

**Colby College**

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# The Other Side of the Podium: Student Information Needs from Inside the Classroom

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Marilyn R. Pukkila

# The other side of the podium

## Student information needs from inside the classroom

**W**hether long-time veterans of information literacy or recent graduates from library and information science programs, librarians who teach usually think they have a pretty good idea of what students need in the way of information. Having taught library instruction sessions for more than 20 years (during which time they have been called by many names), I was aware that assignments, teaching, and expectations on the part of faculty and students had changed, but I wasn't satisfied with my limited exposure to those changes.

In fall 2004, I used my semester sabbatical to audit courses at Colby College with the intention of observing students' information needs within the classroom and in the context of their entire courses, not just their assignments. I also wanted the chance to observe my colleagues' teaching styles as a means of enhancing my own.

Wishing to replicate the student experience in terms of course load, I chose to audit *The Dramatic Experience*, *Religion in the USA*, and *Indigenous Peoples and Cultures of North America*. I also took an online course on pagan pastoral counseling for death and dying offered by the Cherry Hill Seminary, which met weekly for online discussions, giving me, in effect, the standard Colby four-course load. My extra-curricular activities included participation in CIRCLE events (a student group for nontraditional religions, of which I am faculty advisor) and occasional library meetings, and I taught a weekend intensive workshop; this seemed to replicate a typical student load pretty successfully. Indeed, I eventually decided I had to

drop one class part way through the semester due to lack of time, something students are all too familiar with. I also took a three-week trip to New Zealand, during which time I visited the information commons at the University of Auckland, discussed information literacy with the head of the program at Victoria University of Wellington, and explored filming sites used by Peter Jackson in his version of *Lord of the Rings* to enhance the course I teach, *Tolkien's Sources*. This trip meant that I wasn't able to participate in every session of the classes I audited, nor did I keep up with the reading or the written work. Nonetheless, my time as a librarian in the classroom produced some useful and unexpected results.

### Observations

I was fascinated by the amount of information with which students are bombarded from the moment they buy their texts. In the three bags of books I purchased, I received no fewer than 14 pieces of advertising (which made me wonder why we think that students will read the informative flyers we so carefully design for their orientation). I learned the ways that publishers make use of textbooks to promote their other products. A required text for the drama course included a CD for three months' free access to a database, which we in the libraries deem to be below college level. The text even included relevant keywords for the database at the end of each chapter, along with recommended Web sites for further research.

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I was interested to learn of such aggressive marketing to a more or less captive student audience, though I'd be very surprised if any of the students actually used the CD or visited the Web sites; they simply don't have the time (nor, in all likelihood, the inclination) to explore beyond the required material on the syllabus.

And, yes, those assignments have changed. The first-year (and even second-year) research paper was absent from all of my classes; instead, students had group projects or labs, response papers, and text-based essays or tests. While library research could certainly enhance many of these tasks (something that I pointed out on more than one occasion), there was no incentive to look for material beyond that which was presented in class, particularly in the libraries. Issues of proper citation were rarely addressed, and, in one instance, a faculty member was displaying images during a lecture without attributions, despite having urged the students earlier not to do this. (Said faculty member did provide a list of sources for the images after I shared my observations in private.)

I was also firmly reminded that for this generation of students, a pixel is worth a thousand words. During one class discussion, a question was raised, and the professor urged the students to Google for the answer rather than consult the appropriate librarian. In a class where printed texts and films were used with equal weight, the students were notably more active in discussing the films than the texts. Given this obvious evidence of increased reliance on digital and visual media over print resources for both teaching and learning, it's clear that our information literacy programs will need to address issues of media literacy, as well. The principles of evaluation are still the same (authority, reliability, bias, timeliness, and proper citation), but we need to make this clear to our students, who rely so heavily on e-media for all of their information needs.

In observing my colleagues, I received welcome reminders of the many aspects of good teaching, from attention to the physical space (this lighting is terrible!) to good use of humor, motion, open-ended questions, and modeling of expectations (if I were given this

assignment, this is how I would proceed). Clarifying expectations for student performance and assignments is crucial, as these vary widely from teacher to teacher. One professor urged students to ask for extensions rather than write a paper the night before it's due, while another stated flatly that there would be no extensions on any assignment. Skillful use of technology in the classroom is no longer an option; it is a necessity for anyone who hopes to engage students who, by and large, learned how to use computers at about the same time that they were learning how to walk. That said, it's also important to ensure that students have the necessary skills to offer a technology-based presentation, if that is expected. Having one group presentation suffer from failed technology is an all too painful reminder that while we may suppose our students to be technologically literate, we cannot assume it.

### **Take a class**

Given all this, and the simple experience of being a student once again, with all the uncertainty, challenge, and constraint that that entails, I am convinced that anyone who teaches should take a class themselves at least once every other year or so, just to remember what it's like to be on the other side of the podium, whether virtual or literal.

I am very grateful I had the chance to relive that experience, even if I didn't retain much of the subject knowledge that I'd hoped to acquire. First- and second-year courses of necessity introduce an enormous amount of material; students must absorb new vocabularies, theoretical frameworks, and perspectives which often challenge previously held views. This applies to information literacy as much as to theatre or religion or indigenous peoples. I was reminded of the reality of that fifteen-minute attention span we all talk about but rarely allow for, and of how uncomfortable one could get in a one size does not fit all chair in the course of a fifty minute session, and of how frustrating it is when one can't see the screen clearly or hear the instructor. I developed a keen discernment between a truly open-ended question and one that was

shing for a particular response, and in doing so recognized how many times I posed the latter when I thought I was asking the former. I felt sympathy for my fellow faculty when I saw them struggle with the difficulty of allowing silence to stretch out for people to have a chance to think about such questions before answering them. Whatever one's age, one doesn't wish to appear the fool in public!

### How to find out what students need

Even without the magnificent opportunity of a sabbatical, there are many things we can do to become more familiar with student information needs in our classes. Ask if you can sit in on a session or two of a class you will be instructing in the mysteries of library research before you offer your session. Talk to students you see in those classes and ask them about their preferences and challenges in finding information; you can encounter them in the dining halls, in performances, in clubs or interest groups, and

in the stands of the sports arenas as well as in the library and the classroom. Take the time to look at the texts for those classes; the results can be enlightening, to say the least.

It might have been very interesting to use the Web sites from the text for the drama course in a library exercise to evaluate Web pages. Review your instructional material with an eye to media literacy as well as information fluency. If you have a center for teaching and learning on your campus, see if they have a peer observation program and ask to be included in it as both an observer and as one who wishes to be observed. Sit in on instruction sessions of your fellow teaching librarians and really focus on all the aspects that impinge on learning: physical space, movement, technology, content, delivery. If possible, do this for classes that are unfamiliar to you or which cover unknown material. The more we can put ourselves in the place of learner, the more we will experience the needs of learners, and the more effective our teaching will become. ♪

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*("Long-range planning across generational lines" continued from page 145)*

serve on your library advisory committee, library-friendly IT staff, or a representative from the provost's office. They will serve as outside advisors and will broaden your perspective in the planning process.

A final tip for any long-range planning process is to identify those issues that don't require paradigm shifts and are easy to solve. We developed a list of such issues and addressed them before turning to the larger questions of the newly adopted long-range plan. This approach preserved the momentum of the planning process and allowed for the quick and decisive actions that all generations appreciate.

### Epilogue

Despite the generational divides that needed to be bridged during the long-range plan's development, the process has already been deemed a success. A university-wide meeting that was supposed to focus on the long-range planning efforts of all units was modified to focus on the

library's plan, as it was recognized by the provost as the model of how plans should look.

Within the library, the generational lessons learned during the planning process led to thoughtful consideration of how the plan's implementation group would be composed. Along with other diversity concerns, we made a conscious choice to balance the generational representation. So far, so good.

### Notes

1. For further exploration of generations in the workplace, see Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman's *When Generations Collide: Who They Are. Why They Clash. How to Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work* (HarperBusiness, 2002).
2. William M. Curran, "Succession: The Next Ones at Bat," *College & Research Libraries* 64 (2003): 134-40.
3. Carolyn Wiethoff, "Management Basics: Managing Generation X," *Indiana Libraries* 23 (2004): 53-5. ♪