

Harnessing the Intersections of Writing and Information Literacy

Dan DeSanto and Susanmarie Harrington*

Introduction

It's a timely moment to be a librarian and a composition scholar collaborating at the intersection of writing and information literacy. In the past year, two new books address connections across our fields,¹ the ACRL sponsored several webinars on writing and information literacy,² and many conference presentations have noted correspondences between the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*³ and *Framework for Success in Post-Secondary Writing Instruction*.⁴ Both now and in the past, much of the conversation about writing and information literacy has focused on first-year writing instruction; however, this paper draws attention to an often overlooked site of connection between writing instruction and the library: Writing in the Disciplines. Writing in the Disciplines/Writing Across the Curriculum (WID/WAC) programs support faculty seeking to teach disciplinary writing conventions within their departments as well as faculty who use writing to help students learn disciplinary content, methods, and ways of thinking. Both intellectually and logistically, WID/WAC directors and librarians have much to learn from the scholarship and practices in each other's fields. We argue that librarian and WID/WAC partnerships can leverage the intersections of writing and information literacy to support the programmatic development of writing and information literacy throughout departmental curriculums.

Writing Information Literacy, Crossing Common Thresholds

Efforts to build connections between writing instruction and information literacy instruction date back to the 1950s⁵ and more recent history points to Rolf Norgaard's work as a foundational tie between the two fields. Norgaard's "Writing Information Literacy" commentaries in 2003 and 2004 issues of *Reference and User Services Quarterly*⁶ address the interwoven and dependent nature of writing and information literacy. Norgaard very purposefully uses the title phrase "Writing Information Literacy" and explains the exclusion of the word "and" to separate the two disciplines. Rather than the disciplinary meeting suggested by the phrase "writing *and* information literacy," Norgaard suggests an imperative relationship in which practitioners in both fields "discover ourselves as intellectual partners, with writing informing information literacy and information literacy informing work in rhetoric and composition" (125).⁷ Norgaard's suggested blending of fields does not represent a forced merging of two unrelated disciplines, rather, it recognizes the natural overlap of the disciplines and the shared rhetorical concerns we address. As Andrea Baer notes in her monograph on library/composition connections, librarians and composition scholars have shared interests in framing and solving problems, evaluating information, and adding value to that information. She describes information literacy and writing as "creative and inter-

* Dan DeSanto is Instruction Librarian at Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont, daniel.desanto@uvm.edu; Susanmarie Harrington is Director of the Writing in Disciplines Program and Professor of English at the University of Vermont, susan.harrington@uvm.edu

related acts of meaning-making” (3).⁸ Meaning-making is not a simple technical skill; it is a complex intellectual activity, learned over time and in context.

Both the writing and information literacy fields have attempted to articulate these creative and interrelated acts of meaning-making by introducing guiding threshold concepts. Threshold concepts are field-specific ideas which are foundational to acting and thinking as a member of the field. The term, coined by Meyer and Land, refers to knowledge that is “troublesome knowledge—knowledge that is ‘alien,’ or counter-intuitive or even intellectually absurd at face value” (2).⁹ The Association of College and Research Libraries’ *Framework* document uses six frames to articulate fundamental understandings for information literacy.¹⁰ Although it is still being debated whether or not each frame necessarily constitutes a threshold concept, each frame does describe an essential understanding that underpins students’ information literacy skills and abilities. In composition studies, the notion of threshold concepts has emerged in scholarship, not policy. A crowdsourced effort to articulate composition’s threshold concepts led to *Naming What We Know*,¹¹ a book project whose wide acclaim has elevated attention to the ways threshold concepts might apply in research and teaching. In both fields, approaches to theory and practice are under revision to better articulate the essential understandings needed for students to write and use information from a place of genuine understanding rather than mechanical repetition.

Threshold concepts invite us to consider the foundational understandings that make it possible for learners to progress in a given field. As such, they are a powerful lens for both WID directors and librarians. Both librarians and WID/WAC directors frequently consult with faculty who seek help because students aren’t successful: students can’t find the right sources, or they can’t write well enough. When we stop to consider threshold concepts, we shift faculty attention from “*What’s wrong with the students’ work?*” to a more helpful discussion of “*What foundational concepts in this field are going to challenge students? What do they need to know in order to be able to really do the work in this discipline?*” This reframing invites a whole new conversation about the curriculum. If librarians and WID/WAC specialists begin conversations with faculty through the lens of threshold concepts, faculty must consider and articulate the disciplinary understandings that have the biggest effect on student learning within the discipline. The conversation becomes curricular shifting focus from a single assignment or course to the major itself. Faculty trace a pathway through the curriculum and consider a systematic approach to teaching what’s most important.

Getting WILD: Tracing Pathways with Faculty

The Writing and Information Literacy in the Disciplines (WILD) project we discuss here was created to help departments trace and make explicit the pathway writing and information literacy takes within their undergraduate major. It emerged from our university’s most recent accreditation-inspired revision of general education requirements. Attention to general education created what Baker and Gladdis call a kairotic moment:¹² both the writing programs and the Libraries found openings in our general education initiative to create not just course changes but changes in how writing and information literacy were theorized and reinforced across all four years of the undergraduate education. As the Libraries and the writing faculty, separately, began advocating in the general education process, we realized that we were making some of the very same arguments, namely, that

- writing and information literacy involve processes, inquiry, and behavior that are learned in particular contexts and over time
- disciplinary success depends on foundational knowledge, but that general foundational knowledge is not enough for disciplinary success
- expertise in both writing and information literacy instruction and assessment already exists on campus, and that expertise is underutilized

- Students need instruction and practice in their majors in order to be successful

Within the development of what became six general education outcomes for undergraduates, faculty agreed that linking writing and information literacy made sense. Our common cause resulted in a new outcome titled *Communication and Information Literacy*. The campus-wide general education steering group found the outcome important enough to identify as the first general education outcome for the campus to tackle.

The implementation of this outcome resulted in both a foundational campus-wide and a disciplinary initiative. At the foundational level, all entering students now take one of three courses that attend to shared outcomes in writing and information literacy. To build on the foundational writing and information literacy requirement, the general education committee designed the Writing and Information Literacy in the Disciplines Project (WILD). Modeled on discipline-based work in writing across the curriculum, the WILD project embeds curricular attention to writing and information literacy outcomes within participating departments' majors. The WILD model rests on the assumption that disciplinary expertise is the foundation of faculty work and that tying writing and information literacy curricular reform to the central tenets of the discipline recognizes faculty expertise, keeps faculty focused on what happens in their department's curriculum, and is much less likely to be viewed as bureaucratic overreach or administrative busywork.

WILD's process for working with departments is heavily indebted to Pamela Flash and colleagues at the University of Minnesota, where the Writing Enhanced Curriculum (WEC) project infuses writing and instruction into undergraduate degrees, department by department. WEC is built on the following principles:¹³

1. Writing can be flexibly defined as an articulation of thinking, an act of choosing among an array of modes or forms, only some of which involve words.
2. Writing ability is continually developed rather than mastered.
3. Because writing is instrumental to learning, it follows that writing instruction is the shared responsibility of content experts in all academic disciplines.
4. The incorporation of writing into content instruction can be most meaningfully achieved when those who teach are provided multiple opportunities to articulate, interrogate, and communicate their assumptions and expectations.
5. Those who infuse writing instruction into their teaching require support.

To make the integration of writing and disciplinary activity meaningful, WEC begins by surveying faculty, students, and (if appropriate) community partners about writing in the field. Those findings and any disjunctions are discussed and the department then shapes writing outcomes and a plan for implementing them. WEC also supports assessment, pedagogical development, and curriculum development as the department implements the outcomes. WEC's structure and surveys are freely available for other institutions to adapt, and we took their structure as our model. WEC, however, focuses solely on writing and does not explicitly address information literacy. We introduced a focus on information literacy as well as a role for library liaisons to the WEC model.

For instruction librarians, the chance at curricular planning with departments was timely. While there was a very successful liaison program at the University of Vermont Libraries, it, like so many other liaison programs, relied heavily on personal librarian-faculty relationships and was not as systematized throughout departmental curriculums as librarians would like. Liaison librarians were also quickly becoming victims of their own success as the numbers of classes requesting instruction continued to increase yearly. As Zald and Millett found in their case study of library work, campus mission, and accreditation, "a library instruction program built entirely upon course-level partnerships is not sustainable and cannot support consistent student achievement of institutional learning outcomes" (9).¹⁴ On our campus, librarians hoped WILD would push instruction efforts closer to a programmatic approach that, as Baker and Gladdis describe, "moves beyond individual faculty or program

collaboration to take a university-wide, collective approach of embedding and assessing IL throughout the curriculum” (339).¹⁵ In a grassroots way, WILD showed promise for furthering information literacy with liaison departments across campus.

As WILD got off the ground, our first step was to modify the WEC surveys to incorporate information literacy. Crafting the survey template for each department was a good way to bring the department chair, a project leader from among the department’s faculty, and the department’s library liaison into conversation about the project. The next step required departmental faculty to create disciplinary writing and information literacy outcomes. This work quickly revealed the intersections of writing and information literacy. In working with our first few academic departments, we fully expected faculty to draft one set of learning outcomes for writing and another set for information literacy (our surveys, after all, had two separate sections). After some initial attempts, it became clear that it made no sense to apply a disciplinary framework and force faculty to drop their learning outcomes into either a writing bucket or an information literacy bucket. We came to recognize that underpinning any departmental outcome there was a threshold concept that included both writing and information literacy. For example, a threshold concept asking students to consider the needs of an intended audience affects both the information a student selects and the tone or format in which the student chooses to communicate his or her findings. We began urging faculty to focus attention on core disciplinary concepts, and pointing them toward the aspects of writing and/or information literacy that were involved in learning the discipline. We found ourselves reaching for our own fields’ threshold concepts as we reminded faculty that all learning occurs over time and in context.

In drafting disciplinary outcomes, some departments seized on the concepts we brought to the discussion. The Psychological Science department, for example, adopted “sub-goals” (a term to fit within their larger goal-oriented framework) that will be recognizable to many readers: “Students are able to inquire and make strategic investigations of the psychological literature,” “Students recognize that scholarship is an evolving conversation.” Other departments, like Geology, tailored outcomes more specifically to address disciplinary information needs and modes of communication: “Students design and create figures, graphs, and diagrams that communicate information concepts,” “Students are able to translate complex concepts, data and terminology to diverse audiences.” Throughout the process of developing outcomes with departments, our own impulses to claim parts of the conversation as writing or information literacy lessened. Rather, we came to see that both fields attend to some of the same threshold concepts. In perhaps the most glaring example, many departments identified some form of “synthesis” or “using found information to create new knowledge” as an outcome. Both practitioners of rhetoric and composition and information literacy could claim this critical process as their own; however, it is hard to imagine an assessment of “synthesis” that doesn’t include *both* an examination of the information the student sought, evaluated, and selected as well as an examination of the student’s ability to convey the ideas he or she drew from the found information. To consider our fields as separate territory ignores how interwoven our fields often are and, more importantly, ignores a potential opportunity to engage disciplinary faculty in learning to teach both writing and information literacy *while teaching the discipline*.

WAC/WID: Models for Disciplinary Engagement

Composition studies scholarship has established that disciplinary conventions matter, not simply in the differences between genres and methods used across the curriculum, but in the motivations for and approaches to learning. As writing-across-the-curriculum scholar David Russell notes, “one acquires the genres... used by some activity field as one interacts with people involved in the activity field and the material objects and signs those people use...” (56).¹⁶ Learning comes as one settles into a new context, communicating and working with

those more experienced in the ways of the discipline. Skills learned in one context don't automatically translate into new contexts;¹⁷ terms that are used across departments (such as *analyze*, *synthesize*, *report*) might mean very different things in different contexts.¹⁸ What may appear to faculty to be easy skills—the ability to write an accurate summary, or to locate useful sources, to write a clear sentence or to format a table—often depends on a sophisticated understanding of the context for the text being produced. Focusing our conversation on the ways in which disciplinary expectations are articulated, taught, and assessed brought us to the heart of what's most important to faculty.

A move toward a department-based approach to writing shifts attention to how discourse is used within the department's discipline. Expected genres, tone, and writing style may vary greatly from a History department to an Engineering department and WAC/WID accounts for these differences by working with departmental faculty to institute solid pedagogical approaches to teaching writing that can be adapted to a department's own conventions and needs. WAC/WID specialists bring their own theorizing and research methods to bear in consultations with disciplinary faculty, while also encouraging disciplinary faculty to make explicit their own expertise in disciplinary writing. WAC/WID is built on the assumption of shared expertise, with WAC/WID helping to reveal what might otherwise lay tacit for faculty and students.

Instruction librarians also recognize the need for departmental variation by creating liaison programs that pair librarians to work as specialists with different departments. Yet, while these liaison programs have been successful in building librarian/departmental faculty relationships, they have largely resulted in a service model whereby librarians fulfill requests for instruction and react to assignments rather than proactively engage faculty in discussions of pedagogy or practice. Without a programmatic engagement in defining curricular outcomes, librarians will continue to play a reactive role in instruction and remain frustrated by unsystematic and poorly-integrated teaching scenarios within liaison departments.

What Can WAC/WID Offers Librarians?

WAC/WID offers much to inform how librarians might work with faculty to place a focus on the rhetorical dimensions of information literacy. WAC/WID programs work with departmental faculty in ways that recognize departmental writing expectations. James Elmborg, in "Information Literacy and Writing Across the Curriculum: Sharing the Vision," states "WAC theory views academic departments as social units, each with its own set of conventions that signal membership" (73).¹⁹ The WAC workshop model, he notes, revolves around faculty's own goals: "Disciplinary faculty need to identify the questions to be posed and must answer them in their own ways. WAC has rejected standardization in favor of local control" (75).²⁰ Current liaison models acknowledge the need for disciplinary customization and provide a good foundation on which to build; however, WID/WAC initiatives offer librarians a scaffold and a set of models for engaging with faculty in describing the cultural, contextual, and intellectual expectations that constitute information literacy within a given discipline. WAC/WID can help librarians be a part of articulating what Norgaard calls a discipline's "information ecology."²¹

The WILD Project engaged faculty in discussions about their departmental information ecologies, and these discussions often proved fascinating. We listened to nursing faculty debate at length whether or not their undergraduate students were information creators (they are learning to take, chart, and interpret human vital signs but does this mean they are actually creating new information?), geologists discuss how they expect their students to handle and present complex geological data, and faculty in the romance languages describe student research expectations throughout the progression from courses in language mastery to courses in culture and literature. Here disciplinary faculty had conversations about the fundamental aspects of their discipline as liaison librarians primarily listened. It's important to note that none of these conversations started out by stating, "Now we are

going to discuss the information landscape in your field.” Rather, meaningful curricular discussions took place after sometimes long and circular conversations that often started with common complaints about students’ abilities. In our experience, there was no shortcutting the time needed for faculty to work through progressive levels of discourse if we wanted a genuine articulation of the concepts that defined the discipline. Departmental faculty may not be masters of pedagogy in teaching writing or information literacy, but they are masters of their discipline. Listening to faculty members work through their disciplinary conceptions of information literacy proved a valuable, as well as challenging, exercise. As a rare chance to discuss pedagogy with a whole department, a liaison librarian’s inclination can be to seize the opportunity to steer the discussion into a full-blown presentation on the ACRL Framework (now or never!); however, patience, time, and the ability to let faculty work through their own articulations served librarians well. As a discipline that has built an identity around being the purveyors of information literacy, it may be time to recognize that departmental faculty are, and have always been, the primary instructors of information literacy.

Getting What You Give: Sharing the Reins of Information Literacy

Liaison librarians have, for a long time, sat atop a golden hoard of expertise and bemoaned the fact that no one wants to venture to come see it. While we have built an identity as the purveyors of information literacy on our campuses we have also, perhaps intentionally, created a barrier between librarians and the teaching faculty with whom we wish to collaborate. Genuinely engaging departmental faculty, working with them as educational partners and not gatekeepers to their students, requires us to do something very threatening and uncomfortable. It requires us to relinquish our role as the sole purveyors of information literacy and share the riches on which we sit. This shift in roles could create more wealth to be shared across disciplinary boundaries to the great benefit of our professions and our students.

Nancy Seamans, in her chapter “Information Literacy Reality Check,” points to the necessity of relinquishing our primary role with students in circumstances where it makes sense to do so:

...perhaps one of the most important components of sustaining an information literacy initiative is also one that we find most difficult, and that is the willingness to give primary responsibility to others if that’s what will ensure the program’s success. Should a faculty member embrace information literacy concepts and want to take ownership of them, we must ultimately be willing to take a secondary role in how these skills are taught to students. This will be difficult to do since we tend to think of information literacy as a library initiative, but, when appropriate, we must be willing to do so.²²

Departmental faculty address information literacy every day on our campuses. They create researched assignments, help students navigate the information they encounter, and assess student information literacy abilities. They may lack the theoretical framework our disciplines offer, but this, then, begs the question if more of our time might not be better spent engaging faculty in conceptualizing information literacy rather than stepping in front of their students.

Our project found that faculty *want* to align their curriculum. Faculty *want* to attend to writing and information literacy in a systematic way. What they need are the vocabulary and conceptual framework to do so. Here WID/WAC provides useful models. WID/WAC works with faculty in ways that meet instructors at different levels of sophistication and pushes them to further their pedagogical understanding of the teaching of writing. Librarians possess the skills to work with faculty in much the same ways as WID/WAC specialists do, but first,

librarians must acknowledge a shared responsibility for information literacy that includes departmental faculty as well as writing faculty.

Conclusion

As we've argued above, librarians have much to learn from WID/WAC models, and it is also the case that there is much for WID/WAC to take from academic librarianship.²³ Certainly the liaison relationships librarians develop are meaningful and could provide WID/WAC with yet another model for working with faculty. There is much for us to share and Norgaard and Sinkinson challenge librarians to go so far as to "share our educational identities" (31).²⁴ This partnering need not feel like "giving away the keys to the kingdom," rather, it should feel like an alignment of allies teaching intersecting rhetorical concepts. A student may engage in initial inquiry in order to select a topic, synthesize information to inform their ideas, or write their information seeking process into their papers. All of these intellectual activities cross disciplinary boundaries and are as much a part of writing as they are information literacy. WID/WAC and information literacy both have end goals of helping students to cross thresholds and move past the mechanical performing of tasks into a place where students identify the rhetorical situations they face, gather information and shape it for a given context, and articulate why these critical thinking skills are important.

The WILD project has highlighted just how deeply our disciplinary intersections run, especially in the curricular work we do with departments. We realized very quickly the impossibility of teasing apart writing from information literacy in a departmental threshold concept or even in a learning outcome and that our work crosses paths yet again in the work we do with faculty to develop assignments. These alignments suggest that librarians, as the traditional teachers involved in developing students' information literacy, may themselves have a threshold concept before them. On one side is the traditional model whereby librarians see themselves as the sole purveyors of information literacy and uniquely responsible for its development across campus. Across the threshold is a recognition that our practice is placed at a nexus in which writing efforts like WID/WAC, departmental faculty, and librarians converge and share responsibility for developing students' information literacy. Furthering campus-wide information literacy efforts will require crossing that threshold by fostering long-term partnerships that acknowledge differing departmental information ecologies and share pedagogy, literature, and, most importantly, responsibility.

Notes

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