

INFORMATION LITERACY: Adaptability and Authenticity—Using the Next Generation's Powers for Good, Not Evil

by Tiffany Davis Norris

A BlackBerry buzzes at 2 a.m. with a friend's Facebook status update. Texting and instant messaging are preferred to the now slow and passé e-mail. Music and group work accompany what was once silent, solitary research. These are a few of the many ways the next generation of seminary students gathers and processes information.

Librarians are working hard to define the information literacy needs of these Millennials, Bridgers, NextGens, GenYers. They are known by a variety of names and were born anywhere between 1977 and 2002, depending on the source. More importantly, sixty percent of this generation of approximately 80 million people has ambitions for post-baccalaureate education.¹ These students will soon, if they do not already, make up the bulk of our patrons.

Some librarians argue that these patrons should adapt to more traditional research standards when they become seminary students, insisting that they rely on books or print copies of journals rather than the often-dreaded internet resources. Others maintain that information professionals should instead catch up to these younger generations, catering to their desires to the point where a library is entirely virtual—complete with flat-screen TVs and a coffee shop, but no books.²

However, surely there is a middle ground somewhere between libraries throwing out their books and twenty-somethings throwing out their iPods. Most would agree that there is a twofold challenge of not only adapting to growing needs but also of maintaining excellence in more traditional and foundational services. We don't need to reformat an entire library system or insist that students blindly convert to our ways of operating in order to teach them that many of the information skills they need to acquire are actually compatible with their generation's strengths and, sometimes surprisingly, with ours as well. Two of those strengths are especially conducive to identifying their information literacy needs and improving their abilities.

Adaptability: The ever-growing realm of technology dares us all to conquer the trends and discern which sites, software, and gadgets are mere whims and which are here to stay. Librarians will be ineffective and exhausted if we simply embrace all of the latest techno-trends without taking the time to research and consider whether our students will actually find something useful. These students are often masters at sifting through new offerings and adapting to technology, but we librarians have more experience in using some of these technologies in the real academic world. We can collaborate and then define what works better for them and for the library. For instance, can we make our online catalogs look a bit more like Google on the surface, with one main search box, while still helping students go beyond surface-level searching? Can we make use of Twitterish tagging, podcasting, or both? Our potential patrons exist in the digital space, so we must go there—in some form or other—as well, “to show them why the physical library is still necessary.”³

¹ Thom S. Rainer, *The Bridger Generation* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006).

² David Abel, “Welcome to the Library. Say Goodbye to the Books,” http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2009/09/04/a_library_without_the_books/?wtf.

³ John Sutter, “The Future of Libraries, With or Without Books,” <http://www.cnn.com/2009/TECH/09/04/future.library.technology/index.html>.

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Authenticity: Students often maintain that they want authenticity—honesty in political and spiritual leaders, genuineness in worship, and transparency in their relationships. This desire provides librarians a chance to partner with students and teach them that research, too, can be authentic and much more than the proverbially dreaded busy work. A student is more likely to view a librarian who enlightens the “why” behind the “what” as an authentic, trusted source. We can teach them why it is useful to research a topic, which sources to trust and which to view with skepticism, which databases are more appropriate for which topics, and how to narrow down those searches to find that golden number of returns. Once that trust is established, librarians have a tremendous opportunity to guide, teach, and even mentor students through further research.

Students have indeed learned that libraries are no longer the only source for information,⁴ but we can teach them that we are one of the better sources. Working together, the next generation of students and the current generation of librarians can learn from each other’s strengths, adapt to relevant technologies, and form authentic relationships. This collaboration will not answer all the questions libraries face concerning the future of digitization, research, or even ACRL standards, but it will help us take necessary steps toward meeting the evolving information needs of our patrons.



⁴ Robert Phillips, “More to Learn—and Teach!” *Theological Librarianship* 2, no. 1 (2009): 3-4.