelf and located whenever a dose of truth is required), but changes depending on the way in which the interpreting community views it."
new insights and new metaphors. In the winter of 2012 Fister wrote: “We need to help students understand the vast web of meaning in the making and develop ways to shape their own ideas about what parts to pay attention to. They need to know not just how to find finished information but how to grasp meaning as it’s made and how to participate in its making. ... I had a frustrating time this week helping students explore databases, which seem like supremely clumsy boutique shopping sites for products that are each sold separately, detached from the network that produced them.”

Instruction librarians are not personal shoppers, we are consumer advocates. By the time I have added this idea to my repertoire, I am sure Barbara Fister will have long moved on to another idea that I’ll think of later.

**Dialogic Learning: Iris and Steve Discuss Undergraduate Research**

Iris: I find it really interesting that when we each articulated what we saw as the deep underlying problem in the way that undergraduates understand research (and therefore in the ways that we see our jobs), I talked about how undergraduates misunderstand the point of gathering information, while you talked about how the major problem is that undergraduates see information gathering as distinct and separate from writing.

I wonder if these conclusions point to the same deep underlying problem, or if you think they are two problems that often happen together.

Steve: I think that research and writing is problematic overall, I guess. It is full of problems, and part of the process is understanding or overcoming those problems or making those problems work for you.

Even in the short time since I wrote my contribution at the start of this chapter, I have been thinking about how students see that split between researching and writing. And I think what they actually do is more complicated than research first, writing later. In fact, the work that Barbara did in the 1990s shortly after the article that I quoted pointed to undergraduates having more complicated and recursive methods than perhaps I gave them credit for.

I should also say that I don’t think it is crazy for them to want to do the research first, because they are so often working from a state of near-total ignorance.

Iris: Yes, that is true.

Steve: Before they can even articulate a question, they have a lot of reading to do. I think part of it might be a vocabulary problem, as in, they refer to all this initial reading as “research.” And then if they have time, or are diligent enough, they actually do continue to read even as they write and revise. But they don’t necessarily think of that as “research,” they think of it as “writing.”

Iris: Ahh, that makes a lot of sense to me because it is research, but not done for the same purpose. On top of all of this, undergraduates are making a difficult transition, I think, from school to higher education—from learning about things to learning to actually produce new knowledge based on all that background they finally know. I think they are often not yet used to their goal being to create knowledge.

Steve: Yes, and I sometimes see terrible confusion about the role of “opinion” in student writing. Some students have been told that papers shouldn’t be their opinion, so they are very careful to say nothing controversial or original. Or interesting. Then their college professor says, “I need you to write more about what you think of the subject,” and they feel stuck between two poles.
Iris: Right. "Opinion" is kind of like "research" in that we (and classroom faculty) use them to mean "independent thought" and "discovery and synthesis" while students think they mean "feelings" and "background." And all of this gets compounded by misunderstandings about where knowledge-creation actually happens. Students think "over there, with the experts" and we are trying to tell them, "No, in you—in your head, where you synthesize all this stuff from other people."

Steve: Yes, and in fact, in one of these articles Barbara says that we should teach constructivist knowledge creation by example—giving students a chance to see how we create knowledge in our own heads. Is that something that you try to do in the classroom?

Iris: I must, because that is how I think learning happens, but I wonder what examples I actually set that help students learn to recognize it for themselves. What do you do?

Steve: I have never, until this moment, sat down and thought, "how do I teach constructivist knowledge creation by example?" But I think that I do by exposing my ignorance to the classes I talk to. I try and let them know when I don’t know what I am talking about. I don’t use canned searches very often, and instead try and work with what the students are actually interested in and what they have told me in that moment. For example, I will point out that I am doing a really dumb search with just one keyword from them and I am expecting to get back lots of weird results.

And then I talk through how I look at the results and use them to teach myself something about the topic — what kinds of journals are publishing on the topic, what kinds of confusion or false hits I can expect, and so on. So I am starting from a position of ignorance, but learning through the research process.

I think that might be what Barbara is talking about, if on a pretty basic level. I am using the act of research to create a basic level of knowledge as I work. Then I also talk about why certain things we find in the results might be interesting, and that is very rarely because “it will probably have facts I need.”

I notice as I tell you this, though, that I am still pretty well stuck in the “finding things” model that you say we need to get beyond.

Iris: Well, I think we can never get rid of that entirely. That would be throwing out babies with bath water. I think that there are probably lots of places to work in examples of ancillary practice with knowledge creation, and certainly doing so while finding things is important too.

You have made me think about my earlier statement that I am not aware having the goal of teaching constructivist knowledge creation by example, but I am aware that I have shifted my conceptions of my underlying goal from “help them find things” to “show them The Matrix.” So when I teach about attribution and bibliographies, for example, I teach them more about academic sociology than about citation styles.

I want them to see each piece of information not as a golden “nugget of truth,” but as a node, almost. As a place that connects to a whole bunch of other people and ideas and articulations.

I want them to take the red pill.

Steve: I think that is a very valuable approach. In some cases you will be reinforcing what the professors are already teaching them about the discipline, but in many cases it seems like the professors are fish and the academic discipline is the water. You are throwing the students a snorkel.
Iris: And fins! Because the student has to get up to speed pretty quickly.

Steve: Right, yes. Swimming in the Matrix.

Iris: You can’t have too many metaphors

Steve: Metaphors are the sand on the beach. Anyway... I was thinking of the way you ended your piece. “It is not all about finding things. It is about igniting students’ imaginations...” And while I do not disagree, I was wondering about the student who just is not catching fire.

The great Russian director Stanislavski wrote about how an actor cannot expect to be “inspired” on command, that inspiration comes rarely and technique has to carry the load a lot of the time. So can we teach students about doing research when they are not really inspired or on fire, when they are merely on deadline?

Iris: Well, I do not think that the “here is how you” approach to teaching will help either the inspired or the uninspired.

Steve: Yes, very good point!

Iris: If we think of our one session as one experience in a while long set of experiences in which students develop good information literate habits of mind, then even if your one session does not make a huge impression, at least it is not digging the student deeper into misconceptions about the nature and purpose of research. So I try not to teach things very differently, though I certainly do have to work harder to engage some classes, for sure. And some classes do not turn out well.

And just now, as we are talking, I realize that all of this is modeling knowledge creation! I was doing it all along!

Steve: And simultaneously speaking prose!

Iris: Amazing!

Steve: I think I understand what you are saying, and I certainly do not think that the best way to reach bored uninspired students is to be boring and uninspired ourselves.

I think I am just hoping to abstract this a bit more, so that I can tell students explicitly or implicitly, “here are techniques that will help take you from choosing a subject through to a finished paper, and they will help you regardless of how excited and intellectually engaged you are.”

I think that is one appeal of teaching “finding stuff.” Finding stuff will never let you down. You can assess finding stuff. Did they find stuff? Excellent, assessment complete. It is a lot more difficult to assess an imagination on fire.

Iris: Yes, I think that is true. And that is why I have resisted many of the more simplistic assessment efforts floating around, not wanting to be even further reduced to that function just for the sake of numbers. But going back to your example from acting, I wonder what an acting coach would be able to teach us about reaching the uninspired. You talked in your essay about moving from being a “specialist” to being a “coach or even a counselor.” I wonder how an acting coach would approach the problem.

Steve: One thing that actors have to do is put themselves in other people’s shoes and see things from that person or character’s point of view. It is pointless for an actress to say, “well, I am just not that ambitious” if she’s playing Lady Macbeth.
Iris: Several of Lady Macbeth's acquaintances would have LOVED that turn of affairs ...

Steve: "Whatever, damned spot" is not very powerful.

Iris: Hah!

Steve: So, I think the acting coach would have us think about the people in all stages of this research project. Who would care about this topic? Once you have read what they say, why did they say that, and what are they leaving out? "What is my motivation?" is a cliche, but it can be a great question to ask about academic sources and their authors.

Iris: It is also a cliche to talk about how undergraduates are constantly asked to pretend to be little academics in their coursework, so maybe that can work in our favor, too.

Steve: Yes, I would say that I think it is fine to ask them to pretend to be junior professors. It is just a bad idea to think that they can do that without any preparation. I think it might be fun to get more "let's pretend" into our teaching.

Iris: Yes. Maybe more powerful motivation to try for inspiration as our goal might be that there is more than one kind of uninspired student. A good chunk of them might become more interested when they see that there is more going on than panning for information gold in an endless Google gold mine.

Steve: Yes, that is a good point. One of my favorite academic authors is Gerald Graff. He writes about how he was never very engaged by literature until he found out after reading Huckleberry Finn that it was actually a controversial work and not just a kids' story. Once he had to treat a work of literature as a problem to be solved or as a cause of an argument, he suddenly found it engaging and exciting.

Of course, he then went on to be a professor of literature, so we might want to be careful—we don't want to warp all our students to that extent.

Iris: Heh. Yes, be inspiring, but not TOO inspiring.

But yes, it seems like most people go through this kind of transition, where they realize that things are deeper and more complicated than they may seem at first glance. I went through a similar moment of inspiration when I figured out that librarians do more than find stuff (like I wrote about in my essay here).

Steve: I certainly think that a liberal arts education tends to reveal the world as more complicated than it first appears, rather than providing simple answers. Which does not make it any less frustrating for us as individuals who seem to need to continually re-learn the lessons of the past. I wrote a bit in my essay about how it seems like teaching research as a part of rhetoric is something of an evergreen topic for instruction librarians. Barbara wrote the article I referenced in 1990, yet it still seems like this idea that we need to teach "information literacy" less in isolation and more in the context of critical inquiry is still a notion that we are struggling with as a profession. Do you think that is true?

Iris: I think it is true, and I was reminded of our favorite mantra that information literacy sessions are not inoculations — you cannot go to one and then know everything you need to know. So on the one hand, I am disheartened that we as a profession have not internalized this more situated, critical, and nuanced understanding of our work, but on the other hand, I think it is just as true for
us as it is for our students that we need repeated interactions with the concepts throughout our careers.

The director of our writing program at Carleton has written about how ongoing faculty development is analogous to the ideas of "Writing Across The Curriculum," where repeated exposure and practice is more important than one perfect exposure.15

So that is my attempt to be optimistic about all this. The less optimistic part of me wonders if we will ever learn these lessons.

Steve: I suppose it is just parallel to what we have been talking about all along. Teaching is also something that must be learned through imaginative inquiry and constructivist knowledge creation and all that. It is easy to fall back on old habits and assumptions about what it means to teach and learn.

Iris: Yes.

Steve: Even had I read Barbara's article back in 1990, I think I would still be puzzling out all the implications and ramifications of trying to teach constructivist knowledge creation by example. That is kind of the point.

Iris: Yes, I agree, and I think I will be able to read it 5, 10, 15 years from now and it will be useful then, too.

Meanwhile, I will take your idea of being a coach and meld it with my idea of revealing the Matrix and see how that shifts my teaching. I guess that makes me Morpheus!

Steve: Hm. I am not sure putting them to sleep is a good plan.
Nurturing Virtuous Readers

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For the last century, at least, American librarians have struggled to formulate a clear sense of their identity. In academic settings,¹ this usually has involved understanding their identity vis-à-vis faculty and administration, and obtaining “faculty status” was often seen as the optimum achievement. Depending on the institution, “faculty status” may be qualified in some way. Advances in information technology have complicated the picture even further, as librarians are increasingly required to develop strong technology skills. In many instances, professional library positions have been filled with IT professionals rather than with traditional librarians. So the target continues to move.²

Similarly, the mission of the library continues to shift. At one time, the majority of staff time was devoted to acquiring, cataloging, and circulating print collections. Today, the modern academic library is a campus center for technology, instruction, and socializing. Increasingly, library collections are not print or microform, but digital, and access to materials is not via an “ownership model” but through a license for a certain period and population. Librarians must now be able to negotiate such agreements, in collaboration with campus legal staff; network access, with campus IT departments; and offer instruction in their use, sometimes in collaboration with faculty. The effort to formulate, refine, and develop instructional programs under the rubric “Information Literacy Instruction” (henceforth,