1-1-2004

Information Fluency

Janis Bandelin
Furman University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine

Information Fluency

Today's undergraduate students have grown up in a world where computers are ubiquitous. Because they are so comfortable with computers, students often have a naive confidence in their ability to find accurate information, whether using an authoritative database or an Internet search engine.

Recently, Child's Play Communications and Insight Research Group, a market research firm, interviewed 500 children ages 8 to 17 regarding the use of technology. The researchers found that 87 percent of the children "considered themselves good at searching for information on-line."

On what basis do these young people rate their competency? Does being able to find a large quantity of information (or *any* information) on a searched topic mean that the search yields good results? What about the wealth of information in materials that are not found on-line, such as books? For many students, if something can't be found on-line, it doesn't exist. Clearly, there is a need to ensure that students apply critical thinking skills in finding, evaluating and using information.

The American Library Association defines Information Fluency (IF) as "the ability to locate, evaluate and effectively use information." But what is the appropriate level of commitment by our institutions to developing skills in Information Fluency? Should IF instruction be required in every first-year English composition class? Is it important enough to administer systematically throughout the curriculum? Or should it be left to the prerogative of each faculty member, as is the case at most institutions?

During the 2002-03 academic year at Furman, IF concepts and skills were taught in 92 courses in 15 academic departments — a total of 114 sessions. But not all professors take advantage of the university's IF instruction program, and there is no system in place to ensure that each student receives IF instruction. Many faculty, however, are convinced that Information Fluency is essential to academic success. Some even bring their classes to two or more sessions, allowing more time to cover higher-level concepts.

For several years the Associated Colleges of the South (ACS), with generous funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, has provided grants to support investigation of various facets of Information Fluency. Furman has received several of these grants and sent representatives to ACS-sponsored IF conferences.

These opportunities have inspired the Furman library faculty and staff to work with professors and information technology colleagues to integrate Information Fluency into courses. They have also forced us to ask: What level of institutional commitment to IF is appropriate? Isn't Information Fluency too important to be a "hit or miss" endeavor?

This year, the topic of Information Fluency has been included in the university's strategic planning process. While there is shared consensus about IF's importance, decisions about how to implement such a program and how to incorporate best practices from other institutions require additional study and reflection.

The Furman library faculty and staff look forward to helping develop an IF program that equips students to be not just critical thinkers, but savvy users and creators of information. Ideally, we would like to see all Furman students attend a minimum of three formal IF sessions. One would be embedded into a required freshman course; a second would be integrated into a course required for the major; and the third, a capstone session, would be completed before they graduate. Each session would feature the collaborative efforts of professors, information technologists and librarians.

If Information Fluency were woven into the fabric of the curriculum, our graduates would be more sophisticated seekers, consumers and users of information. Whether they move on to graduate school or into the workplace, they will need to have these important skills.

A person who is "information fluent" is prepared for lifelong learning. And isn't this essential to a liberal arts education?

— **Janis Bandelin**
Director, James B. Duke Library