

Enhancing Student Research Skills: Information Literacy Stipends for 2020

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Course and Research Assignment Background

Theology II is a required course, and is an Introduction to Christian Theology. This means that students who enroll in the course may have no interest in theology in general or in Christian theology in particular. Yet, Theology II does have Theology I as prerequisite, so students should have some Biblical aptitude. So I have designed the course to prioritize hands-on self-discovery, with an initial shallow learning curve. While I scheduled “Information Literacy Week” (more information below) in the fourth week of the semester, the very first day of class I mentioned the research paper and the topic of Information Literacy (IL). Before the second week of class even started, I announced the coming “Information Literacy Week,” and I urged students to begin researching their choices for secondary sources for the research paper. The research paper was not due until the last week of the semester, so IL and research truly contextualized the work of the entire semester. Aside from “Information Literacy Week,” the IL saturation reached its second peak by Week 10, in which the first of three successive, weekly research installments for the research paper became due. These installments, which as a group are worth just as much to the semester grade as the paper itself, are a low-stakes opportunity for the students to get constructive feedback on the progress and direction of their research.

Research Background

The course’s Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) require students to acquire and use information from key Christian texts. These texts include the Bible, which typically functions as the primary source. As for secondary sources, these come in layers. First, nearly all Christian theological writings are explicitly oriented to the Bible. This makes theology texts secondary sources. Yet, second, many important theological texts also generate additional scholarly material, which makes them both secondary and primary sources. This complex research environment highlights two Frames of Information Literacy, Research as Inquiry (FRI) and Scholarship as Conversation (FSC). The FRI frame highlights the fact that the Bible and its secondary sources are artifacts, and understanding of them requires careful investigation. The FSC frame highlights the fact that secondary sources themselves and even student research itself can ultimately become part of the scholarly conversation. So to be successful researchers, students must walk a delicate line of understanding that theological data can be both pursued and generated. If either pursuit or generation carries too much weight, the research as theological inquiry can deteriorate to mere Biblical or sociological investigation.

Library Background

Prof. Donna Witek worked with me as my librarian collaborator. We had already worked together on a previous IL project in my sections of Theology I, and we had an ongoing loose working relationship as I continued to implement IL ideas into my courses. While I had included IL in my sections of Theology II, I had never specifically tailored IL to my Theology II course, and I had never specifically worked with

Prof. Witek on the specific IL needs of Theology II. Furthermore, IL standards had changed since my previous IL project, so I needed to update my course material with the new standards.

Information Literacy Standards That Are Addressed

Information Literacy applies to the two research angles in my class: Biblical research and theological assimilation. Each of these angles demands a different primary frame from the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.

The most relevant information literacy frame for the Biblical research angle of my assignments is:

Research as Inquiry (FRI): Research is iterative and depends upon asking increasingly complex or new questions whose answers in turn develop additional questions or lines of inquiry in any field. (Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education)

Within this frame, the most relevant knowledge practices and dispositions for the Biblical research angle of my assignments are:

- (FRIpd1) organize information in meaningful ways;
- (FRIpd2) synthesize ideas gathered from multiple sources;
- (FRIpd3) draw reasonable conclusions based on the analysis and interpretation of information
- (FRIpd4) maintain an open mind and a critical stance;
- (FRIpd5) seek multiple perspectives during information gathering and assessment;
- (FRIpd6) demonstrate intellectual humility (i.e., recognize their own intellectual or experiential limitations).

The most relevant information literacy frame for the theological assimilation angle of my assignments is:

Scholarship as Conversation (FSC): Communities of scholars, researchers, or professionals engage in sustained discourse with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of varied perspectives and interpretations. (Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education)

Within this frame, the most relevant knowledge practices and dispositions for the Biblical research angle of my assignments are:

- (FSCpd1) critically evaluate contributions made by others in participatory information environments;
- (FSCpd2) identify the contribution that particular articles, books, and other scholarly pieces make to disciplinary knowledge;
- (FSCpd3) seek out conversations taking place in their research area;
- (FSCpd4) suspend judgment on the value of a particular piece of scholarship until the larger context for the scholarly conversation is better understood;

The course Student Learning Outcome (SLO) that specifically connects with the assignments for which I am seeking to raise information literacy is:

- Identify and analyze key themes and texts of Christian life and thought.

One way that students learn to identify and analyze these themes and texts of Christian life and thought is through a series of research assignments culminating in a research paper. Nearly every assignment in the semester not only presents theological data, but also specifically exposes the students to the thought world of the writer, from the persona of King Solomon to Rabbi-Apostle Paul, from Athanasius to Martin Luther, from Charlotte Mary Yonge to John Behr, and from John Ruskin to G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis. With the university educational ideal of transformation in mind, students consider dynamics within and outside the authors and contemplate the contexts of individual or corporate transformation.

In Week 4 of the semester, Library Professor Donna Witek and I formally presented what had been latent all along: Acquiring data and evaluating the dynamic relationship of data to the environment of scholarly conversation, two fundamental aspects of both IL and theological research. In this “Information Literacy Week,” we thus explained the deductive foundation for the inductive discoveries we had been targeting from the beginning. In my lecture material, I surveyed the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education both in general and as it relates to theology research. In her lecture, Prof. Witek then explained to the students how to use information resources both to improve the quality of their Bible studies and to improve their evaluation of theological sources. “Information Literacy Week” was thus the formal kickoff for students to begin work on their research papers. The research paper, due late in the semester but built upon a series of weekly graded installments, is a guided interaction between secondary sources (both curated and discovered through independent research), course reading and lecture resources, relevant Biblical texts, and theological themes and methods covered in the course. By researching for this paper, students learn for themselves to isolate theological themes and see how they are presented and developed in the various primary and secondary sources. The research component helps students to use secondary sources to improve the accuracy of their understanding of Biblical passages (FRIpd3-6), draw conclusions for themselves about the development of these Biblical themes (FRIpd2-4, 6), evaluate a secondary theological source (FSCpd2-3) for its situatedness (FSCpd1, 4), or correct their initial, mistaken understandings of the theological concept (FRIpd1, 6) and tell the story of their own research progression (FRIpd1).

Approach to Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

As discussed above, in a theology research paper, there are two types of information implicitly sought in the SLOs: (1) Information from the Bible as a primary source, and (2) Information about the scholarly (and religious) conversation that the Bible spawns in unfolding secondary sources. Accurate assessment of the SLOs must take both types of information into account. Student use of theological information must therefore be assessed from both angles: 1. Did the student make appropriate use of the Bible as a primary source? 2. Did the student use secondary sources to enhance or validate the student’s conclusions about the Bible’s information? At this point, the student is ready to enter the scholarly conversation: 3. Did the student use multiple secondary sources and critically compare and evaluate their contributions with an eye to understanding the theological conversation to which the sources are oriented?

Information Literacy Stipend Adjustments

When I received the information literacy stipend, I began working with Prof. Witek to begin implementing the proposal. The following are changes that I made:

1. I adjusted all of my IL materials to reflect direct interactions with the relatively new the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. First, I created an IL PowerPoint and assignment for my

Theology I course. This material lays the groundwork for the first (FRI) type of information to be researched. Second, I created a corresponding IL PowerPoint and assignment for the Theology II course. This second PowerPoint differentiates between the Biblical and theological dimensions of IL. This differentiation approach emphasizes the second (FSC) type of information to be researched.

2. I collaborated with Prof. Witek to create a new library research guide for my sections of Theology II (<https://guides.library.scranton.edu/theology/arp-trs122>). Previously, we had simply borrowed most of the material from the research guide for Theology I. This borrowing, however, did not take into account both types of research (FRI and FSC) that should be undertaken in Theology II. Further, in developing this research guide, it was necessary to involve Prof. Witek into the pedagogical structure of the course. She needed to understand the FRI and FSC interplay in the major research assignment. The result of Prof. Witek's involvement was her creation of an interactive research flow chart under the heading "Research Strategies and Components." First, this chart laid out what we called the "quadrangulation" of sources. This quadrangulation pictured the complex interplay of dynamic relationship among the four primary and secondary sources. Then, the chart shows the scholarly responses that spin off of each source. Finally, the chart shows the place library resources fit into the research (FRI) and scholarly conversation (FSC). In addition to the chart, Prof. Witek also provided a list of the curated secondary theological sources, and in conjunction with her lecture, she facilitated the technology for the remote sign-up sheets for these sources.

3. With the course now updated in keeping with current IL standards, and with the library research guide precisely tailored to the specific needs of the course, we now were in a position to conduct our "Information Literacy Week," discussed above.

4. In consultation with Prof. Witek, I had already added research strategy and critical analysis language to the rubrics used for grading the research paper. For critical analysis, I used a paper Dr. Mary Goldschmidt circulated at a CTLE rubric workshop entitled "The Critical Thinking Rubric." My revised rubric allowed me to assess the research paper to determine the extent of and quality of IL learning. The new development this semester was the integration of the materials from the "quadrangulation" chart and the "Information Literacy Week" to the rubric. What this meant is that we now had created materials and taught toward the rubric. So students now understand that to get a good grade they must use secondary research, and they must use it well and with good purpose.

4. Late in the semester, for two purposes I administered an IL quiz. The quiz contained both a series of True/False questions and a short essay. The quiz was not graded as correct or incorrect, but simply complete or incomplete. This allowed the students to treat it as a survey. So I was able to get statistics and comments on how the IL emphases during the semester helped students. The second purpose for administering the quiz just as students were beginning a concentrated push on writing their papers was to remind them of the IL emphases that we had covered. I will comment on the results of the quiz below.

Information Literacy Assessments and Achievements

There are two direct ways to evaluate the IL saturation from this semester. The first is to consider student performance on their major papers. While it is difficult to quantify progress on research papers, I will try to do so from two angles. First, when I think of the best paper I graded, I see progress directly connected to my own goals for "Information Literacy Week." One specific request I made of Prof. Witek was that in her lecture she would teach directly toward investigating not only the contents of the secondary source but

also both the character of the author and the reception of the text. In this “best paper,” the student researcher demonstrated a prolonged investigation into both of these features of the secondary source. This success I directly attribute to the “Information Literacy Week.” Second, even though making general characterizations is weak, I believe I can conclude that overall student research papers were characterized as having lively interactions with their secondary and primary sources. Such interactions would be the expected result of the research emphases that Prof. Witek and I emphasized. I would characterize these interactions as not merely looking at a source as a repository of quotes by which to patch together a formally acceptable research paper. Instead, I contend that my students’ use of their sources demonstrates that they recognize their sources to be full statements by an author about topics or situations. I contend that my students’ use of their sources reflect an awareness of the dynamic whole of a text, an author, and a reception context.

The second way to evaluate the IL saturation from this semester is to use the IL quiz (survey—see parameters described above), administered several weeks after the “Information Literacy Week,” and hear what students themselves think. Following is a list of the questions and the statistics for each answer. The first four questions are True/False, and in each case, a “True” answer indicates that a dimension of the IL saturation was beneficial to the student. Overall, 44 or about 90% of the students took the quiz. Of these students, 32 students answered that each of the IL components was beneficial. A ratio of 42/44 students answered that at least 3/4 of the IL components was beneficial.

Information Literacy Individual Questions and Statistics

The text of the first four questions appears below. The statement that most students—remember that just under 75% of students answered each question in the affirmative—objected to was the last statement, the one that claims that the IL emphasis this semester helped students *outside* this course. The other statements each received at least 93% affirmative answers.

1. The information literacy week made my research easier and/or better for my major paper this semester.
2. The Librarian Lecture during Information Literacy Week made my research easier and/or better this semester.
3. The Information Literacy lecture by Professor Arp made my research easier and/or better this semester.
4. The Information Literacy Week this semester made my research easier and/or better in my other classes this semester.

The fifth question gave the students a chance either to claim that IL gave them no benefit or to state what IL feature helped them most:

5. What was one significant tool, skill, or perspective you acquired from Information Literacy Week this semester? If you acquired nothing of the sort, indicate so.

Only two students indicated that IL had no great benefit for them this semester. One indicated that the IL material “toned” skills he or she already had, and the other claimed that the lecture was beneficial. What follows is a short sampling of the IL benefits accrued to the other students.

- I figured out how to research in the library e-reserves

- The weekly installments helped in organizing thoughts and points for the major paper. The concept map which was created by Professor Witek helped with gathering and finding relevant information.
- I learned many things for theology class and my paper, but the most important tool is learning how to navigate through the library and knowing all the resources offered to me. I believe this is most important because I can use this skill in all future classes. I am very comfortable and able to reach out to the librarians for research help, which I was not previously aware of. I became informed with many topics for my theology major paper and I am thankful for that, but I am most glad that I know I have more assistance in the library for future reference!
- One major perspective I earned from Information Literacy Week this semester is that it is okay not an answer for everything in research, for finding good questions can be as important as finding answers.

This sampling, actually lifted directly out of the middle of the D2L answers list, shows the breadth of IL targeted gains this semester, from basic IL resources, to research strategy, to Prof. Witek's chart, to IL relevance beyond Theology II. This breadth, unsolicited and undirected, shows that the IL saturation of this class as intended and expected had a broad and successful footprint.

Ideas for Continued Enhancement of Information Literacy

As I have reread the IL Framework materials that I have tailored to this class, and as I think about where the rubber meets the road of research possibilities and rubric evaluations, I am struck by how open-ended the options for applying IL to Theology II remain. In other words, on the one hand, I could require a pigeon-holed approach to an ever-fine-toothed comb of a rubric. This approach would grade minimal IL engagement on a wider range of fronts. On the other hand, I could retain or design a rubric that contains room for a deeper, more robust, though narrow engagement with IL.

Because of the valuable potential for IL in Theology II, I want to consider taking my engagement with it in the following ways.

1. I am considering writing a theology course pedagogy guide that *begins* with IL, instead of tacking it on. First, such a pedagogy reflects the fact that studying theology in itself is an exercise in IL. Second, by writing such a guide, I myself would continue to strengthen my own grasp of the explicit and helpful connections between studying theology and IL.
2. Building on the pedagogy notion above, I believe that because IL and studying theology are so appropriately linked, more quiz or exam questions and more essay assignments with specific IL angles, instead of distracting from the theological enterprise, actually help to reinforce it.