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Locating the Center: Libraries, Writing Centers, and Information Literacy

by

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In a recent *New York Times* article, Geoffrey Nunberg declares information literacy “a phrase whose time has come.” A significant theme in librarians’ discourse since the late 1980s, information literacy as conceived by Nunberg has become a bigger issue than can be addressed in the library. In language that will seem familiar to writing scholars, Nunberg declares that “instruction in information literacy will have to pervade every level of education and every course in the curriculum.”<sup>1</sup> Like writing across the curriculum before it, information literacy across the curriculum is poised to become a major educational initiative, and as with WAC, a debate within libraries has been brewing for some time about whether information literacy can “belong” to the library or whether it will evolve, like WAC, as an issue for all faculty in content areas. Up until the present time, writing programs in general and writing centers in particular have been relatively unconcerned with information literacy. The time for composition studies to engage information literacy might well be at hand. A number of pressing questions for writing scholarship and pedagogic practice are entangled with the fate of information literacy. All these questions lead to the conclusion that information literacy and writing are fundamentally interconnected in the work of college students.

Writing for an audience of librarians, Barbara Fister has noted the curious intellectual disconnection between librarians and writing teachers.<sup>2</sup> Pursuing parallel paths in the academy, these two groups have much in common, yet they rarely engage each other in questions of mutual academic concern. In fact, we seem to have erected an invisible intellectual wall between those who teach students to write and those who teach students to research. Writing instruction involves the writing—which focuses on language usage, disciplinary discourse, and questions of academic genre—while information literacy involves the research—which focuses on the construction of good search statements, the evaluating of sources, and the assembling of bibliographies. Even the most cursory of perusals will testify to the artificiality of this bifurcated approach. By treating these two domains as separate, we create a disconnection that serves neither students nor our respective professional identities well. In fact, by recognizing that writing and research are one single activity, we might reinvigorate the discussion about writing process and how the search for information is shaped by that process.

Student writing is heavily dependant on academic sources. Especially when they begin to write in academic specialties, students must learn to choose sources that their disciplines deem credible and persuasive. Such judgment about sources is part of the tacit knowledge professors develop over time about their disciplines, and this tacit knowledge must be developed among apprentice writers who want to join the conversation. This “conversation of mankind,” as Bruffee called it, is an assemblage of the “best” sources, and prior to this generation, that conversation was archived in the academic library.<sup>3</sup> Each previous generation of writers has come to the academy and engaged this conversation through the library, and then, through explicit writing instruction, has been coaxed and disciplined into

writing similar discourse. Today's technologies allow a much different engagement as students cut and paste a pastiche of credible and incredible sources together based on web searches, library resources, listserv archives, and blogs. In doing so, students are in danger of losing their connection to the "conversation of mankind" and the associated engagement with intellectual history and practice.

At heart, information literacy involves preserving this conversation as we move into new information environments. Indeed, much of the push for information literacy can be related to the growing volume of disintermediated information online. In the emerging networked learning environment, many of the traditional expectations of faculty and students about where and how learning occurs have become unstable, and traditional measures of quality are no longer relevant. Peer reviewed journals and university presses have long guided students to valid and authoritative academic sources, but such standards have become increasingly slippery as faculty and students move into the discursive terrain of blogs, web sites, and email discussion lists, all of which have become forums for high level academic inquiry and discourse. Under what circumstances can students cite sources like blogs and web sites? How much weight will faculty accord a blog citation as opposed to a peer reviewed journal? These and many other questions are central to both information literacy and composition.

The nature of knowledge production has changed drastically in the past ten years as scholarly literature has migrated from print to pixels. The ease of personal publication has meant that the high barrier once attached to publication is now almost ridiculously low. Nearly every freshman on campus has the ability to "publish" a web site. On the positive

side, alternative voices that might once have been silenced are now accessible through your search engine of choice. But this ease of access places the burden of judging credibility and authority squarely on the shoulders of the student (and by extension, the faculty member who must evaluate the student's work). In the past, faculty could assume that anything that came from the academic library had passed a credibility test, but today's academic library is increasingly virtual, and the line is increasingly blurry between online collections, grey literature, and the "free web."

Indeed, the complex tools that organize the library collection—indexes, bibliographies, dictionaries, and catalogs—tools developed over the past centuries by patient scholars working in timeless solitude—have become transformed (some would argue made irrelevant) almost overnight. Full-text searching enables anyone with even a modest vocabulary to reach deep into textual corpora and retrieve "relevant" results. Students do such searching at an early age, and they often come to college feeling quite confident about their ability as searchers. Research suggests, however, that even experienced library users fail to take advantage of sophisticated searching techniques, ignoring subject classifications and search statement construction in favor of freestyle text searching. Novotny noted in one study that, "many users... expected the library catalog to function as an Internet search engine. They typed in broad keyword searches and expected that the 'computer' would interpret their search and process the results."<sup>4</sup> In actuality, web search engines use complex algorithms to interpret searches, but library catalogs simply do not work that way. They depend, instead, on skillful searching implemented by conscious strategy.

Complicating the situation is the fact that libraries now license aggregated collections they used to own in physical format, and these collections are comprised of articles from periodicals that may bear little resemblance to each other. In some online library databases, newspapers, magazines, trade publications, and academic journals are all jumbled together, leaving it to students and faculty to sort out the relative academic weight of any given title. Academic Search Elite, a common general index, boasts full-text searching of 1,850 journals. Six-hundred of these titles are not peer reviewed. Lexis-Nexis allows students to search daily newspapers from any city of any size in the United States and retrieve contents full-text. Contents are current to within the past week. In visual terms, the library catalog, the subscription index, and search engines like Google look nearly identical (a small box to type in search terms that then display in a numbered list). Conceptually, however, these tools are worlds apart.

What part does this complex information environment play in the lives of student writers? On the most basic level, as students write, they read and think. They accumulate sources, and they write about them. They actively return to sources to fill what information researcher Brenda Dervin calls “knowledge gaps.” Dervin argues that we should treat knowledge as a verb rather than a noun. As students write, they are “knowledging,” engaging actively with new sources and also with prior knowledge drawn from sources.<sup>5</sup> They use those sources to build bridges to cross gaps in their existing knowledge. It has become common to argue in the context of “writing to learn” that writing makes thinking visible, which justifies its use across the curriculum in teaching. If writing makes thinking visible, it also makes gaps in thinking visible. Writers who have knowledge gaps have

those gaps exposed in the course of writing. Indeed, many student writing problems might just as easily be seen as problems with knowledge gaps.

In his often quoted essay, “Inventing the University,” David Bartholomae makes a crucial point: “There is, to be sure, an important distinction to be made between learning history, say, and learning to write as a historian. A student can learn to command and reproduce a set of names, dates, places, and canonical interpretations...; but this is not the same as learning to ‘think’ (by learning to write) like a historian. The former requires efforts of memory; the latter requires a student to compose a text out of the texts that represent the primary materials of history.”<sup>6</sup> My goal here is, to some extent, to question and explore the bifurcation Bartholomae establishes here. Can we really separate the ability to “command and reproduce” pre-existing knowledge from the writer’s efforts to participate in the creation of similar discourse? Are the knowledge gaps identified by Dervin in the “names, dates, places, and canonical interpretations” or in the ability to “think” like a historian? Can the two be separated?

In practice, information literacy librarians and writing tutors enact this bifurcation. Writing tutors handle problems with discourse and librarians handle problems with information retrieval and evaluation. Beyond this distinction, however, writing centers and libraries occupy remarkably similar academic niches. Writing centers and libraries are each positioned as mediators between students and faculty. From this vantage point, they see the best and worst of both students and faculty. From faculty, they see instructors who work tirelessly to create dynamic, engaged learning environments for students, and they see faculty who seem determined to work against the best efforts of students and those who

support them, creating assignments that almost encourage cheating and lazy shortcuts. From students, they see hard work and commitment that faculty sometimes doubt exists, but they also see students who want their work done for them through proofreading or bibliography services. Positioned at the crossroads between faculty and students, librarians and writing center personnel handle the daily transactions of academic commerce, a form of work that is often undervalued or even unvalued by other academics.

A conversation needs to take place between writing center personnel and librarians. This conversation could easily frame a series of shared academic concerns. Many librarians are on the tenure track, and those who are face concerns similar to tenure track center faculty. In the academic hierarchy of research, teaching, and service, librarians and writing center faculty spend most of their time in the final two, less valued, categories. Their status in relation to “real” faculty is always open to question. Positioned as they are between faculty and students, librarians and writing center personnel must translate the concerns and priorities of each to the other. Unlike disciplinary scholars whose work can be defined by subject and method, librarians and writing center staff must be conversant in multiple flavors of academic discourse, and they must do their teaching in the most labor intensive manner possible—the “one to one” fashion of the tutorial.

It is nice to have friends in the academy, and nearly all those who teach writing profess affection for librarians, and the feeling tends to be mutual. At the heart of the foregoing analysis has been the tacit observation that we can and should be more than friends. In fact, librarians and writing centers have the potential to develop important partnerships that build on their mutual interests and the interests of the student they serve. These



partnerships might be both enriching and politically valuable as we move into a new academic era marked by interdisciplinary conversation and increasingly networked knowledges. Having worked at the boundaries of this partnership for almost ten years, and having spent the past year co-editing a collection of case studies about partnerships between writing centers and libraries, I see clear paths to collaboration that are emerging in practice.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, something is going on in these collaborations that merits examination. I would like to summarize some of what we found here.

- Perhaps the most important thing for librarians and writing center personnel to do is begin a working conversation. This conversation should involve professional talk focused on sharing observations and insights to find the intersections between librarianship and writing instruction. At The University of Kansas, Michele Eodice and Lea Currie began to work together to create a writing center in the main library. In doing so, they realized they were enacting the kind of interdisciplinary collaboration being championed by campus administration. They invited stakeholders from around campus to a round-table discussion to talk about collaboration and the conditions that foster it. They concluded that with proper commitment from administration, writing centers and libraries can become leaders in progressive initiatives on campus, modeling new kinds of collaborative programs. Eodice and Currie find their partnership held up to the campus as an example of resource sharing and creative problem solving, and they find themselves on the forefront of defining what collaboration and interdisciplinarity look like. On most campuses, issues of undergraduate teaching and learning are receiving increasing emphasis. Either librarians or writing center personnel can initiate a conversation about how the two units can find common ground.

- Co-referencing—Libraries and writing centers share a common place in the academy, but their areas of expertise are quite different. If each has an understanding of the other’s philosophies and practices, they should find it easy and valuable to refer students to each other. In the course of a tutoring session it might become clear that a student has an inadequate understanding of what kinds of sources are required for a research paper. These students can be easily referred to the library where a librarian on duty can help them with their work. In return, librarians should be aware of the availability of writing center tutors who can provide help with issues of writing and rhetoric. Many experiments are underway that explore these co-referencing models. In one such experiment at Bowling Green State University, writing tutors have been offering “Research and Writing Project Clinics” in the library. Inhabiting office spaces near the reference area in the library, tutors can work with students and send them for quick (or lengthy) consultations with librarians.

In early stages of collaboration, co-referencing can be useful for working out the problematics of the relationship between writing and information literacy.

Occupying marginal status in the instructional culture of academia, both librarians and writing center tutors tend to want to expand the scope of their instruction rather than defer to the expertise of others. The question of research falls in a gray area between writing and library skills. Co-referencing tends to activate anxieties about who owns that territory and can thus provide the occasion for discussions about which activities belong to an individual unit and which are shared.

- Libraries and writing centers have unique needs in the academy in relation to the creation of academic space. Writing centers often contend with bad space, assigned as they are to isolated, hard-to-find offices with insufficient technology. Libraries, meanwhile, are undergoing a crisis of space. As collections become increasingly virtual, the nature of library space is changing, and libraries are actively exploring ways to create space for collaboration and education. Benefits to locating a writing center in a library can be significant. At Wesley College, housing the writing center in the library was at first a way of consolidating services to save money. What emerged was a collaboration between the library and writing center that involves team-teaching and sharing of computer classrooms and lab space. Consolidation of services in one location is attractive to administration, and both writing centers and libraries can be expected to pick up foot traffic through space sharing. Computing services are more likely to be consolidated in shared space, and co-referencing of services is facilitated by the easy access between writing centers and reference librarians housed in the same building.
- Both libraries and writing centers have been increasingly involved in faculty development workshops. Rather than compete for faculty time by offering separate workshops when the issues addressed by such workshops are so related, the two units might benefit from offering shared workshops. Plagiarism, designing effective assignments, active learning, service learning—virtually any topic related to general education—can be framed as a central concern for both libraries and writing centers. At the University of Washington-Bothel, the library and the writing center have been engaged in a ten-year faculty development project built around an innovative class that encourages interdisciplinary research in the

undergraduate curriculum. Becky Reid-Rosenberg and Sarah Leadley describe their work as a constant process of challenging conventional ideas (including their own) about research and interdisciplinarity. Faculty from across campus have been involved in the development of this course, taking the lead at times. Through their collaboration with each other and with departmental faculty, they have fostered important investigations into the potentials and problems of interdisciplinary work.

- Both the writing scholarship and information literacy scholarship have been engaged with creating new kinds of research based in pragmatic approaches to real-world problems. Indeed, this kind of research is at the leading edge of the scholarship of teaching and learning as advocated by the Boyer Report. Nowhere is the unnecessary bifurcation of these two fields more problematic than in the relative ignorance each field has of the other's research. The education of writing tutors should include some framing of information literacy topics, and the education of librarians should of necessity include the scholarship in writing instruction.

Writing tutor Casey Reid describes her growing awareness of the ways writing scholarship can inform the work of librarians while working as Assistant Director of the Writing Center at Southwest Missouri State University and simultaneously working as a reference assistant at the library. Reid notes that writing theory has provided theoretical models for the “reference interview” through analysis of tutorial sessions. She also notes the ways that writing centers have turned their marginalized academic position into a position of intellectual strength—a move Reid right suggests would benefit librarians.

In one of the most intriguing collaborations we encountered, the Connors Writing

Center at the University of New Hampshire Durham had engaged the university archives in the creation of a research archive chronicling the history of writing at New Hampshire. The university archives had never considered collecting student work as part of its chronicling of the university's history, but the writing center staff encouraged librarians to see that student writing (by making thinking visible) might be the best evidence of the intellectual evolution of a campus. The archive at the University of New Hampshire might serve as a research repository for librarians as well as writing scholars. Like writing scholars, librarians need to understand how student work reflects the instruction they have received. Without some comprehensive understanding of what students produce (and have produced over time) no clear picture of information literacy or writing can be achieved.

- Finally librarians and writing staff need to explore possibilities for co-publishing. In recruiting case studies for this project, we required that (with few exceptions) cases studies be written collaboratively. This intentional choice was prompted by our desire to encourage the conversation that co-authorship necessitates. We believe the case studies in our work provide starting points for experiments in collaboration. They also provide abundant models for further collaborative publication. The lines should become fuzzier between information literacy as we experiment at the boundaries. Our own work is intended to test that hypothesis and to provide incentive and opportunities for others to test it, as well.

In an age when literacy itself is being redefined in so many ways, emerging, flexible conceptions of literacy can be used to build bridges—to find ways to close our own thinking gaps. The gap between information literacy and writing instruction can be bridged

to the benefit of everyone, especially students, who will be the ultimate beneficiaries of a more coherent conception of what they do and the demands of the work they are assigned. Collaboration is no panacea for either libraries or writing centers, and problems abound. Writing tutors need to find their comfort zone in this new model, either by expanding their expertise or clearly demarcating their jobs. Reference librarians, trained on the expert model of academic service and ever conscious of their institutional image, may well see collaboration with writing tutors as threatening to their academic status. These very real problems will need to be addressed in the course of evolving relationships. The vitality and energy created by successful collaborations suggests that however difficult the work, the results are well worth the effort.



<sup>1</sup>Geoffrey Nunberg. *New York Times*. 13 Feb. 2005. 4: 4

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Fister. "Common Ground: The Composition/Bibliographic Instruction Connection." *Academic Libraries: Achieving Excellence in Higher Education* (Chicago: ACRL, 1992) 154.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Bruffee. *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983) 113.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Novotny. "I Don't Think I Click: A Protocol Analysis Study of Use of a Library Online Catalog in the Internet Age." *College and Research Libraries*. 65:6 (2004): 531-2.

<sup>5</sup> Dervin, Brenda. "Sense-Making Theory and Practice: An Overview of User Interests in Knowledge Seeking and Use." *Journal of Knowledge Management* 2:2 (1998) 38.

<sup>6</sup> David Bartholomae. "Inventing the University" in *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*, ed. Victor Villanueva (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2002) 633.

<sup>7</sup> *Centers for Learning: Libraries and Writing Centers in Collaboration* eds. James K. Elmborg and Sheril Hook (ACRL: Publications in Librarianship, 2005) (forthcoming).