

## Guest Opinions



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### **“Information Literacy: Wilder Makes (Some Right, But) Many Wrong Assumptions”**

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Stanley Wilder angered many instruction librarians with his January 7th [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) essay, “Information Literacy Makes All the Wrong Assumptions” (Wilder, 2005). Many sent well-reasoned messages to the Information Literacy Instruction listserv [ILI-L@ALA.org](mailto:ILI-L@ALA.org) refuting his arguments. What was so upsetting? Wilder described information literacy as librarians’ response to the “threat of the Internet” beginning in 1989, and then proceeded to present many more misstatements and half-truths about information literacy, about students’ research needs, about what libraries are and should be all about, and about how librarians should help students, all unsupported by evidence of any kind.

Quite truthfully, Wilder made two accurate observations that are worth noting. First, he said that library and information systems are too complicated, and that library web sites have an over-abundance of user interfaces. Both parts of this observation are true. With all good intentions, library web sites created or run by libraries (library home pages and catalogs) do tend to offer many different options for their own web pages and for their online catalogs, often too many for those seeking simple, easy to access and use, Google-like searching.

Regarding the second half of this assumption, Wilder does not give examples, but it seems as though he is referring to a dizzying array of interfaces, each purposely designed by commercial vendors to be distinct and to stand out from one another. It is interesting to note here that Wilder blames one of the victims (the library) for not creating systems that would eliminate the need for instruction. In fact, libraries and librarians, as well as users, have had to contend not only with an endless number of different frequently changing interfaces, but also with underlying searching principles that are far from standardized. For example, a “keyword” search in PsycInfo (a Cambridge Scientific Abstracts database) looks at titles, abstracts and descriptors (subjects). In contrast, a “keyword” search in Expanded Academic ASAP, a heavily used general database licensed from Gale, looks at titles, abstracts, authors, subjects, the text of articles, and more.

In fact, this concern is not new, as Wilder echoes Michael Gorman’s (incoming president of the American Library Association) article, “Send for a child of 4!” written in 1991, prior to the existence of the web. Gorman stated that if only technological systems could be made simple enough for a child of 4 to utilize them effectively, we would not need anyone to teach people how to use them (Gorman, 1991). Has this happened in the 14 years since Gorman’s article was published? No. Is that for lack of trying and lack of protest on the part of librarians? Again, no.

But Wilder does have a point. Librarians should be helping people work around this difficult situation, and they have been, both through instruction and through technology. The California Digital Library (CDL), for instance, has had a simple cross-database search in place for many years--“Searchlight”<http://searchlight.cdlib.org/cgi-bin/searchlight>. Recently, the CDL has been working hard to improve and update its “Searchlight” function by creating search interfaces (metasearch portals) that will allow users to search across many of these commercial interfaces easily and seamlessly. <http://www.cdlib.org/inside/projects/metasearch/index.html>.

Second, Wilder said that libraries need to reach out to students more than they have been, and in better ways, in part, by simplifying and making better use of their web presence. It is true that libraries need to use their web presence to do more to market the benefits of becoming a critical thinker and of utilizing reputable resources for research, regardless of the format. In fact, successful information literacy instruction of all sorts helps people learn how to learn, and how to become discerning in their choice and use of information. In our forthcoming book, *Learning to Lead and Manage for Information Literacy Instruction* (Grassian and Kaplowitz, 2005), Joan Kaplowitz and I devote a chapter to marketing, publicity and promotion, with definitions, examples and guidance on its development and implementation. This is an area academic libraries need to study and develop. (Note: This could be a fruitful topic for a LAUC research grant.)

These two points are important and libraries should address them. However, most of Wilder’s other assumptions are unsupported by evidence in the form of research studies or any other documentation. Furthermore, they exemplify the narrow scope of his experience and his lack of knowledge of information literacy instruction, of its decades-long history and roots in library orientation, library instruction and bibliographic instruction, and of the breadth and vision of the information literacy movement that goes far beyond libraries and librarians. For example, he states: “Information literacy assumes that she [a freshman] accepts unquestioningly the information she finds on the Internet, when we know from research that she is a skeptic who filters her results to the best of her ability.” Unfortunately, Wilder does not cite the research to which he refers, so there is no way to check its validity, its currency and the expertise of its authors.

Wilder’s first unsupported claim is that librarians consider the Internet to be a “threat.” He claims that the “Internet” has posed a threat to academic libraries since around 1989, as evidenced, he says, by the fact that the concept of information literacy was created at about that time. This is not entirely true. The phrase, “information literacy,” appeared first in 1974 (Zurkowski, 1974). Wilder claims further that information literacy was just a reinvention of the educational role of libraries. In fact, it is an extension and expansion of what had been called library orientation, library instruction, or bibliographic instruction over a period of many decades. So, the concept of information literacy was based on a long history of instruction in libraries, and much of it was not new as of 1989.

Second, Wilder states that, “Information literacy does nothing to help libraries compete with the Internet, and it should be discarded.” Here he misunderstands or is ignorant of the primary goals of information literacy instruction. Rather than competition for “eyeballs,” information literacy aims for education, full awareness of all sources of information, critical thinking about them, and full, informed participation in an open, democratic society, at all levels. For the most part, librarians embrace the Internet as a medium to connect people with information, and do not view it as competition. A UCLA faculty member put it this way: “The need for information literacy following the surge in the popularity of the internet is not an issue of competition; but, rather, an issue of learning how to use a new \*source\* of information--not a replacement. Librarians have the right basis for being the teacher of how to use the internet literately as information has become much more complex both in its content and method of retrieval. Thus, information literacy addresses ways to understand and manage the multifaceted complexity.” (Levy-Storms, 2005)

A third misguided Wilder assumption is that students are not drowning in information; in fact, they are perfectly satisfied with what they can find through Google. He really misses the problem and the point of information literacy here, as sadly enough, it is often true that, as Wilder claims, freshmen (and even students at higher levels) often think that the information they find using Google is good enough for almost any information research purpose. Yet the problem is that what a student finds to be good enough is often not good enough for scholarly

research required in much of higher education. As Hall put it:

Students have become extremely good at locating information on the Internet... However, what were once good sources for your average high school assignments are no longer appropriate, or more accurately, authoritative enough for college-level term projects... Sadly, many undergraduates have arrived at the mistaken notion that all sources are created equal... In short, there is a great difference between accessing the Internet for materials on the development of democracy after the Peloponnesian Wars and surfing for Puff Daddy's Web page. (Hall, 2002:15, 18)

Wilder goes on to say that Information Literacy attempts to address the wrong problems in the wrong ways. He claims that librarians insist on instruction in information research because they (librarians) say that the amount of information is overwhelming. Actually, the supply of information has been increasing for many centuries and overwhelmed people long before anyone conceived of an Internet. It just overwhelmed fewer people, in different ways, and not as broadly, as massive amounts of information were not as easily and widely accessible as they are today.

Wilder continues by saying that we cannot afford to teach Information Literacy to each and every student. Apparently, he is unaware of the fact that academic librarians came to this same conclusion long ago, and for many years have used an increasing variety of technological approaches to reach large numbers of students effectively and economically. Librarians have developed many self-paced web-based tutorials like TILT (Texas Information Literacy Tutorial) <http://tilt.lib.utsystem.edu/> and have studied their effectiveness ( Orme, 2004; Roberts, 2003; Coers, 2002; Fowler and Dupuis, 2000). Furthermore, one of the primary goals of information literacy is to teach students how to learn--i.e., to teach them basic concepts and how to apply those concepts to new environments, new databases, and new information needs. Wilder suggests that libraries embrace and utilize "smart information-technology systems ", but unfortunately, he never explains what he means by "smart information-technology systems," does not give examples, and does not supply supporting evidence, or references to vendors of these systems.

Another of Wilder's unsupported assumptions is that the Library is only for reading and writing, and that librarians should use their subject expertise to guide students in their reading and writing. He sees information literacy as taking the wrong approach because it is simply training in the mechanical aspects of information-seeking set quite apart from disciplinary contexts, and nothing more. He recommends, instead, that librarians use their subject expertise in various disciplines to guide students who are "apprentices engaged in a continuous cycle of reading and writing." He bases his recommendation on a colleague's quote, but again, does not supply evidence to support his colleague's statement.

Most would agree that students are apprentices engaged in a continuous cycle of reading and writing, but this cycle should also include some critical thinking based on increasing knowledge of various disciplines, their history, their thinkers and researchers, and their theories. Now, how and where do students identify reputable academic information to read, and who should be guiding students in their critical reading and writing? After reading Wilder's essay, a UCLA faculty member put it this way, in response to this particular assumption: "The author argues that the main purpose of librarians is to help students with their 'reading and writing.' In fact, that is not true. Librarians are supposed to help students retrieve information systematically, among other information literacy skills. Professors teach students how to read critically and write analytically." (Levy-Storms, 2005) Many librarians would probably agree with those faculty, as most librarians are not subject discipline experts.

Wilder does agree that information-seeking for this purpose is important, but wrongly equates it with information literacy. Information-seeking is an essential element of information literacy, but it is not a synonym for it. Information literacy goes beyond seeking for and identifying information, to higher levels of judging and applying what one learns, both effectively and responsibly. The ultimate goal of information literacy instruction is, in fact, to see this many-faceted approach integrated into instruction throughout all curricula, throughout all grade levels, and indeed, throughout one's working life and beyond.

Finally, Wilder suggests that librarians guide students when they ask information-research-related questions at the

reference desk. It is revealing to see here that Wilder is suggesting librarians do precisely what they already have been doing for many decades at reference desks-- finding out about students' writing assignments, helping them narrow or broaden their topics, directing them to research tools for background reading, like the *Dictionary of Art*, or any of a number of online or print encyclopedias, utilizing bibliographies in these research tools, guiding them to useful databases and print materials, and helping students prepare bibliographies. This clearly illustrates Wilder's lack of knowledge of reference desk work in academic libraries, work which often covers exactly these elements, and proceeds in much the manner he recommends. Yes, this is the core of the function he claims should replace Information Literacy, but it is difficult to see what is new here.

In sum, Wilder makes a very few valid points, but buries them in a mass of unsupported claims and assumptions, apparently based on limited experience and even more limited knowledge of real-world information literacy instruction and reference work in academic libraries, limited knowledge of the history of instruction in information research, and little or no knowledge of recent or prior research studies and other publications regarding information literacy in different settings (Examples: Barbour, Gavin and Canfield, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2004; Boon and Julien, 2004; Flaspohler, 2003; Dunn, 2002; Farber, 1993).

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