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PERSPECTIVES ON…

Information Fluency: Not Information Literacy 2.0

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This paper distinguishes information fluency from information literacy as concepts in and approaches to higher education. A review of information fluency literature reveals emphases on defining it, and the importance of collaboration. In addition to distinguishing it from information literacy, this paper identifies two necessary components to information fluency: collaboration and commitment. A table and checklist for assessing these components, along with an exceptionally effective institutional example of information fluency is provided.

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I was introduced to the term "information fluency" by a colleague who described it as "information literacy 2.0". I soon heard more about it at conferences, and read about it in the literature. Its rapid buzz, coupled with inconsistent term usage, initially led me to dismiss it as another trendy catchphrase; therefore, when invited to join colleagues for an information fluency workshop sponsored by the Council of Independent Colleges, I accepted for collegiality's sake with little hope of learning anything useful. I was wrong — I learned many important things, including how, in my view, information fluency should be distinguished from information literacy. This paper does just that, and also identifies two components necessary for information fluency to be a reality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature focuses on defining information fluency, and/or the importance of collaboration in its pursuit. Some attribute The Associated Colleges of the South (ACS) with first introducing and defining the term, and cite their Web page (unfortunately no longer active). Zhang basically equates it as: information fluency = computer literacy + information literacy + critical thinking (2002). This seems to be the consensus; Rettig and Hagen (2003) provide a Venn diagram to this effect.

Mani views information fluency as the next step in the information literacy evolution, and considers how replacing "information literacy" as a phrase with "information fluency" affects perception; without even changing related skills or competencies, she believes "information fluency" is more positive and reflective of the actual learning that transpires (2004). Harris and Millet closely examine the semantics of "fluency" and "literacy", and identify differing definitions for information fluency, including ACS's "…optimal outcome when critical thinking skills are

combined with information literacy and relevant computing skills" (2006); related to Mani, they infer that many libraries replaced "information literacy" with "information fluency" for perceptional rather than application purposes. Gibson and Woodard identify confusion associated with jargon surrounding information literacy and "IT fluency"; they believe competing agendas, both within institutions and outside (e.g. professional associations, government agencies) contribute to an inconsistent perception (2007). Barr calls it "digital information fluency", and focuses on Internet associations (2006). One company, "21st Century Information Fluency", also refers to it as digital information fluency:

> "Digital Information Fluency (DIF) is the ability to find, evaluate and use digital information effectively, efficiently and ethically. DIF involves Internet search skills that start with understanding how digital information is different from print information, knowing how to use specialized tools for finding digital information and strengthening the dispositions needed in the digital information environment."

Moore shares (and possibly influenced) the above thinking, but also stresses the importance of collaboration, particularly among librarians, faculty, technologists, and administrators (2002). Sharkey emphasizes technology, and views digital presentation tools as part of the information fluency process; to this end, she works with her school's "Digital Learning Collaboratory" for more specialized technology support (2006). She agrees with the importance of collaboration for this process, "An overall goal of the organization is bringing together librarians, faculty, and IT staff to collaborate and develop initiatives…" (76). Her 2013 article with O'Connor reemphasizes the need for technology support in relation to information fluency, but focuses more on student searching habits. Fogleman, Niedbala, and Bell share their experiences with faculty/library "project-based" course collaboration, and its positive impact on student research practices (2013). Hein's and O'Connor's information

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fluency book considers relationships between those searching for information and the information itself (2014).

Information fluency is also of interest to high school librarians. Callison defines it as the "...ability to move confidently among media, information, and computer literacy skills resulting in the effective application of a strategy or strategies that will best meet those needs" (38, 2003). Rader's information fluency components closely resemble The Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) information literacy competencies, but also emphasize collaboration to achieve library, media, computer, research, and Internet literacies, and critical thinking (2004). Stripling defines information fluency as the "ability to access, make sense of, and use information to build new understandings" (25); she claims it replaces information literacy "because students must not only know the skills, but also apply the skills fluently in any personal or academic learning situation" (25, 2007). Although they call it "digital fluency", Miller and Bartlett propose a process similar to Stripling's; they call for a "tripartite concept constituting critical thinking, net savviness and diversity" (2012). Canino-Fluit describes the Empire State Information Fluency Continuum and its assessment tools as they relate to New York's common core standards (2013).

I applaud efforts to better prepare people to use digitally formatted information, but disagree with the implication that the traditional information literacy approach (i.e. ACRL's competencies) cannot accommodate modern research needs. As if to validate this thinking, Rader's components and Barr's "five phases of the DIF process" (35) replicate ACRL's competencies, only with more specific Internet emphases. Those who master those competencies can do what they need with any information. There is no arguing that digital information is exponentially growing, and differs from traditional formats. However, ultimately information is information, and mastering ACRL's competencies puts one in control of locating, evaluating, and using it (American Library Association, 2016). To rename the process because the product is increasingly digital in format is unnecessary, and possibly confusing as illustrated by Gibson and Woodard.

That stated, information fluency can and should be distinguished from information literacy. Instead of the current format distinctions, though, this paper recommends it be considered from an institutional perspective (i.e. a school's effectiveness to facilitate information literacy). From this perspective, I identify two criteria necessary for a school to be information fluent.

COLLABORATION AND COMMITMENT

Although recommended for and claimed by many in higher education, collaboration is often a myth. Evans maintains that educators are "not ideally suited to collaborate", and cites structural and personal obstacles (100–101). Inherent is the fear of losing power; when personnel operate in silos, they have full control over work for which they are responsible. Many fear that sharing resources or information will make them less significant (e.g. technology gatekeepers), or the quality of the work will be diluted (e.g. faculty who do not utilize academic support services). As validated by the literature, though, if information fluency is to be an institutional reality, then collaboration is necessary. Piercey (2010) cites Marilyn Friend's and Lynne Cook's (1992) conditions: those who collaborate must share mutual goals, resources, responsibilities, and be equal, voluntary participants.

Ideally all colleagues collaborate, but faculty and the following personnel are information fluency musts: librarians, technologists, instructional designers, and other academic support personnel (e.g. Writing Center consultants). Librarians and faculty already collaborate at schools with strong information literacy initiatives (e.g. assignment design, library instruction, assessment), and this must continue; however, information technology and instructional design are also conducive to information fluency, especially if increased digitization is an institutional goal.

It is important for personnel to commit to collaboration. However, without administrative commitment, it less likely, and by extension,

so is information fluency. Piercey recognizes administrator importance to collaboration in any educational enterprise: "If education leaders want teachers to collaborate more, then leaders must truly lead the way and model the collaboration that they want to see among teachers" (54). Evans (2012) states that administrators must foster "candor and collegiality", and though they should consider feedback, must be willing to "insist" when necessary (104). In short, administration must commit to information fluency, not just through words, but meaningful direction and support, and this means facilitating collaboration.

The chief academic officer must first impress upon deans the importance of information fluency, and why collaboration is vital to it. They in turn must educate and facilitate among department chairs and academic support directors (e.g. IT, Writing Center). Finally, faculty, librarians, and other academic support personnel must be convinced, and enabled, to effectively collaborate. If these people are competent, then how they do it is best left to them; however, considering Evans' and Piercey's insights, there will likely be the need for administrative encouragement.

Collaboration towards information fluency also requires resources, especially proper work spaces. Arguably the most effective model for this is the learning commons. Constructing new buildings designed to accommodate learning commons personnel and processes is an excellent step towards information fluency at an institutional level (especially if those who operate in them are involved in the planning and design); however, renovation or strategic redesign can also make huge differences. Most important is that those who use the space, including students, determine arrangement, and administrators are the ones who can ensure that happens.

INSTITUTIONAL INFORMATION FLUENCY EVALUATION

Using the two criteria from above, institutional information fluency can be evaluated according to the following items listed in the below Collaboration table and Commitment checklist.

COLLABORATION

Information literacy component	Student role	Instructor role	Librarian role	Instructional designer role	IT professional role
Identify	- understand topic as fully as possible	- ensure student topic feasibility	- awareness of topic (perhaps provide insight into feasibility)	- train and support faculty and librarians on how best to integrate and present course objectives and resources	
Locate	- find relevant sources		- provide resources, training, support (e.g. illustrate search techniques)		
Evaluate	- select best sources (e.g. authority, timeliness)		- provide training, support (e.g. discuss source quality criteria)		
Use	- cite sources - create digital scholarship	- provide insight for student scholarship - create own digital scholarship	- provide training, support (e.g. demonstrate citation mechanics)		- provide adequate computer capabilities training, support

While students and librarians are involved in the entire process, instances when the other three are involved are pivotal, especially faculty and IT (without expert computer support, digital scholarship is much more challenging for many). The necessity of instructional design is debatable, but the potential contributions these personnel have for the Identify component are not; effective instructional designers can enhance this component by helping arrange and employ pedagogical best practices in a consistent, systematic fashion. Note: this is a nonlinear process. Component completion does not necessitate that personnel must collaborate in a predefined order. Example: insight gained during Evaluate might cause a student to adjust Identify; hence the importance of having relevant personnel closely situated (e.g. learning commons) for point-of-need support.

COMMITMENT

1) Provide space best suited to collaboration.
2) Hire qualified personnel who have true collaborative ability and desire.
   - This requires managerial talent and employee investigation. Hirers often take for granted one's collaboration ability; there needs to be evidence of it (e.g. explicitly demonstrated results, professional references).
3) Reward collaboration results and attempts.
   - Administrators often claim that process is as important as product. Collaboration is a process; therefore, prove its importance by encouraging and rewarding valid attempts at it, even if they do not always achieve the projected goal.
4) Assign information literacy objectives only to relevant courses.
   - Although information literacy can be argued for any learning situation, some courses are better suited to it than others. Sometimes faculty and deans add information literacy objectives to courses even when the instructor has little intention (or capability) to seriously pursue them. Designating a few pivotal information literacy courses is better than a lot that are not as pivotal, and increases institutional level feasibility (easier for personnel to collaborate on a few, predetermined courses).
5) Scaffolding (relates to #4).
   - When assigning course information literacy objectives, in addition to relevance, sequence should be considered. Librarians often provide information literacy instruction, only to be dismissed by students because "I already had this…" Scaffolding ensures less duplication, better enables collaborators to focus on what needs to be done for a particular course, and paces students for different curricular stages and objectives.

CONCLUSION

I understand the reasoning behind current information fluency definitions, but do not see a strong distinction between them and information literacy. They should be distinguished, but I do not think that it should be by the current format criteria — an institution's information fluency level should be measured by its ability to facilitate information literacy because it takes an entire university commitment to ensure that students have the best chance at it.

I do not find information literacy as a concept obsolete in the new higher education reality of digital scholarship; however, I do believe collaboration is now more important because of it. It is difficult for one

person to be an expert in curricula, librarianship, instructional design, and computer technology; thus providing spaces and personnel for effective collaboration ensures the best chance for today's information literacy possibilities, especially as these apply to the Use component (e.g. digital scholarship). This requires institutional commitment, i.e. information fluency.

Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon is an excellent example of a school committed to information fluency. Library Director Susan Barnes Whyte was recently appointed Director of the Council of Independent College's Consortium Digital Resources for Teaching and Research due to her ability to secure administrative commitment and encourage college collaboration. Under her leadership, the library established the Educational Media Services, Teaching and Learning Support Departments, and Digital Commons@Linfield: Repository, and provides space ("maker spaces") and personnel (faculty, students, designers, technologists) to assist information literacy objectives, along with a digitized scholarship repository. The arrangement is extremely effective, as institutional personnel can work together (e.g. curriculum scheduling, point-of-need support) to increase student information literacy.

No matter what it is called, the need for the library's new higher education role in this information age is crucial to institutional success. All personnel should reconsider their roles and goals in relation to teaching and learning, and executive leaders should support what their people need to meet information literacy demands. Assessing commitment to information fluency as distinguished in this paper is an important step.

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