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Librarians' sport of choice: Teaching information literacy through fantasy football

*This article by **Paul Waelchli** first appeared in the College & Research Libraries News (January 2008) and is reprinted here by kind permission.*

Waelchli's work on innovative approaches to information literacy has continued at St. Norbert College, where he is now information literacy librarian. He has introduced strategies from successful video gaming into the classroom. He serves on an expert panel on gaming and literacy for the American Library Association.

Librarians want students to effectively identify and evaluate information and make decisions based upon what they discover. These are just some of the skills that an information literate student successfully applies. These are the same skills that more than 19 million people use on a daily or weekly basis playing fantasy sports.

As the NFL football season comes to a close, millions of Americans, some as young as 12 years old, have spent the past few months connected to information literacy. They just don't know it.

The challenge for librarians is to connect fantasy sports skills to information literacy and create building blocks for academic applications of the same concepts.
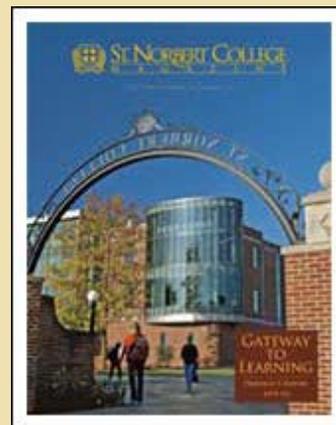
One library, University of Dubuque, did just this by teaching fantasy football research to incoming student athletes. Through the lesson, students engaged in discussions of creditability, validity, timeliness, and search strategies to find and evaluate fantasy football information.

The assessment of these instruction sessions showed incoming students successfully identifying evaluation criteria and reporting positive changes in how they viewed research and libraries.

What are fantasy sports?
Today millions of fantasy sports fans run leagues for every sport imaginable, from major league sports like football, baseball, and basketball to smaller sports like bowling, skiing, and sumo wrestling.

All require players to practice strong research, critical thinking, and communication skills in order to succeed. Regardless of the sport, every

fantasy league requires research on a large number of statistics, trends, and match-ups.

A fantasy football league using a traditional scoring system keeps track of passes, completions, passing yards, sacks, interceptions, rushes, rushing yards, fumbles, receptions, receiving yards, touchdowns, two-point conversions, defensive hurries, kick return yards, punt return yards, field goals, and extra points.

In addition to game and season statistics, a fantasy sports player needs to consider offensive and defensive position match-ups, injuries, rivalries, and weather when preparing for a game.

This research occurs months before any official season starts as players prepare for league drafts that allocate players to fantasy teams. The research is continued throughout the season to determine starting line-ups, roster moves, trades between players, and free agency acquisitions.

Fantasy players devote hours every week to information literacy and yet very little is written about these skills or done to use these skills in education. The majority of fantasy sports players fall within the demographic of college students.

A search through the professional literature finds no relevant literature, even a Google search turns up nothing more than a few librarians talking about their personal passions for fantasy sports. This connection has rarely been explored until now. Fantasy sports can be the building blocks of many students' successful use and integration of information literacy in their lives.

Fantasy football = information literacy?

The high level of player investment creates educational opportunities for librarians. According to a 2006 study by the Fantasy Sports Association, a large number of college students play fantasy sports. Librarians can build upon the information literacy skills that students are already unconsciously using through fantasy sports play.

The successful fantasy sport player consistently applies four of the five ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards (2000). Weekly, and often daily, fantasy sport players meet the following ACRL Indicators:

• *Standard 1:* "The information literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed."

o *Indicator 1:* "The information literate student defines and articulates the need for information literacy."

– As players determine the strengths and weaknesses of their team, they need to decide what information is needed to make a decision. Players need to know what positions are required and what strong roster match-ups exist. Players explore general information sources, like draft guides, in order to gain a specific focus relative to their needs.

o *Indicator 2:* "The information literate student identifies a variety of types and formats of potential sources for information."

– Fantasy players identify a variety of sources, including printed guides, web sites, interviews, peer conversations, forum discussions for information, etc. Players then construct information from the raw data (game statistics) available from the primary sources.

o *Indicator 3:* "The information literate student considers the costs and benefits of acquiring the needed information."

– Players determine what information is available for free and what is fee-based, then weigh the potential benefits of each source before deciding what information to access.

• *Standard 2:* "The information literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently."

o *Indicator 2:* "The information literate student constructs and implements effectively designed search strategies."

– In order to find the information desired, players identify what terms (positions, players, keywords) to search for. Players' search process involves a variety of retrieval methods to find the required material.

o *Indicator 3:* "The information literate student retrieves information online or in person using a variety of methods."

– Fantasy players use chats, forums, call-in shows, interviews, e-mail, etc. to gain primary information from sports writers and other experts.

o *Indicator 4:* "The information literate student refines the search strategy if necessary."

– Players assess the quality of the information they obtained and determine if they have enough to make roster, player, and draft decisions. During this process, players identify gaps in their information and repeat any searches in order to make an informed decision.

o *Indicator 5:* "The information literate student extracts, records, and manages the information and its sources."

– Many players create personalized organizational systems, like spreadsheets and draft cheat sheets, to organize their information. Players track source citations in order to come back to the information and analysis during the season.

• *Standard 3:* "The information literate student summarizes the main ideas to be extracted from the information gathered."

o *Indicator 1:* "The information literate student summarizes the main ideas to be extracted from the information gathered."

– Fantasy players read source content and select the key data that applies to need (roster, team, match-up).

o *Indicator 2:* "The information literate student articulates and applies initial criteria for evaluating both the information and its sources."

– Players determine the reliability, bias, validity, authority, and timeliness of sources in order to make roster and drafting decisions. It is important for fantasy players to recognize the potential prejudice in fan-based sites, compared to professional sites, in order to make informed decisions.

o *Indicator 3:* "The information literate student synthesizes main ideas to construct new concepts."

– Team owners recognize trends and relationships in statistics (primary sources) and commentaries (secondary sources) in order to make roster

decisions. Players often use spreadsheets and tables to construct comparison charts and rankings for drafting a roster.

o *Indicator 4:* "The information literate student compares new knowledge with prior knowledge to determine the value added, contradictions, or other unique characteristics of the information."

– Based on the knowledge the player gained, he or she decides if there is enough information to make a roster decision. As the season progresses, the players integrate new and changing information with previous knowledge to make timely decisions about their rosters and teams.

o *Indicator 5:* "The information literate student determines whether the new knowledge has an impact on the individuals' value system and takes steps to reconcile the differences."

– Players encounter commentaries and information that contradict their own beliefs about teams/athletes and their value. Based on their evaluation of this information, the player determines how and if the information will impact his or her roster.

o *Indicator 6:* "The information literate student validates understanding and interpretation of the information through discourse with other individuals, subject-area experts, and/or practitioners."

– Players engage in personal and electronic discussions about players and roster decisions to gain additional knowledge about their choices. Throughout any fantasy sports season, players can seek expert opinions through weekly shows and chats conducted by paid professionals like writers for ESPN, and CBS.

• *Standard 4:* "The information literate student, individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose."

o *Indicator 1:* "The information literate student applies new and prior information to the planning and creation of a particular product or performance."

– Players articulate the knowledge gained in the drafting process and weekly roster moves every time a new week begins.

o *Indicator 2:* "The information literate student revises the development process for the product or performance."

– After every match-up, players reflect on the process and the results (win/loss) to determine future strategies.

Librarians have the ability to connect these existing skills to academic content in order to help students become successful information literate students.

Fantasy football research unit
Librarians at the University of Dubuque saw the potential in fantasy football as a way to reach incoming students by connecting their fantasy sports skills to information literacy.

The library traditionally was involved in student orientation, providing tours or a limited introduction to library resources.

Since 2005, the library has conducted a technology and library orientation for incoming student athletes when they arrive on campus prior to the start

of the semester.

In the summer of 2006, the traditional library orientation (introducing space, resources, and policies) was dropped in an effort to take advantage of the opportunity to connect these students to information literacy using what they already know: football.

The initial pilot of the revamped orientation was developed based upon the connection between fantasy football and information literacy.

Paul Waelchli, assistant director, and Ryan Banchak, a senior business student, collaborated to create the lesson. Information literacy skills were built into the lesson and the parallels were intended to show the student athletes that they already posses many of the necessary information literacy skills to succeed in college.

Unfortunately, scheduling conflicts in August 2006 prevented the lesson from being implemented.

Waelchli returned to the idea of connecting students to information literacy through fantasy football in the summer of 2007. A new research question was developed to reflect a current controversy in fantasy football that would create a variety of viewpoints: Who should be the third running back selected in fantasy football drafts?

Implementation and success
The University of Dubuque librarians conducted two football orientation sessions in August 2007, with a total of 71 students.

The librarians who taught the sessions had varying degrees of experience with fantasy football. One librarian had no previous experience and emphasized that the success was more about research than about football.

The sessions went extremely well; the students were engaged in discussions and left with positive impressions of the topic and the library.

When the students were surveyed at the beginning of class, only a small percentage had previously played fantasy football. As a result of this limited experience, the students were initially skeptical. By starting out with a discussion of the video game "Madden," the class was drawn into active participation, sharing their personal reflections.

The librarians transitioned this discussion into the research question "Who will be the top running back in the 2007-08 season?" The students engaged with each other and the librarians, even shouting out answers.

This two-minute drill activity resulted in a wide variety of potential sources and created opportunities to touch on information literacy topics. The student athletes discussed the sources and argued over their conclusions.

These discussions could have taken place in any traditional information literacy class and were the true intent of the session itself. The students seemed surprised at the similarities to academic concepts.

At the end of the sessions, the students completed a short evaluation that assessed both criteria for evaluating sources and library perceptions.

More than 80 percent of students were able to describe two of three appropriate source evaluation criteria and more than 60 percent provided all three.

The students were asked to describe what research meant to them before the session and responses included, "headaches," "work I didn't want to do," and "school work."

The responses to the same question after the sessions showed a dramatic change in perspective and included, "making sure one is getting accurate information," "comparing and knowing where I'm getting my information," and "fun work."

While the "fun work" might be a stretch when homework is involved, it does show a change in perspective and awareness about research. One student first said that before the session, research meant "school," but afterwards he responded, "everything."

In addition to the change in perception of research, the student athletes were asked about their perception of librarians.

Prior to the fantasy football orientation session, the students had a 66 percent "very positive" impression of librarians. After the session, the students' "very positive" perception was more than 90 percent.

While these results are not scientific and large enough to generalize, they show a distinct change in students' impressions of libraries and their own abilities. One student stated, "I made the fantasy football connection to looking up school stuff quick, it worked well."

The librarians witnessed positive results during the sessions, and the student evaluations confirmed those perceptions. The fantasy football sessions created the building blocks for future information literacy successes by bridging the students' existing experiences to the skills required for college.

The positive impressions the students reported show an openness to future research, a confidence in their own abilities, and the development of a positive relationship with the librarians.

Any one of these outcomes would be considered a success for a traditional orientation, and combined they demonstrate the potential to create a meaningful connection between fantasy sports and information literacy to enable student success.

Notes
1. "Fantasy Sports Trade Association." 2007, www.fsta.org/index.php (accessed Oct. 13, 2007).
2. "Fantasy Sports Association Resources." 2006, www.fantasysportsassociation.org/resources (accessed Nov. 2, 2007).

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