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Enhancing Information Literacy: A Practical Exemplar

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Abstract

This case-study outlines a teaching partnership between library and academic staff at the University of Waikato. It describes the strategies adopted to develop greater student information literacy and knowledge of source materials; and demonstrates the inter-relationship between student assignments and library resourcing. Both achievements and areas of difficulty are discussed.

At the University of Waikato, with 14,000 students, academic and library staff have sought to foster information literacy in ways that are effective and cost-efficient. Two clear trends have emerged over a decade of practical experimentation: the increased involvement of librarians in the academic teaching programme; and the deliberate designing of assessment tasks to ensure that students become confident users of the Library's resources. Developed initially in relation to a New Zealand history paper which attracts 80-100 students, the partnership involves strategies that are carefully inter-related and readily adaptable to a variety of disciplines and teaching situations, an information literacy outcome that has long been advocated in the literature. (1) Underpinning all of the assessment ideas, though, is the in-house bibliographical guide to the New Zealand Collection (NZC), Map Library and relevant electronic resources.

The Green Guide/Te Arahi Kakariki:

The preparation and production of this substantial reference aid for New Zealand history students is the most tangible evidence of the working partnership in evolution. Begun in 1988 as a small pamphlet listing key reference publications, the 75-page *Green Guide* is now sold at cost-recovery rates (NZ\$10.00) from the NZC itself, a practice which enables students from other courses to purchase it . Borrowable copies are available and the publication is also normally accessible on-line.

The current *Green Guide* is divided into three distinct parts. Section One lists, by title, key reference sources such as biographical, statistical or periodical publications with single or double-page illustrated entries for each category. Section Two gives background detail for the main primary source materials which students are expected to use for coursework: parliamentary debates and reports, yearbooks, census returns, police gazettes, and Commissions of Inquiry. Section Three provides advice, with examples, on how to write bibliographic citations or footnote/endnote references for the materials listed in Sections One and Two. A Table of Contents (written in both Maori and English) and an Index (English only) facilitate student use of the *Guide*. A floor plan indicating the shelving sequence and physical location of resources together with an inside-cover

listing of contact details, staff names, hours of opening and data-base access help students to become more familiar with the NZC and Map Library services.

Transforming the *Guide* from an unattractive listing of useful titles to a comprehensive, illustrated and annotated finding aid has involved a great deal of staff time over the years, accompanied by the usual frustrations caused by changing computer software. Annual revisions are essential to incorporate new resources and student-user suggestions: this is also an ideal opportunity for librarians to update academics on new acquisitions and services. (2) Given the obvious effort involved in preparation and presentation, though, why have staff felt this commitment to be worthwhile? And, in an electronic age, why persist with an in-house, low-technology hard copy that does not return a profit nor gain staff credit for a publication?

Affordability, accessibility and convenience for students are the answers. Students use it, write in it, add references, and make notes. The pristine new edition is transformed over 12 weeks into a somewhat dog-eared record of each student's growing familiarity with the resources. From the librarians' perspective, having a comprehensive guide has significantly reduced the volume of basic reference and citation inquiries. Time can instead be spent in helping students to make more effective use of the materials at their disposal. The *Green Guide* is also an in-house training aid for part-time student library assistants without a New Zealand history background. By familiarising themselves with the contents of the *Guide*, they can help any student who needs general New Zealand reference materials. Section Three also serves as a checklist for non-history students who are using sources for which their course outlines provide no referencing guidelines. Primarily the *Green Guide* empowers students to develop as independent learners through becoming more effective library users. This fundamental objective of both library and academic staff is communicated and reinforced by the teaching strategies adopted throughout the semester. Informal feedback suggests that first-year students who have experienced this teaching partnership become confident in their use of other areas and services in the Library. The *Green Guide* also helps more senior students in a range of disciplines, many of whom purchase the latest edition when embarking on graduate research projects that have a New Zealand focus.

The university environment can be intimidating initially for first-year students, whatever their age and ethnicity, and many Maori students find support by taking language and culture courses that do not require significant use of the Library in their first year of study. As they move on to second year, however, and enrol in a broader range of subject areas, they can be at an information literacy disadvantage when compared with others who are already familiar with the Library and its systems. For those who choose New Zealand-related papers, such as an open-entry second-year level Encounter History course, the *Green Guide: Te Arahi Kakariki* provides a strong foundation on which the Maori Liaison Librarian and other NZC staff can build when helping this particular group of students (usually about 30 in a class of 50-60). And, since the same academic colleague is involved with both the first and second year papers, the teaching partnership strategies are applied at both levels.

In keeping with the University's affirmative action policies, the possibility of a full-text Maori version of the *Guide* has been discussed with the Maori Liaison Librarian and other NZC staff. All agree that such a time-consuming and costly venture would be counter-productive. An existing online Maori Bibliography, featured in the *Green Guide*, is regularly updated to provide a specialist interdisciplinary reference list for both Maori and Pakeha (non-Maori) students working in fields relating to Maori issues. Listings in the *Green Guide* also indicate whenever a Maori language version of a source is available: assignments give students the option of using these and presenting their findings in Maori or English. By focusing on resources that are central to the teaching programme and then designing assignments that give students a language choice when reading the content materials, both the information literacy and the affirmative action objectives are addressed.

The *Green Guide* has also been useful in promoting outreach between the university and its regional communities. Staff frequently speak to local history and genealogical groups and the Section Three guidelines are helpful for family historians who have not had formal training in referencing techniques. Spare copies are donated to community organisations for reference purposes and the *Guide* is also disseminated free of charge to Library colleagues at other universities.

Teaching strategies: the Librarian in the Teaching Program.

A. Tutorials and Introductory Assignments

Among the earliest group ideas tried but subsequently discarded by the course instructor were student visits and source-based quizzes in the NZC during class; and individual interviews conducted by academic staff to test student familiarity with the Collection. These schemes were too time-consuming. Their efficacy was also questionable. The current approaches are a significant improvement.

One involves a small exercise, worth the minimal 10%, which requires students to research a person/place/event or, as a variation in 2000/2001, a Millennium Moment. Supplied with an introductory overview essay which outlines the major changes and developments in New Zealand over the past two centuries, all students prepare to write a short essay in-class, based on the key reference sources listed on the first two pages of the *Green Guide*. Students are encouraged to explore the NZC individually or in groups, though they are cautioned against preparing collaborative answers. Library staff have only a limited range of source queries to contend with and a manageable course-generated workload at the busiest time of the semester. Both academic and information literacy objectives are addressed early in the semester through an assignment that can easily be adjusted to suit a variety of disciplines.

A second assessment strategy also encourages students to use the Library's collections on a regular basis but without excessive strain on staff. Using a different type of resource each week (maps, manuscripts, , photographs, newspapers, statistics, music and artefacts, for example) a 10-part

assignment enables students to submit seven participation exercises on a weekly basis. Each task can be accomplished in less than three hours; well-organized students can work ahead of their peers; and although the source to be consulted is specified, there is always an element of free choice to save pressure on any one reference work. Most students attempt all 10 tasks, knowing that the best seven marks will be counted for the assignment's 30% total value. A variation which has students beginning with plates in the *Bateman New Zealand Historical Atlas* (1997) and then exploring related sources in the NZC, requires more planning to ensure that course members attain the same level of familiarity that the previous assignment achieved. The schedule of tasks enables students to locate and use a range of resources and Library staff know which ones will be the main focus of inquiries in any one week.

In addition to the opportunity for discussion during lecture times, three hours of optional workshops are held by academic staff each week, within the Library itself. Small group seminar rooms are available for regular booking which means that non-borrowable resources can be used during these times. These Library-based sessions are well-attended by students, usually because they provide a chance to ask further questions about the sources to be used for the following week's participation exercise. The link between library skills and learning is constantly reinforced.

Undertaking a book report is another introductory task which works well. Each student is required to select and read a biographical or autobiographical work; to locate a published review by using an on-line data base; and then to write a 150-word annotation for which American Library Association *Choice* cards were used as a model. Advice on the data base searching is given in class by one of the librarians, and reiterated in the course outline instructions which also encourage students to collect, or access online, Reference Department leaflets on locating and writing book reviews. (The extensive range of informative advice sheets produced by Reference staff is often overlooked by students unless they are consciously directed to this service.) The book report is a relatively uncomplicated exercise that encourages students to explore the NZC within the first few weeks of the course and gives library staff only a limited and consistent set of queries to contend with at this time.

B. Resource-based Assignments

For the strategies outlined so far, the general pattern is one of fostering a culture of student/librarian interaction within the library building itself. Yet there is a further dimension to this teaching partnership: the librarian in the lecture theatre. Of all the applied ideas, this is the one which impacts most directly on students. There are several reasons for this response: novelty, relevance, and results.

Gradually more academics are thinking to invite librarians to contribute to classes during lecture times since this is precisely when one demonstration can reach the majority of enrolled students. Computer facilities enable course members to follow the search strategies in action and attention levels rise as students register that the information relates to their next assignment. Usually the

librarian's input is for no more than 20 minutes, programmed for the start of the lecture, and accompanied by a reference handout. Such guidance might take two or three hours to prepare but it generally reaches approximately 75% of the class at any one time and saves a stream of repetitive inquiries at the NZC desk. Above all, students gain the very strong sense that the librarians are on their side, willing and able to assist in this seemingly endless struggle to meet the academic's expectations.

In the second-year course, which is internally-assessed and for which there is an initial Library exercise followed later by two research assignments, the Maori Liaison Librarian or other NZC colleagues generally contribute on three occasions, each time in relation to a specific task. For the first-year course, now that the weekly participation exercises help students to build up familiarity with the basic systems, the in-class contribution of the library staff can focus on the compulsory research assignment that all students must attempt. Four variations have been successful: an information dossier, microfilm analysis, great source search, and novelist's background briefing paper.

With each of these, the students have an element of choice within broad guidelines. The information dossiers have addressed themes of maritime and local history in successive years; the microfilm analysis directed students to locate a newspaper advertisement and then to research the topic depicted. The great source search focused on changing habits and values and had students investigating food, religion, clothing, health, marriage, housing, health, paid work, mobility or recreation. By far the most rewarding of these resource-based assignments has been the novelist's background briefing paper which required students to select an occupation recurring in the census returns between the 1880s and 1930s. Each researcher then had to locate such information as an historical novelist would require to feed, clothe, employ, pay, accommodate, entertain, and transport such an individual within the context of a story set in that time period. Professional writers, to whom a sample of the briefing papers were later sent, responded generously about the quality of the students' achievements.

The teaching partnership has worked most effectively when library colleagues have reviewed a working draft of assignment specifications. Feedback has meant improved instructions and fewer errors, and a far more productive set of librarian/student exchanges when class members begin working on the assignment. The extra lead-in time gives library staff the opportunity to prepare well ahead of student demand, sometimes with unexpected results, as in the year of the novelist's briefing paper, when most class members made a special effort to be on time (8am) for the librarians' session.

The persona who appeared in the lecture theatre bore only a passing resemblance to the staff whom students had come to recognize. Attired in clothing appropriate to their chosen character, each of the NZC librarians displayed and discussed the sources that were most relevant to that occupation. The 1900s domestic servant working for an upper-class Anglo-Irish family in the Bay of Plenty outlined the value of business, regional and school histories, and biographical studies; the WWI English war

bride newly arrived in the Dominion, described statistical, official and war-related publications and the value of an early 20th-century *Cyclopedia* for its insights into the social structure of country towns. A wealthy socialite extolled the virtues of conservative newspapers and fashionable women's magazines. An enterprising milliner discussed sources relating to her interests in theatre and literature, crime rates, and the running of a small business. The fifth member played the role of a 1930s public librarian and emphasized the value of contemporary literature and ephemera. The librarians have since been accumulating old mail order catalogues, diaries and postcards in anticipation of a repeat. Students now at graduate level still refer to that teaching session as a highlight of their year.

One further experiment occurred in 2001 when the government announced funding for an online encyclopaedia of New Zealand. The major course assignment therefore gave students the opportunity to prepare the article they most wanted to write for that new project. Fortuitously, the initial class briefing about specifications (two units of text at 500 words each plus eight resource objects, each accurately referenced and described) was provided by the public historians responsible for establishing the project. Both librarians and academics also attended a seminar for staff and gained a clear sense of the requirements and desired results. The outcome was quite outstanding with one of the student assignments being regarded by the project editor as a model for other researchers to follow.

All of these research-based exercises are but variations on a theme and all have succeeded because of the shared commitment to empowering students through the promotion of good information literacy techniques. There has only been one near-disaster, an assignment which required each student to spend a maximum of ten hours using microfilmed newspapers. Despite careful organization of a student roster, constant mechanical breakdowns led to frustration on all sides, though, eventually, to the purchase of a new machine. There is no doubt that a teaching staff member can risk experimentation and innovation when there is such a secure foundation of support within the library. (3) The team at Waikato have also demonstrated a willingness to cope with the challenges that a constantly changing stream of assignments entails. Now is the time to consolidate and improve upon what has already worked, not least by systematic appraisal of student feedback, familiarisation with theoretical literature on this subject, and an even more explicit advocacy to students of the lifelong benefits of information literacy. (4)

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