

## From Searching to Researching: An Information Literacy Assignment Sequence

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Among the many ideas presented in the ACRL's *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, what struck me most was the *Framework's* focus on dispositions, defined therein as "ways in which to address the affective, attitudinal, or valuing dimension of learning" (2). In other words, not only do students of information literacy need to know *how*, they also need to *care about*; they need to have an emotional investment in the information they're discovering, exploring, evaluating, synthesizing, and creating.

The notion that instructors of information literacy pay attention to students' dispositions makes a great deal of sense to me. And I am not alone in this line of thinking. During her presentation at one Information Literacy Faculty Fellows workshop, humanities librarian Lisa Coats made a point to focus on dispositions. And with good reason. Without the right dispositions, students are not going to put forth the effort it takes to develop their information literacy.

Academic research in particular can be a painstaking and frequently frustrating aspect of information literacy in higher education, even for the most experienced and successful researchers. Is it any wonder, then, that a student researching a topic she cares little about in a manner with which she is unfamiliar (i.e. in the library's databases as opposed to the far more intuitive Google) would choose the path of least resistance and pick the first source or two she's able to find? Why should this student—to cite a selection of relevant dispositions from the *Framework* itself—"value intellectual curiosity" or "value persistence, adaptability, and flexibility" or "understand that first attempts at searching do not always produce adequate results" or "persist in the face of challenges" (7,9)?

I decided to focus my Information Literacy Faculty Fellows project around questions such as this one. My aim for this project is to offer a sequence of assignments that focus primarily (though not exclusively) on the dispositional aspects of the following frames from the *Framework*: "Research as Inquiry" and "Searching as Strategic Exploration." To be sure, as James Lang points out in *Cheating Lessons*, it can be really difficult to shape students' dispositions; however, instructors can control the context in which students learn and, in so doing, influence those students' attitudes towards what they're learning (57-9).

For my Information Literacy Faculty Fellows project, I'm attempting to begin with a context for research toward that will ultimately influence students' attitudes towards academic research. This assignment sequence rests on the assumption that most people nowadays do quite a bit of research and searching on their own time and that many of those people have a pretty good attitude about (and, dare I say, even enjoy) this kind of informal research. One might imagine the hypothetical student from the foregoing paragraph ditching the academic research she's doing and happily travelling down some social-media rabbit hole. Thus, the sequence aims to capitalize on this notion by guiding students through a series of reflective exercises designed to bridge the gap between "boring" academic research and "fun" informal research. It is intended for lower-level courses, such as UNI 101, HON 110, or ENG 201, that afford instructors and students alike some flexibility with the course content.

### 1. Searching

- In this initial assignment, students should document in a simple list their day-to-day internet searching over a brief period (1-2 days). The easiest way to do this is probably to copy and paste one's search history. Though students may want to edit their lists for

propriety's sake, instructors should encourage them to make their lists as exhaustive as possible and to include even the most seemingly insignificant searches.

- Once students have compiled their lists, they should spend some time examining those lists and reflecting on both the *whys* and the *hows* of their searches. Instructors may want to encourage students to narrow their list to 2-3 searches. For each search, they should consider and document their responses to the following questions:
  - What did I search for?
  - Why did I search for it?
  - How did I search for it? (Did I use Google? Something else?)
  - What did I type into the search bar?
  - How many results did that initial search produce?
  - How many of those results seemed promising? Why?
  - Which of these results did I actually click on? Why? Did I venture beyond the first page of results? Why?
  - How much time did I spend with each result I click on? Did I skim each result or read it in its entirety?
  - Did any of the results I examined inspire further searching on my part? If so, what did I search for, and why?
  - Have I satisfactorily answered my initial question?
- Note that some of the foregoing questions might be difficult for students to answer after they've already completed their searches. This is fine. Indeed, not being able to answer some of these questions might very well inspire some students to think more carefully about their everyday search habits.

## 2. Reflective Searching

- The instructor reviews and responds to Assignment 1, offering feedback on the students' responses to the reflection questions and encouraging students to focus in on the topic that interests them the most.
- Students revisit one of their search topics from Assignment 1, documenting and reflecting their searches as they further explore these topics. Along with any questions posed by the instructor, students should again consider the following questions, albeit, they should try to now answer them in real time, as they're conducting the search:
  - What am I typing into the search bar?
  - How many results does that initial search produce?
  - How many of those results seem promising? Why?
  - Which of these results do I actually click on? Why? Do I venture beyond the first page of results? Why?
  - How much time do I spend with each result I click on? Do I skim each result or read it in its entirety?
  - Do any of the results I examine inspire further searching on my part? If so, what do I search for, and why?
  - Have I satisfactorily answered my initial question?

## 3. Reflective Searching Redux

- The instructor reviews and responds to Assignment 2, offering feedback on the search strategies and posing questions to inspire further critical thinking. Instructors should consider asking students the following questions (adapted from George 134-6):
  - When were the results you examined published? Are they still relevant?
  - Who authored those results?

- What affiliations do those authors have? Could those affiliations suggest an agenda on the part of the author?
- Do any of the results you examined offer leads for further searching?
- At what point did you decide to stop searching? Why? Is further searching possible? Necessary?
- Students respond in writing to the instructors' feedback, answering questions when they can and devising new questions for more focused searching in Assignment 4.

#### **4. Library Session**

- Instructors should schedule a library session focused on the differences between everyday internet searching and using Randall Library resources.
- Students should have completed Assignment 3 by the time they attend this library session. They can use their Assignment 3 topics to practice using Randall Library resources during this session.

#### **5. Using Randall Library Resources**

- Students continue to conduct research into their Assignment 3 topics using Randall Library resources. As in Assignments 1 and 2, they should document and reflect on their efforts. More specifically, students should respond to the following questions:
  - What search terms am I using? How many different terms did I have to try before my search produced any relevant results?
  - How many results does this initial search produce?
  - What, if anything, am I doing to limit the scope of my search? For instance, am I limiting the results to a particular date range? To a particular subject? To a particular kind of source (e.g. peer-reviewed sources)?
  - How much does this limiting change the number of results I'm working with? Is this a manageable amount? Should I further refine my search?
  - Which of these results do I actually click on? Why? Do I venture beyond the first page of results? Why?
  - How much time do I spend with each result I click on? Do I skim each result or read it in its entirety?
  - Do any of the results I examine inspire further searching on my part? If so, what do I search for, and why?

#### **6. Putting it all together**

- For the final assignment in this sequence, students reflect on Assignments 1 through 5. They should consider the following questions:
  - What kinds of sources did I find in the Randall Library resources? How are these sources similar to and/or different from the kinds of sources I found in Assignment's 1 and 2?
  - What did my initial searching in Assignments 1 and 2 offer that the Randall Library resources did not?
  - What did the Randall Library resources offer that my initial searching did not?
  - Have I satisfactorily answered my initial question from Assignment 2? Or has my question changed as I've learned more about the topic? If I changed my question along the way, why did I change it? What questions remain?
  - What are the most common perspectives on this topic? Are there any unusual but nevertheless noteworthy perspectives out there?
  - What ultimately, have I learned about the topic that I didn't know before?

## Works Cited

Association of College and Research Librarians. *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education*. 2016. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

George, Mary W. *The Elements of Library Research*. Princeton, 2008.

Lang, James M. *Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty*. Harvard, 2013.