Charting a Course in the Information Age:  
Enabling Students to Develop Information Literacy Skills

Students have always needed information literacy skills in order to search for, find, evaluate and utilize information. Prior to the Internet, cable TV, and particularly the web-based structure developed in the early 1990’s, this usually was focused on school, public and academic library resources.

With the enormous proliferation of information such as the Web, 24 hour cable channels and talk radio, search and evaluation skills are more critical than ever. No longer are students focused on knowledge resources that have been screened for accuracy and selected by trained librarians and other information professionals. Students must be lifelong critical thinkers constantly evaluating the massive amount of information they can find with a simple web search.

What is Information Literacy?
The American Library Association defines information literacy as a set of abilities requiring individuals to "recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information."

Information literacy forms the basis for lifelong learning. It is common to all disciplines, to all learning environments, and to all levels of education. It enables learners to master content and extend their investigations, become more self-directed, and assume greater control over their own learning.

An information literate individual is able to:
- Determine the extent of information needed
- Access the needed information effectively and efficiently
- Evaluate information and its sources critically
- Incorporate selected information into one’s knowledge base
- Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose
- Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally

With constantly expanding information resources available online it is more important than ever that individuals not only know how to find the information they need for their personal, academic and professional needs but can critically evaluate it as well.

Originated as “The Nine Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning” by the American Association of School Librarians for K-12 students, it was expanded by the Association of College and Research Libraries to continue these standards for college students. These standard state that the student who is information literate accesses information efficiently and effectively, evaluates information critically and competently, and uses information accurately and creatively.
**Helping Students Develop Search Strategies**

Students can be guided, through assignments integrated into the curriculum, to develop lifelong skills that will help them find useful information using both web-based and print resources. Certain simple strategies can be used for a broad range of topics. For example:

- Think about the topic.
- Is the internet the best place to find information on this topic? Sometimes a standard magazine or newspaper index will provide what you are after.
- Formulate a sentence describing the topic and identify keywords.
- Read the Search Engine instructions. Each Search Engine generally has a unique set of searching rules. Familiarity with these rules will increase the chances of success in retrieving relevant information.
- Be specific on the first search. Broaden the search in conceptual increments as necessary. (e.g. Ford to car to motor vehicle to transportation).
- Use relevant results to find more relevant results. Use the terms found in a relevant document to further refine your search.
- Use as few words as possible in searching. Avoid common words that are likely to appear frequently in the database.
- Use more than one search engine. Results don't overlap as often as you might think.
- Try a specialized site. Think about where information on your topic might be likely to appear.
- Try an Internet Directory.
- Be prepared for more browsing. Although search results are generally ranked with the most relevant documents first, you may still want to browse through the first 15 to 20 documents to check the validity of your search.

Since library databases share many of the same search characteristics as web-based search engines students need to know that they can use library resources employing the same set of skills developed for web-searching with one added advantage: the library sources have been selected by information professionals for their accuracy and utility, just like the “old days.”

The presenter will share his experience teaching both graduate education and undergraduate computer course students, as well as faculty development training in integrating information literacy in class assignments. He will also provide participants with lists of web sites that offer useful starting points and tutorials to help students formulate and conduct searches.