Learning from Student Learning:

A Librarian-Instructor's View of Her Information Literacy Class

by Carroll Wetzel Wilkinson

Introduction

This article is a sequel to "Stronger Students, Better Research: Information Literacy in the Women's Studies Classroom," published in *Feminist Collections* v.25, no.4 (Summer 2004), and available online at **http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/WomensStudies/fc/fcwilkinson.htm**. It will summarize my experiences and insights based on three more semesters of teaching an experimental, three-credit course now entitled "Gender and the Research Process."

Background

The course started out in 2004 as "Women's Studies Research in the Information Age." It originated in women's studies literature and the ideas of information literacy. To reach a larger audience of students, I expanded its focus in 2006 to the even broader area of gender issues and information and retitled it "Gender and the Research Process."

The students spend the semester involved in various aspects of the research process. This includes framing research questions related to their subject of choice and learning to identify what the characteristics of a good subject actually are. They learn methods of searching for information, deep reading, problem-solving models of research, critical evaluation of information sources, greater sophistication about the genres of publishing, and an appreciation of the services and expertise of the people available in libraries who can facilitate a person's research process.

The course is customized to the students' interests, and so long as their topics have something to do with the socially imposed roles of men and women, the students may choose their own research subjects. They learn several definitions of gender so that they can grasp the cultural imposition of sex-role stereotypes and integrate this into their evolving research process and learning. Many of the tools the students learn are based in the social sciences, although if they are interested in the sciences or humanities, they'll learn to use appropriate sources in those disciplines. Everything else is about the research process and the students' increasing ability, over the semester, to make meaning for themselves through guided learning. You could say the course is fundamentally about learning to learn. By digging deeper and deeper in the resources they find as they do the experiential learning assignments, the students learn the decision-making processes necessary to acquire pre-qualitative and pre-quantitative research competence.

It's my way of teaching "information literacy" — broadly defined as the set of abilities that allow a person to recognize when information is needed and to act effectively and efficiently on that need. The course is also about the ethical applications of information — avoiding plagiarism, understanding the social context from which information comes, and respecting intellectual property created by others.

In 2002, Carleton College's librarians developed an elegant statement, now posted on their website, about the characteristics of a fully informed, information-literate individual in today's complex world:

> An information literate person has to develop a sophisticated relationship with information by fostering appropriate expectations for information sources, effective search strategies, critical evaluation of information sources, and respect for the intellectual work of others.

This emphasis on developing a student's relationship to information, appropriate expectations for it, and evaluation skill, matches the fundamental course results I seek.

Questions and Emerging Answers

At the end of "Stronger Students, Better Research," I posed several questions that I would like to answer here:

- Will my hybrid classroom, with its community information stations stacked with examples of feminist publications and URL lists, catch on as an immersion method?
- Will my "process approach" to teaching research have staying power?
- Did mixing the concepts of information literacy with the information sources of women's studies have sustained appeal?

First, the community information stations have proven to be a good vehicle for exposing students to the genres of publishing. At present the class format is three fifty-minute meetings a week. (I have also tried summer seminars and seventy-minute classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The frequent meetings work best because of the need to develop skills as we progress through the active learning assignments and the ideas of information literacy.) In the available class time of fifty minutes, students can go to one station, choose three sources, evaluate them with my form for print sources, and then report back to the class about their observations. The assignment needs to be repeated several times for students to experience the many formats that are available. They enjoy the URL lists at one of the stations. Here they get to try both beautifully designed websites and sites of poor quality. In the case of poor sites, they use a different form for evaluation of electronic sources, and they use their class workstation to visit the site and analyze its strengths and weaknesses. In each case the students get better at being critical, and they become more skeptical the more they practice the exercise and talk to each other about what they are finding.

As for the "staying power" of the process approach to teaching research, I have received a note from one graduate student who says, "Since taking your course my research abilities

have improved 100%. Where before I was getting B's in my courses, I am now getting A's. Your course has also improved my writing." I do not have such feedback from every student who has taken the course, but even one expressing this conclusion is encouraging. I believe firmly in the "process pedagogy" approach to teaching research, so I do not anticipate a change. Whether the specific feminist sources are sinking in and will be used in the years ahead, my experience is so far inconclusive.

By "process pedagogy," I mean teaching the steps of research by motivating the students to experience relevant small lessons or active learning assignments related to research. We take time, for example, to go over what "deep reading" is, as I fear many students have never been introduced to this expectation. We explore what author William Badke (Research Strategies) calls "Wrestling with the Topic," which involves not only choosing an interesting subject for exploration, but also setting up a complex question as a first step. And we navigate to databases together and explore their characteristics so they can be used intelligently in the future. The course departs from the old model, still in effect in many courses on this campus, of "writing the paper" and focusing solely on tests and the final project "product" at the end of the semester. Instead, the students earn points for writing a developmental essay that starts with a few paragraphs about the question they wish to answer that relates to their subject choice. Then this turns into an essay that gets longer and more significant as they describe their own research experiences throughout the semester. In the essay (submitted in evolving segments), the students must discuss what happens to them as they seek meaning and build their own knowledge. They are rewarded for acknowledging in the essay both the cognitive and affective components of looking for answers. They are encouraged to report bad experiences as well as good in their essays, since those actually happen in real research and learning. And at the same time, they must look deeply at a wide variety of information sources (I require at least five genres, such as books, films, magazines or newspapers, journals, and relevant websites.) They must critically evaluate the sources that they find, rejecting some and then finally choosing twenty of the best for their annotated bibliography, which is, in combination with the long research process essay, the other major assessment device of the course. With guidance, students learn the steps a researcher must take to develop new knowledge. Throughout the semester students seek information and solve the real problems that come up in the research process.

Finally, mixing the concepts of information literacy with resources in women's and gender studies in this course has proven to have substance and durability. The ideas of publication flow, the hierarchy of information, and the bibliographical organization of a discipline are important parts of the foundation of this developing course. And it is easy to illustrate these ideas using feminist sources.

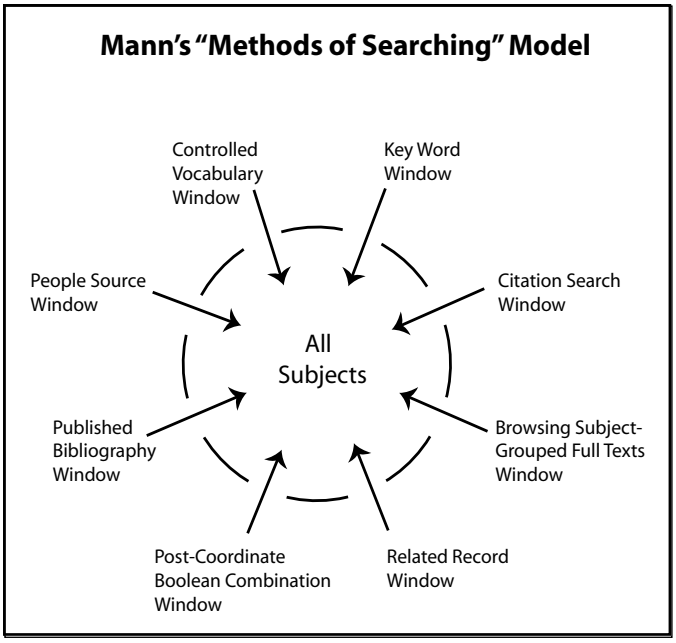
Publication flow refers to the idea that "something happens" and then it's immediately on the Internet, in daily newspapers and weekly news magazines, and, after months pass, in journals and then perhaps a book two or more years later. For example, Nancy Pelosi's recent triumph as the first female U.S.House Speaker has been covered in depth by all the 24/7 news genres, *Ms*. has had a cover article on her already, and soon journal articles will explore

in greater depth the meaning of her breakthrough. This will be followed by books, some written by feminist historians and others interested in her impact, as soon as there is time to get them written, edited, and published.

The hierarchy of information simply addresses the idea that all information is not equal. Some is opinion, some is objective data, some is factual, and some is well-established peer-reviewed (or not) scholarship. This can be illustrated by sending students to the Feminist Majority Foundation's "Feminist Weekly News" feature to find coverage of a news event. Then, assuming it is an ongoing story, such as violent crimes against women, students can visit "Contemporary Women's Issues" through Ebscohost and Joan Korenman's Women's Studies site for a variety of additional feminist sources at different levels of the information hierarchy.

Lynn Westbrook's *Interdisciplinary Information Seeking in Women's Studies* (McFarland, 1999) takes up the bibliographical organization of women's studies, especially in Chapters 1–3, where Westbrook covers the information environment, the information production cycle, scholarly communication mechanisms, the nature of interdisciplinarity, and the nature of information seeking problems in women's studies. The students can read these chapters and reflect on their reactions to her ideas in a guided class discussion.

Thinking critically about both print and electronic information while developing new knowledge through an extensive research project is required in the course of study. Certainly the ethics of information use and the social life of information are also bedrocks of understanding intelligent applications of information. The students demonstrate the results of their learning in their final two-part project entitled "Meta Research Process Essay and Annotated Bibliography." (This is adapted from the work of Susan Beck of New Mexico State University.)



Source: Thomas Mann, *Library Research Models* (Oxford University Press, 1993), p.172 (*fig.11*).

In teaching this course I have learned the answers to other questions as well:

Who registers for "Gender and the Research Process"? Older students, international students, and both undergraduate and graduate students interested in improving their research abilities are registering for the course. So far, thirteen is the largest enrollment I have had.

What are the learning outcomes? Students say in evaluations that their knowledge of the resources (such as databases available through the Libraries)

improves, as does their ability to do research intelligently. Improvement in their work verifies that their ethical application of information gets better with practice. They complete an annotated bibliography with sixteen to twenty sources and a research process essay of twenty pages over the entire semester, and they have at least three chances to get substantial feedback on both these projects. This is essential, because many students do not find it easy to prepare the annotations and the bibliography (which encourages inclusion of all forms of media and e-sources, as well as print).

Problems persist in the students' lack of interest in the seven to eight methods of searching — based on the work of Thomas Mann — that I present (see figure). This may be a learning outcome that I want but have not succeeded in teaching effectively yet. Some students do increase their number of search methods to two or three, and they do become more sophisticated in using Google. While it is true that librarians may have a much greater interest in search strategies than students do, the fact remains that expanding the repertoire of searching options does catch on with some students, and their research findings improve. So I have not given up; I have just become more realistic about getting students excited about this.

Searching for films seems to be an area of great interest to many students, and learning the array of services available through the Libraries produces a kind of amazement in many of the students.

What do the students like about the course? They report liking the wide cross-section of students in the course, which allows for many different perspectives in the classroom exercises and discussions. They like learning what a vast treasure chest of resources and services the libraries offer. They report liking the many chances to re-do their work once they get feedback on its strengths and weaknesses. Nontraditional students (ages forty and older) comment that research is not as dry as it used to be, and that using the Internet is fun once they learn all the places they can go. Students want the intimacy of the class size to continue, but they comment repeatedly that they want to find a way to reach more students to encourage them to take the course. One student suggested that I could reach more students by talking to members of the Parents Club.

What do the students dislike about the course? Their primary criticism was about the lack of a course outline stating the expectations for completion of readings and assignments. (Note: I gave clear assignments approximately three weeks in advance, but the majority wanted the full semester mapped out from beginning to end. This will be changed the next time the course is offered.)

What problems occur as the semester proceeds? Some students are not prepared for the amount of work involved in serious research. Deep reading and critical evaluation of sources

are high expectations for some of them. Furthermore, taking a "process approach" to research is very new for some students. They want to "write the paper," whereas I keep asking them (in the drafts of their Meta-Research Process Essay) to describe the experiences they are having as they look for information. I validate the highs and lows of research as well as the affective dimensions of the process. I stress that research is not just a cognitive process but also engages the emotions. This is difficult for some of them to grasp — and once they have grasped it, they are not quite sure it is allowed in higher-education papers! But it is liberating to many students at the same time.

Managing all the details of the course has been a work in progress for me each time I have offered it. In the Spring 2006 semester I tried to address my lack of organization. I improved my management of grades on both small and large assignments, timely return of graded assignments, and attendance records. I served as a department head at the same time I was offering this course, and I found the transition from an administrative mode to an instructional one a real challenge. I "shift gears" slowly and try to be easy on myself as I move from one role to the other.

How have I modified the course since I began teaching it? The main thing I have done is expand it to include the concepts of gender (not just "women's studies") to widen the course's appeal, because I am under pressure to reach larger numbers of students. I have also adopted a strict attendance policy. After three unexcused absences, the grade drops one point now.

What subjects do the students choose for their research explorations? Topics in Spring 2006 included diabetes education for African American women; the role of women in the politics of Indonesia; the identity issues of adopted children; the effect of the Internet on adolescent development; the reasons some women stay in abusive marriages; the question of European identity; origins of fairy tales in Great Britain and Scotland; and sex trafficking in Asian countries.

What have I learned from the students? They like opportunities to work in groups, with me as an available advisor "on the side"; they like to report the results of their discussions to the full class group; they need plenty of time to learn how to do good-quality annotations for their bibliographies. Without a clear policy on attendance, some take advantage and miss more classes than appropriate.

What else have I learned? Though I envisioned a junior-level appeal, the course has attracted first-year-undergraduate through Ph.D. students, to my great surprise. The first-year student should not have taken the course; she was not ready for the level of work or other academic expectations. Many of the graduate students who have been attracted to the course have been international students. All are united, according to their course evaluations, by a desire to improve their ability to do research in the collections and ways of scholarship of

the United States. Moreover, I have learned that many students of all backgrounds and ages do not know how to do research of even the most basic type. The younger students are characterized by their tech-savvy façade, but they do not try even Google's "Advanced Search" function and have not explored databases in most cases. They demonstrate a "cut and paste" approach to their research assignments at first. The older students are less familiar with social networking software (such as Facebook and MySpace), and they have a genuine desire to know more about the resources we have to offer at the Libraries as well as the wider world of the invisible Web. Interest in Web 2.0, blogging, "mashups," and wikis is definitely growing among all the age groups I have taught.

I have learned the importance of a course outline in addition to a course syllabus. Many students commented in course evaluations that they wanted to know each day exactly what they were expected to complete. I have also learned that having high expectations that are clearly expressed in the syllabus about an attendance policy is essential to student success.

I have learned that the annotated bibliography is a challenging format for some students. It requires their competence in first finding acceptable sources of information, and then analytically evaluating after they have read them. Repeated practice in class leads to improvement in performance.

What outcomes have surprised me? A significant 45% of last spring's students did excellent work and received a grade of A. Their explorations of subjects were thorough and penetrating in keeping with the course expectations.

How important is marketing for the success of this course? Marketing is critical for a special-topics course such as this one, for several reasons. First, there is a great need on this campus to address the development of critical thinking and reach as many students as possible. The requirements of the major limit the number of electives students can take, and a special-topics course is not officially linked to any one curriculum. To establish a broader campus appeal, this semester I wrote all the department chairs of social sciences disciplines, the director of the International Programs Office, the coordinator of the campus program for non-traditional students, and the director of the Student Advising Center in addition to the director of the Center for Women's Studies, to alert them to the existence of this course. I am sending them a flyer designed to promote the potential benefits of the course and to share some of the words of the students' assessments. I am pleased to report that a division of the History Department, called the Cultural Management Studies program (formerly Public History), has approached me about sending students to the course. The director of Advising is also interested in pursuing more of a formal campus partnership. This is an interesting and promising development. Finally, word of mouth is an important and effective marketing strategy. If students send me students, it is the best validation I could ask for.

What is the future of this course? The course has been offered a total of four times now, the fourth time under a new name: "Gender and the Research Process." It is currently be-

ing offered again under the new name. This change signals my two-part desire to expand the scope of potential students and simplify the name. The course cannot be experimental much longer. I must submit it to the curriculum committee of the faculty senate as soon as possible in an effort to get it accepted as an official course in the general education curriculum (GEC). Creating a scalable course offering will be a huge challenge. If the course becomes part of the GEC, its number will drop to a 200 level, and so it may stop attracting graduate students. I am determined to retain the intimacy of the blended/hybrid classroom pedagogy that I have used to date. It is definitely based on a feminist model, and it works well for me and the students. The Spring 2007 offering is listed under the Libraries' new course code: ULIB. This represents the first time the Libraries have had their own course code, and we intend to develop our information literacy curriculum further in the future. Another possible avenue of exploration is teaching this course in an asynchronous environment. I have applied for a course shell in our VISTAeCampus courseware and am experimenting with using aspects of its functionality this semester.

Conclusion

"Gender and the Research Process" is meeting the needs of a small number of students who wish to improve their ability to do effective pre-qualitative and pre-quantitative research. I can now demonstrate that some of its learning results are applicable across a few years. It will be many more years before we know whether a course of this type influences a lifetime of learning (which was one of its original lofty goals.) But whatever happens, the goal of empowering students to seek meaning through research more effectively is being met. I feel a sense of satisfaction in knowing that I am introducing a small number of students to the complexities of the information environment and the opportunities it offers when used with intelligence and confidence.

[*Carroll Wetzel Wilkinson's professional life has changed dramatically since she created and taught this course for the first time at West Virginia University in 2004. While she is still the Women's Studies bibliographer at West Virginia University, she has also become Director of Instruction and Information Literacy for the University Libraries. What she has learned from offering the three-credit information literacy course to women's studies students and interested others as described here forms an excellent foundation for expansion of the university-wide instruction program in the future*.]