

Moving Information Literacy Beyond an “Add-On” to “Hands-On”

SARA J. BEUTTER MANUS

Information literacy initiatives are often perceived by students as “add-ons” to music history courses. While instructors and librarians intend to provide students with the knowledge and skills that they need to research and write papers, a variety of factors often interfere with the effectiveness of library instruction. Lack of attendance by students, inadequate class time, lack of “hands-on” experience for students, and failure to deliver information at the point of need are but a few of the issues that can impede the success of information literacy initiatives. By developing a true partnership between the librarian and the instructor, information literacy can be woven directly into the fabric of the course, improving outcomes for all parties and offer students the chance to engage in a non-traditional, hands-on project.

In the summer of 2011, I was approached by assistant professor of musicology James V. Maiello regarding a newly approved course. James and I had worked together in the past, and he had become a great advocate for information literacy sessions because the skills that students learned led to better research and writing (thus necessitating fewer corrections from him). We had many discussions about how to best remove the obstacles that prevent students from developing the information literacy skills necessary to academic success, and he wanted to design a course that would include information literacy as a primary curricular goal. Our collaboration resulted in the course “J. S. Bach: Learned Musician and Virtual Traveler,” first offered in the spring of 2012.

While the course was for upper-level undergraduates, it was modeled on the graduate seminar model. It was to be discussion-based, and each student would be required to give a substantive presentation on a Bach work. We included several “traditional” music history assignments (an annotated bibliography, a research paper, and an editions study of the Bach B-minor Mass), but we also designed a capstone, hands-on assignment that would require students to synthesize their experiences in the course in a creative way by curating an exhibit at the Anne Potter Wilson Music Library.

Since we envisioned a seamless integration of information literacy into the course, we explicitly included the following course goal and objectives in the syllabus:¹

Curricular goal: To develop advanced information literacy and research methods.

Objective: Acquire, evaluate, and employ relevant information/research appropriately and effectively.

Objective: Communicate in the content area orally and in writing, using an appropriate, discipline-specific vocabulary and proper mechanics of language, grammar, and style.

To reinforce the role of information literacy in the course, I decided to “embed” myself in the class.² I committed to attend all class meetings, and we opted not to schedule discrete library instruction sessions. By removing a set time and date for the librarian, we were demonstrating that information literacy is not a stand-alone concept, but a set of skills that can only be developed within the context of a discipline. Since even the best-designed syllabi can be derailed by unexpected events, being in the classroom gave me the flexibility to deliver instruction directly at the point of need. It was also beneficial to work with students throughout the semester, reviewing information covered previously, answering questions, and suggesting alternate research strategies. Rather than just explaining “how” to do something, we were able to explore “why” things are done the way that they are in a particular discipline.³

As the semester progressed, it became clear that our students were making great strides forward in their research and writing abilities. James and I graded their annotated bibliographies and editions studies jointly, and we offered students the chance to rewrite. Feedback was taken seriously, and later drafts reflected increasing comfort with the research and writing process. Rather than viewing the library (and the librarian) as separate entities, they seemed to grasp the interrelated nature between information and the discipline of musicology.

1. In formulating our goals and objectives, we relied on the Music Library Association’s Instructional Objectives for Undergraduate Music Students, compiled by the Bibliographic Instruction Subcommittee, approved by the MLA Board and endorsed by the Association for College and Research Libraries (2005), http://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/uploaded-Files/Publications/Online_Publications/BI_MLA_Instructional_Objectives.pdf.

2. Embedded librarianship is an increasingly popular means of forging relationships between users and librarians in both physical and online environments. An introduction to the concept can be found in Kathy Drewes and Nadine Hoffman’s “Academic Embedded Librarianship: An Introduction,” *Public Services Quarterly* 6, nos. 2–3 (April 2010): 75–82.

3. Students were particularly interested in learning about the conventions of scholarly discourse and how that related to citation practices.

The final project of the semester gave students the opportunity to curate an exhibit in the Wilson Music Library. This hands-on project put them in charge of documenting their experiences in the classroom throughout the semester in a creative way. By asking them to do this type of capstone, we had the chance to observe how students had synthesized the various elements of the course. Since we wanted to give them the opportunity to make the projects their own, the guidelines were flexible and fluid. The only firm requirement was that each item in the display be accompanied by a descriptive card with a correct bibliographic citation in Chicago style.

It is fair to say that the resulting exhibit, “J. S. Bach: The Learned Musician,” exceeded our expectations. Students did turn to us for some guidance and assistance, but the vision reflected in the exhibit was their own. The exhibit overview describes their approach:

Arguably the most renowned composer of all time, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) was—ironically—somewhat self-conscious of his lack of academic pedigree. From his earliest professional appointments, Bach cultivated consciously his image as “learned,” despite having neither university degree nor academic appointment. This exhibit focuses on the multifaceted nature of Bach’s education and concludes with a brief look at Bach in our own university. He was a product of German’s “Latin School” system, a cut above the “German” schools most children attended, and one based on a Classical model. Bach’s musical education was a combination of traditional North German apprenticeship and self-study, built largely around German masters like Buxtehude, as well as popular Italianate and French styles. Although he never traveled far from his native Thuringia, Bach’s music reflects the varied techniques and styles from all over Europe. Perhaps most surprisingly, Bach took his duties as a composer of sacred music very seriously, becoming a competent, sophisticated theologian in his own right, as evidenced by both his music and his private library. Finally, J. S. Bach left an indelible mark on the American university landscape through performances of his music, scholarly research on his life and works, and in university courses devoted to Bach and the music of his time. It is our hope that this exhibit respects Bach’s own self-image, calling attention to, as Christoph Wolff so aptly titled his magisterial intellectual biography, *J. S. Bach: The Learned Musician*.

Students demonstrated their research skills by searching the library’s collections and the Internet for objects to include in their exhibit. Among the items chosen for display were a 1750 Luther Bible from the Divinity Library’s collection, a digital image from the German version of Wikipedia of a 1609 edition of the *Compendium locorum theologicorum* (essentially, Bach’s

“textbook”), and a commemorative bronze medal cast for Vanderbilt’s 2000 Symposium on Albert Schweitzer from Special Collections.⁴

Students also embraced creative elements in their project. The favorite object on exhibit was a fictional “report card” for Bach which assigned grades for choir, arithmetic, Latin, Greek, religion, logic, and rhetoric. A comment from August Braun, the cantor at St. Michael’s, stated that “we were very excited to have Sebastian join the Matins choir, but almost immediately, his voice dropped an octave in the space of a week. We were hoping to take advantage of his once-fine soprano voice. Hopefully, he can adjust to this new register and stay in the Matins choir.” Bach also received low marks for attendance, which was described as “not his strongest area.” This creative report card recounted Bach’s time at St. Michael’s in a creative and relatable manner.

We believe that the hands-on element of this course was particularly beneficial to our students, as it allowed them to make deeper connections with the course material of the sort that foster long-term retention of information. We also know that the collaboration between librarian and instructor led to better outcomes on course assignments. Far from being an “add-on,” our students truly had a “hands-on” experience that shows how information literacy is a pillar of academic inquiry.

4. Although best known for his humanitarian work, Schweitzer’s two-volume study of Bach’s works (published in 1908) remains a milestone in Bach scholarship. Christoph Wolff was one of the speakers at the symposium, thus adding even greater relevance since his biography functioned as the central text for the course.