Shifting the Discourse:
Information Literacy as an Opportunity to Address Intellectual Virtues

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Academic librarians are leaders and advocates for information literacy (IL) education and have been for decades. However, as information, and its access, has evolved, so too has the discussion surrounding the content of IL curriculum. Librarians have long focused on teaching cognitive skills related to information retrieval and use, such as searching techniques appropriate for databases and identifying different types of information sources. These concepts continue to be relevant in IL classrooms, but in recent years, some librarians have also advocated for the inclusion of outcomes that address the affective dimension of learning. The recently adopted Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education recognized this missing component and affective concepts are prevalent in the document, labeled as dispositions. According to the Framework, dispositions address the attitudes, beliefs, and emotions an individual experiences during research and include traits such as open-mindedness, self-awareness, respectfulness, curiosity, and flexibility. These traits are similar to what Jason Baehr called “intellectual virtues.” Baehr argued curriculum that emphasizes virtues, like curiosity, will ultimately result in deeper cognitive understanding than curriculum that emphasizes subject content, “while also being sufficiently caring and personal.” For IL librarians, Baehr’s argument suggests taking the time to develop dispositions will yield students who are better prepared to engage cognitive skills surrounding information and research. Further, given the ambiguity of research, IL instruction is ripe with opportunity to integrate intellectual virtues.

While opportunity exists and there seems to be growing recognition within the information literacy field for a more holistic approach to instruction, traditional pedagogy focusing on cognitive skill development and the transfer of subject content continues to persist. A traditional approach dominates federal policy in the United States. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) focused on measurable standards that are assessed to expose achievement gaps and has helped shape public opinion surrounding perceptions, beliefs and values of education in the United States. Parker Palmer emphasized the major flaw of the NCLB was its singular attention to measurable content, specifically standardized testing, which marginalized content that might otherwise encourage exploration and inquiry beyond textbooks. More specifically within the IL field, opposing philosophical approaches to education are apparent in guiding professional documents. Nancy Foasberg analyzed the Framework and its predecessor document, the Information Literacy Competency Standards and exposed the ideological differences underlying each document. Foasberg explained the differences as a shift from a positivist to a social constructivist perspective. The positivist approach underlying the Standards aligns with traditional, content-driven education as it presents “a commoditized understanding of information as something that students acquire and put into use through a mechanical set of steps.” Meanwhile, the Framework positions information as something to be “produced and made meaningful within a specific community.” The Framework accounts for the contextual nature of information and the individual, acknowledging students will master concepts at different points and amid various dispositions toward information, research, and learning.

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There is growing emphasis on the integration of attitudes, emotions, and character traits within the classroom. The adoption of the *Framework*, and its inclusion of dispositions in defining information literate individuals, acknowledged the call from many IL experts to integrate the affective dimension of learning into instruction. Beyond information literacy, a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article highlighted several professors practicing an intellectual virtues approach. However, whether increased attention among education experts extends to the broader pedagogical landscape is unknown. As work is underway to adapt *Framework* concepts into existing IL programs, librarians should consider the dominant language surrounding education and the influence that language has on learners. In this study, the author applied critical discourse analysis (CDA) to undergraduate student talk about research experiences to reveal the underlying beliefs and ideologies students have regarding the purpose of research, and more broadly, education. Findings suggest the dominant discourse surrounding education continues to reflect a traditional model that emphasizes content rather than intellectual virtues. This paper presents findings of this analysis and suggests future IL instruction focusing on intellectual virtues may be an opportunity for librarians to shift the dominant discourse.

**Information Literacy and Intellectual Virtues**

Information literacy experts have long advocated for the recognition of the affective learning dimension in research. Most notably, Carol Kuhlthau’s model of the information search process incorporated student feelings of uncertainty and anxiety during the research process. Kuhlthau argued one’s feelings significantly affect one’s experience with information and those feelings should be included in the learning process. Dane Ward also advocated for a more holistic instructional approach that emphasized self-awareness and asked, “can we be information literate if we possess the technical ability to find and evaluate information, but not the human capacity to experience and value it?” Ward emphasized the importance in being able to recognize one’s own research preferences and limitations. Robert Schroeder and Ellysa Cahoy urged reconsideration of the ACRL Standards and suggested learning outcomes that address “a person’s attitudes, emotions, interests, motivation, self-efficacy, and values” be included in future iterations. After the *Framework’s* publication, Eveline Houtman applied the concept of self-regulated learning and integrated metacognitive activities into instruction that promoted students’ self-awareness. Houtman described her shift in perception of self-regulated learning activities as something she once viewed “as wrappers around my content; I now see them as central to my teaching and to students’ learning.”

Librarians have not used the term “intellectual virtues” to describe instruction that fosters dispositional qualities, but the concept provides a useful lens as librarians integrate *Framework* ideas into instruction. Baehr outlined a formal conceptualization of intellectual virtues that aligns well with the aim of information literacy education. First, intellectual virtues share a common intrinsic motivation for a desire to learn or understand. Second, intellectual virtues involve a disposition to engage in a particular activity. For example, a curious person possesses a disposition to wonder and ask questions, because she has an internal desire to learn more about her subject. Other traits Baehr described as intellectual virtues include open-mindedness, attentiveness, intellectual courage, and intellectual honesty. Baehr emphasized teaching intellectual virtues is not only about developing motivated students, but also bridges a gap between those teachers who emphasize rigor and those who emphasize the personal nature of learning. “Deep understanding, which again is the proper aim of intellectual virtues, is a significant and demanding cognitive achievement.”
Discourse Surrounding Education

Education that emphasizes attitudes, values, and emotions is gaining attention among experts, but whether this attention has extended to students is unknown. Do students embody dispositional qualities? More importantly, do students perceive that the purpose of education is to foster traits? Critical discourse analysis is a research method that seeks to uncover how discourse reflects and constructs social practices. CDA is a broad term encompassing many approaches to the study of discourse, but, those who apply CDA to a text are most often interested in examining power relations and underlying ideological views that have become normalized. Because discourse is a social practice, it not only constitutes events, identities, and relationships, but also reflects existing situations, institutions, and structures.

In an educational context, CDA research has suggested the dominant perception of education does not include intellectual virtues or fostering dispositional qualities. Lilie Chouliaraki studied talk within a classroom that purported to be student-centered. However, Chouliaraki found the regulative nature of the talk focused on procedures, ensuring each student could complete a specified task. This approach left little room for the instructor to consider individual intellect and provided little opportunity for student controlled learning.

Jennifer Cohen analyzed mainstream newspaper coverage of education and found social language more often focused around issues of accountability, rather than emphasizing the teacher’s knowledge or expertise. In other words, news stories focused on school and teacher failings and suggested scientific, measured outcomes were the solution.

The subsequent analysis applied CDA to student conversations about research experiences to understand the dominant public discourses regarding educational practices. While the literature and public policy suggest a traditional, content-driven perspective of education persists, increased attention to the affective dimension of learning may be shifting student perceptions regarding the purpose of education.

Method

In spring 2016, the researcher led four focus groups with undergraduate students from the Department of Communication at a metropolitan, mid-sized university. The focus groups contained 18 total participants. Each group met for 30 to 45 minutes. Questions encouraged participants to reflect on their research experiences as college students, including barriers and their perceived abilities, conceptualizations of information literacy, and the extent in which research and/or information literacy had been the subject of a lesson. The researcher recorded and transcribed each focus group. The researcher applied critical discourse analysis to the transcripts to identify student perceptions and underlying beliefs regarding research and education.

Norman Fairclough outlined a three-dimensional model to apply CDA, where each artifact under analysis consists of a text, a discursive practice, and a larger social practice. A critical analysis involves close examination of the linguistic structure of the text by incorporating an analysis of the discourses articulated in the text and considering how these findings reproduce or shift the existing discourses and broader social consequences. Marianne Jorgenson and Louise Phillips highlighted several potential tools for textual analysis, of which transitivity, modality, and wording were applied in this analysis. When analyzing transitivity, the researcher is interested in how individuals are assigned agency and focuses on the relationship between a subject and its action. For example, passive sentences often serve to remove responsibility from an individual. When analyzing modality, the researcher is interested in the speaker’s affiliation with a statement. Individuals will commit themselves more strongly to some statements and less strongly with others using high or low affiliation. A researcher will look for hedging in statements, such as when an individual uses words like “well,” “a bit,” or “I think” to identify low affiliation. Finally, analyzing word choice reveals broad ideas about agents and actions. For example, Cohen
analyzed wording in texts as a way to identify repetition and patterns related to the concepts of measurement and failure in schools. In the context of this study, text analysis revealed how student language about research activated a broader discourse about education.

**Analysis**

Using focus group transcripts, the researcher analyzed the transitivity, modality, and wording found in student language to identify how discourse represented and created dominant ideologies regarding education. The analysis revealed the dominant discourse present during student focus groups centered on content-driven education and identified four common themes supporting this perspective: a teacher-centered classroom, binary thinking, lack of self-awareness, and a simplification of research.

**Teacher-Centered Classroom**

“Student 14: I feel like I’m constantly putting fluff in all my research, because they’re like it has to be ten pages”

“Student 18: we had to use a book resource, we had to actually go get a book.”

Examining the transitivity and wording of student statements revealed how students in the focus groups assigned responsibility for learning. Language consistently reflected a perception that teachers are the focus of learning. A teacher-centered perception of education is a perception that leads students to believe that learning is something done to them, rather than something in which a student might take ownership. In the statements above, students are de-emphasizing their responsibility for learning and assigning that role to the instructor. Both students use the verb has/had, an objective obligation verb. Rather than imposing an obligation on themselves (I must write a ten-page paper), the objective structuring shifts the obligation to someone else. In this context, a teacher did in fact assign each project; however, the sentence structuring indicates students have not accepted the obligation as something to complete for themselves. Rather, the assignment is something to complete for the instructor.

In addition, both students generalize the agent, an indication that there is a belief all professors act in the same way. Student 14 uses the plural pronoun they, suggesting all instructors mandate a certain page requirement when assigning a research project; whereas, Student 18 emphasizes that the instruction to “go get a book” was one that applied to an entire group (we), not only the individual. Generalizing the agent reinforces the idea that the responsibility for learning or completing an assignment always falls to the professor, not only during this one instance.

Passive construction of student statements also illustrated students were assigning responsibility for learning to the instructor. Students consistently articulated “I was taught” rather than “I learned.” The word taught suggests a student consumes information, perhaps a lot of information, but that student does not produce information and is restricted from exploring alternative ideas, beyond what the instructor provides. On the other hand, a student who learns content is an individual who could apply the information to other settings. Assigning the responsibility for learning to the instructor holds students back from exploration and discovery of a subject, as we see in the following exchange:

*Student 7: …I’ll go to like the database, usually Lexis Nexis is my go to, but –*

*Researcher: Why is that?*

*Student 7: You know, I think it’s because, like, that is what I was taught, I don’t think I even know of any other databases to go to to be honest.*
Another student expressed a similar sentiment when considering sources for an upcoming research project. “Student 4: And I’m sure there are millions of scholarly articles to like quote, but we haven’t really been directed towards that.” In both instances, students are restricting their educational experiences due to “what I was taught” or what they have (and have not) been “directed towards”. As the above examples illustrated, students clearly feel their education is restricted to the content that the instructor has selected to deliver and reflects a perception of content-driven education.

**Binary Thinking**

Analyzing student word choice revealed a number of binary terms used to describe experiences with information and the research process. Palmer argued that while binary logic has provided remarkable advances in science, “either-or thinking has also given us a fragmented sense of reality that destroys the wholeness and wonder of life.” The instances of binary terms that appeared during student focus groups demonstrated student perceptions of learning as either-or dichotomies with no possibilities to consider gray areas in between ideas. Consider the following comments reflecting students’ conceptualizations of information literacy:

*Student 6: …being able to um go through a lot of different information and determine what’s right, what’s wrong, what’s credible, and what’s not.*

*Student 7: I would say just like being able to know if a source is credible or not credible.*

Labeling information as “right” versus “wrong” or “credible” versus “not credible” removes any contextual understanding of information. For instance, a blog post on technology in the classroom might not be appropriate for academic purposes, but would be very useful for a teacher prepping for class the following day. In addition, binary thinking causes students to categorize content, rather than connecting and linking information together. A college student might categorize books, for example, as the only appropriate source to consider for a research project, thereby dismissing a wealth of information found on the Web, only because it does not fit into a preconceived category of what the student deemed as credible.

Additional binary thinking reflected student perceptions of research as “Internet-based” or “traditional.” In other words, students conceptualized research as structured (traditional) or online, rather than considering broad applications of research and information seeking. The following statements also illustrate how the students are constructing a particular reality through their conversation as Student 10 builds on the ideas and the same words from Student 9.

*Student 9: I don’t feel like I’ve had many, what you would call traditional research experiences…. But being a PR student, I’d say I’ve probably done the most research online…So just doing a lot of research online about the events they’ve held and the staff members, past productions, stuff like that. Um, that’s been the bulk of mine has been more Internet-based.*

*Student 10: Um, going along with that, mine [research] has been mostly Internet-based as well, but I’ve had some traditional research in my earlier like English and writing classes where I’ve come into the library and gotten sources from here and the databases online from the Steely website and stuff, but the majority of things I’ve had to research have been very like, close-ended or strict topics so I’ve, you know, go to a source, find it online…*
Using the words “traditional” and “Internet-based,” both students are reflecting and constructing a perception of research that falls into one of two categories. Binary thinking will severely limit student exposure and exploration of additional ideas beyond the perceived categorized content provided in the classroom.

**Simplification**
Additional word analysis revealed a simplification of research and the research process. In reality, research is anything but simple and should be an intellectually rigorous activity. However, the comments articulated from many of the undergraduate students reinforced a perception of the research process as an easy, linear, or straightforward process. In the focus groups, students used words that describe a process, such as “checkmarks,” “directions,” and “step-by-step.”

*Student 6:* …basically when I write my papers, I literally go line for line of the rubric and check everything off to make sure I’ve written about it in the paper and that’s the most important part because that’s what they’re grading on.

*Student 13:* …couldn’t like remember how to use it and I was like this is embarrassing cause how many classes have I been in the library where they like take you through step-by-step….

*Student 14:* “…like we had to use JSTOR and like, but those directions were like laid out for us, so it was just like, oh I just followed and then threw the paper away when I turned in my homework…”

As indicated in the comments above, students maintain a perception of research that is process focused, and Student 13 not only perceives, but also recalls instruction presented as set of sequential steps. Certainly, information literacy instruction contains many examples that aid in this perception. From using specific tools to the process of developing an idea to citing a final paper, librarians and classroom teachers often present these ideas in a sequential order.

**Lack of Self-Awareness**
A lack of self-awareness became apparent when examining the modality of student statements. Students attempted to construct an identity as knowledgeable researchers, but low affinity with statements illustrated many students are still developing as information literate individuals.

*“Student 6:* I don’t know, it’s like on the, when you, or you can Google the NKU, I don’t know what it’s called but you can search for like journals and periodicals and stuff like that.”

The use of “I don’t know,” “like” and “stuff” are illustrative of hedging, indicating low affinity with the statement. The student is trying to appear knowledgeable in his use of research resources, but has a hard time articulating a description of that resource. The low affinity illustrates a lack of self-awareness, because the student does not consciously recognize his shortcomings.

Contradictions also illuminated the lack of self-awareness as students attempted to articulate an identity that indicated familiarity with research. However, contradictory statements arose later in the conversation. The following excerpt represent one student’s voice as the conversation surrounding research experiences unfolded during the focus group.

*Student 2:* My engineering research background was more very condensed a lot of information in
small packages, whereas like my communication research I’ve had to dig a little deeper to find what I was looking for but I’ve never had a problem with research.

Student 2: (later) I would have to agree that ease of access sometimes can be a little difficult and just finding supporting or refuting topics...

Student 2: (later): ...it was kind of hard taking apart fact from opinion. So that’s where that got a little difficult...sometimes when reading what I was finding it seemed more opinion that fact. So that one was frustrating.

Student 2: (later) Like, we had to write it from our own point-of-view. And to piggy-back off of what you were saying [pointing at S4] is sometimes you’ll have this great idea but he’s like you’ve got to support it well if no one’s done it, how do you support it?

Initially, student 2 portrayed a sense of confidence regarding his experience with research and legitimized his statement by alluding to his “scientific” past in engineering. However, as the conversation continued, the student’s comments indicate that in fact he had a few problems with research, particularly with accessing and evaluating information.

The lack of self-awareness evident in the student focus groups clearly indicates a need for education that extends beyond content. However, it also adds support that students perceive education to be content-driven, because they are resistant to the idea of appearing inexperienced. When education emphasizes content, students will focus on a “correct” answer and mastery of specified skills.

**Shifting the Discourse**

The above analysis illustrated a dominant discourse reflecting a content-driven model of education and lacked recognition of intellectual virtues. This analysis is not to suggest that teachers at any level of education create an environment that is completely content-driven while ignoring the affective dimension; however, it is the public perception that can make it difficult to overcome ingrained notions about what it means to educate and to be educated. Palmer explained “teachers who use nontraditional methods feel thwarted by the traditionalism of their students, their students’ parents, and some of their colleagues” and called for teachers to lead the movement in changing public perception. For this reason, as librarians consider approaches to information literacy instruction, an explicit focus on intellectual virtues will foster dispositional qualities described in the Framework, but also may provide an opportunity for librarians to shift the dominant perception of what it means to learn.

Baehr explained that when a teacher emphasizes intellectual virutes, “his aim will be to mold and shape his students as persons—to impact their fundamental orientation toward epistemic goods and the practices that facilitate these goods.” Such an approach will ask students to consider the value of learning, beyond the price tag, and encourage students to care about the material presented. Baehr outlined several possibilities to approach IV instruction in the classroom, including direct instruction in which the instructor explicitly describes intellectual virtues to students. During IL instruction, this could mean a ten-minute discussion at the beginning of a one-shot session about what it means to be a curious person or an intellectually honest person, and why it matters in the context of a research assignment. Jacqueline Kracker applied a similar idea when she presented Kuhlthau’s information model to students, directly addressing the anxiety and uncertainty students encounter during research. Kracker found the presentation reduced student anxiety surrounding research assignments and suggested, “naming unspoken feelings opens the topic for discussion, and sharing uncomfortable feelings with others who can relate to the experience can be an effective way of diffusing the impact of these feelings.”
In addition to discussing intellectual virtues early in class, Baehr also suggested intellectual virtues be reinforced and connected with course material. For information literacy librarians, this might involve a short discussion about the concept of open-mindedness, and then reinforcing the concept later in class while students are analyzing bias in news sources. The librarian might ask students to think about how an open-minded person would read and react to the information versus someone who does not embody the virtue. Additionally, a librarian might introduce the concept of perseverance. Later, while searching a database, students might consider how a persistent person would seek out and use research tools versus a person who does not display perseverance.

**Conclusion**

The above analysis revealed how students construct and reflect a representation of education that emphasizes content, not intellectual virtues. Analyzing transitivity and the wording of statements, students consistently placed the teacher at the center of learning. Perceiving one’s education to be teacher-centered means the student is relinquishing full authority for learning and removes opportunities to explore or inquire about a subject. A classroom that embodies complete lecture and places all the authority on the instructor has been critiqued for its attention to rigor and lack of inquiry emphasis.\(^6\) Wording analysis also revealed student’s binary thinking and simplification of research. These examples suggest students focus on content, but do not consider the content in broader contexts. Additionally, simplifying the research process could be particularly problematic. Kuhlthau has shown feelings of uncertainty and anxiety exist during research,\(^37\) but if a student perceives research to be easy, any feelings to the contrary will by psychologically contradicting. Finally, several instances of hedging within student statements indicated a lack of self-awareness. When a student perceives that her education is content focused, she will be less likely to reflect on her own strengths and weaknesses and be more concerned with appearing knowledgeable in a subject.

As librarians consider how to integrate intellectual virtues, this analysis provides support on the need for more explicit instruction within the affective learning domain. An emphasis on intellectual virtues in the classroom does not ignore cognitive skills or subject-specific content that is important to each academic discipline, but it does foster the affective dimension of learning so that students are better able to engage, reflect, and apply content beyond the classroom context.

**Notes**

4. Ibid, 252.
10. Ibid, 704.
17. Ibid, 248.
18. Ibid, 251.
21. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid, 83.
28. Ibid, 84.
31. Palmer, The Courage to Teach, 64.
34. Ibid.