

**Compliance, Cooperation, Collaboration and Information Literacy**

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## **Compliance, Cooperation, Collaboration and Information Literacy**

### **Abstract**

As academic institutions have devoted increased efforts to information literacy skills assessment, more opportunities for collaboration between the library and other campus organizations have been developed. The authors describe their experiences concerning a collaborative project to revise a credit-bearing information literacy course. Theoretical constructs are used to analyze the process.

### **Introduction to Issues of Collaboration and Information Literacy**

As the 21<sup>st</sup> century begins to unfold, librarians witness the continued need for promoting basic information literacy skills – a need that has been made more critical since the explosion of the Internet and other new forms of information sharing. Information literacy, long championed and promoted by librarians, now enjoys the attention of and increased emphasis from other education professionals, as well as local program administrators, state legislators and accrediting organizations around the United States.

This increased focus on information literacy offers opportunities and new challenges for academic librarians. In this paper, we explore some theoretical elements of collaboration and offer an interpretation of the collaborative process from the perspective of one of the foremost authorities on collaborative learning, Kenneth Bruffee. This exploration of collaborative theory takes place within the context of revising an information literacy course at Washington State University.

The topic of collaboration, particularly collaboration between librarians and individual academic faculty, has been widely documented over the years in the professional literature. The nature of these one-on-one collaborations and their evolution over the past few decades has been discussed in numerous journal articles. Now that many library instructional programs are shifting focus from these informal collaborative arrangements to a more formal sharing of information literacy goals with broader academic and non-academic entities, organizations, and bodies, the literature has noted this change as

well. Many authors note that these underlying changes to society's view of the role of information literacy result in the need for librarians to rethink and extend their collaborative skills beyond those they have used in traditional interactions with teaching faculty.

For example, in "Who's Afraid of Partnerships for Information Literacy Initiatives?" Lampert explores the collaborative challenge facing librarians, discussing in some depth the changing environment which requires librarians to strive for more "full partnerships"—to go beyond their normal collaborative successes with faculty in instructional objectives. Lampert notes, "[P]resent reality shows that it is often commonplace to neglect the need for full partnerships and compromise when dealing with the topic of information literacy." Furthermore, Lampert asserts that the manner in which librarians respond to opportunities to work with these new partners will determine the framework around which individuals both inside and outside the academic world view and value information literacy.<sup>1</sup>

Rader builds on this idea, and states that the collaborative effort is especially important because of the growing number of players addressing information literacy. Beyond librarians, individuals and entities within the traditional university setting, outside of it, and even outside the field of education play a growing role in the shaping of both the definition of information literacy, how it is taught, and how it is assessed.<sup>2</sup> In "Information Literacy Accreditation Mandates: What They Mean for Faculty and Librarians," Thompson identifies "new players" outside the university campus who bring their weight to bear in the shaping of information literacy programs: Professional organizations; Foundations; Accreditation programs; Legislative bodies; and Educational associations. Thompson goes on to outline several steps librarians are taking to fit into this new design model. To cultivate collaborative success, he advocates that librarians stress their commitment to academics and the university community, and continue their evolution as curriculum developers and skilled collaborators.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps no team has done more to explore and explain the collaborative process for librarians than Dick Raspa and Dana Ward. In their definitive collection on the theme of library collaboration, The Collaborative Imperative: Librarians and Faculty Working Together in the Information Universe, they gather together essays which critically address collaborative issues related to contemporary librarianship.

Central in many of these articles is the notion that *relationships*, requiring a varied level of time and emotional investment from all players, provide the foundation upon which successful collaboration is built.<sup>4</sup>

What does this “full partnership,” in the words of Lampert or this enriched notion of “relationship” cited by Raspa and Ward encompass beyond our traditional modes of collaboration or cooperation with teaching faculty? Perhaps more importantly, how can we tell if our interactions with others in a more complex environment are developing to deeper and more sustained levels of collaboration with teaching faculty, university administrators, and other members of academic communities? If, as Lampert suggests, the perception and implementation of information literacy programs and initiatives hinge on librarians’ success in expanding their collaborative skills to newer, less predictable partners, then it is incumbent upon us to study and become more comfortable with this process. What benchmarks exist by which we can measure our success? How can one tell when collaboration is happening and when it is successful?

Many of the benchmarks we naturally use to assess the scope and effectiveness of information literacy collaboration emerge from our interactions with others involved in the process – particularly toward the end of the project or after much of the process has concluded. But is it possible to anticipate how successful information literacy collaboration will be before the process begins? Perhaps we cannot always predict the course of these partnerships, though we can identify the qualities of our interactions with potential collaborative partners and read the subtext of our relationships during—and sometimes before—the earliest stages of the collaborative process. The qualities of these interactions indicate the course and depth of collaboration.

Kenneth Bruffee, who extensively researches and writes about collaboration in the field of education, offers the most detailed examination of the collaborative process in the context of student interaction in the composition classroom. His exemplary work on collaboration includes numerous essays and articles, as well as the seminal book [Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence and the Authority of Knowledge](#). Curiously, while most of the literature in library science on collaboration is directly or indirectly derivative of or corresponds to Bruffee’s ideas (e.g., Raspa and Ward’s discussion of

degrees of interaction) it is difficult to find any mention of him. Perhaps this lack of reference reflects the perception that Bruffee's work is not relevant to discussions of professional collaboration because it focuses on collaborative learning. Yet much of Bruffee's work focuses on the subtexts of collaboration—what happens “under the surface” of interactions between players during the collaborative process, the relevance of which extends beyond collaborative learning. Bruffee's work is particularly relevant to this discussion because he outlines and explains the underlying factors that facilitate or prevent successful, effective collaboration. In addition, Bruffee's principles of collaborating are insightful and useful for librarians as they more frequently interact with extra-library partners and programs, an ongoing trend in our present era of information literacy mandates and distance and non-traditional education initiatives.<sup>5</sup> The pressure to share the concept of "information literacy" is a relatively new one for librarians, and because collaboration efforts are more formal and structured, a more formal and structured look at the topic of collaboration in education is necessary.

In this article, we examine the categories of players shaping how information literacy is defined and presented to students at Washington State University. These players are described in terms of the role they play at the university, their impact on information literacy curriculum standards, and their goals for assessing information literacy. This theoretical discussion is framed by the experiences of three librarians who worked collaboratively with these other bodies to revise an information literacy course (General Education 300, “Accessing Information for Research”) for WSU distance students. Finally, we reconsider the collaboration process in light of developments at WSU and analyze elements of that process through the collaborative elements identified by Bruffee.

### **General Education 300 – Overview and Revision Process**

General Education (GenEd) 300, “Accessing Information for Research” is a one credit course which has been taught since 1995 to students enrolled in Washington State University's Distance Degree Program. The course is not required, but regularly sees fifty or more students a semester. Originally, the course content was contained in a series of videotapes and accompanying course book. These materials

presented a set of predetermined “research scenarios” which were based on common topics related to the social sciences. Students worked through several of these various “research scenarios”, as they learned research skills and techniques. For example, students majoring in Criminal Justice could have taken a look at a scenario focused on researching ways the United States government interdicts drug trafficking from foreign countries. As they proceeded through the course, students considered how to apply the weekly lessons to their chosen research scenarios.

Although the content of the course has not changed drastically over time, the advent of web-based databases, and the growth of the Internet in general has required that the course curriculum be updated on a yearly basis. In 1997, the course became totally web-based and centered on a set of eight online modules:

- Lesson One – Course Introduction: Libraries and Modern Research
- Lesson Two – Information Landscape: Growth, Formats, Types and Producers of Information
- Lesson Three – Academic Disciplines: the Sciences, Humanities, and Social Sciences
- Lesson Four – Question Analysis: Research Scenarios
- Lesson Five – Database Structure
- Lesson Six – Database Searching
- Lesson Seven – The Internet: Cultural Aspects and Technical Issues
- Lesson Eight – Evaluation of Information: Relative Objectivity

In the fall of 2002, General Education 300 underwent a substantial revision to bring it closer in line with current pedagogical thinking and to better utilize the technology available to online classes. Additionally, it was necessary to clarify how the course fit into the new mandated “information literacy” requirement for higher education in the state of Washington. The revision project was complex and extended well into the spring of 2003. The desired revisions, in some respects, were sweeping. Most notably, the course was adapted to a new online course space software called “The Bridge”. Built locally by Washington State University’s Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, The Bridge (see Figure 1) offers an easy way of facilitating discussion with students, as well as organizing course objectives and activities, and taking care of the typical “housekeeping” tasks common to all classes.

Additionally, the course’s approach became “project-oriented” instead of “scenario-oriented.” Rather than working with predetermined research scenarios, students now develop their own topic or

research project based on their interests or term paper requirements from their other courses. This tactic was implemented in an effort to enable students to apply more directly the course to their real-life information needs. Students work exclusively with their topic during the semester, as they develop their knowledge of library services, research concepts and skills, and apply the course readings and assignments directly to their topic of choice. Online interaction among the students assists with this goal, as they help each other think through the assignments and offer advice and ideas to each other in threaded discussions. Indeed, The Bridge encourages student-student collaboration and the course requires this collaboration in the form of quality “response posts”.

The formalization of an Evaluation Criteria for the course, and for each of the assignments or “Activities” was another result of the revision of GenEd 300 (see Figure 2). Previous versions of the course contained stated goals and objectives which, while helpful to students, perhaps were not as explicit and detailed as those developed during the collaborative revision process. A formal “Evaluation Criteria,” which clearly outlined performance and grading standards for each required assignment, was a new addition to the course. With the new criteria, students would be better able to understand the requirements of the various assignments, and instructors would have a more solid basis for grading and assigning point values for performance. The development of this Evaluation Criteria also facilitated the reorganization of the course material, which, most notably, resulted in the simplification of the course outline into four, rather than eight, components:

- Activity 1: Information Environments and Needs
- Activity 2: Defining Information Needs
- Activity 3: Searching and Gathering Information
- Activity 4: Citing and Evaluating Information.

### **The Players**

This latest round of GenEd 300 revisions amply illustrate Rader’s observations concerning the increasing number of bodies invested in the idea of information literacy. One of the main impetuses behind the course revision was a bill passed by the Washington state legislature. House Bill 2375, adopted in the year 2000, called for the institutions of higher education within the state to: “... (a) Develop

a definition of information and technology literacy; (b) develop strategies or standards by which to measure the achievement of information and technology literacy; and (c) develop a financial assessment of the cost of implementation.” (The complete text of the bill can be found at this URL: <http://depts.washington.edu/infolitr/HB2375.htm>.) The state mandate was one of the most significant factors in the revision of GenEd 300.

In response to this mandate, during the Fall of 2001, representatives from each of the six four-year institutions within the state of Washington (Central Washington University, Eastern Washington University, the Evergreen State College, University of Washington, Washington State University, and Western Washington University) formed the “Task Force on the Assessment of Information and Technology Literacy,” which identified the Association of College and Research Libraries’ (ACRL) Information Literacy Standards as the primary tool by which information literacy would be measured and assessed in the state of Washington. Because the ACRL standards were recognized by the larger statewide task force as the guiding principles, we looked to document which standards were addressed in the course. Although technically not a “collaborative player” during the revision process, the extent to which the standards framed the interaction between the librarians and their collaborative partners cannot be underestimated. The ACRL standards, in effect, served as the “language” of the librarians involved with the revision project.

Deeply engaged with the interest in the state information literacy mandate, the WSU Libraries’ Instruction Department delegated work on the course among three librarians. The Instruction Department was primarily concerned with explicitly identifying which ACRL Information Literacy Standards were addressed in the course, documenting those standards, and infusing the curriculum with more obvious links and references to the ACRL standards. Another goal of the Instruction Program in examining the course included the idea of more formally identifying the place of the course within the context of the entire Library Instruction Program at WSU, and its role in promoting information literacy.

The WSU Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT), one of our partners in the course, facilitates projects for faculty and instructors centered on improved pedagogical design with an eye



toward incorporating technology and online learning for both distance students and campus-based WSU students. CTLT often conducts workshops and other educational and development activities for the teaching faculty. One tool on which CTLT heavily relies is its “Critical Thinking Rubric.” (The rubric can be found at this URL <http://wsuctproject.ctlt.wsu.edu/ctr.htm> along with links to information concerning the development and implications of the rubric.) On its web site, CTLT states that the rubric “works mainly by demystifying the expectations that faculty have for students” by changing the “environment in classrooms from information retrieval based models to situations in which students can engage with course material and become users of information rather than recipients of it.” The Critical Thinking Rubric served as the model for the development of the revised General Education 300 Evaluation Criteria.

The Distance Degree Program (DDP) at Washington State University facilitates enrollment and administrative support for distance students enrolled in the institution. Undergraduate degrees available to WSU’s distance students include: Business, Social Sciences, Humanities, Criminal Justice, Human Development, Agriculture, and Education. Nearly all courses supported by DDP are asynchronous and most are semester-based. (More information about DDP services and programs is available at <http://distance.wsu.edu/index.asp>.) DDP has traditionally been involved with the revision of courses offered under its auspices – with specific concern for ensuring the courses are set up and structured so that students from a distance can work effectively with the curriculum. During the process of this latest course revision we worked with a representative who was closely tied to both DDP and CTLT.

### **The Experience of Collaboration**

With all the players in place, the stage was set for collaboration. As Bruffee observes, however, “... collaboration in whatever form ... is never unproblematical.”<sup>6</sup> The librarians charged with revising GenEd 300 certainly discovered the truth of Bruffee’s words and determined that the process of fulfilling this charge might have been streamlined if they had started the project with an understanding of a few of his core concepts. Reviewing the many elements of collaboration identified by Bruffee, the following stand out as the most significant for the librarians who worked through the GenEd 300 course revision

process: Assumptions; Authority; Group Composition; and Language.

**Assumptions:** Not all the players mentioned above were involved in the collaborative process from the earliest stages of the project. First, the librarians charged with revising the course met to discuss the proposal and brought her or his set of personal assumptions to the table. These assumptions underwent examination not only by the individual who owned them, but also by the entire group as the issues were discussed. Bruffee describes this examination of assumptions as a “reacculturative process” that enables players to “become members of knowledge communities whose common property is different from the common property of the knowledge communities they already belong to.”<sup>7</sup> As a matter of course, the collaborative process drove this examination. Discussion, debate, misunderstandings, and breakthroughs brought these assumptions to the surface as well as compromise and the resolution of differences. As a result, one librarian in the group who had taught formally in the classroom and had experience in lesson planning brought informed assumptions to the project which were readily accepted as relevant insights into how the project should proceed and provided a focus for the next stage in our collaboration.

However, as we became more deeply involved with our partners outside the library who were more familiar with educational practices within the other contexts of the university (classroom teaching, DDP, etc.), we began to realize that many of those assumptions would need to be abandoned, or at least altered if the collaboration were to be successful. The conversations that ensued to resolve the difference of these assumptions served to build new assumptions between all players in the larger collaborative group. The issue of the wording and organization of the course curriculum, goals, and objectives underwent numerous revisions before all the involved parties were satisfied. In the end, the librarians were able to incorporate the content within the preferred formatting and organization of our partners from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology. We were able to reach a new understanding of shared knowledge, which Bruffee claims is a result of the “conversation that goes on among the members of a community of knowledgeable peers and in the ‘conversation’ of mankind.”<sup>8</sup> In

the end, after much confusion, we finally reached a set of shared assumptions.

Later reflecting upon this process, we realized the writing of objectives for each unit (activity) was a process with many hurdles. Clearly there seemed to be a standard DDP way of writing objectives, or “goals” as they are called in the Bridge, that differed from our background and training. The terms “objective”, “goal”, and “method” all had meanings different than those with which we were familiar. Thus, we recognized that our assumptions about learning objectives derived from our training—how they are expressed and assessed, even what they are—were different from the assumptions about the concept of “objectives” possessed by the DDP staff, who were experts in distance course design and implementation. Yet the assumption that objectives remained a crucial element in the revision of GenEd 300 was shared by all players.

**Authority:** The issue of responsibility for the project became a subject for discussion as we proceeded through the collaborative process. Who made the ultimate decisions as to the wording of the assignments, course material, goals and objectives, and the course presentation? The issue of authority was not only a point of focus between the librarians and our outside collaborative partners, but also among us. In addition, other players within the libraries had an interest in promoting varied approaches. For example, there was confusion about whether the overall unit and objectives of the course would be mapped to the “Big6”, the five ACRL Standards, or some other combination of theoretical constructs. The Big6 offers information seekers a linear set of six steps for addressing research questions.<sup>9</sup> Each approach had its advocate among the librarians.

If we had had an unlimited amount of time to work through these issues, we might have been able to come up with a reasoned philosophy as to why we should choose one set of standards or research construct over the other, or negotiate between all of them and come up with something new. Although the ACRL Standards were the “backbone” of the Information Literacy program, as adopted by WSU and state, some parties involved with the course revision argued that integrating the Big6 model would provide students with an easy method of remembering and applying practices which, while in line

with the ACRL standards, were more accessible to the average undergraduate. In short, this was a question of “packaging.” Time constraints and other issues brought up by our outside partners dictated that we not add an additional layer of theory over the ACRL standards. Most notably, our partners at CTLT pointed out that too closely integrating a theoretical construct into the course curriculum, and introducing the jargon associated with the ACRL standards would do more to confuse the students than facilitate learning. In the end, we mapped the course “goals” to the ACRL standards and kept the Big6 theory in the background.

**Group Composition:** An effective group composition is one of the most fundamental elements identified by Bruffee as necessary to facilitate the collaborative process. Bruffee contends that several elements, including group size, heterogeneity or homogeneity, ethnicity and work phases, have a direct influence on how successful or unsuccessful a collaborative group will be. In general, heterogeneous groups of four or five people collaborating to make decisions are the most effective, with ethnic differences and perceptions of dependence and interdependence (concepts that influence work phases) adding complexity.<sup>10</sup>

According to Bruffee’s findings, then, the librarians might have anticipated the collaborative difficulties.

One librarian (and author of this paper) observed:

During the two-and-a-half month time period I was involved with this project, I participated in approximately 15 meetings. There were five to six people involved in the project and yet the entire group was at only one meeting. We spent a great deal of time at each meeting speculating about what the absent folks were thinking and interpreting their work without their input.

**Language:** The lack of shared language seemed to be a major problem in the collaborative process.

The DDP coordinator had a different point of reference than the librarians, as previously described in respect to the idea of objectives. Similarly, the librarians did not share many experiences or

backgrounds, because we had not worked together extensively before being charged with this project.

We experienced great difficulty in reconciling these differences so that everyone could understand each

other. Even when some progress seemed to be imminent, understandings would break down and the building process needed to be reinitialized. A librarian (and author of this paper) evocatively described language issues within the course space, the Bridge, as follows:

The terminology present in the Bridge created problems. While it seemed clear that a syllabus would probably reside in the “main notebook,” it was confusing to figure out if the syllabus should somehow be incorporated into the “information” and “timeline” sections. In addition, what I believe most people would call the “units” (the basic content components of the class) are called “activities” in the Bridge. This is confusing because an activity in teaching typically refers to a specific event within a particular lesson. The “information” section of each activity is broken down into three parts: description, goals, and evaluative criteria. Given this system, it was difficult to track particular goals with their corresponding evaluative criteria. It was necessary to create a labeling or numbering system.

Bruffee suggests that our confusion may have arisen from a failure of all players to internalize the “language of the conversation” for the purposes of negotiating a consensus.<sup>11</sup> One of the reasons for this failure may have been the inability of the players interacting to translate each other’s language. In the scenario described above, for example, the author uses the phrases—“seemed clear,” “most people,” “in teaching typically,” and “given this system”—that suggests the librarian belongs to a specific social or professional community that possesses ideas and values markedly different from those held by the other players with whom he/she now must negotiate. Bruffee calls collaborative groups that must learn to speak each other’s language “transition communities”, and goes on to evoke the perceptions that may underlie the scenario described above:

[M]embership in a transition community may often be, as reacculturation always is, stressful and uncertain. The conversation of transition-community members is dominated by talk about these stresses and uncertainties of reacculturation. Much of it is in-the-same-boat talk. Members talk about what it was like to be a member of the old community, what it may be like to be a member of the new, unfamiliar community, and what a pain in the neck it is to change: nostalgia, anxious anticipation, and complaint.<sup>12</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Despite the collaborative setbacks, we fulfilled our charge and offered a revised version of GenEd 300 in the fall of 2002. We also learned valuable lessons about the collaborative process. Namely, the

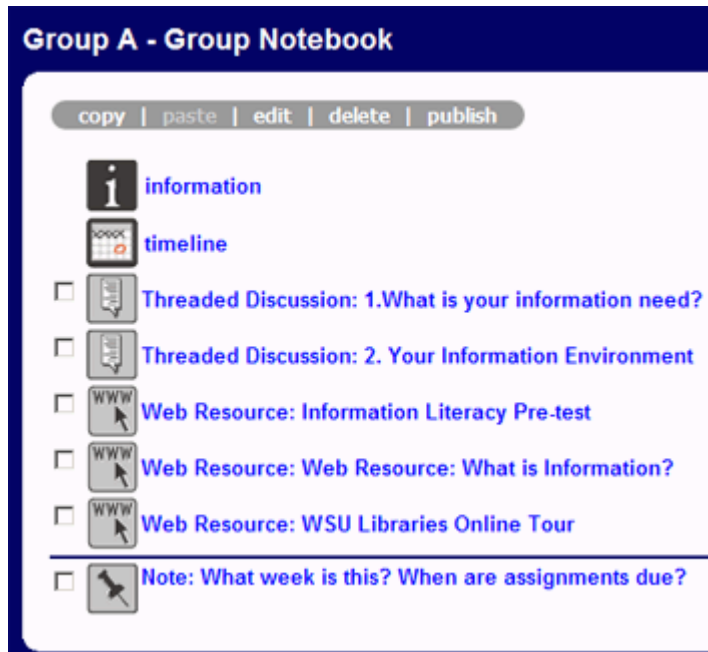
collaborative process can be uncomfortable and confusing, the ultimate outcome unclear while underway. However, if the collaboration is successful, constructive synergy develops, and the goals of all players are reasonably met. Issues and conflicts are reconciled, and the outcomes are stable and enduring. In addition, collaboration is a recursive process that requires time and planning. We were not satisfied with our revision of the course until much later, and we continue to improve the course with an eye toward recognizing new partners for collaboration as we proceed. Through this ongoing process, we have become more confident and comfortable collaborating with a changing roster of players. We have also had the chance to apply Bruffee's insights in ways that significantly improve the quality of our collaborations because we are more aware of our assumptions, how group composition influences collaboration, and the need to describe goals in a language understood by all collaborative players.

Finally, Bruffee speaks powerfully to librarians who find themselves charged with formally sharing information literacy concepts to a new and ever widening cast of players and partners in the collaborative process. His research into collaborative learning resonates in current information literacy contexts because it provides insights into how librarians can facilitate and anticipate successful collaboration in increasingly dynamic instructional environments. In the recent past, library user education was a mainly isolated component of university teaching. It supplemented what occurred in the classroom, and librarians held many of the same assumptions as their teaching peers. Now, information literacy is viewed as a unique set of skills and cognitive abilities that co-exists with and is as relevant as other learning imperatives in contemporary higher education. By following Rader's advice to stress their academic commitment to the university community, continuing the evolution as active partners in curriculum development, and developing skills as valued collaborators, librarians can begin to translate the relevance of information literacy not only within academics, but to society at large, and open the door to creative, enduring, and productive collaboration in the process.

## Notes and References

1. Lynn D. Lampert, "Who's Afraid of Partnerships for Information Literacy Initiatives? Working Together to Empower Learners," *College and Research Libraries News* 64 (April 2003): 246-248, 253.
2. This fact is reflected in the literature of library science very aptly documented by Rader (p.1), who notes that in the year 2002 alone, 300 professional publications dealt with the topic. Hannelore B. Rader, "Information Literacy 1973-2002: A Selected Literature Review," *Library Trends* 51 (Fall 2002): 242-59.
3. Gary B. Thompson, "Information Literacy Accreditation Mandates: What They Mean for Faculty and Librarians," *Library Trends* 51 (Fall 2002): 218-41.
4. Dick Raspa & Dane Ward, "Listening for Collaboration: Faculty and Librarians Working Together," in *The Collaborative Imperative: Librarians and Faculty Working Together in the Information Universe*, edited by Dick Raspa & Dane Ward (Chicago: American Library Association, 2000), pp. 1-18.
5. Kenneth Bruffee, *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1993).
6. Ibid., p. 26.
7. Ibid., p. 3.
8. Ibid., p. 130.
9. The information literacy model developed by Mike Eisenberg and Bob Berkowitz (<http://www.big6.com/>). The ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education were created by the ACRL Standards Committee (<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.htm>).
10. Bruffee, "Collaborative Learning," pp. 32-34.
11. Ibid., pp. 47-48.
12. Ibid., pp. 75-77.

**Figure 1 – Screen Shot of The Bridge**





**Figure 2 – Screen Shot of “Goals” from The Bridge**

**Goals** [\[edit\]](#)

**Goals for Activity 3**

1) Refine topic and identify a variety of potential sources of information to support your research topic.

2) Utilize services available to you to request and receive information related to your project.

**Evaluation Criteria** [\[edit\]](#)

**Evaluation Criteria - Activity 3**

THREADED DISCUSSION 1: Narrow Topic/Ready to Research

[Articulate your need for information.](#)

40 points: Identifies at least 3 sub-issues for the topic of interest. Clearly articulates reasons for seeking information on these sub-issues, including how they contribute to or support the research topic.

25 points: Identifies at least 3 sub-issues for the topic of interest. Unclearly articulates these sub-issues and weakly outlines reasons for seeking information.

15 points: Identifies sub-issues of interest or potential research value only with guidance and prompting from instructor and provides little reason for seeking information on the topic.