Think about what is relevant

Integrating research into the classrooms often starts with providing students the skill set to critically discern relevant information. But that is not always easy. There are several obstacles which prevent students from being able to successfully complete a research-based assignment:

From Anne-maree Lloyd (2010) we take the idea that embodied information literacy should be understood as occurring within socio-culturally created “landscapes” that evolve over time into “intersubjective space[s]” of collective practice. Students begin as “outsiders” to these spaces and become “insiders” as they are acculturated to the social practices that comprise the landscape of a discipline or sphere of life. Lloyd broadly defines three landscapes in which information literacy is commonly practiced:

- Students are still confused even after a library session and they don’t seek help
- Assignments are often unclear or require resources beyond what the libraries can provide
- Faculty aren’t aware of how librarians can help

Fig. 1: Fundamental challenges when designing a research assignment

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academic landscapes, workplace landscapes, and community landscapes, or what we’ll here call the landscape of everyday life.

But how can we make sure that students become information literate? The first step, is simply being aware of the issues that are present, such as:

- What is the faculty role in ensuring student success in research?
- Do faculty expect students to need help with their research projects? If so, do they direct them where they can receive assistance or do they assume the already know?
- What do faculty think students need most help with in relation to the research process?
- What can librarians do to help students who are conducting research?

Next, is to think about how information is used, created and shared within a specific discipline and how that relates to the goals and outcomes of the assignment. Some guiding questions to think about are:

- How do students show understanding of the disciplines’ concepts, values, information creation and sharing practices?
- How do faculty define critical thinking within their disciplines?
- What don’t students know? What are their learning gaps?
- What is the skill set of the successful student?

We also want to ensure that the assignments we’re creating are meaningful and robust. In that respect it is crucial to develop assignments that are “good” as well as “effective”. Such assignments should:

- How do faculty address “authority” in the discipline?
- How do students develop a network/information network?
- What resources do faculty hope students will use after they graduate?
- How are students expected to contribute to knowledge of the field?

Finally, students should ideally have all of the support structures in place for them to be successful and know what those are. Faculty awareness of the libraries’ resources and services is a critical component to this success. The UMD Libraries have departmental liaisons in every subject area who are knowledgeable, friendly and more than happy to help. Working with a librarian to design an assignment and work with your classes to show them how to find information and incorporate it into their coursework is a great way to start the research process. Asking students to talk to a librarian (even if they don’t think it necessary!) as part of their work is a great way to make that connection outside of class and provides yet another opportunity for learning and feedback in a way that makes research and the libraries a natural partner and extension of the classroom.