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Using teaching faculty focus groups to assess information literacy core competencies at university level

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Abstract

Grand Valley State University librarians designed and conducted teaching faculty¹ focus groups to gauge their response to a new information literacy (IL) core student competencies document created to support a developing library IL programme. Although the competencies were inspired by existing, widely known information literacy standards and guidelines the University Libraries' Information Literacy Competencies document (ILCC) is unique and written specifically to address the university's culture and curriculum. The authors of this paper formed a research team to assemble two groups of teaching faculty from various disciplines and to analyse focus group transcripts using a content analysis approach. The resulting data revealed unexpected perceptions about information literacy among teaching faculty and concerns about how to apply the ILCC document. In analysing the data, we generated ideas for supporting teaching faculty as they apply the ILCC document. Focus groups were used to gauge teaching faculty perceptions of the ILCC document. The results of the focus groups informed our efforts to tailor the ILCC document to existing university programs and curricula by using the language that was familiar to teaching faculty; and to explore teaching faculty perceptions of challenges and needed support. The paper explains how the focus group method was employed to test information literacy competencies in order to provide a potential model for other universities who are customising their own information literacy standards.

Keywords

Information literacy; focus groups; universities; liberal education; libraries

1. Context and Purpose of the Study

In 2008, the authors of this paper were among the five librarians from Grand Valley State University (GVSU) who crafted an Information Literacy Core Competencies (ILCC) document outlining the information literacy core competencies expected of undergraduate and graduate students (Beaubien 2009). The ILCC document was intended, in part, as a tool to facilitate the

¹ At Grand Valley State University, both librarians and teaching staff are professorial teaching faculty. To distinguish between the two groups, librarians are called "library faculty" and teaching staff are called "teaching faculty."

³ GVSU has five libraries on its campuses, although the whole library department is described as University Libraries and this term is used in this paper.

discussion between the University Libraries³ and the broader GVSU community⁴ and to develop instruction guidelines on information literacy.

The ILCC document defines information literacy as “a set of skills which includes finding information effectively; managing the abundance of information available; thinking critically about resources; synthesizing and incorporating information into one’s knowledge base; creatively expressing and effectively communicating new knowledge; using information ethically; and using knowledge to better society” (Beaubien 2009). The ILCC document also includes a set of teaching objectives organized into six overarching IL goals⁵, and, most importantly, it provides a common language for scholarly and pedagogical dialogue among teaching and library faculty.

The ILCC document was tailored to the GVSU community by aligning it with university-specific standards and curriculum guidelines. After completing the ILCC document, the authors of this paper realised that this customisation required feedback from a larger group of teaching faculty as their receptiveness to and acceptance of the ILCC document would impact on their instruction and assessment in the classroom. In other words, we deliberately shared the ILCC document with teaching faculty because their use of this document would indirectly affect students.

Focus groups were chosen, in part, for their participatory nature, thereby taking advantage of GVSU’s culture of ground-up decision making and the GVSU community’s willingness to try innovative approaches. The focus groups were designed with three objectives: to begin introducing the ILCC document to teaching faculty; to gauge how useful the document would be as a tool for teaching faculty; and to ensure that the language we used in the document was adaptable to a full range of disciplines. This paper summarises the results from the two focus groups and discusses implications for GVSU.

Founded in 1960, Grand Valley State University is a multi-campus comprehensive university located in western Michigan in the United States and has a current student population of approximately 24,000. Over the years, it has consistently promoted the values of a liberal education, thereby embracing the tradition of teaching a broad-based education in the arts and sciences balanced by specialised, in-depth study. Grand Valley State University defines liberal education as “foster[ing] critical thinking, creative problem solving, and cultural understanding for the benefit of lifelong learning and global citizenship” among its students (GVSU 2009, p.4). This multi-faceted definition of liberal education, as applied at a large university, allows considerable breadth of study. Therefore, one of the challenges we faced as the authors of the ILCC document was to create a document that was appropriate for the broad range of general education courses as well as the more focused major courses of study (e.g., engineering, writing, philosophy).

These general education courses are part of the GVSU General Education Program, which takes the liberal education philosophy and translates it into a standard general curriculum that all students must complete. The program outlines specific skills and knowledge goals students are expected to learn in the general education courses.⁶ Information literacy is part of the critical skills goals that is covered by the general education courses.

Before the implementation of the ILCC document information literacy was already embedded in the GVSU curriculum, although its scope was limited to “locate, evaluate, and use information effectively”. We saw a clear connection between our information literacy core competencies and the General Education Program’s goals. This was reflected in the ILCC document by establishing a strong link between the ILCC competencies and the university’s goals for general education

⁴ Throughout this study the term “community” is intended to be all-inclusive of the university’s teaching and library faculty, administrative staff, and students.

⁵ <http://www.gvsu.edu/library/information-literacy-core-competencies-168.htm> [Accessed 4 November 2010]

⁶ GVSU’s General Education Program:
http://issuu.com/gvsu/docs/3581_gen_ed?mode=embed&layout=http%3A%2F%2Fskin.i

thereby helping teaching faculty incorporate the broadly defined IL provision in the general curriculum.

2. Customised Information Literacy Core Competencies

Information literacy has been defined and promoted by various library organisations, including the Association of College and Research Libraries, which formulated the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education in 2000 (American Library Association 2006). Those IL standards delineated the breadth and range of skills that information literacy encompasses and also helped to elevate the discourse to the broader higher education community. The American Association for Higher Education and the Council of Independent Colleges endorsed these standards (American Library Association 2006), which, among others⁷, formed the foundation of our own customised set of Information Literacy Core Competencies (ILCC). (See Appendix A.) The curriculum at GVSU is arranged by three levels: basic, major, and graduate. Basic courses are usually preliminary, designed for first- and second-year students, and include courses in the General Education Program. Major courses are, as their name would indicate, for students majoring in a particular course of study. Graduate courses are for graduate students. We wanted our competencies to align with this existing curricular structure simply because we felt that by using the three existing levels to structure the ILCC document this would encourage its adoption by teaching faculty. As a result the ILCC document is structured with objectives for three levels: General Education and Basic Skills Courses; Major Programs; and Graduate Programs. As mentioned earlier, the ILCC document also aimed to provide a shared language and spark a dialogue between librarians and teaching faculty. A concerted effort was made to use as little library jargon as possible, for example terms like “Boolean searching,” “bibliographic citation,” and “controlled vocabulary” were avoided in order to create a document that would be relevant to teaching faculty from a range of disciplines.

After the completion of the ILCC document, we applied for an internal grant to fund a project to solicit feedback on this document from professorial teaching faculty. During the first phase of the project we ran two teaching faculty focus groups to generate discussion designed to gauge the inclusivity and perceived applicability of the ILCC document. Reflections on the outcome of this phase are presented in this paper. The next phase, due to be completed by the end of 2010, will test the actual applicability of the ILCC document by piloting this in a number of existing courses.

3. Focus Group Design

In this section we examine the purpose and suitability of the focus group format. To begin with, the focus groups were expected to investigate the following:

- the need for the ILCC document,
- whether the ILCC document language was inclusive enough for application by various disciplines,
- whether the teaching faculty were willing to use the ILCC document in their course design, and
- whether the ILCC document could be applied to a variety of syllabi, assignments, and assessments.

We expected that participants would also help us determine what specific types of practical guidance (i.e. library support, examples of syllabi, examples of homework assignments, librarian-lead workshops, etc.) teaching faculty would need to apply the ILCC document to their courses. Focus groups were identified as the best method of data gathering because of their ability to aid researchers "looking for the range of ideas or feelings that people have about" the ILCC document,

⁷ See References for other standards and competencies that influenced the GVSU ILCC document.

and because we wanted to gauge "differences in perspective between" the authors of the ILCC document and the teaching faculty who might use the ILCC document (Krueger & Casey 2009, p.19). As proposed by Bruce et al. (2006), teaching faculty and library faculty bring different experiences to the teaching and learning of information literacy. In line with the general aims of the focus group method we were not seeking consensus, but wanted to explore this gap by recording the experiences of teaching faculty (Morgan & Krueger 1993) and test the effectiveness of the language used to describe the various skills goals and objectives (Krueger & Casey 2009). It is important to recognize that focus groups offer strengths and weaknesses that may affect results. For example, some of our focus group participants knew one another. This might have inhibited free sharing of opinions and criticisms due to university politics or other similar circumstances. Conversely, such familiarity might help them share ideas more freely. Similarly, the benefit of recording the focus group's discussion was weighed against the potential risk that the recording equipment may make participants feel self-conscious. Demographic differences and strong personalities also may affect the conversation, although these problems would be minimised by an experienced facilitator (Stewart & Shamdasani 1990, Morgan & Krueger 1993). We took these issues into account when making the decision to use focus groups for our study.

3.1 Focus Group Implementation

Two two-hour focus group sessions were planned with participants drawn from an array of units and disciplines across the university. Randomized, controlled sampling was neither necessary nor appropriate for these targeted groups simply because we wished to solicit feedback about the ILCC document specifically from teaching faculty who had expressed some interest in information literacy principles and practices. To that end, library faculty recommended at least two teaching faculty who fitted these criteria and as a result we selected fourteen out of the 38 teaching faculty identified.

In order to take advantage of some of the benefits of heterogeneity in focus group composition (Stewart & Shamadasani 1990), the participants were selected to ensure that each focus group included no more than one representative from any one discipline, that each group had a balanced gender distribution (overall there were eight women and six men), and an equal range of teaching faculty status (e.g., tenured, visiting, etc.). Both groups included members from the following disciplines and units: biomedical sciences, business, chemistry, classics, communications, computer science, geology, Honours College, nursing, philosophy, physical therapy, psychology, women and gender studies, and the writing centre. Each selected candidate was offered an honorarium after participating in the focus group, which was funded by an \$1,800 Pew Scholar Teacher Grant we were awarded by the GVSU Pew Faculty Teaching and Learning Centre.

The focus groups met on June 10 and June 11, 2009 and were conducted by an experienced facilitator from outside GVSU, a university professor who was knowledgeable about information literacy. As required by GVSU's institutional review board, at the beginning of each two-hour session all participants were advised that the conversation was being recorded and was to be transcribed.

The facilitator guided the groups using a script designed to evaluate the University Libraries' Information Literacy Core Competencies document. Specifically, we wanted to learn about the teaching faculty's understanding about information literacy, including whether this concept was discussed in their departments. The facilitator also asked about GVSU's information literacy competencies themselves, and about the organisation and clarity of the ILCC document. Finally, the facilitator explored what the teaching faculty felt they needed to integrate information literacy into their classes and what kinds of support the library could offer. At the conclusion of each session, participants were invited to submit additional, voluntary comments on a printed form.

4. Focus Group Analysis

As a first step, we transcribed the audio from each focus group and anonymised the transcript data. Following from this we coded the data and grouped similar codes into a few dozen concepts. For example, throughout both focus groups the teaching faculty discussed how students are not always able to apply what they learned in one course to another course. We used the concept *knowledge transfer* to describe this. As another example, teaching faculty frequently mentioned their concern about academic honesty and whether their students fully understood proper citation format, problems with plagiarism, and reasons to adhere to ethical standards in their research. We called this concept *academic integrity*.

In line with the content analysis approach these concepts were grouped into broad categories that helped us explain how the participants reacted to our ILCC document. For example, we grouped the concepts of *methodology*, *bias*, *relevance to topic*, *quality*, and *currency* into a category called *evaluating sources*. Another category called *research process* comprised the concepts of *question development*, *searching skills*, *identifying the need for information*, and *identifying appropriate sources*. In all, we identified twenty-two broad categories. As a detailed account of all the categories generated by this analysis goes beyond the scope of this paper in the next section we focus on three main categories: *the definition of information literacy*; *recommended changes to the ILCC document*; and *assessment* (This last category includes the assessment of student learning outcomes, assessment of teaching, etc.)

5. Focus Group Findings

5.1 Defining Information Literacy

One of the goals of our research was to determine how teaching faculty define the term "information literacy" within the context of their teaching and their disciplines in line with the primary objective of this project that by explicitly defining information literacy teaching faculty would be able to integrate information literacy objectives in their teaching practice.

Focus group participants were specifically asked how they define the term information literacy, how they incorporate information literacy into their classes, and the importance of information literacy in their departments and disciplines. Because we had sought out participants who had demonstrated some interest in information literacy principles and practices, all participants were familiar with the term information literacy to some extent, although their definitions varied significantly as they were drawn from previous experience, readings, and accidental discovery while searching for tangential information (e.g. plagiarism prevention, general curriculum guidelines, accreditation requirements, etc.).

It is important to note that although participants used the same terminology to describe information literacy (see Figure 1), it is impossible to determine whether these views were the result of reviewing the ILCC document, whether they originated from the focus group conversation, or from their own prior knowledge. However, we did note that teaching faculty seemed comfortable using the terminology within the ILCC document. As shown by the data below teaching faculty described both the application of information literacy skills (left column of Figure 1) and the definition of information literacy (right column of Figure 1) suggesting a familiarity with both the theory and practice of information literacy.

Figure 1: How teaching faculty talk about information literacy.

| <i>How faculty talk about information literacy:</i> | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| critical thinking | organizing information |
| sense making | synthesizing information |
| communicating | evaluating information |
| paraphrasing | finding information |
| citing | searching for information |
| consumer of research | ethically using information |
| defining a question | understanding information |
| constructing logical arguments | gauging applicability of information |
| supporting logical arguments | obtaining information |
| managing sources | critiquing information |

Note. From focus group transcripts, June 10-11, 2009.

5.2 Changes in the Language of the ILCC Document

Participant discussion led to specific content changes within the ILCC document. In some cases, terminology was added and revised to better align with teaching faculty language. For example, we added an objective related to development of a proto-thesis (i.e. preliminary opinion on a topic), as this process was discussed by both focus groups. The suggestions from teaching faculty were used to identify content that needed clarification. For example, the ILCC document originally contained an objective which read: *Uses current awareness tools (e.g., RSS feeds, blogs, and listservs)*. Teaching faculty were unfamiliar with the term "current awareness tools." We revised the language and clarified the intent in order to make the objective clearer. The revised version reads: *Use current awareness technologies (e.g., RSS feeds, blogs, and listservs) to stay versed in research.* (See Skills Goal IV in Appendix A.)

Teaching faculty who work with undergraduate students pointed out several areas that were not addressed by the ILCC document. For example, objectives were added that addressed managing information overload and using library services such as interlibrary loan. Additionally, teaching faculty spent a great deal of time discussing their undergraduate students' advanced technological skills. They argued that teaching faculty should be encouraged to leverage the skills students are already using at this point in their social lives (e.g. social networking, Twitter feeds, folk taxonomies (social tagging), etc). For example, students already know how to subscribe to news updates, as many subscribe to Facebook alerts and Twitter feeds. With guidance, students could be using these skills to subscribe to things like internship alerts and disciplinary-related RSS feeds. Within the ILCC document, we applied this feedback to our employment of advanced technological applications (such as using RSS feeds). In addition, we added these technological skills at the major program level to convey the expectation that a student's skill in technology should increase with their progression from the major to graduate level. (See Skills Goal IV in Appendix A.)

Teaching faculty who work with graduate students also gave several suggestions for objectives operating at graduate level. As a result, we added some objectives relating to understanding the disciplinary process, adhering to disciplinary ethical guidelines, and developing search skills to achieve efficiency and relevancy in search results. (The original ILCC document did include a skills goal covering the ethical use of information. We retained this skills goal but rewrote it to include an objective addressing ethical considerations specific to the discipline.)

5.2.1 ILCC Document Structure

The skills goals in the ILCC document were listed in a particular numbered order for ease of reference. The teaching faculty thought that this numbering demonstrated a rigid hierarchical order of the skills goals. Some teaching faculty commented that the linearity of skills goals was incongruent with their own cyclical philosophies of information literacy, while others argued that a reordering of the skills would make more sense in their particular disciplines. These comments stress the point that becoming information literate is not a linear process.

It was impossible to reorder the skills goals to address all of the concerns of teaching faculty. Instead we decided to make the following points explicit from the outset:

1. The nature to the skills goals is recursive. One skill may inform any of the others, and a student should be expected to move back and forth through the skills goals as dictated by their information need.
2. Teaching faculty may choose to teach students skills goals in any order they deem appropriate for their disciplinary and individual teaching goals.

Faculty also expressed confusion over the order of the objectives listed under the goals in the ILCC document. The objectives within each skills goal were intended to build upon one another, for example, the Major Program objectives build upon the objectives met at the General Education and Basic Skills Courses level.

In order to address these confusions, we expanded the preamble to include new sections regarding the structure and purpose of the ILCC document and stress that teaching faculty can apply or revise the ILCC document to suit their disciplinary needs. The ILCC document is intended to help teaching faculty make information literacy more explicit in their teaching and assessment strategies.

5.2.2 Clarification of the Skills Goals

Teaching faculty response to the objectives within the ILCC document as a whole was quite positive. However, several teaching faculty criticised the sixth skills goal, Develop Subject Knowledge. Teaching faculty felt that the skills goal defined as "to understand the disciplinary and societal context in which information is presented and created and is able to contribute to that body of information" was too broad and would be difficult to assess. Teaching faculty were also concerned that the objectives in this skills goal overlapped heavily with the rest of the skills goals in the ILCC document. As one teaching faculty member commented, "The objectives [in skills goal six] seem to be activities students might do to meet the other objectives.[such as] using advanced subject search features in research databases [..]."

Upon further reflection, and in order to address the teaching faculty concerns, we considered deleting skills goal six and adding its objectives into other skills goals where necessary. However, we felt that skills goal six, with its emphasis on global citizenry, critical thinking, and communication, reflected values outlined in the university's mission, vision, and curricular guidelines. In response to the concerns expressed by teaching faculty we decided to rewrite this skills goal.

When we examined the overlap between objectives in skills goal six and the rest of the skills goals, we realised that, in contrast to the broad statement, the skills goal's definition and objectives were narrowly focused on the content and structure of a student's particular discipline. This narrow focus led to objectives in skills goal six frequently overlapping with major program competencies in the other skills goals. To address the overlap and redundancy, we chose to focus skills goal six on the

ability to communicate and contribute to the disciplinary and societal context of information. With this new focus in mind, we pulled objectives related to communication from the other skills goals so that they could stand alone in skills goal six (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2: Original skills goal six.

| | |
|---|--|
| I | <p>VI. Develop Subject Knowledge</p> <p>Understand the disciplinary and societal context in which information is presented and created, and is able to contribute to that body of information</p> <p><i>General Education and Basic Skills Courses:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Be aware of subject-specific resources (e.g., subject guides, subject-specific databases, liaison librarians, etc.) <p><i>Major Program:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Comprehend the academic process in specific disciplines ▪ Consult with university subject experts (e.g., instructors, librarians, software specialists, etc.) ▪ Use advanced subject-search features in research databases ▪ Be able to select a breadth of discipline-specific materials (e.g., scholarly journals, trade publications, books, government information, web-based resources, etc.) ▪ Be familiar with post-graduate resources to foster professional membership, leadership and community involvement ▪ Be familiar with primary sources <p><i>Graduate Programs:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Be familiar with seminal works and experts in field ▪ Be able to articulate the standards of the field ▪ Contributes to associations & networks related to the discipline <hr/> <p><i>Note.</i> From Beaubien, S. et al. 2009. Information literacy core competencies. January 2009 ed. XX: State University.</p> |
|---|--|

Figure 3: Revised skills goal six.

| | |
|---|--|
| I | <p>VI. Communicate Knowledge</p> <p>Understand the disciplinary and societal context in which information is presented and created, and is able to contribute to that body of information</p> <p><i>General Education and Basic Skills Courses:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Synthesize information from various sources ▪ Develop awareness of publication lifecycle ▪ Recognize the financial forces driving the availability of information <p><i>Major Program:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Apply content knowledge to service learning environments ▪ Identify post-graduate resources for professional development, leadership, scholarly communication and community involvement ▪ Use government information to foster informed citizenry <p><i>Graduate Programs:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Contribute to associations and networks related to the discipline ▪ Participate in the academic process of one's discipline (e.g. discovery, proposal, funding, research design, dissemination, etc.) ▪ Share findings with peers in open fora <hr/> <p><i>Note.</i> From State University. 2010. Information literacy core competencies. [Online]. March 2010 ed. XX: State University. Available at: http://XXsu.edu/library/information-literacy-core-competencies-168.htm [Accessed 23 March 2010]</p> |
|---|--|

5.3 Assessment

Assessment was a major theme in the focus group discussions that reflected teaching faculty's concerns of accountability and workload. We discovered that it was necessary for the ILCC document to address this issue before we could gain consensus or support from teaching faculty. Teaching faculty viewed assessment as being an integral, inseparable component of their work and agreed that information literacy should in theory be assessed for a number of reasons:

1. Information literacy is central to the mission and vision of the university
2. Assessing information literacy skills encourages teaching faculty to work information literacy components into the framework of a course
3. Students will not concern themselves with the attainment of information literacy skills unless teaching faculty are explicitly assessing those skills

Whilst teaching faculty recognised the importance of assessing information literacy, it was evident that focus group participants shared the concern that the adoption of the ILCC document at university or department levels would lead to an increase in assessment responsibilities for teaching faculty. In particular they wondered if this was yet "another assessment tool...to be wary of" and worried they would reach "a point of exhaustion" when faced with the additional assessment of the ILCC objectives on top of existing assessment requirements from other governance and departmental bodies.

The issues of assessment raised in the focus groups' discussions went beyond the scope of our project and what we could feasibly address in the ILCC document. To anticipate and shape future conversations on the relationship between assessment and the ILCC document, we expanded on the preamble stressing that the ILCC document is not intended to be an assessment tool. The preamble also outlined several ways that teaching faculty and their departments could use the ILCC document as an "information literacy lens" through which their existing curricular materials could be viewed.

In the focus groups teaching faculty also considered how the ILCC document could be used to inform (and perhaps reform) the current assessment process. Some participants argued that the library should play a more central role in the university's assessment process and that librarians should act as liaisons between individual teaching faculty and university assessment committees. Others were more realistic about the library's role in assessment, arguing that the university "already [has] assessment procedures in place both through the [general education] programs and through the majors programs." Teaching faculty agreed that the ILCC document "can be used to inform the larger university assessment process" and advocated for including it in the existing assessment procedures. Examining whether the ILCC document could inform the existing university assessment process is something that goes beyond the scope of this study and could be explored by the library in the future.

7. Conclusion

The focus group data was rich in content and offered a detailed insight into the teaching faculty's view of information literacy. In future we envisage potential for scholarship in the area of assessment simply because this was discussed at length by the focus groups' participants. Further investigation could explore the creation of assessment documents for information literacy, related course assignments, and other support documents suggested by teaching faculty. These suggestions emerged during the focus groups' discussions but went beyond the scope of this study.

As further scholarship is undertaken, there are a few limitations to the study that should be considered. First, we were not able to determine whether faculty defined information literacy independently from the definitions promoted by the ILCC document and GVSU. Secondly, the selection of our focus group samples illustrates another limitation of the study given that the selection of teaching faculty participating in the focus groups depended on whether they had an interest in information literacy and whether they were available and willing to participate. It follows that the initial interest towards information literacy expressed by the focus groups' participants may not be representative of the entire teaching faculty. Furthermore, our process was contextualised to fit our own institution and may not necessarily be applicable to other institutions.

We set out to gauge the success of the ILCC document by conducting focus groups to gather teaching faculty perceptions of the document. Ultimately, our study showed that the ILCC document resonated with teaching faculty who participated in the focus groups. This was most clearly demonstrated in the positive comments made about the ILCC document itself and in the discussion that showed a clear alignment between the library's definition of information literacy and the teaching faculty's understanding of this concept. Such a positive response bodes well for the ILCC document's future and our hope that it will eventually become integrated into the broader academic community at GVSU. The ILCC document was intended from its inception to be a flexible document which needs to be reviewed and updated on a regular basis, and in our view it is the adaptability of this document rather than its prescriptiveness that will ensure the implementation of the ILCC document by the GVSU community.

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Appendix A: GVSU Information Literacy Core Competencies

Last updated 18.03.2010

Available at <http://main.gvsu.edu/library/information-literacy-core-competencies-168.htm>

What is information literacy?

Information literacy is a set of skills which includes finding information effectively; managing the abundance of information available; thinking critically about resources; synthesizing and incorporating information into one's knowledge base; creatively expressing and effectively communicating new knowledge; using information ethically; and using knowledge to better society.

Why is information literacy important?

Within the context of a liberal education, information literacy prepares students for lifelong learning, a value championed in the University's strategic planning and curriculum documents. Grand Valley State University's mission is to educate students to shape their lives, their professions and their societies.

Information literacy supports this mission by empowering learners to:

- Inform themselves
- Inform their profession
- Inform society

What is the purpose of these competencies?

Information literacy is a shared responsibility among all stakeholders; it requires awareness of what others are doing in programs and initiatives across the university and in the community and, after awareness, a willingness to take deliberate, mindful action. To that end, these competencies are an attempt to provide a shared language to spark dialogue within the broader academic community. Such dialogue lays a foundation for integrating information literacy into learning opportunities. This can take many forms: collaborating on assignment creation; coordinating syllabi across a department, providing a framework for faculty workshops and training, writing learning outcomes for assessment. This collection of competencies is one tool to help facilitate that integration. These actions ultimately make information literacy more explicit to faculty and students and encourage ongoing conversation.

How are these competencies structured?

Information literacy concepts defined in these competencies were mapped wherever possible to GVSU's General Education Program guidelines in order to illustrate that information literacy is implicit in all learning environments.

A hierarchical numbering system was imposed upon skills goals in order to make conversations about this document easier. However, when this collection of competencies is used as a tool it need not be used in this linear fashion. The order in which information literacy skills are learned is dependent on one's specific information needs and existing skills.

While the skills goals are not necessarily linear, the objectives within each goal are intended to build upon one another. A scaffolding hierarchy was used throughout the objectives in order to delineate a deepening understanding of information literacy as students progress in their education. For example, students in their major programs are expected to have already learned the information literacy skills listed under the General Education and Basic Skills sections.

The objectives also may be used to begin identifying deficiencies in information literacy skills. For example, it might be necessary for a graduate student to relearn skills ordinarily expected of students at the basic or major level.

How might individual faculty and departments interpret this collection of competencies?

Every effort was made to use inclusive language and to make concepts adaptable to any academic discipline. Individual faculty, departments, and units are encouraged to modify these competencies to better address the unique requirements of their disciplines. These competencies may be used as a lens through which to view existing assignments and to edit them to better elucidate information literacy skills goals. (For information about revising course materials, see [Information Literacy in your Discipline.](#))

| Skills Goals | Objectives |
|--|--|
| <p>I. Construct a question or problem statement</p> <p>Able to articulate need for existing information and literature and develop a research question or thesis statement.</p> | <p><i>General Education and Basic Skills Courses:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define the topic and the information needed • Develop and refine a proto-thesis or preliminary opinion on the topic • Seek information beyond course materials as necessary • Develop a manageable focus appropriate to criteria of assignment <p><i>Major Program:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively and independently seek sources beyond course materials • Articulate research question or thesis statement within confines/context of discipline • Use discipline-specific terminology <p><i>Graduate Programs:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop an original research question which contributes to the body of knowledge in the field |
| <p>II. Locate and Gather Information</p> <p>Able to execute a plan for locating information by developing a search strategy and identifying sources of information</p> | <p><i>General Education and Basic Skills Courses:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a plan for searching • Identify various sources of help in searching (e.g. library and classroom faculty, library staff, peers, library guides, etc.) <p><i>Major Program:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify core subject research databases • Use advanced search features in subject research databases • Use recursive searching techniques • Identify a breadth of primary and secondary sources of information in the field (e.g., scholarly journals, trade publications, books, government information, web-based resources, subject experts, etc.) • Interpret and use citations to find additional literature • Recognize tools for acquiring resources outside of GVSU collections (e.g. Document Delivery, Interlibrary Loan, etc.) <p><i>Graduate Programs:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek primary sources from foundational theorists and practitioners • Construct advanced searches that are efficient and yield pertinent information |
| <p>III. Evaluate Sources</p> <p>Able to evaluate the quality, usefulness, and relevance of the information they discover</p> | <p><i>General Education and Basic Skills Courses:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differentiate between scholarly, trade, and popular sources • Evaluate resources for authority, accuracy, reliability, coverage, and timeliness • Evaluate found resources for relevance to the topic and adjust topic accordingly <p><i>Major Program:</i></p> |

| | |
|---|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify possible biases within an information source • Define peer reviewed • Seek feedback from peers and professors • Make use of review tools to evaluate information sources (e.g., book reviews, annotated bibliographies, etc.) <p><i>Graduate Programs:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differentiate between types of research (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, etc.) • Evaluate research methods within studies • Identify research biases within studies • Apply evaluation criteria in the identification and use of key sources of information (e.g., journal impact factors) |
| <p>IV. Manage Information Able to manage information from a variety of sources</p> | <p><i>General Education and Basic Skills Courses:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a strategy for logging and retrieving information found • Recognize information overload and develop strategies to manage information anxiety <p><i>Major Program:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a citation management system (e.g., RefWorks or EndNote) • Recognize how current awareness technologies (e.g., RSS feeds, blogs, listservs) can be used to stay informed in areas of interest <p><i>Graduate Programs:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use current awareness technologies (e.g., RSS feeds, blogs, listservs) to stay versed in research • Preserve/archive research, data, portfolio, thesis, project, etc. to ensure its future accessibility |
| <p>V. Use Information Ethically Understand the legal and ethical implications of using information appropriately and responsibly</p> | <p><i>General Education and Basic Skills Courses:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize the basics of plagiarism and copyright • Cite sources appropriately <p><i>Major Program:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop an increasing awareness of responsible use of information and types of plagiarism • Recognize ethical and legal considerations specific to the discipline • Use information ethically as global and local citizens <p><i>Graduate Programs:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose whether to retain author rights for future use of research output • Adhere to professional ethical guidelines (e.g. HIPAA, FERPA, HRRIC/IRB, etc.) |
| <p>VI. Communicate Knowledge Understand the disciplinary and societal context in which information is presented and created, and is able to contribute to that body of information</p> | <p><i>General Education and Basic Skills Courses:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synthesize information from various sources • Develop awareness of publication lifecycle • Recognize the financial forces driving the availability of information <p><i>Major Program:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply content knowledge to service learning environments • Identify post-graduate resources for professional development, leadership, scholarly communication and community involvement • Use government information to foster informed citizenry <p><i>Graduate Programs:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribute to associations and networks related to the discipline |

| | |
|--|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in the academic process of one's discipline (e.g. discovery, proposal, funding, research design, dissemination, etc.) • Share findings with peers in open fora |
|--|---|

Faculty may also use the document to:

- collaborate on assignment creation
- coordinate syllabi across a department
- provide a framework for faculty workshops and training
- write learning outcomes for assessment
- make information literacy more transparent

This collection of competencies is not intended to be an assessment document with measurable outcomes. The outlined teaching objectives are intended to shape instruction; measurable outcomes could be written to create a separate assessment document, however, that is currently outside the scope of this document.

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