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Rediscovering Renaissance Research: Information Literacy Strategies for Success

Sarah Burns Gilchrist

abstract: While remaining cognizant of several aspects of current information literacy (IL) instruction methods, including threshold concepts, the author re-created experiences shared by students as she searched for, analyzed, and compiled resources pertaining to the Renaissance. Good IL instruction supports education of the whole person, develops new modes of thinking, and defines scholars' relationships to their disciplines, their institution, and their communities. In short, good information literacy instruction draws from the ideals of the Renaissance and often results in a change of perspective after discovering deeper meanings in materials, concepts, and processes.

Background

When SECAC, the Southeastern College Art Conference, invited me to combine my session on information literacy (IL) instruction in the arts with a panel on the Renaissance at its 2014 meeting, it highlighted a gap in my education.

Although I was a visual arts librarian who had a minor in art history in college, I had never actually taken a course on the Renaissance. To fill this lapse, I determined to educate myself about the period. I searched for, analyzed, and compiled resources pertaining to the Renaissance. I created a list of major artists of the period and a timeline showing important events in chronological order.

My self-directed learning project enabled me to re-create the process undertaken by students as they did research and acquired knowledge in a new area. This adventure in self-education gave me a unique opportunity to investigate research methods through

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the eyes of a student and brought me important insights about how information literacy strategies can bring success.

This project began with the addition of new liaison areas for the departments of Art and Design, Art History, and Art Education at Towson University in Towson, Maryland. In addition to these three departments, liaison responsibilities for the College of Education (with special focus on the departments of Educational Technology and Literacy, Instructional Leadership and Professional Development, and Secondary and Middle School Education) helped to inform this investigation. This combination of departmental responsibilities, previous and current experiences in both the art world and K–12 educational systems, and a continued interest in the science of learning and instruction provided an opportunity for assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of current IL efforts at Towson. Because of these experiences, examples emerged of resources and best practices for higher education programs dedicated to the education of artists, art historians, and art educators.

Leadership at Towson University places a high value on information literacy skills developed in visual and performing arts programs, including a continued interest in students' "effective communication, critical analysis, and flexible thought."¹ The university's former president began her academic career as a professor in Towson's Theatre Arts department. Under her leadership, Towson reintegrated art and design concepts into every level of scholarship at the institution, combining them with a commitment to excellence in teaching as well as with the ideals of a true liberal arts education in an effort to develop students with strong problem-solving, entrepreneurial, and critical thinking skills. Renaissance studies encouraged historical awareness; appreciation of physical and natural beauty; knowledge of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, and philosophy; and personal political involvement.²

Art students must display a depth and breadth of understanding to plumb available resources. Research in art is complicated by challenges not found in other disciplines, so scholars in art programs would do well to develop advanced IL skills early in their academic careers.

The Information Renaissance

Technology places information at our fingertips as well as hurdles at our feet. During the Renaissance, "Art and design [was] taken to mean the invention of all sorts of techniques and machines."³ In the current information

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renaissance, libraries, museums, repositories, and archives have made great efforts to digitize information. In certain cases, researchers can find media and information about contemporary artists and art movements solely on the Internet. Although the World Wide Web seems to provide instantaneous access to resources, it is a chaotic mix of websites with wildly varying organizational structures and without any

discernible logic. The freedom of creation that is the foundation of the Internet is also its greatest weakness. As a result, searches for visual images are problematic for researchers.

There are several major challenges in online searches for images. Metadata attached to images are subjective and sometimes incomplete. Images held by institutions or featured on artist websites are not indexed in a universally available central database or catalog like WorldCat, the catalog developed for books by the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC). WorldCat contains millions of entries categorized using recognized subject headings for library holdings around the world.⁴ Naming and cataloging of art objects is made difficult by language mistranslation, by varying perceptions of subject matter, and by attribution ambiguity.

Benefits of Information Literacy

Information literacy instruction is a key component for understanding the multitudes of resources available online and in the deep Web. As scholars learn to identify the processes and concepts involved in information management, they become adept at revealing new sources and identifying quality resources. Technology will continue to change the information landscape. Information guides decisions at every level, and we, as informed citizens of our global community, improve our environments by learning about information literacy.

After several years of observation, it has become apparent that students, when given the chance to experiment in a situation where help is available nearby, will find the information necessary to complete their tasks. Teaching students a few simple skills

before open searching sessions greatly improves their search efficiency, but those skills may also be addressed as students discover hurdles in their searches. By providing examples and acting as a guide, instructors help students improve their IL skills and their understanding of technology in ways that are meaningful for them. As a result, learners more easily remember navigational skills and grasp IL

concepts. In his book *Brain Rules*, John Medina mentions twelve concepts that influence learning: survival, exercise, sleep, stress, wiring, attention, memory, sensory integration, vision, music, gender, and exploration.⁵ When students are allowed freedom to seek out information resources in a safe environment, they are fulfilling their need to explore in a way that grabs their attention and stimulates their senses.

Although it may seem contradictory, observation has also revealed that students initially hesitate to deviate from prescribed guidelines. Given the freedom to explore, some students respond with momentary panic. Seth Ashley, Grace Lyden, and Devon Fasbinder—researchers at Boise State University in Idaho and the University of Missouri in Columbia—reflected this feeling when they commented, during their media literacy study, “Students almost never expressed uncertainty, raised questions, left items blank,

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or said they did not know. They seemed more interested in providing a single ‘correct’ answer than in acknowledging the complicated reality of these corporate and commercial media messages.”⁶ By incorporating free exploration and one-on-one consultations, instructors help students transition from fear of noncompliance to self-confident searching.

Fixed or Growth Mind-Set?

In her book on the impact of affect on learning, *Mind-set*, Carol Dweck found that people fall into one of two categories: fixed mind-set or growth mind-set.⁷ According to Dweck,

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mind-set preference may be changed through personal awareness, is often influenced by teacher attitudes, and determines learning aptitude. Students in the fixed mind-set took fewer risks, lied about their ability, and preferred to remain at the same level of learning.⁸ In the Renaissance, radical shifts in perspective, style, and subject dramatically changed the art landscape forever. If Renaissance culture had not supported a free environment, Renaissance artists would have been unwilling to experiment, to take risks, or to

change established rules—in other words, the environment would have encouraged a fixed mind-set. Culture, politics, and art of that period would have remained stagnant without a growth mind-set.

Educational institutions have conditioned many students to prefer a fixed mind-set through overuse of standardized testing and exercise of curricular control. Additionally, the abundance of information available to everyone encourages quick consumption without discretion or evaluation. Student reluctance to speak up, dig deeper, or question authority has a dire impact on their IL habits and on their ability to participate fully in society. Casa Gioiosa, the Renaissance school supported by the Gonzaga family of Mantua, Italy, provided an education that

As facilitators of learning experiences, we can also cultivate an environment that supports the growth mind-set by believing in and challenging our students, creating an atmosphere of trust and openness, encouraging failure, and learning from setbacks.

supported the community by ensuring an open, inquisitive, educational environment. All students left the school with an understanding of essential concepts and of their place in society.⁹ As facilitators of learning experiences, we can also cultivate an environment that supports the growth mind-set by believing in and challenging our students, creating an atmosphere of trust and openness, encouraging fail-

ure, and learning from setbacks. We can also help students become lifelong learners by demonstrating the importance of information literacy to daily life and incorporating these concepts into our own ideologies.

Diving into the Ocean of Information

The good news is that students in art classes already demonstrate many of the characteristics necessary for good IL skills, including growth mind-sets, creative thinking, an ability to analyze, and general inquisitiveness. It is the instructors' mission to show students how to dive deeper into the ocean of information. With a nod to the increased appearance of local landscapes in Renaissance painting and to Baltimore's bayside location, what follows is a simple summary of IL concepts and the current information environment using an aquatic analogy.¹⁰

The advent of the Google search engine algorithm has reshaped research habits. One academic review of threshold concepts and information literacy concluded that Google has complicated the research process because "students encounter formats in the wild" and are unable to differentiate between types of resources.¹¹ Not surprisingly, when doing scholarly research, students often expect to find everything they need in one location by using multiple phrases in one search box and without designing a complex search strategy. Librarians cultivate better searchers by taming the wildness of the open Web with IL instruction. For an in-depth analysis of the role of Google in library searches, see Helen Georgas's three-part study, "Google vs. the Library."¹²

In the classroom, one analogy used is that research is a process similar to fishing. Results vary in size, quality, and number. A good search requires active engagement in the research process, and multiple attempts and strategies are necessary to get the best results. Students need to cast their nets, evaluate their catch, save the valuable results in a safe location, release what does not fit their requirements, and then repeat the process until they have reached a reasonable limit. Overall, students need to understand that, like fishing, research takes patience and persistence. Scholars must find the right combination of locations (databases and catalogs) and lures (keywords) to bring in a successful catch.

The information environment (especially the electronic environment) has been compared to an ocean of knowledge. Fishers of knowledge find the fastest results by snorkeling at the surface—that is, by taking information from open-access, public sources found through search engines. Diving deeper into research requires special equipment, like scuba gear (often in the form of databases or subscriptions paid for by an institution), and catches bigger fish. The deepest research requires submersible technology, like submarines, and specific knowledge of the ocean topography to navigate effectively. Resources found in archives or special collections, including primary sources such as original artwork or letters, are retrieved at this level.

As with any exploration, we can guide ourselves, and inquisitive minds often do. Yet we benefit from having several tools: a map of the terrain, an awareness of technology designed to help navigate the territory, and experiential or learned knowledge of the environment. In the ocean of information, the deeper you go, the more important

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these tools become. It is easy to snorkel at the surface without running into obstacles, but deeper exploration requires specialized training, like scuba lessons, and understanding of patterns and processes, like the mechanics of a submarine, for safe and successful navigation. Innovative IL instruction methods encourage students to chart unknown territories, to share that information with their fellow scholars, and to develop self-confidence in their ability to navigate the environment. The best teaching techniques are also adaptable according to the fluidity of the information landscape.

Standards for Information Literacy

Luckily, librarians have developed standards and are revising them to help instructors discover best practices for IL instruction and to serve as guideposts for lesson plans. For some scholars, the specific term *information literacy* is not introduced until graduate school. Often, instructors teach undergraduates the skills essential to good IL practice without defining them as information literacy. Because librarians are charged with the management of information, information literacy is a central part of our focus, yet we are not alone in our quest for higher levels of awareness surrounding these concepts.

Before delving into specific examples of university-based IL instruction practices, a clearer understanding of the theory of information literacy and threshold concepts is necessary. In a report from the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Information Literacy Competency Standards Review Task Force, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) noted, “Multiple literacies, including digital, visual, textual, and technological, have now joined information literacy as crucial skills for this century.”¹³ ACRL’s original definition of *information literacy* as a set of abilities requiring individuals to “recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” helped build the foundation for many library instruction sessions.¹⁴

As the information environment changes, we are beginning to realize that the ACRL Standards do not address all the needs of today’s learners. The ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards Review Task Force correctly surmised, “The Association of College and Research Libraries Information Literacy Competency Standards

The Task Force took standards that had become removed from classroom practice and were driven by assessment and replaced them with new concepts reflecting more realistic depictions of overarching ideals shared by information professionals.

for Higher Education should not be reappraised as they exist but should be extensively revised.”¹⁵ Investigation of “current literature covering information literacy and related literacies, information technology, and critical theory” began in July 2011, and new information literacy threshold concepts have been reviewed and revised by the Task Force and the greater library community.¹⁶ Much like the transition from Gothic to Renaissance artwork, the Task Force

took standards that had become removed from classroom practice and were driven by assessment and replaced them with new concepts reflecting more realistic depictions of

overarching ideals shared by information professionals. The group designed the new concepts to include a perspective that both the practitioner and student could appreciate and apply to multiple scenarios.

Threshold Concepts

Basic understanding of threshold concepts as they apply to information literacy is the focus of two articles by Lori Townsend, Korey Brunetti, and Amy R. Hofer.¹⁷ In a July 2011 article, the three authors share Jan Meyer and Ray Land's definitions of *threshold concepts* as "core ideas and processes that define the ways of thinking and practicing for a discipline, but . . . often go unspoken or unrecognized by practitioners."¹⁸ Threshold concepts teach the "why" of the discipline by "encouraging students to change how they see the world—and possibly themselves . . . [Threshold concepts] are essential to the process of teaching and learning."¹⁹ By definition, all threshold concepts are

- Transformative—they cause a shift in perspective;
- Integrative—they bring disruptive concepts together;
- Irreversible—once you learn them, they cannot be unlearned;
- Troublesome—they first seem counterintuitive;
- Bounded—they are usually unique to a specific discipline or they define the scope of a discipline.²⁰

Reflecting on the Renaissance provides an appropriate example of crossing a disciplinary threshold. Before the literal and figurative shift in perspective from Gothic to Renaissance painting, the composition of scenes and distortions of image size isolated viewers from iconography.²¹ After Renaissance images began to be created, artists revisited the Greek and Roman depiction of human form and introduced a specific focus: humanity within the context of religion and society.²²

Townsend, Brunetti, and Hofer apply Meyer and Land's concepts to information literacy and propose five threshold concepts in their 2011 paper for IL instruction: format as process, authority is constructed and contextual, information as a commodity, primary sources and disciplinarity, and the library as research.²³ In their October 2012 article, they apply student data gathered from classroom experience and reevaluate their original concepts to encompass seven areas in IL instruction:

- Metadata = findability.
- Good searches use database structure.
- Format as a process.
- Authority is constructed and contextual.
- "Primary source" is an exact and conditional category.
- Information as a commodity.
- Research solves problems.²⁴

When we look at several of the threshold concepts, we begin to understand the complexity of the landscape of information literacy. For example, "Metadata = findability" declares, "Metadata makes information findable through its orderly description of the qualities of that information," such as controlled vocabularies, URLs, indices, and



citations.²⁵ “Good searches use database structure” discusses the use of Boolean search terms such as AND, OR, NOT, *, and “ ” and encourages understanding the structure of databases.²⁶

“Format as process” is one of the most important concepts in today’s environment. It deals with understanding how research materials are created, vetted, and presented

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to scholars and the public.²⁷ Understanding this concept leads to a much deeper understanding of the media sources surrounding our society and enables students to deliver resources with full confidence in their appropriateness. While it is tempting to believe that the final version of the concepts approved by ACRL in February 2015 will be the last word in information literacy threshold concepts, it is more realistic to understand that the community

of scholars, librarians, and practitioners will continue to refine these concepts as they are tested in classrooms.

Information Literacy Assessment

Because the ACRL Standards are often tied to measurement of student skills, they have been used in processes of institutional assessment and accreditation. In a study conducted by Megan Oakleaf, a nationally recognized assessment advocate and the leader of Towson’s RAILS (Rubric Assessment of Information Literacy Skills) project, Michelle Millet and Leah Kraus used IL assessment to fulfill an accreditation requirement at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. Librarians at Trinity developed the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) required under Core Requirement 2.12 of their accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), based on information literacy.²⁸ One of the best features of their information literacy assessment plan was that it involved input from people in all areas of the university, including faculty, administrators, staff, librarians, and students.²⁹ They reported that the best IL assessment should occur “within the library; in the classroom; on campus; and beyond the campus” with “feedback from faculty and students . . . to help librarians refine information literacy instruction.”³⁰

Researchers in Australia (Jenny Ellis and Fiona Salisbury); at the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale, Florida (David Walczak, Monika Reuter, and Diane Sammet), as well as a team with ties to Boise State University and the University of Missouri (Ashley, Lyden, and Fasbinder) devised studies involving first-year students and examined their need for IL instruction and their progression through information literacy thresholds.³¹ All three teams noted the lack of student ability to distinguish materials when they arrived on campus. Ellis and Salisbury commented, “Even if [students] were handed a reading list by a lecturer, they do not appear to have the knowledge of how to de-code the citations and find the items.”³² The evaluative nature of these scenarios provided additional evidence for inclusion of IL instruction in classrooms around the world.

The Challenges of Art Research

Joan E. Beaudoin at Wayne State University in Detroit focused on how and why images were used by archaeologists, architects, art historians, and artists.³³ Beaudoin discovered that these scholars used images in a variety of ways, including for knowledge, inspiration, critical thinking, engagement, proof, translation, conceptual models, cognitive recall, emotion, marketing, social connection, and trust. She concluded, “The need for high quality, well-described images . . . continue[s] to be overlooked.”³⁴

Sian Everitt at the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design in the United Kingdom provided an excellent analysis of online resources by providing details of the development of an institutional archive.³⁵ Notable resources that would enhance scholarship in the United States included Archives Hub, which “provides a single point of access to 18,928 descriptions of archives held in more than 90 universities and colleges in the UK (www.archiveshub.ac.uk).”³⁶

Two of the most entertaining studies involved arts-based lesson models for IL instruction in studio art and history classrooms.³⁷ Daniel Payne from the Ontario College of Art and Design in Canada provided descriptions of student-devised art installations based on IL instruction concepts.³⁸ Kristi Palmer, a librarian at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), collaborated with a women’s history class to research, arrange, and create a mural about women in the United States.³⁹ Both researchers used concepts embedded in the practice of art to engage their students more fully in their understanding of information literacy.

Research in Renaissance art history enabled me to interpret research strategies in a way similar to that of undergraduate students. However, I had distinct advantages over many students, as most instructors would. My background in studio art and art history gave me a useful foundation of knowledge. That background—with help from a classic textbook on art history, *Gardner’s Art through the Ages*—indicated that my research was moving in the right direction.⁴⁰ As an information professional and liaison for the College of Fine Arts and Communication, I had a deep understanding of the electronic, print, and personnel resources available at Towson. Finally, anxiety levels may be greatly reduced for instructors like myself, because research fulfills both personal and professional goals.

Resources for Study of the Renaissance

Specific resources related to the Renaissance that should be helpful for students searching for new perspectives include *Renaissance Art and Architecture* by Gordon Campbell; *Florence & Baghdad* by Hans Belting; and *The Controversy of Renaissance Art* by Alexander Nagel.⁴¹ A short work by Rosa Maria Letts provided an overview of the Renaissance and facilitated cross-referencing of her analysis with images and information from *Gardner’s*, museum websites, and two databases of images, ImageQuest and Artstor.⁴² During this process of cross-referencing, compilation of a timeline, and creation of a list of artists from the Renaissance, several online sources with excellent details emerged. Instructors might use these resources in classes about the Renaissance.

Most artists and art historians with Internet connections know about the continuous introduction of new museum sites, artist web pages, and archival databases. During my



research timeline, the Getty Museum in Los Angeles announced that it would begin to allow “downloads of over 250 free art books” at <http://www.getty.edu/publications/virtuallibrary/index.html>. A list of high-resolution images compiled by a librarian and shared with the library community through *American Libraries Direct* (a weekly publication from the American Library Association) may be found at <http://oedb.org/ilibrarian/guide-little-known-image-collections-millions-free-hi-res-images>.

Direct links to specific websites related to works from the Renaissance may be found in the Appendix to this article and as follows: the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Siena, Italy (www.operaduomo.siena.it); the Victoria and Albert Museum (www.vam.ac.uk) and the National Gallery of the United Kingdom (www.nationalgallery.org.uk); the Metropolitan Museum in New York City (www.metmuseum.org); Artstor (library.artstor.org); Pinacoteca Nazionale di Ferrara in Italy (www.piracoteca-ferrara.it); and the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid, Spain (www.museodelprado.es).

Good IL instruction, teaching methods, and research strategies share a focus on uncovering connections.

Each museum and archive had different types of information. Some were extensive—for example, the National Gallery includes a reverse view of paintings. Others included only a timeline or basic metadata but were useful for their images of artwork.

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Conclusion

This investigation into the Renaissance provided a better sense of the challenges faced by students during research. It also supports the belief that good IL instruction, teaching methods, and research strategies share a focus on uncovering connections. Change of perspective occurred while learning about the deeper meanings found in Renaissance culture, and this shift encouraged improved instruction and resources for the IL program at Towson.

Lifelong learning seems to be a value held by higher education and based in ideas from ancient Greece, Rome, and the Renaissance. Moving forward, scholars should take a moment to consider how their investigation and involvement in scholarship impacts and affects the world and to share information about information literacy with their fellow scholars, faculty, and librarians.

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Appendix

Web Resources Related to Renaissance Artworks

- Christus, Petrus, *A Goldsmith in His Shop*, oil on oak panel, 1449, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, last modified July 21, 2014, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/459052?=&imgNo=0&tabName=related-objects>.
- Dürer, Albrecht, *Coat of Arms with a Skull*, in Encyclopædia Britannica ImageQuest, http://quest.eb.com/#/search/renaissance-art/1/135_853697/Coat-of-Arms-with-a-Skull-Created-by-Albrecht-Drer/more.
- Mantegna, Andrea, *Cristo con l'Animula della Vergine*, tempera on wood panel, 1460, Pinacoteca Nazionale di Ferrara, Ferrara, Italy, last modified July 22, 2014, <http://www.pinacotecaferrara.it/opere/common/scheda.jsp?nctr=08&nctn=00039718>.
- , *Death of the Virgin*, tempera on wood panel, 1462, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, Spain, last modified July 22, 2014, <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/death-of-the-virgin/>.
- Siena, Opera della Metropolitana, "Battistero do San Giovanni," last modified May 16, 2014, http://www.operaduomo.siena.it/eng/battistero_approfondimento.htm.
- Van der Weyden, Rogier, *Portrait of a Lady*, oil on wood panel, 1460, National Gallery, London, last modified July 21, 2014, <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/workshop-of-rogier-van-der-weyden-portrait-of-a-lady>.
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10. Helen Gardner, Fred S. Kleiner, Christin J. Mamiya, and Richard G. Tansey, *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, 11th ed. (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001); Letts, *The Renaissance*.
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12. Helen Georgas, "Google vs. the Library: Student Preferences and Perceptions when Doing Research Using Google and a Federated Search Tool," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 13,



- 2 (2013): 165–85, doi:10.1353/pla.2013.0011; Helen Georgas, “Google vs. the Library (Part II): Student Search Patterns and Behaviors when Using Google and a Federated Search Tool,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 14, 4 (2014): 503–32, doi:10.1353/pla.2014.0034; Helen Georgas, “Google vs. the Library (Part III): Assessing the Quality of Sources Found by Undergraduates,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 15, 1 (2015): 133–61, doi:10.1353/pla.2015.0012.
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