

J. Willard Marriott Library University of Utah

Developing Students' Literacies: Report on the VITL initiative and pilot study

In May 2009, a campus Visual, Information and Technology Literacy (VITL) Task Force recommended an ambitious goal to reach all students with common learning experiences to establish a foundation in visual, information and technology literacies. This foundation would support their further academic work and prepare them for lifelong learning in the information, media and technology rich 21st century. The Task Force further called for offering faculty grants and student awards and incentives for VITL work, increasing faculty outreach and development, addressing technological and infrastructure needs, assessment of VITL learning, and integrating VITL with K-12 teacher education.

The Marriott Library commitment to the VITL initiative remains strong and we see this as a long term project. President Young's vision for the providing a "signature student experience" for every student adds to the compelling need for the University of Utah VITL effort.

The focus of the past year has been working with faculty with whom we have existing teaching partnerships to enhance the library component of the courses with a greater VITL emphasis. Using this pilot experience, we now want to work with additional faculty and classes to give more students a VITL learning experience.

This report reviews the value of a VITL education to our students, describes the 2009-2010 VITL pilot, and outlines our next steps in the initiative. It also identifies some of the challenges of finding new faculty partners, creating new kinds of assignments, making additional demands on students and faculty, and scaling VITL to a level that does impact every student.

Reviewing the importance of new student literacies

Educators have fought so-called "wars on illiteracy" in various forms for so long that the phrase may seem cliché. Literacy has been described historically as a cognitive activity involving reading and writing. More recently, however, other kinds of literacies have been identified as crucial for success in education and the workplace.

Our "digital native" students, who were raised on MTV and the Internet, who are adept at playing video games, and whose ears and eyes are connected to cell phones and iPods, are as accustomed to visual as they are to oral and written communication. Nevertheless, they may not be able to articulate how visual communication works or apply it effectively to their coursework. They need to be instructed in how to move from the position of consumer to that of critic, and finally of maker of visual communication. They need, then, to be asked to answer such questions as "How is visual language constructed? How do senders and receivers create meaning? How do students "read" visual texts and interpret them? How (and with what technology and tools) may visual texts be created?"

Through their teaching mission the libraries support learning in information literacy by helping students develop the ability to find, access, evaluate, create, and use information in scholarship and in other research endeavors. Information literacy involves far more than finding library resources: increasingly, it requires effective use of technology and multi-media resources in a new information landscape. More and more attention is being focused on visual literacy as a requirement for life and work in the 21st century.

As librarians and faculty accustomed to traditional, textual literacy we have had to interrogate our assumption that words have primacy over visuals and sounds. We have come to recognize that visual literacy—the set of skills involved in the interpretation, criticism, and production of images—is increasingly important for communication and expression. The evolving world of teaching, learning and scholarship reflects the multi-dimensional nature of knowledge.

The 2009-2010 VITL pilot

The interdisciplinary VITL initiative is built on collaborations among faculty and in partnership with the libraries. It requires a variety of approaches and solutions to embed visual and technology literacy training and practice across the disciplines and throughout the curriculum to enhance student learning.

The 2009-2010 academic year VITL pilot focused primarily on first-year programs, especially LEAP Writing 2010, Writing 2010, and Exploration, Health Science and Fine Arts LEAP. The pilot involved around 15 classes—fewer than we had originally planned. The experiment, however, was (mostly) deemed a success, and will be expanded in the 2010-2011 academic year.

Rather than a “one size fits all” approach, librarians worked with faculty partners to shape assignments that had both practical and pedagogical value specific to the course work.

Visual Literacy--LEAP Writing 2010

Experienced instructor Nancy Jensen took the reins in LEAP Writing 2010. She worked with librarian Linda St. Clair to develop a visual literacy pre-and post-assessment. She reported the following results:

Pre-and Post Assessment:

- **Higher self assessment.** Although most students initially rated their visual literacy skills quite high, they rated their overall skills and their ability to “recognize and understand visuals much higher on the post-assessment at the end of the semester. They did not identify as much increase in their ability to “convey ideas or messages through imagery.”
- **Improved analysis of a visual.** Most students provided a more detailed, in-depth analysis of an advertisement in the post-assessment at the end of the semester. Students also had developed a vocabulary for describing the visual and analyzing its effectiveness and had developed better organizational and essay writing skills.

Visual Analysis as Part of Synthesis and Researched Argument:

- **Synthesis/Multiple Source.** Students were required to find visuals on the theme of power and authority and to connect to written articles on the same topics.
- **Research Argument.** Students were required to use a visual or to incorporate information from a visual into their researched argument and document the visual appropriately.

Based on the strength of Nancy’s experience, all 17 sections of this fall’s LEAP Writing 2010, working

with librarians Alison Regan and Linda St. Clair, will incorporate three visual literacy components (visual argument analysis essay, synthesis/multiple sources essay, and researched argument that incorporates visuals).

Pre-Professional LEAP for College of Health and Health Sciences Students

Librarians Alfred Mowdood and April Love worked extensively with students in five sessions held in the library. As part of one assignment, students were required to analyze graphics and charts. Students answered questions using “How to Lie and Cheat with Statistics” from the University of Washington. (<http://faculty.washington.edu/chudler/stat3.html>)

Pre-Professional LEAP for Fine Arts Majors

It should come as no surprise that VITL serves as what fine arts librarian Greg Hatch describes as an “organic” part of Fine Arts LEAP. In Fine Arts LEAP students were introduced to image databases such as *AP Images* and *ARTstor*, and were shown the physical picture files in the Fine Arts library collection. Students were required to produce image-rich, media-rich projects, and many of their projects were both written and performed.

As the culmination of their year, students worked with school age children from Neighborhood House (<http://www.nhutah.org/pageview.aspx?id=31279>), a non-profit organization that provides after school activities and support for at-risk youth. Groups of University students worked with youths to write and perform a play. All aspects of coordinating production and staging were the responsibility of the University students.

Writing 2010

Most Writing 2010 instructors declined to be part of the pilot project. The chief reason for non-participation was the sheer volume of traditional material on writing and rhetoric that must be covered in such a class, and the relative inexperience of Writing 2010 instructors. (Most are new graduate students without prior teaching experience.)

Librarian Sarah Bosarge, who has over a decade of experience teaching writing as well as librarian expertise, undertook an ambitious project with her fall Writing 2010 students. Sarah focused on Web 2.0 technologies. Students participated in a class online network, blogs, wikis and Wikipedia, and turned a formal, academic essay into a web-accessible public work of their own design. Student response to the plan was enthusiastic, but Sarah reported that she abandoned the project in the following semester when she discovered that her spring class demonstrated less facility with writing. She returned to a more traditional focus in order to concentrate on collegiate level writing.

Supporting learning through new online tools

Improving online access to services and resources, building online tutorials, and creating online tools to guide students to the best resources for a given project or class are important parts of the VITL initiative. We are now using a new software platform called LibGuides to create research and “how to” guides. We have over 140 published user guides linked to the library web. We will continue developing new online tools and learning modules.

Graduate students

Students enter graduate programs at the University of Utah with varying levels of readiness to conduct advanced library research in their fields and use technology and visual resources in support of their work. In 2009-2010, the Marriott Library increased its efforts to reach and assist graduate students

with additional outreach, an expanded workshop schedule, designation of a graduate student only reading room, and better collaboration with other individuals and units on campus that support graduate students.

Examples of other ongoing initiatives

Here are some additional examples of successful ongoing library/faculty collaborations.

In 2006, Associate Professor of French Christine Jones worked with rare books curator Luise Poulton to find material in the Marriott collection related to 17th and 18th century European dramatic arts. The material formed the basis for a graduate seminar in which students not only read and commented on these rare materials, but contributed to a web site about how European dance intersects with theater, print, and visual culture. Working with the library's Digital Technologies staff, the class arranged to have all or parts of the books scanned, and they then worked with the Technology Assisted Curriculum Center to put those materials on a web page for other scholars and students to consult.

<http://www.dramatispersonaearchive.org/>

Since fall 2006, librarian Alfred Mowdood worked with several professors teaching ESS 2500: Exploration of Movement Sciences to develop extensive library exercises. In addition to traditional subject-matter expertise, Mowdood taught the student-researchers to use software tools like Microsoft Excel in order to display their original research findings. Alfred has continued to support this class and has recruited another librarian to help teach this course. Student final research projects are showcased at the end of the semester at a poster session fair.

The Book Arts Program's studio is where aspiring and accomplished bookmakers, artists, and creative writers discover, capture and create new original works. Each year, the program teaches three for-credit letterpress printing and bookbinding classes. It partners with faculty to offer students additional hands-on sessions in typography and letterpress printing. It pairs traditional printing techniques with digital image and textual processes. It routinely encourages interdepartmental collaborations, offering a variety of workshops, lectures, exhibitions, and community outreach programming. Students do such things as sew a multi-section, non-adhesive bound drawing book, and then produce a series of drawings within the book; learn how to print on a traditional printing press; and produce visual, textual, sculptural, traditional, and experimental artists' books.

In fall 2009, librarian Alison Regan and computer professional Tony Sams taught a new class "Writing 3040—Digital Storytelling." Using library computer labs, specialized software, and video and still cameras, students learned about and practiced digital storytelling, writing, and technology. The class is being offered again in fall 2010.

Other faculty/library partnerships

We are eager to recruit and work with more faculty partners. Partnerships with the library take a variety of forms. Across the disciplines the libraries can support discovery, access, analysis, technology training, and creation of new media. We have, for example, partnered with:

- Communication/UWP Professor Maureen Mathison to introduce graduate research methods and assist students in using relevant software to create visual representations of data sets;
- Communications faculty to help students convert paper-based portfolios into digital formats;
- Literature faculty to explore and use the technologies (wood block engraving, steel engraving,

- medieval ornamentation) central to the history of book illustration;
- Art faculty to teach students how to use such databases as ARTstor and AP Images;
- ESS faculty to help students create simulations and visual representations of research data;
- Writing instructors to help students create cognitive maps of their research findings in advance of writing argumentative essays;
- Natalie Stillman-Webb during course planning for Writing 4030: Visual Rhetoric, Word/Image/Argument, where students learn theories of visual rhetorical criticism and examine different strategies for integrating words, images, and other multimedia elements.

The future

We feel like we have made some good headway with introducing VITL elements into core classes. We have a better understanding of how to build VITL elements into assignments as well as the challenges that adding new research methods or methods of presentation present to instructors and students.

Here are areas of focus for the coming year(s):

Expanding the curriculum. Build on our successes last academic year by continuing to push VITL themes and elements in LEAP and LEAP Writing 2010 classes. Find additional faculty partners who are interested in strengthening one or more VITL components in their students' research, writing, data representations and other visual/media applications, and use of software relevant to their disciplines and projects. Identify ways to scale the initiative given limited library staffing, such as training TAs to teach the VITL components and using more online teaching modules.

Online learning. Expand online tools and learning.

Assessment. Strengthen assessment of student learning outcomes.

Faculty development and assistance. Continue to expand services and training offered through the Digital Scholarship Lab (DSL), Education Services, and the Knowledge Commons to support faculty and TA teaching and digital scholarship. Take advantage of technology in new library classrooms to give faculty opportunities for experimenting in VITL teaching (incorporating visuals in print, 2D, 3D, or electronic format, trying out new technologies, hardware, and software, and co-teaching VITL skills with Marriott Library faculty and staff).

Outreach to campus. Plan a campus-wide VITL forum in 2010-2011 featuring national and local speakers to increase awareness and understanding of the importance of VITL learning for student engagement and success. Showcase exemplary student projects and faculty teaching.

Strategic planning. Make the VITL initiative a prominent priority in the Marriott Library's Strategic Plan (currently in development to cover 2010-2013).

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 August 26, 2010