

Information literacy : the partnership of sociology faculty and social science librarians

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**INFORMATION LITERACY: THE PARTNERSHIP OF SOCIOLOGY
FACULTY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE LIBRARIANS***

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THE AUTHORS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a joint project of the American Library Association and the American Sociological Association. The goal of this collaboration is to guarantee that students of sociology, particularly sociology majors, develop strong information literacy skills during their undergraduate experience. The article talks about national standards for information literacy and how they relate to the sociology major. It presents examples for applying the sociology information literacy standards to course assignments and the sociology curriculum. We also provide suggestions for building linkages between sociology faculty members and social science librarians, as well as ways in which information literacy outcomes might be assessed in the sociology curriculum.

INFORMATION LITERACY: THE PARTNERSHIP OF SOCIOLOGY FACULTY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE LIBRARIANS

This paper reviews a collaborative project between the American Sociological Association (ASA) and the Anthropology & Sociology Section (ANSS)-Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) of the American Library Association. This collaboration focuses on how sociologists and social science librarians can work together to integrate information literacy (IL) goals across the sociology curriculum. The paper is divided into three sections. First, we talk about information literacy in sociology and how it relates to national standards on information literacy. We provide ideas for enhancing course assignments by integrating information literacy student learning outcomes into those assignments. Second, we review a set of tips for establishing fruitful relationships between sociology faculty and social science librarians. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of assessment of information literacy in the sociology curriculum.

INTRODUCTION TO INFORMATION LITERACY FOR SOCIOLOGY AND TO THE ACRL-ANSS IL STANDARDS

According to the ACRL's *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (2000) "An information literate individual is able to: Determine the extent of information needed, access the needed information effectively and efficiently, evaluate information and its sources critically, incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base, use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose, and understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally." (pp. 2-3). The ACRL further states that "information literacy forms the basis for lifelong learning.

It is common to all disciplines, to all learning environments, and to all levels of education. It enables learners to master content and extend their investigations, become more self-directed, and assume greater control over their own learning.” (p. 2). Using similar language, the ASA’s document, *Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major Updated*, states, “The best thing sociology can do for undergraduate students, whether majors or not, is to teach them to learn effectively so that they can keep up with rapid changes in society, particularly in knowledge, and live meaningful, engaged, and productive lives” (McKinney et al. 2004:1).

The ACRL definition of information literacy for higher education is generic, and for faculty who have been through a rigorous research process to complete a dissertation, article, or book, it may sound like a set of obvious skills *implicit* in the act of research. Librarians observe that many faculty members assume students already have or can easily figure out how to obtain the research skills needed to write a research paper. Librarians’ experience, however, indicates that most students lack many of these critical skills, particularly the higher-level ones, and will revert to what they already know and take the path of least resistance simply to find what seems like “good-enough” information to write a research paper. Google and Wikipedia are examples of easily accessible sources that students frequently consult and use uncritically. Within the sociology curriculum, how can we educate students not to rely solely on the catch-as-catch-can of Google searching and to carefully distinguish between some miscellaneous website and a scholarly article? How will they learn the best sources of scholarly information in the field of sociology? How will students learn about using appropriate tools to systematically challenge and evaluate the articles, books, and websites they read and the evidence on which these texts are based?

Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop (2003:491,493) define “critical sociological thinking” as “the ability to evaluate, reason, and question ideas and information while demonstrating awareness of broader social and cultural contexts.” For students of sociology, a discipline which examines social relationships and structures, information literacy includes making certain substantive connections – for example, the connections between information and the context in which it was collected or produced, between the research and who benefits by it, between social survey data and their interpretations and diverse uses, and between online communities and face-to-face communities. An information literate sociology student, who is learning about social stratification and inequality, should be able to recognize and discuss the disparities between those with access to information resources and technologies and those who lack it, and what this may mean in society. Information literacy for sociology is not only about using *Sociological Abstracts* instead of a less suitable database to find material on a topic (though it includes that); it is also about using sociological concepts and bringing sociological concerns to the research process and to the critical evaluation and use of information.

What is Information Literacy for Sociology and Anthropology?

For sociology, information literacy must include reference, or connection, to the following: 1) **Tools**: knowledge and use of the specific reference tools and databases for the discipline and related areas; 2) **Theory**: knowledge of social theories to provide context for the articulation of research questions and the evaluation of books and articles for sociological and anthropological analysis; 3) **Methodology**: selection, understanding, and use of sociological research methodologies such as using raw data and the software to analyze them, doing survey research, participant observation and other fieldwork techniques, and complying with the ASA *Code of Ethics* (1999) for use of human subjects and sharing the products of the research with

research subjects; 4) **Sources**: the meaning of primary and secondary sources for these disciplines and how each type is used in sociological and anthropological research; 5) **Inequality and Censorship**: understanding how social inequality and/or government policies affect access to information, both in society at large and for researchers seeking access to information and populations to study; 6) **New technologies**: social consequences of new technologies, including unequal-access issues and the new world of online communities (such as Facebook and Wikipedia) and how this changes the information landscape; and 7) **Interdisciplinary research**: the relationship of sociological topics to other fields and how this affects information seeking and evaluation. Addressing these aspects of sociological (and anthropological) research within the basic structure of the ACRL definition of information literacy was critical to the creation of the new discipline-focused information literacy standards document.

The ACRL-ANSS *Information Literacy Standards for Anthropology and Sociology Students* (2007), over two years in the making, was drafted by three librarians, received input from several sociologists and a few anthropologists, and was vetted and approved by information literacy experts in the ACRL.¹ It is accompanied by a selected bibliography of related resources. The intent is for program directors, curriculum committees, and individual faculty members to use the learning outcomes and examples as tools in designing courses, requirements for the major, and assignments. Librarians can use the standards as a basis for library and research instruction geared to sociology. The key question that the small ALA-ACRL-ANSS committee set out to answer was: What is information literacy in the disciplines of sociology and anthropology? In order to translate the generic ACRL definition into something specific to research in these disciplines, the committee needed to see which of the generic objectives and

¹ Final approval is expected shortly from ACRL. The ASA Council unanimously endorsed the ACRL-ANSS IL draft Standards in August 2006.

learning outcomes rose to the surface as most important and how they could be transformed. The document had to be concrete enough for use by faculty and librarians concerned with students' research and critical thinking skills.

The ACRL-ANSS IL Standards document outlines student learning outcomes for information literacy in sociology, but there are several related issues it does not address. It is left to sociology departments to decide where information literacy fits into the sociology curriculum and major and how it will be taught and incorporated into coursework. It is also up to sociology departments whether to seek campus partners and resources, including of course the library, to assist faculty and students in this effort. Although a version of Bloom's Taxonomy (Krumme 2005) was used to ensure the learning outcomes would be assessable, *how* to assess whether students meet the information literacy learning outcomes was not part of the ACRL-ANSS IL Standards' scope. More about assessment is in section three of this paper.

The Structure of the ACRL-ANSS IL Standards

The ACRL-ANSS document includes four main standards. These are essentially the same as the first four generic ACRL standards: 1) Know what kind of information is needed; 2) Access needed information effectively, efficiently, and ethically; 3) Evaluate information and its sources critically [and] incorporate selected information into knowledge base and value system; and 4) Use information effectively and ethically to accomplish a specific purpose. Each standard includes a few numbered primary objectives – labeled “What the student needs to do” — such as “Define and articulate the information need” and “Apply appropriate criteria for evaluating both the information and its source.” Under each objective are specific learning outcomes — labeled “Key behaviors for success”— that the student can demonstrate, such as “Identifies and lists key concepts, terms, social theories, culture groups, places, and names related to the topic in

preparation for searching for information on it” and “Recognizes the cultural, physical, or other context within which the information was created and accessed, and understands the impact of context on interpreting the information.” Illustrative examples accompany many of the key behaviors, such as this one which goes with the latter outcome: “Examples: questions and understands whether the researcher had full access to pertinent government sources or to the population studied, whether the researcher encountered censorship or culturally imposed limitations in asking questions or gathering information, for whose benefit the research was produced, and which data or viewpoint might be missing from the analysis.” Other “examples” identify specific sociological or anthropological research tools that can help students achieve a given outcome, although the examples do not comprise an exhaustive list of key resources.²

The original (generic) ACRL document had five standards, with the *ethical* use of information as a separate standard. The ethical components are integrated throughout the ACRL-ANSS IL standards to emphasize that they are essential to, rather than apart from, the research process and the learning outcomes in sociology and anthropology. Several of the lists of “Key behaviors for success,” therefore, end with specific outcomes called “Ethical, sociocultural, and legal dimensions and behaviors,” such as “Identifies and discusses the social consequences of new forms of information technology. Examples: problems of unequal access to information, the uses and meaning of online communities, and the Internet as a tool for doing ethnography” and “Knows when citation of sources is necessary in order to respect authors’ intellectual property rights and accurately indicate where the words and ideas of others have been used.”

The Appendix provides ideas for enhancing course assignments and projects to integrate information literacy student learning outcomes and augment the students’ research experience.

² Many more sociology information sources can be found in the research guide by Aby, Nalen and Fielding (2005).

They are based on the ACRL-ANSS *IL Standards*, which faculty are encouraged to explore to find additional learning outcomes that resonate with course and assignment goals. Rewriting a term paper assignment to include specific scholarly research tools, student reflections on the research process, and/or critical evaluation of data or other material is a way to address student information literacy. To assess if the learning outcomes have been achieved, relevant criteria for grading and evaluation would be established along with the revision of the assignment.

DEVELOPING PRODUCTIVE LINKAGES BETWEEN SOCIOLOGY DEPARTMENTS AND LIBRARIANS

This section of the paper reviews several guidelines that can increase the likelihood of successful relationships between sociology faculty and social science librarians as they work together on issues related to information literacy. First, it is important to translate concepts and ideas about information literacy into language that can be understood and then implemented by sociologists. As noted earlier, both sociology faculty and social science librarians share a set of goals related to enhancing the information literacy of our students. The two groups may, however, use different terminology when talking about these student learning outcomes.

Perhaps the most useful piece of advice is to use *structures* that already exist to help build ties between social science librarians and sociology departments and faculty. The ASA's set of national recommendations for the undergraduate major in sociology (McKinney et al. 2004) provides an excellent place to start. A number of these recommendations link well with information literacy goals. In particular, recommendations 4 (repeated exposure to research opportunities and using data to test research questions), 5 (a cumulative curriculum, development of written and oral communication skills), 8 (race/class/gender), 9 (multi-cultural, cross-national, cross-cultural information), and 16 (assessment) can all be easily linked with information literacy

student learning outcomes. Kain (1999) gives one explicit example of a cumulative curriculum consistent with these recommendations. This example focuses upon student learning outcomes that build a series of research competencies throughout the undergraduate major. Further, the *ASA Report of the Task Force on Sociology and General Education* (Keith et al. 2007:11) acknowledges that the ALA-ACRL-ANSS information literacy learning outcomes for sociology students provide a basis for sociologists to connect curriculum content with the general undergraduate education requirements. These recommendations provide excellent opportunities for forging relationships between sociology faculty and librarians. It may be fruitful to talk with sociology faculty/departments/department chairs about how linkages between the library and the department can be exploited in developing a program that is consistent with these recommendations.

The ASA has a set of regularly trained consultants called the Department Resources Group (DRG). These faculty members are recommended by the national office to do external department reviews. Most institutions have a regular cycle of department self-studies and external reviews. Schedules typically include a meeting with a librarian. DRG consultants who do these reviews typically request that a librarian be included in the schedule of the on-campus site visit. They evaluate linkages between the department and the library on campus, and often recommend strengthening ties that can help to achieve student learning outcomes. In order to evaluate where information literacy is or can be integrated into the sociology curriculum, faculty curriculum committees can collaborate with their college or university library's subject specialist or information literacy librarians to consider each of the four main ACRL-ANSS information literacy goals and whether they are, or should be, addressed in courses in the sociology curriculum. This process would take into account the introductory, theory, research methods, and

statistics courses as well as the capstone experience. Such collaboration could also examine whether information literacy outcomes are incorporated into other courses required of all majors, courses taken by half or more of majors, and other subject area courses. Changes to the curriculum and to coursework, both for majors and non-majors taking sociology courses, would ensure that students repeatedly receive experiences in which they develop their information literacy skills.

Largely because of pressure from accrediting agencies, institutions have encouraged departments to develop assessment plans that state explicit student learning outcomes, evaluate those outcomes on a regular basis, and feed back the results of those assessments into the system in an attempt to improve the program. Recommendation 16 from *Liberal Learning* stresses the importance of assessment. In addition to the assessable learning outcomes in the ACRL-ANSS *Standards* (2007) that can be incorporated into an assessment program, the ASA also has a document that is helpful to sociology departments developing their assessment plans (Lowry et al. 2005). Using or adapting assessment plans provides yet another structural support for productive linkages between sociology departments and librarians. (The last section of this paper focuses upon assessment of information literacy.)

In helping sociology departments to think about the development of relationships between social science librarians and individual faculty as well as departments/programs in sociology, remember some basic principals about professional relationships. Productive relationships between professional librarians and sociology faculty are reciprocal. Relationships between academic professionals are built up over time. It is important to establish linkages between librarians and new faculty as they join an institution, and build a sense of trust and

confidence. The ability to build relationships between sociology faculty and social science librarians, like with any people, varies by individual.

Faculty and librarians are very busy and often feel over-burdened. Fruitful relationships are built when both librarians and faculty see ways in which the relationship helps them work toward their goals and be more productive with their time. From the perspective of both professor and librarian, a successful relationship is one that helps sociology faculty see how collaborative work with library liaisons will help them achieve their student learning outcomes in the classroom. An excellent starting place is the common ground provided in the ASA and ACRL-ANSS learning outcomes related to research skills and critical thinking.

ASSESSMENT OF INFORMATION LITERACY

This final section of the paper focuses upon assessment of information literacy. Assessment is an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2006). There are a number of benefits from assessment of information literacy student learning outcomes. It allows us to think systematically about what we want to accomplish in a program. According to the specific objectives that departments have for student learning, they can select the information literacy outcomes from the ACRL-ANSS *IL Standards* that they wish to teach and assess. The systematic assessment of the extent to which these objectives are met is a critical part of continual efforts to strengthen the program in sociology.

Potential Instructional and Assessment Sites within the Curriculum

Information literacy can be taught and assessed either through designated general education courses required of all students or through designated courses within each academic major, or both. For example, during their first year of study, James Madison University students must complete three general education courses that cover basic skills in reasoning, writing, and oral communication.

Supplementing these courses is a computer-based information literacy tutorial, *Go for the Gold* (2007), which is comprised of eight learning modules that include instruction, illustrations, links to databases and Internet sources, and practice exercises that are immediately scored online. The modules explore the library, searching databases, finding and evaluating information, strategies for papers and speeches, and ethical use of information. Similar tutorials can be found on many college library websites, such as Rutgers (2004) and UCLA (2006). The JMU courses assign research papers, annotated bibliographies, and speeches that require use of the information literacy skills. By the end of the second semester, students are required to pass an online Information-Seeking Skills Test (ISST) - a 53-item test that requires demonstration of both knowledge and information-seeking skills. Results are tabulated and compared from year to year.

In addition, like many institutions, each academic department at JMU has an assigned library liaison. These librarians may offer course-related instruction on request, discipline-specific research guides, and individual student assistance to help students learn information acquisition and evaluation skills important in their field of study. Close collaboration between the librarian and the instructor is essential. While many institutions now use some form of the general education approach, it is possible for departments at these or at any institution to implement specific information literacy requirements within the academic major. For example, almost all sociology programs require a course in Research Methods. The department could construct one or more information literacy objectives that would be taught and assessed in the Methods course.

Another useful example can be found at Wartburg College (2005), where information literacy is built into the five core courses that all students must complete in their first two years. Information literacy skills are completely course-integrated and sequenced so that lessons are not repeated across the courses (although prior lessons are affirmed and used). Wartburg is conducting a

pretest - posttest (three data points) design to assess the outcomes of the program. Students take an information literacy test at the point of entering the college, at the start of the second year, and just prior to graduation.

Potential Assessment Measures

Direct Measures. A variety of measures can be used to assess information literacy. The first set of these are direct measures of learning. These are tests (multiple choice, essay, short answer, or online research simulations) given to ascertain student knowledge and skill, and can be geared to specific learning outcomes in a discipline, for example, after a research instructional session or upon graduation. A few commercially available standardized tests³ are available to assess information literacy, but these are generic and not at all discipline-focused.

A second type of direct measure involves research applications that could be assessed as part of a small group exercise or as a component of a research paper. For example, students could assemble short bibliographies on an assigned topic, and within small groups could share the process used to identify high-quality, relevant literature and discuss what other techniques might have been helpful. Alternatively, they could include a description of the processes used to identify and evaluate materials cited in the research paper, and this could count as a designated amount in the final grade of the paper. A third type of direct measure is class assignments. Examples of class assignments that require demonstration of research skills can be drawn from the Appendix.

Indirect Measures of Learning. Indirect measures assess self-perception of learning. These can be especially helpful when done in conjunction with one or more direct measures. Classroom assessment techniques, those which are designed to provide feedback to the instructor *during* the course, are one indirect measure of student learning. For example, after most or all of the instruction

³ The two most well-known examples are Education Testing Service's *iSkills* and Kent State University's *Project SAILS*.

is completed, each student is given the opportunity to write a question about something that is still confusing on an unsigned note card. Self-rating techniques, in contrast, focus upon end-of-course perception of growth in information literacy.

CONCLUSION

Skills in information literacy are an important part of the undergraduate sociology major. The integration of information literacy student learning outcomes into the sociology curriculum provides an ideal nexus for linking sociology faculty members and social science librarians in a common enterprise. We hope this article has provided some insight into the importance of information literacy, how it can become a central part of the undergraduate sociology curriculum, and how it can be assessed on a regular basis.

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APPENDIX: Eight Sample Information Literacy Enhancements to Assignments

These ideas are based on experiences teaching sociology students information literacy and research skills. If the specific sources mentioned are not available through your campus library, discuss alternative sources with your librarian to achieve the same outcomes.

1. If a website is included in your bibliography, include a brief rationale to justify its use as a source of information in the research paper. Relevance to the topic is assumed and is not a justification. Consider criteria such as authority/authorship, organizational source, bias, level of information, date, writing, type of information, and the value of links or sources cited.
2. In a text you read (article, book, textbook), select one of the main books or articles that the author used and cited. Find this source in the library or online. In one paragraph, comment on the first author's use of the source, e.g., whether or to what extent the research results, data, statements, conclusions, or other information are represented appropriately.
3. Use American Factfinder (U.S. Census) to find data about the ethnic group or locality related to your topic. Incorporate the data into the assignment or paper, and cite it appropriately.
4. Identify the theory/theoretical framework/key theorist/social theory that the text or study uses or is based on. Look it up in a scholarly online or printed encyclopedia (e.g., *International Encyclopedia of Social & Behavioral Sciences*; *Encyclopedia of Sociology*; *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*). Write a short description/definition/synopsis of the theory/theorist, and cite the encyclopedia article you used.

- If you choose to use Wikipedia, it must be **in addition to** a scholarly encyclopedia, and your synopsis needs to include a paragraph comparing the information, authority, and sources cited in the Wikipedia article with those in the standard scholarly encyclopedia article.
5. What did the critics or other scholars say about this book / this author's work? (Use article databases to find book reviews; use the *Social Sciences Citation Index* database to find citations to the author's works.)
 6. Select a table or graph that represents data (from textbook, handout, article, etc.) and explain what it conveys, how it conveys the information, and whether you think all the elements of the table are clear.
 7. Find two articles that use the General Social Survey [or the Current Population Survey Series] related to your research topic [or the seminar topic]. (Use the *Bibliography of Data-Related Literature* database at <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/citations/index.html>.)
For extra credit, describe how the data are used in these articles.
 8. Describe the methodologies used to conduct the research reported in the text (article, handout, book, etc.). Identify the ethical issues involved for the researchers, the informants/population, and/or the funding agency.