More on Collaboration

Are Schools Killing Reading?

Plagiarism: Learning Opportunity

Wearable Technology
Information Literacy Scaffolds at the High School Level

by KELLY PAYNTER

A LTHOUGH THEY ARE dubbed the Digital Generation, information literacy skills do not come automatically to high school students. Teachers and the school librarian must work together to provide strategies and scaffolds so that these students can evaluate sources critically. Whether modeling the digital search process, creating pathfinders of authoritative sites, or initiating discussions about quality resources, the school librarian is a valuable instructional partner. The school librarian and teachers, working together, can direct students toward authoritative sources without excessive hand-holding or stifling creativity.

As a high school librarian, I found that even though high school students were sophisticated in certain technological areas such as social media, they were unprepared to find and evaluate resources for research. Classroom teachers were often too busy to teach such topics, and they assumed the concepts had been mastered in middle school. Information literacy prowess often boiled down to luck. If the student had a teacher who regularly took the class to the library and/or parents who reinforced literacy concepts at home, they were usually proficient in information literacy.

COLLABORATION GOLDMINE

One of the hallmarks of school library programs is collaboration with teachers. Often this is initiated by the school librarian, but it can also be initiated by a frustrated classroom teacher whose students accepted the first result from Google as the ultimate authority or used Wikipedia or Yahoo! answers to support their arguments. In worst-case scenarios, the students plagiarized papers submitted to paper mills or paid for these “resources.” Information literacy skills are “expensive” time-wise but invaluable in the long run for their usefulness across all disciplines. Such instruction can also save the harried classroom teacher much frustration when grading.

Teachers may assert that students will not use paid databases even if they are demonstrated, but I have not found that to be true. I have observed students using the district’s digital library on their own, and they frequently asked for the passwords outside of formal class instruction. Yes, some students will use Google no matter what, but educators should not give up teaching the more scholarly resources.

EXAMPLES OF COLLABORATION

The following examples of collaborative lessons are ones I have used to teach integrated information literacy and research skills in conjunction with a classroom project. I am a firm believer that information literacy skills should not be taught in isolation, because students will be unlikely to remember the material if it is not used immediately.

LANGUAGE ARTS

American Literature classes study the novel Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck. Underlying the novel are the ideas of consumerism and the American Dream. The teacher wanted the students to relate those concepts to current world events. (This is a frequent theme that I have noticed since the advent of Common Core—literary criticisms are out, and personal or cross-discipline application is in.) The problem, however, is that students often have so little an idea of what goes on in world events that they have a problem formulating thesis statements or even knowing meaningful keywords. When faced with such difficulties in starting, some students simply fail to start.

We have, in our district, a paid subscription to an excel-
lent digital library which has numerous paid databases. Telling the students to “have at it” with 65+ resources, however, would overwhelm them, so I always started with helping the students narrow the number of databases to search. I recommended *Opposing Viewpoints* (Gale) and *Student Resources in Context* (Gale). These databases have Browse Topics buttons that allow students to see the most commonly researched topics. This feature was helpful for mining for keywords and deciding on themes. Together we brainstormed useful keywords, such as “student loans,” “celebrity culture,” and “executive compensation,” and ideas for thesis statements, including: Do money and possessions make someone happy? Has Black Friday gotten out of hand? Does spending create a robust national economy? The students picked a position and supported it with scholarly resources from the databases and quotations from *Of Mice and Men*. The end result was a higher-order thinking essay that synthesized information from multiple sources.

Another project in American Literature was the study of Melville and Hawthorne. These works begged the question, “Are humans inherently good or evil?” My favorite way to begin instruction was to type this question into Google. The first page of Google results was normally worthless as far as scholarly credibility. Paper mill sites, Q&A sites, personal blogs, and non-scholarly philosophy sites appeared. We clicked on each result, tried to find the authors’ credentials, and discussed why the sites were not research-worthy. I then directed them to the district’s databases. We brainstormed keywords such as “moral code,” “human nature,” and “social influence.” Again, it was not laziness on the part of the students that they found such projects hard. They simply did not have enough life experience to be able to produce these keywords by themselves. I found that modeling the research process while verbalizing what I would do when I hit dead ends or discovered quality resources helped them to attempt later searches individually. I encouraged the use of physical library books such as *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* by Philip Zimbardo and *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* by F. B. M. Waal. These books covered relevant topics, so the students could review synthesized tones on the material. I found that with vague research concepts students were more willing to use books than they were if they were doing a straightforward topic such as “biomes.”

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is a popular novel for 9th grade literature classes, because it poses the question, “Is justice always served?” The teachers wanted the students to find examples of modern-day Tom Robinsons to compare with the book’s plot. Again, most students were unfamiliar with current events and had a difficult time getting started. The end product of this assignment was an MLA-formatted annotated bibliography of articles that showed how justice was served (or not) in the present day. Major points I addressed included: What comprises an annotated

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bibliography? What is the point of an annotated bibliography? Why should one start with a paid database instead of a search engine? How can students cite articles properly?

The Language Arts teachers had already implemented a department-wide annotated bibliography format. Each student received a handout that showed an example annotated bibliography on the front, and on the back, were explanations as to what should go in each section. Students were expected to provide the MLA citation (they loved it when I showed how to export citations from databases; another advantage over Google) and then summarize the article. The next paragraph evaluated the source critically and discussed how it could be used in the final paper. Having a standardized format across all classes was helpful, and leaving copies of this handout in the school library helped to emphasize cross-discipline usage.

SOCIAL STUDIES

The humanities also lent themselves well to research projects. Advanced Placement (AP) classes, in particular, revolved around expressing oneself in writing and using Document Based Questions to provide evidence to support a position. In AP U.S. History, while examining the Bill of Rights, students performed current events research to see how those rights applied in modern times. I first walked the students through a model search. In Academic Search Complete (EBSCO), querying “7th amendment” returned multiple articles, not only about the U.S., but also about China. After filtering by Geography, there were still a large number of results, so we talked about putting quotation marks around the search phrase, writing out seventh, and brainstorming keywords such as “right to jury.” The students were also shown citation assistance tools such as EasyBib.com and CitationMachine.net.

An AP Economics unit explored the following question: What causes the U.S. labor force participation rate to decline? The students were asked to propose three hypotheses. The process was difficult for them, even as high-performing seniors. They did not know enough about the economy as a whole, nor did they have enough life or work experience to be able to articulate why people would choose to work (or not). We began by free-associating why people might leave the workforce. Common answers included staying home with children, joining the military, and retiring. Further prompting caused them to think of other reasons such as disability. Even as an experienced researcher, I find government sites to be the proverbial “black hole”—one can get mired in the minutiae. For this exercise, I pre-screened potential sources such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the U.S. Census, and the Social Security Administration; and non-government sites like PEW Research and Gallup. After brainstorming keywords and approaches, the students successfully found sources that confirmed or refuted their hypotheses. I did not consider telling the students which sources to use as hand-holding; even experienced librarians are made aware of previously unknown resources by their peers. By showing students that there are sites or databases tailor-made for a given search, librarians reinforce the concept of learning to learn.

In AP Human Geography, freshmen undertook a heritage project where they studied their ancestors’ origins and created migration maps. Ancestry sites are often password-protected and extremely in-depth. By showing the students how to navigate these sites, it saved time and confusion. We discussed which immigrant groups would have been processed through various points of entry to the U.S. This project also helped show students the items unavailable through Web searches, since much of ancestral heritage information comes from paid sources.

In AP U.S. History, juniors examined primary source documents and used them to develop research-based positions. Many students were unfamiliar with the term “primary source,” so we first defined the phrase. Next, we discussed why databases were a good option for locating these sources. Although many primary sources are in the public domain and are easily accessed by a Web search, often they are not labeled specifically as primary sources, thus limiting search results to the students’ prior knowledge. Conversely, many databases, such as MAS Ultra (EBSCO), Annuals of American History (Britannica), and U.S. History in Context (Gale) tag primary documents in their collections, so students can browse these items or limit searches by document type.

CONCLUSION

High school students still require adult direction when learning information literacy skills. Educators often assume someone else has taught the basics or think that students should know intuitively these concepts. With technology’s proliferation, many have fallen into the trap of believing that information literacy skills are something students naturally acquire, but educators need to remember that these skills are more than just standards to be “checked off”—they involve long-term, cross-curricular, higher-order thinking processes that students need help cultivating. It is also true that teenagers will probably avoid practicing these skills unless required to do so. After all, it is easier to click on the first result from Google, but as caring educators, we owe it to students to refuse to allow them to shortchange themselves.

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