

# **Statement of Interest and Intent to join the Critical & Creative Thinking Graduate Program at University of Massachusetts Boston**

**December 1, 2003**

I am a community college librarian with teaching responsibilities. My areas of interest within academic librarianship are in systems and bibliographic instruction; in other words, part-‘techie’ and part-educator!

I was a librarian in a TAFE (Technical and Further Education) college library in Australia in 1994 when the Internet first began to impact all aspects of work in libraries. Bibliographic instruction (“library skills”) sessions in those days essentially consisted of holding up a reference book and discussing how to use it and other paper-based resources. We were just beginning to demonstrate one or two “new” CD-ROM products that had green text on black screen and a command-based interface. The search mechanism employed was clunky and time-consuming, but the students loved it!

Today, by contrast, there are a vast number of online databases, many of which have different search interfaces that must be learned before the higher order skills of applying search strategies can even be attempted. The variety of data – including traditional sources such as peer-reviewed journals, newspaper articles, books, subject encyclopedias, and reference books, to more recent forms of information available on the Web such as personal, corporate, or organizational Web sites, white papers, working papers, databases, personal narratives, and multimedia – represents a quantum leap in access to knowledge and information. During the past 10 years, I have seen first-hand the advantages and disadvantages with which such an array of resources presents our students. In the era when print was the only option, students could easily master the basic research steps of consulting an index to journal articles or following up on sources cited in a bibliography. Now, the sheer volume of unfiltered information means that the student faces a daunting task in trying to sift through and select the best and most relevant resources.

I became interested in the relationship between critical thinking and bibliographic instruction when it appeared to me that to teach students which database to use or how to

structure a citation is putting the metaphorical cart before the horse. Students need to be able to analyze the kinds of information that are required for an assignment; to effectively formulate a search strategy by identifying concepts and keywords that will lead them to the desired information; to choose relevant and appropriate articles from a list of results; to understand and critique the information found in various sources, and to be able to synthesize and integrate this information in their essays or research papers. Many of these skills have been identified in standards for information literacy. My interest lies in how librarians can teach students to use critical thinking while conducting research for their essays and papers. I am seeking admission to the Graduate Certificate in Critical and Creative Thinking Program because I believe that it will give me the knowledge and tools to be able to investigate the ways in which critical thinking can become an integral part of conducting library research.

Critical Thinking is part of the “thinking skills” movement that has been in existence in some form for the past four decades. In the context of ‘seeking and evaluating information’ that librarians use, some of the skills used are logic-based, such as identifying cause-and-effect relationships, distinguishing factual claims from value judgments, identifying points of view, detecting bias, judging the strength of an argument, determining the credibility of a source, problem solving, and decision making. <sup>1</sup> More recent proponents of critical thinking have broadened the concept to incorporate what might be called “intellectual character traits” which may include attitudes, motivations, emotions, and other elements typically left out of ability-centered accounts of good thinking. <sup>2</sup>

In my work as a teaching librarian, I have had many opportunities to observe the way that students respond to the challenges posed by their assignments. Before the formal research process can even begin, a critical reading and understanding of the assignment is necessary; however, students’ understanding of the assignment can depend on many things: the clarity with which it is written; the students’ perceptions of how the assignment relates to what has been discussed in class or the textbook readings; and/or the students’ understanding of the subject matter and how it is categorized in published literature. Once these hurdles are crossed and the actual search for information starts, the student needs to think critically in order to decide where to begin searching; to be able to devise search strategies appropriate for the topic; to read, understand and evaluate (not merely print out!) the content of the information source. Too often I

have seen students grab the first few articles or Web sites they find without subjecting the material to even a rudimentary examination of the author's or site's factuality, motivations, or biases.

Critical thinking goes beyond mere evaluation of Web sites, however. It is an approach to library research that is similar in spirit to the "Writing Across the Curriculum" initiative. This approach advocates teaching writing as a process rather than a set of isolated skills. In an article in Reference Services Review this year, James K. Elmborg says that:

"There is a similar danger in current information literacy practice. There is a "grammar" of information, and many librarians devote precious instructional time to teaching subject-searching versus keyword-searching; Boolean connectors; complex nested search statements or the intricacies of the Library of Congress Classification System. Like sentence-level skills, these are isolated skills that separate research from the making of meaning. That is not to say that these concepts are not important, but rather that, as ways of encouraging students to see the importance of the library in the development of their ideas, they are not compelling or even interesting." <sup>3</sup>

I believe that if we as librarians promote critical thinking as a process rather than as a set of discrete skills, our bibliographic instruction sessions will be enlivened and energized. Students may come to understand and appreciate what librarians have known all along: that research is exciting; that research matters. That when conducting research, they have a responsibility to examine their own assumptions and opinions as well as those propounded in published sources, by their friends, and in the media.

Notwithstanding the quote above, I am guilty, as a teaching librarian, of having used just such an "atomistic" approach. For too long, the methods used to teach library research have emphasized format and product over process. I can see now that this emphasis has contributed to students coming to the library with a "grocery shopping" mentality: "I'll need four journal articles, two peer-reviewed, and a couple of books; maybe pick up some statistics and three to five Web sites – and can I have those wrapped in MLA format?"

I want to change the way I approach the teaching of research skills. I want to show the students that the process is not linear – there are many dead ends, shortcuts, and wrong turnings; there are opportunities to refine or re-focus the original topic. Sonia Bodi writes about this when she describes a study published by Carol Kuhlthau in 1993:

“Our goal is to show students a systematic way of finding relevant sources of value; instead, we set them up for frustration because searching does not progress this smoothly, and one size does not fit all. Kuhlthau further argue[s] that because librarians do not address the complexity of the learning process, librarians often mislead students into thinking information seeking is **merely identifying sources and not interpreting them** [emphasis mine].<sup>4</sup>

When I became interested in critical thinking as it applies to library research, I looked at a number of institutions and programs throughout California and the United States that offer critical thinking courses. I found that the Critical and Creative Thinking Certificate Program at UMass Boston is one of a kind. I liked that it is aimed at working educators and professionals and offers the kind of interdisciplinary emphasis that I feel is vital. I believe that the CCT Program is structured to help me gain the necessary knowledge and techniques so that ultimately I can design a course, a tutorial, or individual workshops that embody the latest findings on critical thinking. Indeed, as I progress through the courses, it should become clearer to me what kind of product will work best for the students I teach.

The mission statement in the CCT handbook aptly summarizes my desire to enter the Program: “The Critical and Creative Thinking (CCT) program at the University of Massachusetts Boston provides its students with knowledge, tools, experience, and support so they can become constructive, reflective agents of change in education, work, social movements, science and creative arts.” I would welcome the opportunity to become such an agent of change!

Jan R. Coe

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## References

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4. Bodi, S. (2002). "How Do We Bridge the Gap between What We Teach and What They Do? Some Thoughts on the Place of Questions in the Process of Research." Journal of Academic Librarianship. 28(3):109-114.