

2016

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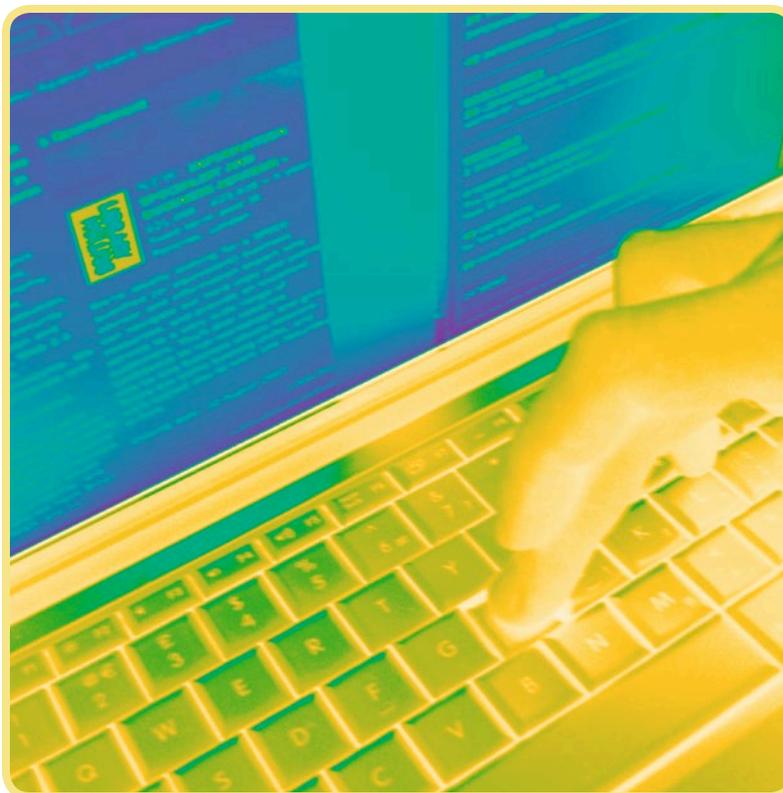
Lancaster, Sean (2016) "Beyond the Basics: Information Literacy," *Colleagues*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 8.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol13/iss1/8>

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Beyond the Basics: Information Literacy

By Sean Lancaster, GVSU Faculty



Reading and writing certainly get the most focus on the topic of literacy,

but most students advance beyond the basic reading and writing literacy skills and become ready for more advanced instruction. In this article, I explore an important aspect of literacy that is often an afterthought in many schools: information literacy.

In 1983, the seminal report “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform” brought forth shockwaves in educational circles. This report, along with others that followed, provided the impetus for the American Library Association (ALA) to create the, “ALA Presidential Committee on Information Literacy.” This blue ribbon panel produced a report in 1989 that defined information literacy, in part, as being able to, “recognize when

information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the

needed information” (retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/whitepapers/presidential>).

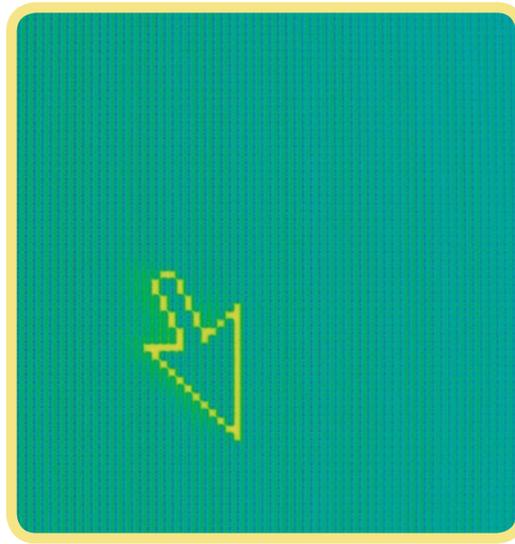
Following the Industrial Age, the Digital Revolution has shifted the first world into the Information Age. The Information Age is characterized by computerized access to massive amounts of information. The ALA report touted the importance of being information literate in a time before the internet was widely used. And, the ubiquitous access to so much information is what now makes information literacy even more critical.

An easy way to illustrate the importance of information literacy begins by imagining a student conducting an internet search. Perhaps the student is writing a paper

about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Information literacy is the ability of the student to find related material and determine the validity and reliability of the material that is being sought. After finding the material, or in some cases, evidence, an information literate student can use that material in the product being produced (e.g., a research paper).

I teach an undergraduate course for students who are becoming teachers where I have used an activity that asked my students to evaluate a website about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Specifically, they were asked to follow a link to the website, analyze it, and complete a survey about the credibility of the site. A surprisingly small percentage of the students were able to determine that the first website was created by a white supremacist group that was purposefully trying to discredit MLK Jr. I asked my students to evaluate five websites in this activity. Three of the sites were fairly credible. Two were not, including the MLK Jr. site in question. Many of the students would quickly scan the headlines, see the photos of MLK Jr., and then in the follow up survey, explain to me that the site was worthwhile for writing a report on MLK Jr. Not many students investigated deeply and examined content enough to ascertain that the site was heavily biased and erroneous. The URL for the site featured MLK Jr.'s name, so it could easily look legitimate from a quick glance. This activity demonstrated the importance of teaching information literacy to these future teachers. If they were easily tricked by a site with a legitimate looking URL, then how are K-12 students going to stand a chance? The media and politicians are often quick to note that students should be learning how to think critically. Information literacy skills are critical thinking skills, and they need to be emphasized and taught in schools.

Unfortunately, information literacy skills create a paradox in education where nearly all stakeholders would agree that the skills are necessary and critical for students to learn; however, our standardized testing in the state and nation



do not assess information literacy skills. This lack of accountability can easily result in schools failing to put forth an effort to teach these skills.

One organization trying to address the call for teaching information literacy skills is the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). ISTE is the preeminent professional organization and learned society for technology in education.

ISTE produces standards related to teaching technology and most recently produced standards for students in 2007/2008. These standards serve as the model for states, including Michigan, who produce their own standards. In 2009, Michigan adopted the Michigan Educational Technology Standards for Students, which are closely aligned to the ISTE Standards. The standards are being updated and refreshed, but the current standards clearly require the teaching of information literacy skills to students. For example, the 6th-8th grade standards in Michigan require schools to teach, “6-8.CT.3. gather data, examine patterns, and apply information for decision making using available digital resources.” A teacher trying to meet this standard could create an activity about doing a careful and meaningful internet search for evidence on a topic of interest. An activity like this could address multiple standards and still prepare students for a test on content as well. It’s up to the teachers to be creative in order to address the vast number of standards.

I described how my own students have struggled with using information literacy skills at the undergraduate level. These students grew up in a time when information literacy skills were not valued enough to be taught. Society cannot afford an entire generation of students entering the Information age unable to critically analyze the constant stream of media and content entering their social media feeds. Schools need to prioritize these skills. Information Literacy must be a new imperative for education reform: A Nation At Risk 2.0.