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The Myrin Library News

Teaching Students to Swim in the Online Sea
A reprint of an article by Geoffrey Nunberg, from the *New York Times*, 2/13/2005*

Information literacy seems to be a phrase whose time has come. Last month, the Educational Testing Service announced that it had developed a test to measure students' ability to evaluate online material. That suggested an official recognition that the millions spent to wire schools and universities is of little use unless students know how to retrieve useful information from the oceans of sludge on the Web.

Clearly, "computer skills" are not enough. A teacher of Scandinavian literature at Berkeley recently described how students used the Web to research a paper on the Vikings: "They're Berkeley students, so, of course, they have the sense to restrict their searches to 'vikings NOT minnesota.' But they're perfectly willing to believe a Web site that describes early Viking settlements in Oklahoma."

That trusting nature is partly a legacy of the print age. If we tend to give the benefit of the doubt to the things we read in library books, it is because they have been screened twice: first by a publisher, who decided they were worth printing, and then by the librarian who acquired them or the professor who requested their purchase.

The Web imposes no such filters, even as it

Reprinted with permission from G. Nunberg

allows users to examine subjects people would never have gone to a traditional library to research, like buying a printer or a cheap airline ticket. Many adolescents use the Internet to get information about issues they are reluctant to discuss with parents or teachers, like sexual behavior, sexual identity, drug use or depression and suicide.

But there is a paradox in the way people think of the Web. Everyone is aware that it teems with rotten information, but most people feel confident that they can sort out the dross. In a survey released last month by the Pew Project on the Internet and American Life, 87 percent of search-engine users said they found what they were looking for all or most of the time.

That level of confidence may not be justified, particularly when a search for information requires judging a Web site's credibility. According to the Pew survey, only 38 percent of search-engine users were aware of the difference between unpaid and sponsored search results, and only 18 percent could tell which was which.

A 2002 study directed by BJ Fogg, a

The Information Literacy Issue

In this issue of the Myrin Library News, we're focusing on Information Literacy. Perhaps you've heard of the phrase, perhaps it's new to you, but one thing is for sure, as Dr. Nunberg of Stanford points out in our feature article: its time has come. Now, it isn't a matter of where to find information, but where to find the *right* information, the kind that's appropriate for scholarly research. It's a matter of doing good research, which is as hard as it ever was, if not harder for the temptation to use whatever Google shows us first. We in Myrin help many students, in personal meetings and at the reference desk, formulate their topics and find the materials they need. But we don't reach all of them. We are working hard, in partnership with faculty members, to help students stay afloat, and to come up with an effective way to reach more of them, when they need us. Contact us at dskorina@ursinus.edu or x.2302 for more information.

Information Literacy at Ursinus

by Diane Skorina

"Some professors may object to the call for 'information literacy'," writes Todd Gilmore, a librarian at Yale University, in a recent *Chronicle* article. He continues: "[T]he term can rankle. It risks sounding elementary, or condescending, or alarmist, or perhaps seems like an affectation by which librarians seek to mystify and aggrandize what they do via jargon." That's why, he says, he prefers to use the term "Research Education," which is clearer, more straightforward — it's something that librarians and professors alike can agree that many students need. Personally, I like the term "Research Education" for those very reasons. But I do think that information literacy is grander than that, and more ambitious: it's not just about research, after all — it's about teaching students the skills they need to think about what they're reading, seeing, and listening to *critically*, for school, for work, for life.

So whatever we call it, and however we define it at our particular colleges and universities, information literacy is a concept that's here to stay, and it's an important part of any campus. Now, even the Middle States accreditation standards describe information literacy as an "essential component of any educational program." As defined in Standard 11 of the "Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education," information literacy encompasses several skills related to research that address "a student's competency in acquiring and processing information in the search for understanding."

The information literate student is able to determine the need for information, access it, evaluate it, incorporate it into his/her knowledge base, use it effectively to accomplish a specific purpose, and understand the nature of using it ethically. In the college context, this essentially means that the student knows how to do thorough, comprehensive, scholarly research (as opposed to just finding something on the Internet using a search engine), and incorporate that research ethically into his/her own work.

The problem students face today is not the *difficulty* of finding information, but rather the difficulty of finding *too much* information. Today we are surrounded by information in all media types, almost drowning in it, and all we need to do is hop on the Internet, so it seems, to find out what it is we think we need to know. But students coming to college are expected to be more thorough than this. At Ursinus, students must complete an Independent Research component to graduate, many will have the opportunity to participate in Summer Fellows research or an Honors level thesis, and most seniors must complete a capstone project of a major research paper. All of these projects require in-depth knowledge of the research process, the ability to discern between different types of information and the ability to choose wisely among all of the available resources.

As Gilmore of Yale suggests, the best way to produce information literate students is through a partnership of faculty and librarian. (See http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2006/10/2006100301c/careers.html for the full article.) We as librarians will continue to make a concerted effort as educators to move from the old model of "Library Instruction" to a broader, more comprehensive "Information Literacy/Research Education" approach. We believe in this, and we are looking for partners in this process. We are happy to meet with your students, and also to work with you to design classes and assignments to help students develop the new skills they need in this Information Age.

> *Whatever we call it...information literacy is a concept that's here to stay, an important part of any campus.*

More Readings in Information Literacy

- Association of College & Research Libraries Information Literacy Competency Standards: http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.htm

- ACRL Information Literacy Website: http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlissues/acrlinfolit/informationliteracy.htm

- 21st Century Information Fluency Project: http://21cif.imsa.edu/

- *I Found It on the Internet: Coming of Age Online.* By Frances J. Harris. [2nd Floor Myrin: 025.04 H241]

- *Integrating Information Literacy into the College Experience.* [2nd Floor Myrin: 025.5677 In8]

- "Farewell to the Information Age" by Geoffrey Nunberg: http://www.ischool.berkeley.edu/~nunberg/farewell.pdf

Teaching Students to Swim...(cont'd)

Stanford psychologist, found that people tend to judge the credibility of a Web site by its appearance, rather than by checking who put it up and why. But it is much easier to produce a professional-looking Web site than a credible-looking book. The BBC was recently duped by a fake Dow Chemical site into broadcasting an interview with an environmentalist posing as a company spokesman.

Then, too, search engines make it all too easy to filter information in ways that reinforce pre-existing biases. A Google search on "voting machine fraud," for example, will turn up popular Web pages that feature those words prominently, most of which will support the view that voting machines make election fraud easier; opposing sites won't tend to feature that language, so will be missed in the search. A researcher exploring the same topic in a library would be more likely to encounter diverse points of view.

Up to now, librarians have taken the lead in developing information literacy standards and curriculums. There's a certain paradox in that, because a lot of people assumed that the digital age would require neither libraries nor librarians. But today, students have only limited contact with librarians, particularly because they do most of their online information-seeking at home or in the dorm.

More important, leaving information literacy to librarians alone suggests a failure to understand the scope of the problem.

Part of it lies in the word "literacy" itself. No other language has a word that covers such a broad swath of territory, from reading and writing skills, to a familiarity with culture, to elementary competence in subjects like math or geography. To many, "information literacy" suggests a set of basic ABC's that can be consigned to Information 101.

One can list some basic principles of information literacy, like "Recognize an information need"; "Evaluate sources critically"; and "Check to see if the site sponsor is reputable." But those precepts are only of limited help with all that people now use online resources to do.

Last fall, for example, I co-taught a graduate course on "Information Quality" at Berkeley's School of Information Management and Systems. The students were highly sophisticated about search engines and knew their way around the Web.

But even they had difficulty with exercises that involved evaluating information in unfamiliar areas, like using the Web to decide which online degree program to recommend to a friend.

Still, given more time, those students would have known where to go for more accurate maps of the territory they were exploring. Unlike most students, they knew that "what's out there" doesn't end with what comes up on Google. University librarians complain that students tend to confine their online research to Web searches, ignoring other resources that the libraries have access to, like old newspaper archives, map collections and census data.

No less important, the students in our course would have known to use an even more basic technique: asking the right person. E-mail turns the Web into a vast digital help desk; user groups are teeming with people who will gladly explain the finer points of espresso machines or the history of English slang. But most people rarely think to make use of them.

In the end, then, instruction in information literacy will have to pervade every level of education and every course in the curriculum, from university historians' use of collections of online slave narratives to middle-school home economics teachers showing their students where to find reliable nutrition information on the Web.

Even then, it is true, most people will fall back on perfunctory techniques for finding and evaluating information online. As Professor Fogg observes, people tend to be "cognitive misers," relying on superficial cues whenever they can get away with it.

Only when confronting a question that is personally important - a health problem, a major purchase - are most people motivated to dig deeper. But that is reason enough to make sure that people have the skills they will need.

Geoffrey Nunberg, a Stanford linguist, is heard on NPR's "Fresh Air" and is the author of "Going Nucular" (PublicAffairs, 2004).

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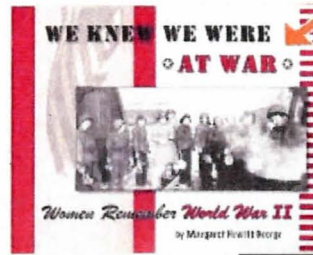## Upcoming Events: First Fridays & Exhibits

Myrin's First Friday programs continue this Spring. The events begin at 3 p.m. in Jazzman's Café. Stay tuned for e-mail updates:

February 2: Alumna author **Margaret "Peg" George** will talk about her recently published book: *We Knew We Were at War: Women Remember World War II.*

March: TBA

April 6: Sculptor of Found Objects **Leo Sewell**, of Philadelphia, will speak about his art. See http://www.leosewell.net/ for a brief biography and pictures of his work.

Artwork by Leo Sewell, Sculptor of Found Objects

Main Floor Lobby Exhibits: Information Literacy materials will be on display, as well as an exhibit on Women and War. A Black History Month exhibit, focusing on the first Black students at Ursinus, will go up in February.

The EDIBLE BOOKS Competition will be coming in late March — stay tuned for updates and announcements! And start thinking now about your entry...

Staff News

David Mill has returned from his sabbatical. He will be presenting a Baden Lecture on March 27, "Is the Library Still the Anchor Store at the Info-Mall? A Look into Ursinus Student Information Consumption."

Delia Tash, Temporary Reference Librarian in the Fall Semester, left Myrin on December 22. Her work on processing gift books, especially for the Grundy Collection, was invaluable.

Staff Recommendations

When a recommendation is available through the library, the call number and floor location are noted after the title.

Diane Skorina highly recommends *Middlesex* **by Jeffrey Eugenides** [currently missing from the library]. It's the epic story of one faulty gene that finds its expression in Calliope "Cal" Stephanides, a hermaphrodite with a fancy prose style and one of the best 20th century narrators ever.

Denise Hartman highly recommends *Kite Runner* **by Khaled Hosseini** [1st Fl., Best Sellers, 813.6 H794k], a very moving story about a young Afghan boy's journey through life.

Sarah Penniman recommends *The Week*, a news magazine that covers "all you need to know about everything that matters." All sides are represented in the news excerpts pulled from "the best of the U.S. and international media." It's short, simple, and above all, wonderfully witty.

Charlie Jamison recommends *Unshelved: a Typical Day at the Library* **by Bill Barnes and Gene Ambaum**, a collection of comic strips about the world of working in and using libraries. These were originally published on the Internet at www.unshelved.com, where you can find current cartoons.

FROM THE STACKS... Hello again fellow Bibliophiles! It is I, **Lindsay Sakmann (C'09)** here again to review another book for you! I have selected the book *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* by Gregory Maguire [1st Fl, New Book Shelf, 813.54 M276w].

I started reading this novel with the preconceived notion that Elphaba, the main character and the future villain in the *Wizard of Oz*, was always evil. However, through the course of the book I found myself sympathizing with her and realizing that the people in her life were as much responsible for what happened as she was. After a tough childhood — in the words of Kermit the Frog, it's not easy being green — Elphaba goes off to college and gets stuck with a roommate, Glinda, who does not understand her. Soon Elphaba leaves college behind to help her underground cause, Animals, embarking on a love affair along the way.

Overall, *Wicked* was very interesting because of the fact that you sympathize with one of the classic "evil" characters of all time. Responses of people I've talked to run the gamut between love and hate, and to tell the truth I find myself leaning toward the "mildly disliked" category. I felt at some times there was a deeper meaning I just couldn't figure out, and some parts of the novel are down right confusing. I am, however, glad I took the time to read *Wicked*. As always, I am here: just email me at Lisakmann@ursinus.edu with books you would like me to review! Until later fellow bibliophiles HAPPY READING!