

"Information Literacy," Critical Inquiry, and the Mission of Grinnell College: A Proposal¹

Information literacy has been described as “a new liberal art” which involves “critical reflection on the nature of information itself, its technical infrastructure and its social, cultural, and even philosophical context and impact.”²

Understood in this sense, information literacy is fundamental to Grinnell College's mission, to our more recently framed Strategic Plan, and to each department's pedagogy. Grinnell is committed by its mission to education in the liberal arts "through free inquiry and the open exchange of ideas."³ "As a teaching and learning community," moreover,

the College holds that knowledge is a good to be pursued both for its own sake and for the intellectual, moral, and physical well-being of individuals and of society at large. ... The College aims to graduate women and men who can think clearly, who can speak and write persuasively and even eloquently, who can evaluate critically both their own and others' ideas, who can acquire new knowledge, and who are prepared in life and work to use their knowledge and their abilities to serve the common good.⁴

Similarly, Strategy #1 of the *Strategic Plan* is to "[i]ncrease the emphasis on inquiry-based learning."⁵ As we glossed that concept in the document "Supporting Inquiry-Based Learning Under Grinnell College's Strategic Plan: Implications for Library and Information Technology Services", inquiry-based learning "is experiential and discovery-based; it is grounded in engagement with original sources and evidence; and it challenges students to develop their capacities for collaboration, analysis, creativity, and communication as they learn to participate as members of the broader scholarly community."⁶

We propose that "information literacy" be understood in this expansive sense, as *critical reflection on the methods, norms, and significance of inquiry*. Although there are some basic information skills and competencies common to all research,⁷ "information literacy" as we understand it is strongly dependent on disciplinary context, and each department will teach inquiry in a distinct way. Liberally educated students will understand:

- how and why inquiry is differently shaped by different disciplines;
- the materials (evidence) from which inquiry begins for different disciplines, and the course along which inquiry logically proceeds from those materials;

1 This paper originated in an outline prepared by Jim Swartz, Sarah Purcell, and Richard Fyffe at a NITLE/CIC workshop on the "Transformation of the College Library," March 27-29, 2008.

2 Jeremy J. Shapiro and Shelley K. Hughes, "Information Literacy as a Liberal Art: Enlightenment Proposals for a New Curriculum." *Educom Review* 31(2), March/April 1996: <http://www.educause.edu/pub/er/review/reviewarticles/31231.html>. We might add "economic" and "political" to the contexts that are especially germane to information literacy today.

3 Mission Statement, 2002, <http://www.grinnell.edu/offices/president/missionstatement>

4 *Ibid.*

5 Strategic Plan, 2003, <http://www.grinnell.edu/offices/institutionalplanning/strategicplanning/includes/StrategicPlan050305.pdf>

6 "Inquiry-Based Learning under Grinnell College's Strategic Plan: Implications for Library and Information Technology Services," 2007, <http://www.lib.grinnell.edu/general/mission-policies/EKILibITVision112007.pdf>

7 The expanded definition of "information literacy" suggested in this paper allies it closely with several interdisciplinary fields, including media studies, communication studies, and critical information studies. Basic information skills are outlined, among other places, in the *Competency Standards* developed by the Association of College and Research Libraries, <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.cfm>.

- the ethical issues that may arise in the course of inquiry, and how those are addressed by various disciplines;
- the role of communication and critique within communities of learners, and how communication practices differ among disciplines.

As we suggested in "Supporting Inquiry-based Learning," an important part of inquiry-based pedagogy should be practices and tools that help make the results of student inquiry visible within the Grinnell community, as a stimulus both to critique and to reflection on the processes that led to the product.

At the same time that they are disciplinarily inflected, however, the methods and norms of inquiry -- and the associated practices by which the results of inquiry are created, shared, controlled, and preserved -- are also significant to "society at large" as matters of public policy. As the flow of information and knowledge, especially in digital forms, becomes more global, such public policy issues as information privacy, information security, the roles of the public and private sectors in the creation and dissemination of information, equitable access to information, intellectual property law, and related issues will become increasingly important to all citizens' understanding of the contribution of information to "the common good."⁸

Grinnell's program of inquiry-focused education already incorporates "information literacy instruction" in fundamental ways. The goals of this proposal are:

- to deepen the College's understanding of *critical inquiry* in liberal arts education and to create greater intentionality regarding its place in our teaching practice;
- to encourage greater collaboration among departments/concentrations and cognate programs like the Libraries, Instructional Technology, and the Writing Lab;
- to develop programming (lectures and similar events) around the public-policy issues posed by information in contemporary society.

Deepening the Program: A Proposal

Grinnell College has a strong foundation on which to develop an intentional critical inquiry program. Key components already include:

- Tutorial, which includes explicit goals for basic information literacy;⁹
- the instructional programs offered by the Libraries, Curricular Technology, and the Writing Lab;
- rich and diverse collections of "primary evidence" in digital and non-digital formats, including historic documents, early printed books, works of art in a variety of media, numeric and spatial data sets, research findings as reported in scholarly journals, historic scientific instruments, and biological specimens;
- a broad array of public events programming;

8 Two among the many works that address the larger public policy issues raised by the flow of information and knowledge are Manuel Castells, *Rise of the Network Society* (Blackwell, 1996) and Sandra Braman, *Change of State: Information, Policy, and Power* (MIT Press, 2006).

9 <http://www.grinnell.edu/offices/dean/tutorial/tcas/>

- faculty development programs.

However, the relationships among these components and the potential they collectively hold for enriching learning at Grinnell have not been well articulated. We propose four broad strategies for deepening Grinnell's commitment to critical inquiry:

- **Increase collaboration** among classroom faculty, librarians, technologists, and writing, visual arts, science learning, and allied professionals.
 - Develop workshops on critical inquiry and information literacy that bring together classroom faculty, librarians, and writing and technology professionals.
 - Conduct an inventory of disciplinary goals and practices for teaching information literacy at Grinnell College, and share across departments, the Libraries, and the Writing Lab. This will help disseminate good ideas, stimulate innovation, and encourage collaboration among classroom faculty, librarians, and other professionals on campus.
 - Evaluate MAP procedures and policies for opportunities to create clearer roles for librarians, writing professionals, and technology professionals;
- Develop technologies that **share primary-evidence collections and locally created knowledge** in ways that encourage discussion and increase awareness (on campus and off) of the College's resources.
 - Enhance the digitization program for Library, Gallery, and other collections, and develop technologies and standards to ensure that the digital collections can be searched together.
 - Create a campus-wide web site including information about -- and access to digital versions of -- primary evidence collections in the Gallery, Libraries, departments, and elsewhere.
 - Continue exploration of the Liberal Arts Scholarly Repository as a site for sharing (locally and globally) selected student and faculty work; develop guidelines for use and selection. This may stimulate discussion about information policy issues (copyright, sharing beyond the community), showcase excellent work, and encourage greater campus engagement in the inquiries being conducted by students and faculty. (See <http://www.lib.grinnell.edu/services/LASR/index.html>.)¹⁰
- Enhance **facilities** for inquiry-based learning
 - Update the campus "master plan" with attention to classroom, media, and Library opportunities to encourage collaborative learning and evidence-centered teaching;
 - Consider needs and opportunities for a campus-wide digitization facility.
- Sponsor public and co-curricular **programming** on information citizenship and public-policy issues.
 - Introduce "information citizenship" into Rosenfield programming.

¹⁰ For information about the LASR project see <http://www.lib.grinnell.edu/services/LASR/index.html>.

Possible Timeline

Spring 08:

- Offer Library 195, "How Disciplines Construct Knowledge," team-taught by Rod and Hunter

Summer 08:

- Offer Faculty Workshop, "Literacies in a Digital Age" (CTS and Libraries; week of June 16).
- Faculty/librarian planning for History 195 (Prevost, Purcell, Rod).
- Develop rubric for survey/inventory of departments' goals/practices for information literacy in their disciplines [R Fyffe to lead].
- Library self-study under way; topics for investigation and assessment include "Information Literacy," "Collection Development," "Discovery and Access," and "Special Collections and Digitization," among others.

Fall 08:

- Report on Information Literacy Initiative at Faculty Meeting [Swartz, Purcell, Fyffe]
- Begin survey/inventory of departments' goals and practices for information literacy [liaison librarians]
- Convene "information citizenship" planning group for the Rosenfield Program [Purcell]
- Continue digital repository development [Fyffe/Francis]
- Library self-study drafts completed
- Review MAP procedures for librarian consultation and deposit of finished product in repository
- Tutorial and Advising Committee to review information literacy goals for Tutorial
- Offer Library 100, "Library Research Techniques"

Spring 09:

- Offer History 195 [Purcell/Prevost/Rod]
- Update campus master plan pending Trustee approval [Sortor]
- James Boyle convocation and related programming [Boyle convocation approved; Fyffe/Purcell to coordinate; date not known, could be Fall 08]
- Offer Library 100, "Library Research Techniques" [Jones]
- Offer Library 195, "How Disciplines Construct Knowledge" (2nd offering)
- Develop proposal for Library 195 (regularize, offer as seminar, redefine?).

Summer 09:

- IT/Library/Writing Lab/Faculty Workshop: case studies in disciplinary norms for critical inquiry and information literacy