
Information Literacy as Human Formation in a Seminary Library

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ABSTRACT Seminary libraries play a unique role in the lives of their users. In a seminary there is a strong emphasis in preparing students for areas outside the academic setting. At Conception Abbey and Seminary College, the idea of “human formation” plays a considerable role in the lives of students as they become formed in the character needed to become Roman Catholic priests. The nature of their future roles creates an even stronger need to be information literate as they lead communities of people both spiritually and socially. Seminary librarians can advocate for being involved in their formation programs by asking to present in areas outside the classroom, making a case based on a denomination’s values and formation guidelines.

INTRODUCTION

As a solo information literacy librarian, I face many challenges, but after the pandemic, any progress has felt slow to recover. However, I have been able to refocus my plans in a different way that is seeing some success. Using the foundational texts for Roman Catholic seminary formation, there is much evidence that can be found in supporting information literacy initiatives for the seminary (Kriegh 2019). Using this knowledge, I have been able to propose formation in media and information literacy for seminarians in the context of the “Human Formation” program at Conception Seminary College.

HISTORY OF CONCEPTION ABBEY

Conception Abbey was founded in 1873 to serve the Irish and German immigrants in the region at the request of a missionary priest. The monks came from Engelberg, Switzerland, to begin the foundation. The monks started a school and college, as well as a theology school which was eventually scaled back to just a college seminary.

The abbey church was made a basilica in honor of its service to the region. Its primary ministries today are the seminary college, guest house, and printery house.

Through its collections, the library primarily supports the monks of the abbey community and the seminary, though many of our employees are also regular library users. This presentation will focus on the seminary aspect of the library's mission.

SUPPORTING PRIESTLY FORMATION

The library is considered a department of the seminary college, so our primary function is as an academic library. Our support of the seminary includes providing information literacy and research instruction, supporting the pillars of the seminary (pastoral, intellectual, spiritual, and human) through access to print and electronic collections, and providing materials that deepen a connection to the Catholic church. We also facilitate peer tutoring and study hall (which takes place in the library), and we support faculty and seminary formators in their efforts to teach their students.

WHAT IS A COLLEGE SEMINARIAN?

The Roman Catholic seminary process is arranged in a couple different ways, depending on the time the seminarian decides to enter seminary. At the college level, he will need to enter a college philosophy program; college seminary focuses on philosophy, while post-college studies include theology. If he already has a college degree, he will enter a pre-theology program, which allows him to take the needed philosophy courses before entering theology school. Conception is a college seminary. Many students come right out of high school, and just as many transfer in at the sophomore or even junior level. College seminary is focused especially on preparing the seminarian for future theology school and sets the foundation for his formation. We also have a pre-theology program for those who need it. Seminarians' lives are very busy as the pillars of formation are often competing with each other in terms of time and commitment.

The activities of a college seminarian include: taking courses in philosophy and the liberal arts; praying the office and the Liturgy of the Hours; attending daily mass; attending formation conferences connected to the pillars of formation; performing service work;

meeting with chaplain, spiritual director, and other formators; filling leadership roles; and performing on-campus work study.

YOUNG ADULT

When working with college students, there are a certain set of developmental traits that are happening simultaneously to their education and formation. Navigating their roles and identities as discerning future priests, it's something I've found is good to remind myself as it is easy to think of college students as completely developed adults. The developmental processes are particularly relevant to consider as they are layered into navigating our digital information landscape.

These are some details from the State Adolescent Health Resource Center from the University of Minnesota I've used as I've advocated for doing more media and information literacy work with students. The 18- to 24-year-old is beginning to: adjust to a new physical sense of self and a sexually maturing body, renegotiate relationship with parents/caregivers, meet demands of increasing mature roles and responsibilities, develop stable peer relationships and apply abstract thinking skills, define a personal sense of identity, and adopt a personal value system (Teipel 2012)

INFORMATION LITERACY FOR FUTURE PRIESTS

I have come to see that information literacy is especially important for future priests. None of us is a stranger to polarization in media and news. Catholic news media can be just as partisan and polarizing. Seminarians come into the seminary with their own experiences of the world and the church. The seminary has an even greater role in the lives of their students as they attempt to form them in preparation for the life of a parish priest. One hopes that their parish priest, despite their own personal perspectives and opinions, can have an objective sense of how the media operates, how information can be biased, and understand that responsibility in terms of ministering to his people. Seminary librarians can back up their goals for information literacy by finding support in several documents that lay out the qualities and characteristics that need to be cultivated in seminary formation.

GOVERNING DOCUMENTS

In the Roman Catholic tradition there are several examples of documents from the Vatican and bishops' conferences that lay out how a priest should be formed. There are also local documents that could be helpful in this regard; an example at Conception is our seminary handbook. In a seminary context (of any denomination) it is worthwhile to find these kinds of documents to strengthen any proposals you may be working on for developing information literacy. Examples are: *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), *Program of Priestly Formation, Fifth Edition* (2006; sixth edition forthcoming), and *Ratio Fundamental Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (2016). A document that directly talks about media and is still surprisingly relevant though written in 1986 is *Guide to the Training of Future Priests concerning the Instruments of Social Communication* (1986).

It is also my hope that the forthcoming update of the *Program of Priestly Formation* will offer stronger support for having formation that relates to digital media and communications, which can strengthen library proposals for information literacy training.

HUMAN FORMATION

The pillar of formation that I find to be particularly relevant for librarians is human formation. This goes to the heart of developing the seminarian in terms of human development and character. The new *Program of Priestly Formation* describes benchmarks for human formation that include: self-awareness, relational skills, and self-discipline (*Principles of the New PPF*). Other denominations may talk about human formation in terms of character formation or growth in virtue. Human formation is to: "Assist seminarians in developing their character and personality so that they become for others a bridge to Christ by a threefold progression of knowledge of self, acceptance of self, and gift of self" (Conception Abbey 2022).

The following quote comes from *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, which truly encapsulates the idea of human formation:

In order that his ministry may be humanly as credible and acceptable as possible, it is important that the priest should mold his human personality in such a way that it becomes a bridge and not an obstacle for others ... the priest should be able to know the depths of the human heart, to perceive difficulties and problems, to make meeting and dialogue easy, to create trust and cooperation, to express serene and objective judgments.

The quote illustrates that these are ideals not just for those who are in religious contexts; it has helped me to think about ways to include those ideals in how we teach information literacy. These are not academic outcomes, and they get at a more personal framework. Thinking about this more has made me realize that information literacy should more frequently belong more in this kind of environment rather than just an academic setting.

INFORMATION LITERACY AT CONCEPTION

Information literacy at Conception entails an “Introduction to the Library” session for new students, three to four instruction sessions during the Writing II course, and one-shots as needed. I would describe our setup as a fairly average, if not minimal, program with potential for growth. At this point there are some challenges in terms of getting faculty on board and getting built into the curriculum consistently. Consistency is probably the biggest struggle in terms of integrating with the academic program. But with some seminary initiatives that are happening in the near future, I hope to find more support. One of my biggest accomplishments has been being able to give a couple formation conferences (which are under the human formation pillar) on media literacy that went over very well; the administration then invited me to give a presentation for their Board of Regents meeting on the role of digital technology in the life of the average college student and how that relates to seminary life. So, it’s clear my colleagues are seeing value in what I’ve been working on.

The first formation conference was *Formed in the Mind of Christ: The Seminarian’s Participation in News and Social Media*.

Here, I used a scripture verse from 1 Corinthians as a theme to help seminarians understand more of what their role is on social media:

The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for,

“Who has known the mind of the Lord
so as to instruct him?”

But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor. 2:15–16 [NIV])

I also did some informal polling during the presentation with the students that indicated that there was a desire for more help with navigating the media and information.

My other presentation, *Attention in the Age of Distraction*, used familiar philosophers such as St. Augustine, Simone Weil, and Josef Pieper to discuss being attentive and how not being intentional with how we spend our time digitally (even if for good things) can affect us spiritually.

My hypothesis for why the formation conferences went over so well with the students is due to their being external to the classroom. The traditional instruction model is usually embedded into the classroom, which has its benefits and drawbacks. It's advantageous in that it's adjacent to helping students to do research and prepare for writing. It has its drawbacks in that it is tied, to some degree, to the interests of the professor and time constraints to provide the necessary content to get through to the student. I found that I had little time for more information literacy-focused concepts and instead required a lot of time reviewing the more functional parts of searching and using databases (which the professors also seem more interested in).

The formation conference model gave me more freedom to really give time to the concepts that I wanted to impart along with interactive ways to do so.

NEW PROPAEDEUTIC YEAR

There is further opportunity to expand what I have begun in terms of the new propaedeutic year which Catholic seminaries have been looking forward to with both hesitation and anticipation, as it will require a big shift in the seminary model. The new *Program of Priestly Formation* has been recently approved by the Vatican but has yet to be implemented. So far, I have been able to access the summaries the USCCB has been putting out with explanations (*Principles of the New PPF Bulletin* 2022). The propaedeutic year is a year added to the beginning of seminary discernment that requires limited academic courses and a strong emphasis on spiritual and human formation.

Depending on the language of the sixth edition of the *Program of Priestly Formation*, I'm hoping there may be some support for including sessions in information and media literacy. This is coupled at our institution with some plans for limiting smartphone use. As seminarians remove one of the biggest distractions in terms of me-

dia and information overload, having sessions that develop a sense of reflection and evaluation would perfectly lead into conversation on information literacy.

FUTURE GOALS

My future goals are to increase the number of formation conferences focused on media and information literacy, use academic courses to focus on research processes (database navigation), use formation areas to focus on information literacy components, and integrate a set number of sessions into propaedeutic year.

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

To further support the idea of taking information literacy outside the classroom is the concept of knowledge transfer, which I encountered in a training session a local English professor was giving to our writing tutors. One definition is “*writing transfer* refers to a writer’s ability to repurpose or transform prior knowledge about writing for a new audience, purpose, and context” (Moore, 2). Underneath the concept is the recognition that students have difficulty transferring knowledge to new contexts without direct cues more generally; this is referred to as transfer of knowledge. In writing, this occurs when students learn how to write for one particular class but then has difficulty applying the same concepts to a new context.

First-year writing programs may even attempt to “teach for transfer.” This helped me to think about whether classroom-based information literacy is the only or even the best context for information literacy, inasmuch as it is not just an academic concept. Information literacy is less of a skill to apply and more of an awareness; the phrase meta-cognition gets used in ALA’s framework for information literacy; in a religious context, it might even be seen as a virtue. This strengthened my conviction that this kind of training belongs firmly in the human formation category rather than as an academic process—though there is certainly overlap. Anecdotally, I have seen solid student researchers who could grasp credibility in terms of academic journals and authority and yet have little sense of how the same concept transfers to how they consume news and media. Adding information literacy to areas outside the classroom could encourage stronger practices of attitudes important for information literacy.

CHALLENGES

There are certainly some challenges to taking information literacy outside of the classroom. It's unclear if this kind of model could work external to a religious or seminary setting, which focuses more fully on character development in comparison to other higher-education institutions. Finding and maintaining support in alternative settings could prove difficult. Assessment is more natural in a classroom environment, so being able to assess work done outside the classroom could also be harder. But while there are challenges to taking information literacy outside the classroom, they are fairly parallel to the challenges of having it in the classroom, which include relying on faculty willing to support information literacy initiatives, being restricted to time constraints, and consistency.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, I hope that this begins a conversation on how information literacy can be brought out from a primarily academic context to other areas and especially to emphasize the need for information literacy in the human formation of future Catholic priests.

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FURTHER READING

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