

## **Collaboratively Developing Information Literacy Curricula for Academic Writing through Focus Groups with Romanian and American Educational Professionals**

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### **Abstract**

Disinformation and misinformation have become increasingly alarming problems for all educators in almost every country with the rise of Internet use and social media. But how do educational professionals counter what seems like an overwhelming issue? Local and international education professionals should work together to share insight into effective methods of assisting students with the difficult task of discerning what is real and credible online. An excellent place to start with this daunting challenge is to build an information literacy curriculum that assists students with academic writing. Teaching information literacy skills in conjunction with basic academic writing skills sets students on a path to be critical thinkers and to learn how to do reliable online research.

Working with the methodology of focus groups (a qualitative research method) in an online format, educational professionals from different countries can collaborate to plan together and share ideas to develop the most effective curricula to achieve common information literacy goals. This collaborative approach can help to provide lessons and materials to students that are culturally and linguistically adapted to be truly successful in each local educational context. Global problems demand solutions that come from international collaboration. Through the methodology of online focus groups, the potential to work together on these types of issues is now more accessible and practical than ever. This article highlights the collaboration of a focus group held from fall 2021 to winter 2022, comprised of Romanian and American educators working together to develop an information literacy curriculum to be used for teaching academic writing.

**Keywords:** information literacy, education in cross-cultural contexts

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Fake news, media literacy, disinformation and misinformation have become buzzwords in recent years. However, these terms are often vaguely defined. In their report, Howard et al. (2021) highlight, “While mis/disinformation is a topic of growing policy and academic interest, the debate lacks a common vocabulary and shared definitions. Various types of problematic content are frequently conflated within both scholarly and public discourse.” Regardless of vocabulary, many would agree that the ability to discern what is real and credible information has become a serious issue in most cultures with the rise

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of social media. In their report, Martens et al. (2018) note, “It is only recently however that it [fake news] has surged back onto our radar screens, in the wake of the digital transformation of news from offline to online distribution and the rise of social media as a news distribution channel.” But the question that we then must confront is: where do we start to tackle this gigantic issue? As a professional school librarian, I advocate to start with teaching information literacy with a focus on academic writing. According to the American Library Association, “Information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.” The ALA continues to state that, “To be information literate, then, one needs skills not only in research but in critical thinking<sup>1</sup>.” Information literacy can be viewed as the umbrella under which other types of literacy such as media, digital, etc. fall. If we can explicitly teach information literacy and especially for academic writing, we can arm students with a set of universal tools to help them combat the online information overload which is saddled with all the problems that can be described as fake news, disinformation, misinformation, etc.

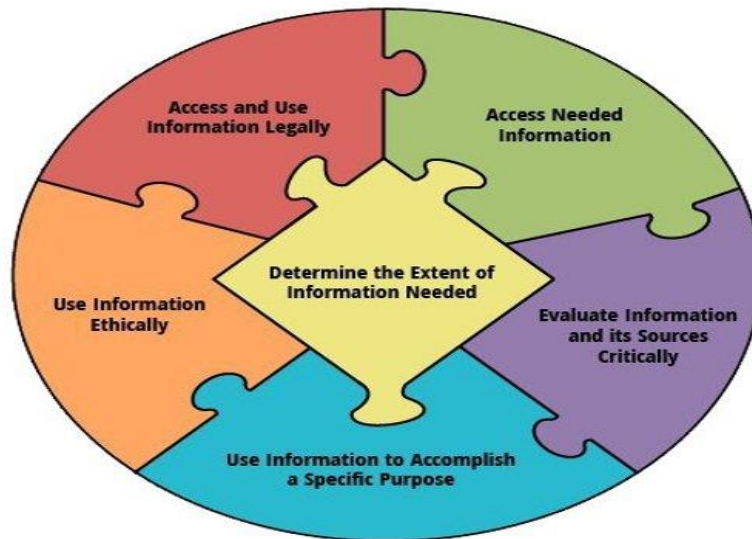
The way information literacy has been taught (if at all) in the past varies by school and country. In the focus group that was held prior to the publication of this article, it was concluded that in practice there is no common framework for teaching information literacy to elementary, high school or university students in Romania. Similarly in the U.S, where education requirements are mostly determined by each state at the K-12 level, I can confirm that each state has a different approach to information literacy standards and some do not have any defined standards for this topic. Porter et al. (2009, p.238) write, “Content standards provide teachers with a set of guidelines for what students are expected to know and be able to do, defining the intended curriculum. And although the current 50-state system of education gives each state the task of setting content standards, there has been little empirical investigation of the similarities and differences among state content standards.” For universities, which are fairly autonomous in the U.S., some are experimenting with implementing campus wide standards and some have not addressed the topic, yet. Information literacy is normally seen as the responsibility of librarians. However, in this digital age and with the disruption to traditional learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, I want to highlight the importance of librarians and other educational stakeholders working together to discuss and create a shared information literacy curriculum or framework that can be taught and applied across different institutions, (e.g. school districts, counties, states, countries, etc.) particularly within the lens of academic writing, which is an essential skill that naturally fits with information literacy. This is based on the idea that if one can do accurate research, synthesize the findings and think critically about the content, then that leads to the base skills required for academic writing. This article explores the findings of Romanian and American educators based on five different focus group sessions that were held to examine further issues surrounding teaching information literacy, and developing information literacy curricula for academic writing. The following graphic from

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<sup>1</sup> <https://literacy.ala.org/information-literacy/>

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Michigan Technological University visually represents the key elements that comprise information literacy.



<https://www.mtu.edu/library/instruction/information-literacy/>

## 2. METHODOLOGY:

This research used the qualitative research method of focus groups. According to Nyumba et al. (2018, p. 20), focus groups are frequently used as a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of social issues. The method centers on obtaining data for a purposely-selected group of individuals in lieu of searching for a statistically representative sample from a larger population. Breen (2006, pp. 467-468) suggests focus group moderators design a focus group interview schedule, which leads each focus group session through semi-structured questions that adhere to a time limit along with a welcome, overview of the topic, statement of the ground rules and assurance of confidentiality. The focus group held for this research adhered to the interview schedule organization recommended by Breen.

Participants included ten individuals including, three university professors/lecturers in the field of foreign language, one university professor in the field of journalism, one former professor in the field of literature, two school librarians, one public librarian, one secondary level English teacher and one secondary level school counselor. I acted as the moderator. Nine of the participants were Romanian and one was Romanian-American. Two of the participants had extensive study and/or teaching experience in the U.S. Nine of the participants were female and one was male.

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Geographic regions of Romania represented by these individuals for their work included: Bucharest, Alba Iulia, Craiova and Galati.

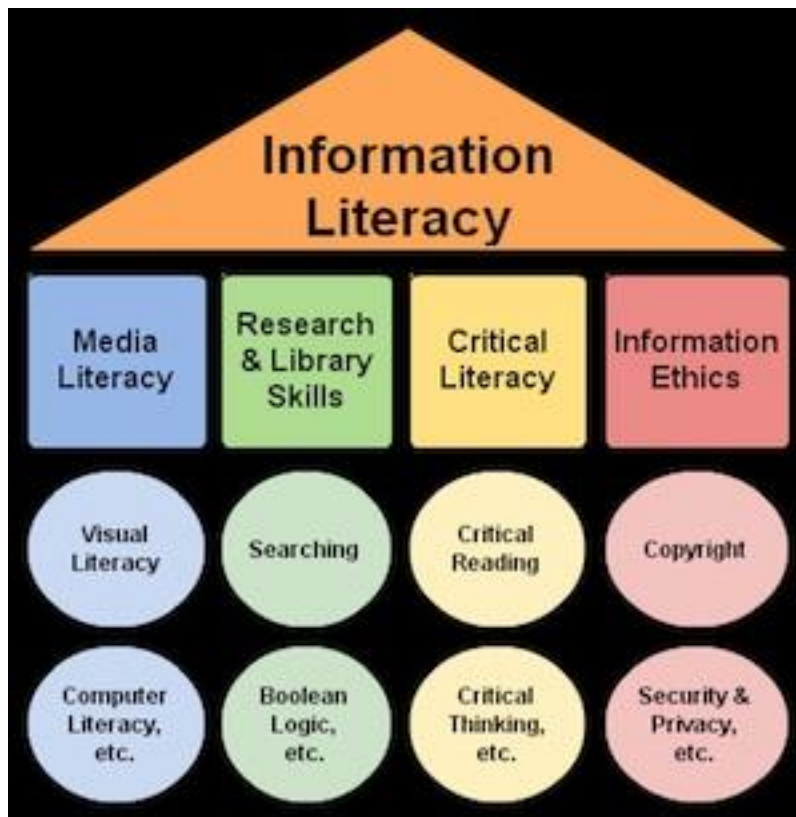
The focus group met a total of five times on Zoom and each session lasted approximately two hours. Before each meeting, participants were sent a list of semi-structured (normally 8-10) questions that would be asked during the next session. After the first session, each set of questions built upon the previous week's discussion. There was always extra time for participants to add any information they thought was relevant that was not already covered in the questions. Two sessions partly focused on participants working in Zoom "breakout rooms" to develop their own mini information literacy lesson and then teaching their lesson to the main group. This activity generated further reflection about working together collectively to define how to teach about information literacy. The final session concluded with discussion questions that centered around a case study conducted by librarians at the University of Houston concerning creating a standardized information literacy assessment for undergraduate students. This case study was the springboard for hypothesizing how a similar project could be carried out in Romania.

All of the sessions were recorded with the participants' consent and analysis of the recordings was done using the method of emergent coding. Stuckey (2015, p. 8) writes, "One of the keys in coding your data, and in conducting a qualitative analysis more generally, is developing a storyline." She goes on to state that codes can be emergent, meaning that they were concepts, actions, or meanings, that evolved from the data.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:**

#### **3.1 The value of explicitly teaching information literacy**

The first code that emerged from analysing the focus group recordings was the value of explicitly teaching information literacy to tackle other subjects that fall under the umbrella of information literacy. If we think of different types of literacies with information literacy on top, it is one way to approach teaching the topic. If students learn to recognize, locate, evaluate and effectively use needed information, it is a starting point for addressing other subjects like media literacy or even avoiding plagiarism. The graphic below from a UNESCO MOOC visually represents this idea.



<http://elab.lms.athabascau.ca/mod/book/view.php?id=867>

To further support this finding, Shapiro and Hughes (1996, p. 3) write:

Information and computer literacy, in the conventional sense, are functionally valuable technical skills. But information literacy should in fact be conceived more broadly as a new liberal art that extends from knowing how to use computers and access information to critical reflection on the nature of information itself, its technical infrastructure, and its social, cultural and even philosophical context and impact - as essential to the mental framework of the educated information-age citizen as the trivium of basic liberal arts (grammar, logic and rhetoric) was to the educated person in medieval society.

### **3.2 The need for a more standardized framework concerning information literacy**

The next code that materialized was the need for a more standardized framework or curriculum concerning information literacy that spans across different educational levels. From the focus group, it was concluded that some individual educators and librarians in different spheres (schools, school libraries, public libraries, universities and university libraries) are working already in Romania (and also the U.S.) on teaching information literacy. However, there are no universal goals, resources or standards. This arguably

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makes for an inefficient approach to teaching a critical skill in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Some students may get duplicated content or have large gaps or no information literacy training at all depending on where they attend school or university. This finding held true for both the Romanian and American educational landscapes. Many institutions have not previously thought of information literacy as being a subject to be explicitly taught, but in this current era, as Shapiro and Hughes previously stated, we should think about information literacy as being equivalent to a field such as grammar. That is to say, it should be an essential cornerstone of everyone's education that more or less covers the same information regardless of the institution where one studies.

In their article, *Developing an Information Literacy Assessment Rubric*, Gola, Ke, Creelman, and Vaillancourt, all academic librarians at the University of Houston, discuss a case study they conducted to craft a campus-wide assessment of undergraduate student information literacy skills. The authors partnered with the University of Houston Office of Institutional Effectiveness and the Director of Assessment and Accreditation Services for General Education. The project focused on identifying students' level of information literacy skills via submissions of multidisciplinary undergraduate papers, in order to create benchmarks for instructional programs. The ultimate objective was to synchronize the library and the academic departments' approach to teaching information literacy across the campus. The project resulted in a rubric being made to assess undergraduate students' information literacy skills concerning academic writing. In their conclusion, Gola et al. (2014, p. 141) write:

While the rubric development and rating process was time-consuming, the experience was extremely beneficial in teaching librarians about rubric development, sample selection, norming, and general assessment best practices. Furthermore, the rubric is being reused and revised for additional information literacy assessments and is helping to build a greater culture of assessment around information literacy. Perhaps even more important, the results are now an essential component of how librarians communicate with faculty when planning information literacy instruction. The results are generating more campus-wide discussions on how to strengthen information literacy education, and the project as a whole cultivated a shared understanding of librarian and faculty concerns regarding information literacy.

Through this case study, Gola et al. demonstrate the potential for educators from different fields to work together to create a common information literacy framework, especially in regards to academic writing. Previously on the University of Houston campus, the academic library existed in one sphere and the individual academic departments existed in another. However, through this project it was affirmed that it is possible and beneficial for different educational stakeholders at an institution to work together to develop shared benchmarks of what all students should know concerning information literacy at the end of their studies. This article was read and discussed by the focus group participants and it was hypothesized that a similar approach of creating an information literacy rubric across other institutions of varying size could be achieved, if the proper funds were allotted. The key takeaway was the need to work together across

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stakeholders and institutions to develop standardized approaches to teaching about information literacy. Academic writing is not usually taught by librarians. Hence, it's a good example of the partnerships which can be established between English instructors and librarians.

### **3.3 Teachers of teachers**

The next code that emerged was the idea of “teachers of teachers” for information literacy. This concept could be applied to the U.S. but was mostly created with a Romanian context in mind. Romania is a geographically large country and transportation from one region to another can be long and cumbersome. Several members of the focus group who are actively teaching or working in libraries with young people stated the logistical challenges posed to them and their colleagues to receive continued professional development training regarding teaching information literacy. Almost all workshops or courses were either held in Bucharest or involved traveling abroad. It was concluded that most of these types of workshops that the participants were aware of, were offered by international organizations or foreign governments. These focus group members said that even if the expenses for travel were covered by the workshop, their family responsibilities kept them from being able to participate in such events. The alternative proposal suggested is that foreign governments or international organizations host workshops about teaching information literacy in Bucharest or other major cities, but add a “teacher of teachers” component. This would mean that part of the workshop would certify the participants, professional teachers, professors or librarians to then offer a similar training regarding the content in their local communities. This would need to involve a stipend for those certified to be able to logistically afford to hold trainings in other communities, but it would not need to involve an entire salary. In some cases, it might be even more economical for the event hosts to organize workshops in this way than to pay for educators to travel abroad.

This concept of teachers training teachers in other contexts is not new. It has been used before in other settings and could prove to be a valuable tool in promoting teaching about information literacy in Romania. In *Multiplying the Effect of Professional Development: Teachers Training Teachers*, Hansen-Thomas et al. (2012, p.134) state:

Effective teachers know who is being taught and what kind of background, interests, and experiences they bring with them and adjust instruction to meet their learning needs. Thus, PD utilizing peer interaction such as the teacher-to-teacher model is grounded in this notion of understanding both the content and the learner for greater effectiveness. Here, we refer to this model as turnaround training to highlight the notion that the teachers developed knowledge and expertise and then shared that expertise with their peers.

Hansen-Thomas et al.’s findings highlight the strong potential turnaround training (as they call it) has to bolster professional development opportunities among educators. This could easily be applied to Romanian educators regarding the subject of teaching about information literacy.

### **3.4 Continued dialog about information literacy**

The final code that unfolded was the concept of continued dialog about an information literacy framework through the form of a monitored blog or social media group to foster a community of practice. In *Developing a Community of Practice around Teaching: A Case Study*, Bolander Laksov et al. (2008, p. 124) assert: "If a community of practice around teaching is established, teachers will not only evaluate their teaching and invent new ways of organizing teaching and learning, but also will reflect on their practice and share their ideas of new ways to support learning." This blog or social media page project is underway and will be monitored by a Romanian colleague and myself. The final platform has not yet been selected but the concept will entail adding monthly content about resources, events, and creating a space for dialog (either questions or comments) for professionals interested in teaching information literacy. The idea is to share resources in multiple languages (English, Romanian and possibly French) and create a continued place to talk about teaching information literacy. There are various information literacy initiatives happening in Romania, but there is no standardized platform or database to announce or archive these resources. Another key issue is that they are often not in Romanian. To truly multiply the effectiveness of teaching about information literacy, the focus group agreed that more materials need to be accessible in Romanian. This platform with a Romanian moderator will allow for at least more credibly translated materials to be shared or for Romanian professionals to create their own materials and upload them to the platform for others to use in an open-access format.

### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

This focus group provided a valuable experience for educators involved in teaching information literacy to work together and discuss key ideas in this field. As previously stated, there are many buzzwords today, such media literacy and fake news among others. The 21<sup>st</sup> century along with the rise of social media has demonstrated a vacuum that exists in the education systems of many countries concerning students lacking concrete skills to navigate the online landscape that is oversaturated with content and competing information sources. This focus group's findings reinforced the idea that explicitly teaching information literacy skills (based on the working definition from the American Library Association) for academic writing can support the foundational skills potentially necessary to navigate the confusing online world that now exists.

There is still much work to be done in Romania and also in the U.S. to reach a standardized framework of information literacy skills for academic writing or in the general context. However, the focus group showed promising results that when different stakeholders in teaching information literacy come together, interesting, useful and

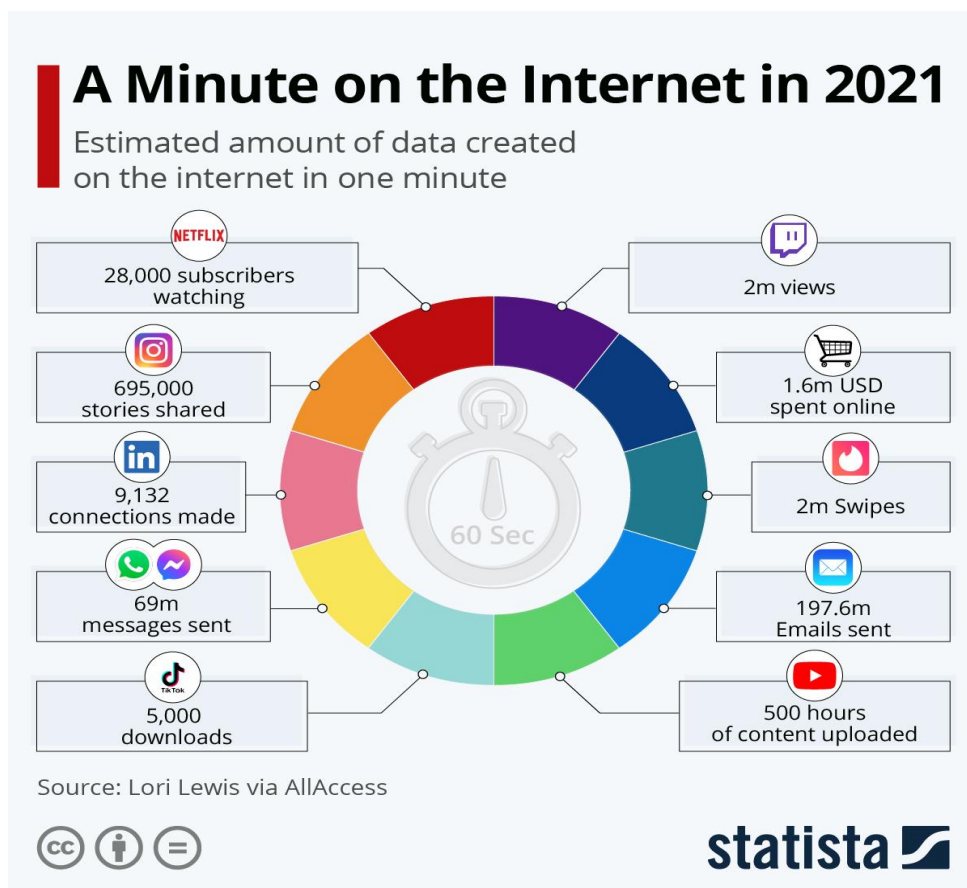


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important conversations happen. Also, having a cross-cultural component adds a rich dimension to talking about what can be considered a global problem.

For information literacy initiatives to have the most impact, they should take into consideration all of the different stakeholders involved, and the time and personal commitments that target participants might have. This is where a program like teachers training teachers might come into play. Also, the importance of language in teaching information literacy is essential. If materials are only or mostly only offered in the most commonly spoken world languages, this eliminates the number of individuals that these initiatives will reach.

In the future, the need for more programs that address teaching information literacy will only grow. Below is a 2021 graphic from Statista that illustrates the average amount of data created on the Internet in one minute. This focus group centered on explicitly teaching information literacy for academic writing as one potential approach to giving students the base skills necessary to navigate the supercharged online world of this decade. Other methods are certainly possible, but it is undeniable that there is a growing need for structured programs that address teaching information literacy.



<https://www.statista.com/chart/25443/estimated-amount-of-data-created-on-the-internet-in-one-minute/>

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