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As I was editing this issue about information literacy from kindergarten through graduate school, I was also rereading a favorite children's book, *A Bone From a Dry Sea*.¹ The author, Peter Dickinson, asks us to look "through the lenses of time" into the distant past, as he conjures up our ancestors—a tribe on an African plain "only about halfway toward words."²

In the opening chapter a young girl named Li applies a strategy from a children's game to trap a dangerous shark by stranding it on a sloped ridge of rock extending from the shore. She is distinguishable immediately from the other members of her tribe, whose behavior is governed by custom. Her insight in applying a known set of behaviors to new circumstances is, as yet, beyond their capacities. She knows that her actions are not accidental and, while she has no words yet for her reflective behavior, this knowledge makes her "different." As I peered through Dickinson's story-lens, "right at the edge of imagination's eyesight," it struck me that I was seeing the birth of a risk-taking, curious, creative, problem-solving being in the process of becoming self-aware—in short, what we would call an information-literate student.³

As you might surmise, the book continues to develop Li as a problem-solver who uses questions, close observation, and thoughtful testing of hypotheses to find solutions to practical problems. For hours she watches a spider in order to understand how it spins a web. She wonders how she might use that knowledge to catch the minnows that slip through her fingers. Undiscouraged by her own clumsy and broken nets, she continues weaving until it is too dark to see: "The failures were knowledge, feeding her need."⁴ Her weaving attempts continue to be unsuccessful until she modifies the task, using mesh-like rotted gourd fiber to catch shrimp, not minnows. Not only does she apply learning from one experience to another, but she is able to see beyond her failures to redefine the problem. As I was reading Mary Ann Fitzgerald's article in this issue summarizing three new studies about the information literacy skills of first-year college students, it hit me that Li is just what colleges wish for.⁵ She is able to access information, weigh its credibility against criteria she has devised, and synthesize knowledge from multiple sources.

Yet Li's yearning to know extends far beyond these practical problems—to wondering about existence, not unlike our own thinking:

She felt she was close to something enormous, some knowledge—not a piece of knowledge, like how to bash a mussel open on a rock or the way the stars moved—but a whole knowledge. The knowledge had the shape of a question. It seemed to fill her world like the light of the rising sun, to send tremors of its presence through her like the warming sun rays. Other questions, the ones about using and seeing, she was outside of. She could study and think and find their answers. This one she was inside of, part of. In fact she was herself the question.⁶

Our students, like Li, are becoming self-aware and questioning human beings. However, if they are to understand that information literacy has value, it must reach them not as assignments, lists of rules, and checklists, but as enthralling work. If it is to stick for a lifetime, information literacy must be a transformational process. What an important task we have—to create learning that compels our students past twilight, imbued with a feeling of investigating something enormous!

The second task of teaching information literacy came to me as I was reading an article in the *New Yorker* by Malcolm Gladwell about the popularity of SUVs despite the overwhelming evidence that they are unsafe.⁷ In extensive interviews with car buyers, a cultural anthropologist hired by the automakers concluded that "when SUV buyers thought about safety they were thinking about something that reached into their deepest unconscious."⁸ At an analytical level they know that taller cars are more likely to roll over and that larger cars do not hug the road well. At an unconscious level, they feel powerful when looking down, impervious to crashing—safer.

Deeply rooted in unexamined feelings and beliefs, our misconceptions may result in dangerous decisions like buying an SUV, because "feeling safe has become more important than actually being safe."⁹ Our students—

really all of us—are filled with confidence in our common sense, which can be dead wrong. Our task is to teach our students the rigorous, analytical, sweaty work of closely examining an argument, questioning our thinking patterns, ferreting out inconsistencies—fundamentals of critical thinking. Rather than teach the skill, if we teach to transfer that skill—in using a library, recognizing bias, or analyzing an argument—from one setting or task to another, students recognize that information literacy is not a school task but a lifetime habit

of mind—of evaluating and using information for personal, social, or global purposes.

Hand-in-hand with teaching an analytical approach, we have yet a further task to create a classroom of respect where students can draw on their intuitive understandings, for they, like Li, are “only about halfway toward words.”¹⁰ They know more than they can say, or they say it in ways that are hard for us to analyze. Yet this tacit knowledge can be tapped in service of innovation and insight. An example: Last week I got a phone call from a parent whose young child writes and draws with astounding brilliance—poems of joy and mystery, with softly shaded drawings. The parent related her daughter’s experience involving a rejected research essay that didn’t follow the assigned model, in which the teacher said, “Your problem, Sara, is that you’re just too creative.” While we are often teaching an information literacy process that is analytical and explicit, we must create a respectful place for tacit knowledge that can appear first in imaginative, symbolic language rather than logical, reasoned, organized writing.

In Seymour Sarason’s latest book, *And What Do YOU Mean by Learning?*, he reminds

us that the kind of teaching we do affects student motivation: “Teaching is not a science, it is an art fusing ideas, obligations, the personal and interpersonal. The chemistry of that fusion determines whether or how subject matter matters to the student.”¹¹

About now, you’re probably thinking, “Oh, get a grip Debbie—their Google-eyes glaze over when I teach Boolean searches.” Or, “How the heck am I going to apply a research rubric to a poem?” As a first step I am suggesting a revised definition of information literacy, which alters

our goal—a level of competence that some call “information fluency”—and our methods of achieving it.

“Information literacy is a **transformational** process in which the learner **needs** to find, understand, evaluate, and use information in various forms to **create** for personal, social, or global purposes.”¹² Still, you’re right—I’ve given no easy answers.¹³ But when I have been successful at designing and creating an environment in which the questions asked are genuine, my students have given me permission—indeed invited me—to teach rigorous thinking. And, when I am presented with the gift of a student’s intuition, I am the learner, too, asking rather than answering. ●

References

1. Peter Dickinson, *A Bone From a Dry Sea* (New York: Dell, 1992)
2. *Ibid.*, 17.
3. *Ibid.*, 16.
4. *Ibid.*, 21.
5. Mary Ann Fitzgerald, “Making the Leap From High School to College,” *Knowledge Quest* 32, no. 4 (Mar./Apr. 2004): 19–24.
6. Dickinson, *A Bone From a Dry Sea*, 34.
7. Malcolm Gladwell, “Big and Bad: How the SUV Ran Over Automotive Safety,” *The New Yorker* (Jan. 12, 2004): 28–33.
8. *Ibid.*, 29.
9. *Ibid.*, 30.
10. Dickinson, *A Bone From a Dry Sea*, 17.
11. Seymour B. Sarason, *And What Do YOU Mean by Learning?* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2004), 199.
12. Located at <www.noodletools.com/debbie/literacies/information/1over/infolit1.html>, with thanks to several of my fellow bay-area independent school librarians for helping think this through.
13. OK, one tip. “The Five Paragraph You-Know-What” in Tony Romano’s *Crafting Authentic Voice* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann 2004), 60–69.

Suggested Reading

Information Literacy K–20

Callison, Daniel. *Key Words, Concepts and Methods for Information Age Instruction: A Guide to Teaching Information Inquiry*. Baltimore, Md.: LMS Associates, 2002.

The author’s stated goal is to broaden the application of information literacy to information inquiry as a learning and teaching process. The book serves that purpose admirably. It includes a discussion of the concepts, components, and methods of information inquiry; a historical overview and analysis of existing information literacy models; and a proposed scope and sequence of skills. The bulk of the book defines key instructional concepts with a discussion of implications for practice and pointers to other resources. The influence of this work can be seen in lessons designed for student inquiry at <<http://pmms.msdppt.k12.in.us/imc/Inquiry>>.

Eisenberg, Michael B., Carrie A. Lowe, and Kathleen L. Spitzer. *Information Literacy: Essential Skills for the Information Age*. 2d ed. Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2004.

An essential historical and global overview of information literacy K–20, in a second edition. Our task of explaining

information literacy beyond our profession has been made easier as a result of the work of Mike Eisenberg and Big6 Linworth publications. <www.linworth.com/search_list.cfm?type=5>. With their help we have gained credibility with parents, elementary, and secondary school teachers and administrators.

Grassian, Esther S., and Joan R. Kaplowitz.

Information Literacy Instruction: Theory and Practice. Information Literacy Sourcebooks. New York: Neal Schuman, 2001.

Any consideration of K–20 information literacy would be incomplete without this comprehensive discussion of information literacy instruction accompanied by a CD-ROM to help you choose and plan instruction. What and how we should teach—framed in a discussion of learning theory, instructional design principles, teaching methodology, and considerations of context.

Koehlin, Carol, and Sandi Zwaan. *Build Your Own Information Literate School*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Hi Willow, 2003.

The authors' framework makes the teaching of critical thinking at varying levels of difficulty (novice, apprentice, and expert student) practical and clear. More than a book of activities, yet the reader can easily dip, pick, and use.

Kuhlthau, Carol Collier. *Seeking Meaning: A Process Approach to Library and Information Services*. 2d ed. Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2004.

Kuhlthau's life's work on the user's process of seeking meaning has profoundly influenced our classroom practice, yet when and how to intervene based on the user's uncertainty, yet is not well-integrated into K–20 standards.

Loertscher, David V., and Blanche Woolls.

Information Literacy: A Review of the Research. 2d ed. Salt Lake City, Utah: Hi Willow, 2002.

Charts and diagrams, examples and tips make this an accessible review of the research on information literacy, supplemented by examples of relevant research from other disciplines.

Stripling, Barbara K., and Sandra Hughes-Hassell, eds. *Curriculum Connections through the Library: Principles and Practice*. Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2003.

An important addition to our professional literature, this book of essays features the voices of eminent school library thinkers regarding effective practices in inquiry teaching and learning, assessment and collaboration.

Teaching

Barell, John. *Developing More Curious Minds*. Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 2003.

A bible of inquiry-rich classroom strategies.

Costa, Arthur L., and Bena Kallick. *Assessment Strategies for Self-Directed Learning*. Experiments in Assessment. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Pr., 2004.

We all agree that students should learn to plan strategically, recognize when they are on target or need help, and reflect on their process and product so that they can learn from past experience. Costa and Kallick provide a blueprint of self-assessment strategies with the goal of teaching us how to create independent, self-directed learners.

Pope, Denise Clark. *"Doing School": How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated*

Students. New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Pr., 2001.

The author shadows five highly regarded high school students through the school year. They are diligent, earn awards, and perform community service, but are unengaged, jumping through the hoops, "doing school." Their manipulation of the system, deceptions, and cheating are a condemnation of school culture and structure. Pope's indictment of school culture will challenge you to reassess your own teaching. A glimpse of her work appeared in an article "The Grade Trap: Students' Perspective on Doing School" in the May/June 2003 issue of *KQ*.

Sarason, Seymour B. *And What Do YOU Mean by Learning?* Heinemann: Portsmouth, N.H., 2004.

Sarason contends that school reform has failed because of our lack of clarity about the meaning of learning. He defines productive learning as a social process in which motivation and attitudes, cognitive and emotional responses are inextricably connected. Examining the learning of preschoolers at home, he contrasts it with what he calls unproductive learning in school. You will find yourself examining your library's environment with new eyes.

Sherman, Chris, and Gary Price. *The Invisible Web: Uncovering Information Sources Search Engines Can't See*. Medford, N.J.: Information Today, 2001.

While the book's massive listing of resources with companion Web site <www.invisible-web.net> justifies purchase, it is the insight into these brilliant searchers' minds that makes this book essential for every school librarian. A chance to learn from experts.