

## the front end load of student research

In a phase one study of young college students (the product of the teacher-librarian's information literacy efforts in the K-12 arena), Alison Head and Michael Eisenberg (2009) asked what problems these young adults faced in doing research assignments in college. Below is their list, which we abridged slightly; but notice the familiar problems students are having on the front end before they get into the reading, synthesis, and writing process.

### Course-Related Concerns

- Information overload (e.g., the more you know; the less you know; it is depressing).
- Too much irrelevant information; cannot locate what is needed from online results.
  - Beginning and getting started on an assignment.
  - Trying to find the "perfect source."
  - Not knowing what to look for, yet still sifting through articles that might fit.
    - Trouble finding books needed on library shelves.
    - Can find the citation online, but cannot find the full-text article in a database.
    - Scholarly databases or library books are out of date.
    - Finding statistical information online.
    - Having to change and refine how to write a research paper from class to class.
    - Having to buy a source unavailable on campus.
    - Feeling that nothing new is being said and feels like it is the same information again and again.
    - Conducting research to meet another's expectations.
    - Too many results from a Google search and having to sort through them.

In other findings, Head and Eisenberg also discover that students procrastinate doing research assignments until the last moment, and thus experience anxiety when trying to find what they need. They also find that students appreciate academic librarians who help with their search at the moment of need but not when taught a "course" or workshop in library research.

Consider the following issues as teacher-librarians try to raise/develop a new generation of students really prepared for college research:

- The overwhelming nature of the information world. We argue that children and teens need to learn strategies to come into command of and build their own information spaces that are much smaller than the juggernaut of the whole Internet (Williams & Loertscher, 2007). While you are reading, also check out page 50 of *Redesigning Literacy 2.0* for David Warlick's warning to teacher-librarians (Warlick, 2008).
- The tendency of instructors to throw open the topic of student research. We argue that any instructor who allows students to tackle "any topic you are interested in" invites plagiarism but also introduces much confusion. Generating a major umbrella question with students doing various subtopics either as groups or individuals under the umbrella is much more likely to result in a smooth beginning and focused inquiry. It also allows for a major analysis across student research projects at the end as a whole-class magnificent "so what" activity (Loertscher, Koehlin, & Zwaan, 2007).
- The tendency of instructors to create an assignment and just wait for the products to be handed in for grading. We argue that in the evolutions of libraries into learning commons, assignments should

become conversations among instructors, teacher-librarians, subject specialists, and even parents (Loertscher, Koechlin, & Zwaan, 2008).

• Courses or workshops in "library." We argue that just in time instruction about the research process is far superior to teaching a curriculum of library or information skills. Yet many professionals persist in wanting to teach a course. Hundreds of articles in the professional literature have argued this point over several decades without a massive change in the behavior of professionals in the field. The best current statement of integration and collaboration is found in one of the latest works by Allison Zmuda and Violet H. Harada (2008).

• The front-end elephant of finding and locating the right amount of high quality information. We argue that the front-end mechanics are and should be subservient to the really important part of inquiry and learning. The reading and digesting of what is found, the analysis of the information gathered, the communication of new knowledge, and most important, engaging in a major "so what" activity across all the research projects done by students constitutes the central elements of effective inquiry. Thus, in a collaborative effort, classroom teachers and teacher-librarians plan inquiry so that the bulk of time spent is NOT on topic development and finding information (Loertscher, Koechlin, & Zwaan, 2007).

More and more academic librarians are developing higher expectations for the K-12 information professional. The traditional emphasis on finding and locating needs to be re-examined as we assist learners in getting over the first barrier of inquiry and into the fascinating world of higher-level thinking about the content. When as a profession we concentrate only on front-end skills, we never push into the center of teaching and learning. Perhaps that is why general education writers and thinkers rarely consider our contribution as essential.

## REFERENCES

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