Chapter 4
Library Instruction in the 21st Century

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The adoption of Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) information literacy standards, the rapid development of teaching and learning technologies, and the movement toward assessment of academic programs have shaped library instruction programs as formal, conceptual areas of study with increasingly greater presences in their institutions.

INTRODUCTION

In 1989, The American Library Association’s President’s Commission on Information Literacy defined information literacy as including four components: the ability to recognize when information is needed and to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information. This ushered in a new era in library instruction. However, it would take time for the library profession to make the transition from library instruction programs focused on how to use the quickly increasingly number of electronic databases, to a more academic approach. Students need to learn to determine information needs; define types of information sources and their uses; view scholarly information as communication within a field; understand organizational schemes and working within them to locate sources; evaluate sources by criteria dependent on their characteristics; vary search strategies to refine result sets; understand literature outside one’s area of expertise; cite sources properly and use information ethically; recognize unethical practices such as scams, hoaxes, or lies; synthesize information; and present it effectively. More broadly, students need to develop critical thinking skills; that is, students need to think in deliberate and reflective ways about the information they need, seek, retrieve, and use. Some librarians had always approached instruction sessions as opportunities to teach concepts rather than skills, but many had approached these sessions as requiring only that they indicate where to find a list of sources on a subject or how to navigate a

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4241-6.ch004
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database, and did not easily incorporate this new
view of library instruction into their thinking.
Gibson stated that, “Information literacy builds
on the previous work of the library community in
the instructional movement called bibliographic
instruction (sometimes called library instruction or
library user education as well). This earlier effort
focused on teaching students the tools, resources,
and strategies for using a specific library’s infor-
mation resources to best advantage for particular
assignments given by faculty… bibliographic
instruction is sometimes useful, but self-limiting
and often peripheral to any true programmatic
reach and development for teaching research and
information skills (2008, pp. 12-13). The opinion
of some library leaders that library instruction
would soon be unnecessary (See chapter 3) was
not so much a philosophical stance as the failure
to envision the cognitive processes behind infor-
mation seeking behavior.

Academic areas see value in the research and
knowledge that other subject areas can bring to
their own; in fact, interdisciplinarity is increas-
ingly common in scholarly pursuits. William A.
Perry’s article, “Different Worlds in the Same
Classroom: Students’ Evolution in Their Vision of
Knowledge and Their Expectations of Teachers”
in 1985 began a discussion in library literature
about the development of cognitive processes in
college students. When students state that they are
looking for information to support their opinions,
they are not merely expressing a misconception
about the research process that can simply be
corrected; they are revealing the current stage of
their development in understanding the nature of
truth and research in influencing our decisions. As
explained by Perry, the student’s view of the role
of the teacher varies, depending on the student’s
own stage of cognitive and moral development.
Thus, the responsibility of the librarian/teacher
is to provide the learner with “the support of
some elements that are recognizable and familiar
[at the learner’s current stage]...and a degree of
challenge,” to assist the student in the maturation
of their thinking.

Subsequent books by William G. Perry, Jr.
(1990) and King and Kitchener (1994) further
elucidated the importance of facilitating cognitive
development in information literacy programs.
King and Kitchener stated that “One of the most
important responsibilities educators have is help-
ing students learn to make defensible judgments
about vexing problems” (p. 1). This is in sharp
contrast to Brown’s very pragmatic view that “In
many lines, ability to use a library is necessary
for success” (1927, p. 99). King and Kitchener
outline 6 stages of Reflective Judgment:

**Stage 1:** Knowledge is assumed to exist absolutely
and concretely...
**Stage 2:** Knowledge is assumed to be absolutely
certain or certain but not immediately avail-
able...
**Stage 3:** Knowledge is assumed to be absolutely
certain or temporarily uncertain...
**Stage 4:** Knowledge is uncertain and knowledge
claims are idiosyncratic to the individual
since situational variables (such as incor-
crect reporting of data, data lost over time, or
disparities in access to information) dictate
that knowing always involves an element
of ambiguity...
**Stage 5:** Knowledge is contextual and subjective
since it is filtered through a person’s percep-
tions and criteria for judgment...
**Stage 6:** Knowledge is constructed into individual
conclusions about ill-structured problems
on the basis of information from a variety
of sources...

Exposure to theories such as these on ethi-
cal and intellectual development and reflective
judgment led academic librarianship to develop
standards for information literacy programs, in-
cluding general standards and separate standards
for subject areas and distance learning.