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Teaching Information Literacy

by Ratna Chandrasekhar



Photograph by David Wilson

If a modern Rip Van Winkle, a person who last visited a library 20 years ago, should suddenly awaken, he or she would be in for a shock. Gone are the bulky wooden structures containing hundreds of drawers, the catalogues which once held a separate card for each book in the library's collection. Instead, entering the library, Rip would see banks of computers, providing access to a vast quantity of information from books, journals, and newspapers as well as from libraries, websites and databases around the world. Today, information can be retrieved far more quickly and efficiently than ever before. Yet this marvelous technology has brought with it new problems and challenges for students and teachers.

As academic librarians, my colleagues and I at the Maxwell Library are continually at work developing new instructional strategies to meet the needs of Bridgewater students and faculty. The internet has transformed the way research is conducted and made finding information a great deal easier. But it has created challenges too. The sheer quantity of information available can be bewildering. It's common for a student researcher to enter her topic in a search engine only to discover, a few seconds later, several thousand 'hits' or matches. How can she limit this topic to make it more manageable?

Even more critical is the need to evaluate and analyze information. Decades ago, when the only materials available were those in the library's own collection, students could generally assume that the books and articles they found could be trusted. In the new world of electronic information, however, students need to become aware of the difference between materials available through databases that the library subscribes to and those accessed through search engines on the internet. Databases provide material that may or may not have been published in print form and is generally from valid sources. Often references found on databases have been peer reviewed and may even be available in full text. Students using search engines, such as Yahoo, will find a vast amount of material, but nothing has been pre-selected and all sources appear equally valid. Nothing on the screen tells the user whether or not the information he is reading is accurate, whether the

author is reliable or prejudiced, a recognized authority on his subject or a 7th grader. Library users must be aware of the significant differences between general internet searches, which provide no easy way to distinguish between the trivial and the significant, and the databases, which facilitate academic pursuits.

Programs promoting information literacy grew out of the need to teach students to use electronic sources effectively, and to evaluate, synthesize, and cite sources correctly. To achieve this goal, Bridgewater's academic librarians have adopted several strategies. *Introduction to Information Resources*, a required course which introduces students to the resources and services available at the Maxwell Library, has an internet component focusing on search engines, web sites, etc. When customized instruction is requested, librarians work closely with individual faculty members to design sessions to meet the needs of students in a particular course. The number of information literacy sessions offered at the Maxwell Library has increased steadily over the past few years: during the academic year 2000-2001, 5602 students participated in 246 bibliographic sessions. In addition, the library offers a number of forums to introduce faculty to the ever-changing world of information. We encourage collaboration between faculty and instructional librarians in an effort to improve the methods for teaching students how to be better researchers.

Librarians are playing an active role in developing strategies to promote information literacy. We want to provide the resources and services necessary to have BSC students graduate with a solid understanding of the new information technology.

—Ratna Chandrasekhar began working at the Maxwell Library in 1980 and was a Senior Librarian at the time of her death in October, 2002. She served as Acting Director of the Library from 1991 to 1994. Ratna understood the enormous potential of computer technology and was instrumental in creating a classroom within the library dedicated to teaching the basics of computer-based research. Well known in the campus community for her dedication to students and faculty, Ratna was a beloved and valued member of the library staff.