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## *Basic Course Forum: Adaptation*

# **Centering Information Literacy (as) Skills and Civic Engagement in the Basic Communication Course: An Integrated Course Library Collaboration**

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In an era of proliferating “fake news” stories (Fisher, Cox, & Herman, 2016; Mikkelson, 2016; Rutenberg, 2016; Tavernise, 2016), and a “post-truth” political climate (Higgins, 2016; Oxford Dictionaries, 2016),<sup>2</sup> the need to pair public communication and civil discourse with information literacy instruction is more important than ever. A recent study by researchers at Stanford University revealed an alarming trend among students from middle school to college: while students at various stages of their formative education may have a facility with social media use and Internet navigation, they are easily deceived when asked to determine if the information they have read online is reliable, misleading, or patently false (Donald, 2016; Stanford History Education Group, 2016; Wineburg & McGrew, 2016). According to the study authors, “Overall, young people’s ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: *bleak*” (Stanford History Education Group, 2016, p. 1). As university teachers, we see this “bleak”

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<sup>2</sup> In the Oxford Dictionaries definition, “post-truth” is described as the “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”

assessment as a call for the basic communication course to adapt its pedagogy toward a more critical information literacy instruction and application.

Each semester, over 500 students, many of whom are first-year and/or first-generation, take a Fundamentals of Public Communication course at the University where the authors work. Most students enroll in the course to fulfill a general education requirement, consistent with national trends (Morreale, Myers, Backlund, & Simonds, 2016; Valenzano III, Wallace, & Morreale, 2014). Following the dominant model for the basic communication course in the U.S., the focus is on public speaking (Valenzano III, Wallace, & Morreale). In addition, however, this course aims to develop a foundational understanding of communication as a relational, ongoing process with social and political consequences. We highlight the thoughtful practice of communication as a civic responsibility and seek to develop students' civic participation, which have been identified as unique opportunities for the basic communication course to enhance general education (e.g., Hunt, Simonds, & Simonds, 2009; Kahl Jr., 2014).

A key component of understanding and practicing communication as critical engagement with people, communities, and messages is developing students' information literacy, which, as described below, we seek to do through a sustained, curriculum-integrated course-library partnership (Meyer, Hunt, Hopper, Thakkar, Tsoubakopoulos, & Hoose, 2008; Sjoberg & Ahlfeldt, 2010; Weaver & Pier, 2010). The partnership supports student learning and performance in areas that are common in basic course curricula across institutions, such as conducting research in preparation for informative and persuasive speech assignments. Beyond this support, our collaboration aims to increase students' understanding and application of information literacy as a contextual and relational/collaborative process, thus adapting to what we believe to be an important demand of foundational communication education.

### **Demand**

Information literacy is “the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015, n.p.). Jacobs and Berg (2011) explain that information literacy is at the center of lifelong learning since it works to “empower [students] in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use, and create information” (p. 383). Developing and applying information

literacy practices has been described as an important general education demand for all students (Hunt, Simonds, & Simonds, 2009; Jacobson & Mark, 2000; Rockman, 2002) and may be even more salient to first-year and/or first-generation college students in today's source-saturated, post-truth context.

However, in addition to the “bleak” assessment of students’ information literacy skills with which we started, research notes a gap between instructors’ goals, students’ perceptions, and actual information literacy outcomes for students (Maughan, 2001; Weetman DaCosta, 2010). Some have argued that the basic communication course is uniquely positioned to address the demand and the gap between information literacy goals, perceptions, and outcomes in the college classroom (Hunt, Simonds, & Simonds, 2009). Furthermore, integrated library partnerships in the basic course have been found beneficial in developing stronger information literacy and critical thinking skills (Mazer, Hunt, & Kuznekoff, 2007; Meyer et al., 2008).

We see the demand for continuous and sustained information literacy instruction in the basic communication course as two-pronged. First, as prior scholarship suggests, information literacy instruction needs to guide students to advance beyond post-hoc selection of easily accessible, immediately available resources in order to satisfy assignment requirements (Hunt, Simonds, & Simonds, 2009; Meyer et al., 2008). The goal is to see information literacy as a communication process (and skill): from selecting a topic, through locating, evaluating, and integrating reliable sources, to reflecting on the messages produced and audience reactions. Second, there has been a multidisciplinary effort toward critical information literacy instruction that develops students’ social awareness and civic engagement (Hernandez & Knight, 2010; Jacobs & Berg, 2011; Riehle & Weiner, 2013; Simmons, 2005; Smith, 2013). This is reflected in the National Communication Association’s call for prioritizing teaching that guides students in utilizing communication to participate in their communities and respond to issues of local, national, and global significance (Blair, 2015).

### **The integrated library-course partnership as a necessary adaptation**

To address the demands described above, in the summer of 2015 we forged a course-library partnership that integrates information literacy instruction into the Fundamentals of Public Communication curriculum. Rather than an add-on, library instruction and collaboration became an integral part of the course, modeling partnerships and communities as indispensable to rich and impactful learning. We

moved away from unidirectional library instruction that simply demonstrated where to find reliable sources (e.g., Weaver & Pier, 2010) and instead worked together to develop the course curriculum, including an assignment-specific sequence of library sessions and relevant instructional materials. Following and extending prior effective adaptations (e.g., Hunt, Simonds, & Simonds, 2009; Meyer et al., 2008; Sjoberg & Ahlfeldt, 2010; Weaver & Pier, 2010), specific changes we made in order to establish an integrated partnership that forefronts information literacy as an ongoing collaborative process include:

- Student-driven and applied library session(s) in which students engage in the research process from idea generation to accessing, evaluating, organizing, and citing sources;
- Recurrent in-class research and topic development workshops, including peer feedback sessions on the quality and types of sources used;
- Collaboratively-developed resource guides and worksheets to support students in the research session(s);
- Adding an in-class civil dialogue assignment, supported by a library session, in which students are required to apply information literacy to communicate the complexity of an issue, take and support an informed position, and facilitate a dialogue about the issue.

### **Partnership in context and practice**

Woven throughout the basic course curriculum, information literacy instruction may be facilitated by the section teacher and/or the librarian throughout the semester, but at minimum one library session is included in all sections of the course (20-22 sections a semester) to assure a consistent foundation. This session happens in the fourth week of the semester, as part of students' preparation of an informative speech, which is typically done in a symposium format. In the session, students refer to guides and complete worksheets, developed jointly by the liaison librarian and course instructors. This type of collaboration in producing curriculum materials reflects a growing trend in university classrooms for sustained partnerships and meaningful integration of information literacy and library instruction into course content (e.g., Association of College & Research Libraries, 2016; Lindstrom & Shonorock, 2006; Mounce, 2010).

In this initial session, the librarian is focused less on database demonstration, which assumes facility with a topic and with searching for information, and more on

helping students strengthen their capacity to think through and engage in the research process from multiple angles and perspectives. Students are encouraged to take common issues or experiences and position them as researchable questions for class speeches. This approach is transferable to information needs and research projects beyond the basic course. This focus was developed in direct response to findings from Project Information Literacy, in which 84% of undergraduate students shared that getting started on a research project was one of the most challenging aspects of the research process (Head & Eisenberg, 2010).

To demonstrate how topic selection and research can be grounded in students' everyday experiences, an example we use in this initial session is the topic of selfies. This topic resonates with many students given that more than half of young people in the "Millennial" age bracket have posted a selfie to a social media site (Taylor, 2014). Students are asked to consider how they would prepare an informative speech on the topic, and through (an often animated) discussion, they suggest a range of ideas, such as the historical development of self-portraits, the variety of devices people use, who is most likely to take and distribute photos of themselves, and where to find selfies on social media. We then discuss how to turn selfies into a persuasive speech topic, with positions ranging from whether or not selfies are an art form to whether or not selfies should be prohibited in certain places. This leads to a conversation on the kinds of questions various sources can answer (e.g., popular press coverage, journal articles, books) and a brief search of relevant library databases. Tapping into an entertaining, commonly understood practice provides a way for students to turn familiar ideas into compelling research topics.

In addition to topic selection, the class engages in an open discussion of credibility that touches on when and how Google, Wikipedia, and the library can aid the selection of sources. The conversation engages a critique of post-truth approaches to accessing and using sources by highlighting that while information is more accessible and abundant than ever, it is variable in quality. An active learning exercise reinforces this theme, in which students critique two web sources on a similar topic. In the course of this evaluation, the CRAAP test (Meriam Library, 2010) is introduced as a method of thinking critically about the evaluation and selection of sources. In discussing and critiquing existing sources, we also weave in the key topic (and learning goal) of ethical use of information. Students consider how the sources they are critiquing use and cite information, as well as how documenting one's research process translates into supporting ideas and appropriately crediting sources in their speeches. This information literacy approach to the integrated library

session models topic selection, research, and speech development as interconnected and iterative parts of a process, rather than idiosyncratic tasks.

Following the initial library session and the informative speech presentations is a newly-developed civil dialogues assignment. This addition to the curriculum is supported by another library session that is organized as a research workshop. The civil dialogues assignment asks teams of students to participate in three research-intensive activities:

- Students prepare and present case briefs on contentious, community-relevant topics (e.g., ballot measures in election years). The informative case briefs aim to encompass the complexity of an issue and incorporate different perspectives on that issue.
- Following the case brief presentations, students write position paragraphs for each case, in which they declare and describe their informed and researched position on each case.
- Dialogue groups are formed, so that a range of positions is present in each group. The teams then facilitate in-class civil dialogues about the issues on which they presented the case briefs. Writing the position paragraphs and further researching their positions prepare students to participate in the dialogues in an informed manner.

Engaging and furthering information literacy is key to the civil dialogues assignment – from deciding on and researching an issue, through critique of information and messages, to the ethical participation in learning communities (i.e., examples of information literate habits, as described in Association of College and Research Libraries (2015). To this end, the second library session provides students with opportunities to apply, assess, and develop their information literacy skills and dispositions. In a workshop format, the librarian and the instructor work with the teams to brainstorm topics and possible sources that encompass a variety of positions on the issue of interest. By working alongside students to consider possible approaches to taking informed positions, this session builds on the first in reinforcing student agency in the selection, critique, and organization of sources and information. Furthermore, the repeated work on teams (consisting of students, the instructor, and the librarian) models knowledge production and civic participation as collaborative and relational, expanding a performative understanding and practice of communication beyond a transmission view.

## Conclusion

Through a process-centered, integrated approach to developing (critical) information literacy, our course-library partnership aims to strengthen both abilities in accessing and evaluating information and confidence in self-directed, yet collaborative, learning and knowledge production. This, we believe, is a hopeful approach to centering civic engagement, critical thinking, and creativity in education, as has been called for in the fields of both communication (Blair, 2015) and library science (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016). This method of instruction also aims to resist the pitfalls of “post-truth” information gathering and to foster the critical consumption and use of information.

Yet, we feel limited by the lack of continuity across courses and semesters that would allow students to build on experiences and knowledge. We hope that the integrated course-library partnership we briefly describe here may serve both as a model and as a question mark, followed by an ellipsis... For instance, what could be the place of the basic course, as a general education requirement for many, in an integrated approach to (critical) information literacy education across the curriculum? ... As we continue to consider how partnerships may best support the development of information literacy as an applied, relational, and critical practice, we urge basic course directors and instructors, librarians, and administrators to expand the meanings and practices of both integration and collaboration within their/our specific campus contexts.

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