What do you think of when you hear the word librarian? I’m not much of a betting person but even I would feel pretty safe guessing that your answer would involve something to do with books. Buying books, cataloging books, preserving books - you name it, and we’ve probably done it to a book… Books play an important part of our library heritage, but just as it’s frustrating for language teachers to be seen as only teaching grammar, it would be a mistake to assume that librarians only show off the books.

In this article, I aim to show how librarians are a key pedagogical partner for teachers who are looking to integrate technology into the world language classroom. Centered upon my experiences as the Romance Language Librarian at the University of Colorado, Boulder (CUB), I will start by exploring both the rationale and the motivation for working more closely with language librarians. I will then illustrate these ideas by providing an overview of a number of collaborative projects that were designed to integrate broader questions about information and technology into the world language classroom. The article will finish with an overview of how these ideas could be developed in the future.
WHAT’S A LIBRARIAN DOING IN A WORLD LANGUAGE CLASSROOM ANYWAY?

Information literacy is not synonymous with research papers. Instead, as a core competence of today’s increasingly global information societies, it should be seen as playing a unique and an essential role throughout the entire curriculum.

Book projects aside, the usual way that librarians are associated with world language departments is through information literacy instruction. Traditionally defined as the ability to find, use, and evaluate information, information literacy has been most closely integrated with the work and the classes of literature professors; teaching undergraduates about peer reviewed journal articles, helping graduate students to choose a citation manager, and promoting the MLA database to all. However, just as the 2007 Modern Language Association (MLA) report, Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World, pointed out that a two-tiered model of world language education is outdated, a scenario where information literacy is solely associated with literature classes is equally restrictive. Information literacy is not synonymous with research papers. Instead, as a core competence of today’s increasingly global information societies, it should be seen as playing a unique and an essential role throughout the entire curriculum.

Coincidentally, the ideas behind the 2007 MLA report emerged at the same time as a number of studies from the field of Library and Information Studies were starting to question and broaden our traditional understandings about information literacy, too. Most simply, these studies aimed to move information literacy beyond its academic roots to engage more deeply with sociocultural ideas of theory and practice, or the idea that people use literacy in context. This meant that rather than seeing information literacy as a generic skill that is applicable to and transferable across all settings, it was reconceptualized as emerging from and being specific to the social practices of a specific community. In other words, and just as in our understanding of language, information reflects the “established knowledge of [a] native community and society,” including memory, experience and social conventions (Kramsch, 1993, p.43). These ideas demonstrate the importance of thinking about information literacy within a subject context rather than as just a study skill that students develop in their first year of college.

More importantly for the purposes of this article, however, these ideas also helped to highlight that information literacy should not merely be seen as an academic skill; instead, and just like in literacy more generally, if information literacy arises from social practices then people must demonstrate and use different information literacies within different domains of life. The focus on society also raises a number of new ideas related to information literacy, including the belief that because society itself is structured by and reflective of power relationships, then a critical engagement with the tools and technologies that underpin our information societies is essential. Most importantly, however, and bringing these ideas back to the world language education context, these ideas help to demonstrate that information literacy forms a key part of a student’s knowing of a language and a culture. If information is culturally specific (information that is
valued in one community may not be valued in another, for example), then information literacy will introduce students to knowledge that is only available through the world language, thereby fulfilling the ACTFL Connections Standard (Standard 3.2). At the same time, the fact that information emerges from and is shaped by a community’s sociocultural practices means that information literacy can also be a vehicle through which students can reflect on differences between languages, thereby also accomplishing the goals of transcultural competence that are so clearly outlined in the 2007 MLA report. These ideas are complex, but together, they form both the motivation and the driving force behind my work with language instructors at CU.

HOW DOES THIS PLAY OUT IN PRACTICE?

This all sounds well and good in the abstract, but what on earth does this look like in the classroom?! Here are a few examples of projects that I have recently worked on at CU.

One of the first projects with which I was involved was with French students who were setting up a class newspaper. In a hybrid class that was structured through Ning, the learning community site, my participation consisted of both online and offline engagement and focused on helping students find popular information in French for the article that they were writing, offering advice about finding and using online images ethically, and guiding copyright and online citation practices. I believe this class was successful because it gave students the chance to fully explore the everyday tools and sources that French people frequently consult, to paraphrase Hock (2007, p.51). In effect, the in-person class was dedicated to not only introducing students to local search engines and tricks for searching Google in French, but also for reflecting on the differences between English and French information use, for example, the reasons why Google Scholar does not index many articles in French. At the same time, by being embedded in the online course, my access to the discussion fora and student workspace meant that I could offer advice about information sources that was tailored to each student’s topic. A series of online videos that I made helped to further reinforce these points.

Another project that I worked on was with advanced Spanish language students who were studying trash in Latin America through the lens of social justice (Hicks, 2015). Rather than just focusing on ensuring students knew how to use the library databases to find relevant peer reviewed articles in Spanish, we used the research session in the library to focus more broadly on issues of access and power within the world of information, an approach that was in keeping with the theme of the class.

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They also explored Wikipedia’s edit pages and used a post class survey to reflect more concretely about these issues, including what information our society values, as well as the
contested nature of knowledge. While our class time was brief, these ideas helped students to think about information, rather than just where to find it. This critical approach to technology is often overlooked, but will only become more necessary as our information worlds continue to expand.

One of the newer projects that I have been working upon has focused on the workplace, and how we prepare language students for information usage after graduation (Hicks, in press). Workplaces are information-rich settings yet, in focusing uniquely on academic information literacy, we often neglect to think about the wide range of information activities that our language students will engage with after graduation. We may also fail to recognize that students may still need assistance developing effective information management habits, a key aspect of information literacy. Drawing upon this idea that we often adopt technology on a haphazard basis, this class thereby used audio recordings of interviews with professionals about their use of information and technology in the workplace in order to facilitate student reflection about their own technology and learning habits. By focusing on comparing students’ current technology use to that of professionals, we aimed to get students reflecting on the information competencies that they may need to develop for the workplace. At the same time, the focus on personal habits would also help students to develop as lifelong and self-regulated learners, another key goal of information literacy education.

Lastly, my work with world language departments has not just been limited to the students. Language educators, too, can benefit from working with a librarian, and I have been lucky enough to present several workshops under the auspices of the Anderson Language Technology Center (ALTEC) at the University of Colorado Boulder. One of the most recent workshops centered on keeping up and keeping organized in the field, or how language educators can use tools such as RSS and journal alerts, as well as technologies such as Evernote, Scrivener and Feedly to curate and filter their way through information overload. Another workshop that I developed with a colleague focused on copyright, with a particular focus on ensuring that language educators use images, videos and other teaching materials legally and ethically.

I’m also engaged in several new projects, the most exciting of which is my doctoral work that is focusing on investigating the role of information and information literacy within study abroad. Several studies have demonstrated that information literacy plays a key role in helping refugees and immigrants to adjust to the realities of new cultural contexts. Yet, despite the acknowledgement that language students engage in a variety of new activities when they go abroad and that their new landscape is informationally, as well as geographically and linguistically very different from home, there have been few studies that explore how information literacy can facilitate and mediate student transition within their new environments. By employing interviews as well as an ethnographic smartphone app to explore student experiences, I am just about to start data collection for this project, so please let me know if you can help me recruit participants!

**FUTURE PLANS**

Although decreasing budgets means that the number of language librarians may never be as high as it has been in the past, the good news is that librarians are more knowledgeable about
pedagogical practices than ever before. Coupled with their detailed and insightful understanding of information societies around the globe, it is clear that your local librarian can bring a valuable perspective to any world language classroom. How can you make the most of their skill and expertise? Start by inviting them to departmental pedagogical workshops or reading groups; while librarians are often versed in concepts of information literacy, they may not have made the connection to language instruction before. Equally, think carefully about your assignments. Just because you don’t assign a research paper doesn’t mean that you can’t use the librarian. Brainstorm with your librarian about how else you can integrate information literacy into your teaching. Most importantly, try and meet the librarian halfway by getting to know their discipline. From the world of libraries, Project Information Literacy has some very valuable reports that aim to unpack student research habits throughout college and in the real world. Feel free to share key documents in the language learning field with them, too. Joined up and collaborative teaching can only ever have a positive outcome!

Do you collaborate with librarians at your institution? Let us know how in the comment section below!

REFERENCES


Project Information Literacy. http://projectinfolit.org/