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Information Literacy: Information Age
Competencies Needed to Re-present Creation

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made;” (New International Version, John 1:1-3a). A very familiar yet powerful passage from the Gospel of John, profoundly establishes Christ, the logos, as Creator. This is further substantiated as verse three continues: “without him nothing was made that has been made.” Nothing exists aside from Christ’s creative activity, everything emanates from Him. Furthermore, Christ sustains creation, He is continuing to be actively involved with His world as Paul writes, “all things were created by him (Christ) and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (Col. 1:16-17). God, through Christ, presents truths of Himself and the world He created. In the Incarnate Word, God is manifested (Vawter, 422). Each time we read these passages, Christ re-presents Himself, as it were, as the sovereign Creator God. “The Word”, words which re-present the creative, awesome, power of God: words which are brimming with information.

Additionally, in Genesis, information is provided that man was given the responsibility to care for the earth and all other living creatures (Gen. 1:28-30).

Information does re-present the world. The root word of the term *Information* means “to give form to, to give a character, to furnish with knowledge” (Oxford, 473). Through Christ, man is furnished with information of Himself, God, and the cosmos. Indeed, the entire canon is referred to as “the Word” and extends information of all God has chosen to reveal.

From the time of the Fall, information like everything else has borne the consequences of sin. Information as imparted by man is often inaccurate, tinged with bias, based on faulty research, or otherwise misconstrued. Instead of representing God’s good creation, information as misused by fallen man often presents a distorted view of creation . Of course, the affects of sin has distorted and corrupted creation itself (Wolters). However, this paper is concerned with information about creation. In order to restore information to its intended use as re-presenting God’s creation, critical thinking skills must be imparted to assist information users to view and use information from a biblical perspective.

In this Information Age, there is a torrent of information from a host of sources which at times is overwhelming. Information literacy is a set of skills to traverse the vast sea of information. This paper will examine these skills or competencies

needed to be information literate and some methods to achieve this. Furthermore, the usage of information will be explored from a biblical perspective.

It is no accident that today's culture is referred to as the Information Society. Data and facts proliferate at astonishing speeds. In a study by faculty and students at the University of California at Berkeley, it was estimated that new information has doubled in the last three years. Conclusions were based on the amount of unique information stored between 1999 and 2002. The study only measured the quantity of information, not the quality (Lyman). Almost the same growth rate in the number of web sites is reflected in the findings by Robert H. Zakon, in his *Hobbes Internet Timeline* (Zakon). In one portion, he charts the growth of the number of sites which reveals that in December 2000 there were about 25,000,000 sites whereas in December 2003 the number of sites were over 45,000,000.

Not only is the amount of information increasing, but also the variety of formats from which it can be retrieved: print, electronic, video, audio, or a combination are only a few. With digitization, much information is available literally at a user's fingertips.

However, quantity of information does not impart quality. The challenge for today's students is to sift through the information available and to recognize the valid, reliable, accurate, pertinent data and to use it wisely. As the Association of College and University Libraries state in the Information Literacy Competency

Standards for Higher Education, “The sheer abundance of information will not in itself create in itself a more informed citizenry without a complimentary cluster of abilities necessary to use information effectively.” Moreover, for the information user who perceives information as representing God’s creation, the acquisition of these abilities is even more critical.

An event which occurred about a year ago, convinced me that information literacy needs to be taught from a biblical perspective. A student, I will call Tom, approached my desk for some reference assistance. Along with him came his friend Bill. As we all sat down at the Reference computers, Tom inquired about getting research papers from the internet and how to obtain them. At first, I thought he was being facetious and I did not take him seriously. He then asked me if I would write his paper for him, explaining he had a ministry and, although he had all his sources, he had no time to write his paper. Then his friend Bill, who was working on a Biblical studies paper, inquired about a Scripture reference and Tom quickly answered. Tom knew Scripture, he had a ministry, yet he had no qualms about using information unethically. This almost cavalier attitude towards information reveals the dualistic thinking many users have: a ministry is spiritual and therefore worthwhile, yet information as just an assortment of cold facts and data to them. In their minds, they are absolved from any responsibility towards information. Besides, for most students, participating in a ministry is much more

fun than doing research.

The challenge is to present information first as imbued with meaning from God as representing creation and therefore, we are to be good stewards of it. Then since God gives the command to love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18), love should be extended to the author of the information, thereby treating the information with responsibility and care.

Information Literacy

For many years, librarians have been providing library instruction for their users. However information literacy is much broader than library instruction. It is concerned with information found both within and outside the walls of the library. It seeks for the learner to think critically about the information, not merely about the resource from which it comes. Information literacy is often confused with computer literacy since much of information is accessed from the computer and therefore technological skills are used. Computer literacy provides the user with the ability to use the computer and its software to create and manipulate data.

Information literacy, on the other hand, is concerned with the content which is accessed via the computer as well as through other formats (Spitzer, 27).

One succinct definition of information literacy is “the ability to locate, evaluate, and use information to become independent life-long learners”(SACS). If we

employ this definition, then the first competency is that information literate students must have is the ability to locate information. This often means the initial step is to understand the complete assignment. Learners do not always comprehend what the outcome of the research assignment should be or they are confused about the details.

Students can then be encouraged to select topics of interest to them. When I give instruction to a counseling class I select as a sample search, the topic of characteristics of Bipolar Disorder in young adults, explaining that since my stepdaughter was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, this topic is especially meaningful to me. Additionally, researching the disorder has helped me to understand her and some of her struggles, and hopefully to better relate to her. As I go through the steps to research the disorder, I visualize her and the information becomes alive with significance. This is what information should be as it represents a facet of God's creation.

After a topic is chosen then it is important to get a broad overview or the "big picture" of it by consulting general and subject-specific encyclopedias or feature articles. So many times, information users will focus on one small aspect of a topic without knowing its context and the issues surrounding it, much like the fable of the blind men attempting to describe an elephant by only feeling one small part of the animal. Also, by first approaching the complete topic as God's creative work,

then information users are better able to appreciate a smaller aspect of it as also His handiwork.

Developing a search strategy is also important in locating information. This involves identifying key terms as well as related terms, synonyms, and, at times, antonyms of the topic. Carey Moore and I developed a Search Worksheet as an aid for students to construct a search strategy. These are just some of the skills needed to locate information.

Information literate individuals must also acquire the ability to evaluate information once it is located. This means to think critically about the information and the source from which it comes by comparing it to other sources for reliability, validity, accuracy, and bias (ACRL,7). One alarming trend is was reported just this past Saturday in the Dallas Morning News. In a Pew Research Center study it was found that many young adult voters get their political information from late night television and comedy TV shows (Nelson). Critical thinking is especially important for users of internet sources. College students in particular have a tendency to depend on the internet for their information pursuits. However, as one study expressed, “Although these extreme internet users find information easily and quickly, it is questionable whether they are able to effectively filter through the

large quantities found to successfully recognize misleading, flawed, or incorrect information” (Brown). One solution is to require students to use peer-reviewed journal articles found on the library’s online databases, but even that does not teach them to evaluate the source. One librarian, Barbara Kobritz has an interesting approach. She has the students write annotated bibliographies, answering two questions: “1. What claims is the author making? 2. What evidence does s/he give to support the claims? These questions force the student to look at the piece from ‘inside’...I ask them simply to read the article and think about whether the evidence supports the claim”. This is fine, but Mark Schwehn would have students answer a third question: what does it say about how I should live? This last question would prompt students to think ethically as they evaluate the information (Schwehn, 18).

Here at DBU, Peggy Martin has adapted a handout to help students evaluate internet resources.

A third competency for information literate users is the ability to use information effectively. This is more than organizing and synthesizing information into a research paper. Using information effectively includes the ethical use of information, as God intends – being caring stewards of information and loving our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:39).

Quentin Schultze in his book Habits of the High-Tech Heart urges us to step

back from the frenzied infatuation our culture seems to have with cyber-technology and, with care examine our use of it. He decries informationism, a “quasi religious philosophy... a ‘faith’ in the collection and dissemination of information as a route to social progress and personal happiness”(21). Repeatedly, Schultze calls for approaching technology with responsibility. Furthermore, he entreats us to return to the traditions of gratitude, which he defines as “ultimately thankfulness for the creation” and responsibility which he calls “primarily service to others” as we consider technology (79-80). Schultze continues, “we are to be stewards rather than exploiters” (80). The same traditions as Schultze refers to can be applied to the use of all information resources.

Mark Schwehn discusses charity as it applies to academic endeavors. He illustrates this application by sharing how he encourages charitable thoughts toward historical figures. He states “I think the exercise of charity toward my historical subjects is bound to make me a better historian: more cautious in appraisal, more sympathetic with human failings, less prone to stereotype ...As with history, so too with philosophy: charity both enriches and enlivens the quality of thought” (Exiles, 51). Again, so too with information literacy: charity provides the basis for ethical use of information.

Student information users need to be taught *how* to be stewards instead of exploiters, *how* to extend charity (love) to information. Users can be led to

appreciate and be grateful for creation as it is revealed in the information whether it is communicated through words, music, art, or any of a myriad of other formats.

Using information responsibly can be taught as it relates to the ethical use of information. Schultze's definition of responsibility as service to others reflects God's commandment "to love your neighbors as yourself" (Matt. 22:39).

Therefore, information users can be taught that if they strive to be obedient to God and His commands, then their ethics must be rooted in unselfish love for others and that applies to the usage of information as well as to everything else.

To enable students to live out love as the basis of their ethical beliefs as they use information, several timely issues can be explored: plagiarism, copyright, and integrity toward information.

Plagiarism is a common temptation for information users. Students are faced with so many demands on their time - remember our friend Tom - and with the computer's cutting-and-pasting capability, it is so easy to inadvertently include a few words without giving credit to the author, thereby committing plagiarism. Not a problem, or is it?

One little known fact is that "plagiarism" comes from the same Latin word as "kidnapper" (Oxford, 685). When this fact is shared, it sheds new light on plagiarism and exposes the seriousness of the issue. Teaching students the

consequences of plagiarism can be accomplished by discussing cases such as Jayson Blair, the New York Times reporter, who resigned when he was caught plagiarizing an article from a San Antonio paper (Mnookin). More importantly, students can be led to conclude that if love for their neighbor is the guiding principle as they use information, then they will be more likely to be careful to give credit to the author and, perhaps, view citing references as a manifestation of the commandment.

One tool we can share with students to help them determine when they need to cite a source is Turnitin. By going to this web site (www.turnitin.com), students can electronically submit their own research papers. The paper is compared to others in the Turnitin database. If a similar phrase is found, it will be color-coded, thereby indicating the phrase needs to be cited or paraphrased.

Another issue in information ethics is copyright. For research papers, copyright may not pose a problem. However, when media is incorporated into a presentation, information users must investigate existing copyright law. A good web site to go for the law is by Georgia Harper at the University of Texas at <http://www3.utsystem.edu/ogc/IntellectualProperty/cprtindx.htm>. Also, since many college students are downloading and sharing internet music files, copyright is a highly relevant topic.

At a recent conference of the Texas Library Association, an attorney gave a presentation on copyright law and libraries. She had some surprising news. According to her, copyright law has “extended the term of copyright protection eleven times in the last forty years...a work is protected (by copyright law) from the moment of creation, it does not have to be ‘published’, it does not have to include a copyright notice ...currently, a work is protected for the life of the author plus seventy years” (Hoffman, 2004). For information users, this means any information in any format including the internet, unless it is known to be in public domain, is to be considered copyrighted (Hoffman). Since student users depend so much on the internet, this is significant in light of a Newsweek article which stated “What’s on the Web is extremely ephemeral. Very little of it was written before 1995” (Bruce Kahle qtd. in Stone 58).

Examining recent news items involving copyright and applying Biblical principles will help students learn to use information ethically as well as legally. For example, on March 23, just a few weeks ago, copyright suits were brought against students at twenty-one universities. The Recording Industry Association sued these students because of unauthorized song –swapping activities. Concerning the students’ actions, one university provost said, “That’s not something that makes me very comfortable, but it’s the way it is” (USA Today). Information users can be reminded of the Biblical injunction to

submit to authorities as they are God's servants (Rom. 13:1-7). Excusing behavior on the basis of "it's the way it is" is not Biblically ethical. Also, since loving our neighbor is the guiding principle in our ethics, then loving and serving our neighbor is to obey the law by acquiring the music legally.

Another recent event involving copyright can be used with students to assist them in understanding the complexity of copyright issues. A few weeks ago, Donald Trump filed a request to copyright the words "you're fired", the words he uses on his popular television reality program (Graham). However, Susan Brenner of Chicago used the phrase seven years ago as the name of her ceramics studio but she neglected to register her store's name (Precker). This interesting chain of events could be utilized as a discussion about copyright ownership.

Integrity is also an issue in the use of information. Integrity as it is used here, simply means, using the information as the author intended: not to twist the original research to fit the user's purposes. Sometimes students come to their research with preconceived ideas and then they try to find information to support their own opinions, much like a young child learning to put together a puzzle, jamming the pieces together and insisting that they fit. Information users need to be shown that loving one's neighbor includes respecting the intellectual property of the owner by using the information as the author intended.

Locating, evaluating, and using information are competencies which are needed

by all information users in the academic environment and beyond. These competencies are applicable in seeking a job, buying a home, selecting an insurance plan, researching a personal medical condition, and all the other major decisions in life, truly enabling information users to also be life-long learners as they re-present God's creation.

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