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Information Literacy, Media Literacy, and the Attitudinal Positioning of WPAs Combatting Mis/disinformation

Joshua Nieubuurt

Abstract

Informational flow is paramount to the success of interpersonal communication as well as macro communication that allows for people to engage with the overarching sociopolitical apparatuses as a citizen. Chief among hindering informational flow are the obstacles of mis/disinformation. This research project is an exploratory study into the attitudinal positioning of a wide range of WPAs across R1 research institutions. Results found that WPA's perceptions are positively aligned in agreement with the value of IL and ML. Furthermore, WPAs are utilizing IL and ML within their programs both knowingly and serendipitously. Despite the positive attitudes toward interdisciplinary approaches to combating mis/disinformation, all participants noted barriers to implementing IL and ML in a more focused manner. This paper proposes that writing program administrators may be well situated within institutional networks to aid in combating mis/disinformation. Potential avenues of action include leveraging their positions within universities to focus more on multiple literacies (Information and media literacy as well as others) across and/or within disciplines. Furthermore, WPAs may be able to act as a hub to begin conversations and actions that invite the greater community to participate in multiple-literacy based training practices.

Keywords: (1) Writing Program Administration, (2) Mis/disinformation, (3) Information literacy, (4) Media literacy

Introduction

Life in the 21st century revolves around the flow of information. Great networks of information empower decisions on both macro and micro levels: from the policies of a country to the interpersonal decisions made by individuals. One of the great threats to information flow is the plague of mis/disinformation. UNESCO (2020) has spearheaded an attempt to stifle the, "misuses of information," noting such as a threat to the global informational ecosystem. Other organizations and researchers across social spheres (including law, public health, politics, and science) have also highlighted the rise and risk of mis/disinformation (American Bar Association, 2022; Willie, 2021; Jerit and Zhao, 2020; Kuklinski, 2000; Lutrell, et al., 2015; West and Bergstrom, 2021; Bessi et al., 2015). One often cited remedy for the plague of mis/disinformation is through various forms of information literacy (IL) and Media Literacy (ML) (UNESCO, 2020; Rader, 2002; O Connor et al., 2011; West and Bergstrom, 2021). Although this approach is widely considered to be one of the better tactics, little to no research

has been conducted considering the attitudinal stances of writing program administrators (WPAs) at the university and college level.

Due to the high volume of students reached, an increasing focus on interdisciplinary cooperation, and their ability to act as a hub within an institutional network, writing programs (and their respective WPAs) are well situated to aid in tackling this important issue. This research project is an exploratory study into the attitudinal positioning of a wide range of WPAs across R1 research institutions. Results found that WPA's perceptions are positively aligned in agreement with the value of IL and ML. Furthermore, WPAs are utilizing IL and ML within their programs both knowingly and serendipitously. Despite the positive attitudes toward interdisciplinary approaches to combating mis/disinformation, all participants noted barriers to implementing IL and ML in a more focused manner.

Literature Review

The following sections give a brief overview of some of the more pertinent literature relating to this study. It is not an exhaustive look, but it does encompass enough background information for non-experts to join into this important conversation. Furthermore, it should add “shading” to the more complex issues facing both scholars and laypeople in relation to IL and ML and the battle against mis/disinformation.

Media Literacy

In a media-saturated atmosphere the ability to sift through, critically examine, and exercise one’s individual ability to consume, create, and share media is an increasingly valuable skill set in the 21st century. Definitions of media literacy abound. Many focus on the individual’s ability to confidently critically analyze media in order to make critically informed decisions and to be able to engage in competent informed citizenship (Aufderheide, 1992; Center for Media Literacy, 2022; European Commission, 2007; Mackey and Jacobson, 2011). Aufderheide (1992) notes the goals of ML include, “informed citizenship, aesthetic appreciation and expression, social advocacy, self-esteem, and consumer competence” (p.9) In other words, the various participant driven assemblages of media are akin to specialized lenses in which one views the unique social ecosystems in which one engages with and within (Jones-Jang et al., 2021). Information literacy has a more hands-on approach, seeing information as a tool to be utilized rather than a lens to view the world through (Koltay, 2011; Livingstone et al., 2008).

Information Literacy

Information Literacy (IL) has a decidedly longer academic history than that of media literacy (ML). Many of its initial definitions were forged prior to the phenomenal rise in personal Internet usage (Mackay and Jacobsen, 2011). In

1989 the American Library Association wrote, “To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (ALA, 2019). The locus of this conception of IL lingers on into the 21st century. With that noted, IL does take on a slightly different form depending upon which discipline is defining it (NCSU, 2022). Late in the 20th century Snaveley and Cooper (1997) noted the uptick in interdisciplinary interest in IL and called for a more cohesive definition to address this trend. This debate on the “correct” or most holistic definition continues to be hotly debated across disciplines. Jones-Jang et al. (2021), referencing the work of Livingstone et al. (2008), describe IL as a kind of user-friendly tool in which to “act upon the world.” In short, IL is the harnessing of information technologies in order for a person, or people, to utilize to make pragmatic and informed decisions.

IL and ML meets Interdisciplinary Approaches to WPA Work

Historically, IL and ML have been deemed as part of the Library and Information Science disciplines (Koelling and Russo, 2021; Mackey and Jacobson, 2011; Rader, 2002). Furthermore, although there have been calls for IL and ML to begin in primary and secondary education, higher education has generally been the locus of IL and ML instruction research (Rader, 2002). Despite the research focusing on higher education, American students are generally introduced to IL and ML beginning in the early years of their primary education (O’Connor et al., 2011; Rader, 2002; Mackey and Jacobson, 2011). Due to the pervasiveness of mis/disinformation, an interdisciplinary strategy appears to be a sound approach agreed upon across disciplines. Although widely agreed upon, the praxis of accomplishing this task is where things become opaque. This paper contends that WPAs with a philosophical

disposition to Writing Across the Disciplines (WAC) are best situated to enact change within an institution's network.

In institutions of higher education IL and ML have been historically tag teamed by librarians and members of the English faculty, generally finding methods in which students could incorporate these skills into their coursework (for example, learning sound research practices for course research papers) (Koelling and Russo, 2021). Others have called for even greater increases of literacy across information networks including the following areas: metaliteracy (including emerging technologies literacy) (Mackey and Jacobson, 2011), scientific writing literacy (West and Bergstrom, 2021), critical information literacy (Torrell, 2020), and mobile information literacy (Pinto et al., 2020). While the literacy fields continue to expand into domains outside of library and information sciences, the modern WPA may be advantageously situated within the institutional network to aid in cross-pollination of these concepts through the pedagogical approaches found in WAC programs.

As of 2008, 51% of institutions of higher education had a WAC program in place (Thaiss and Porter, 2010, p.537). Such positionality could potentially aid in an increase in IL and ML across first year writing programs, aiding in increasing student literacies and preparing them for the mis/disinformation they will encounter in academia and in the “real-world.” This follows in line with the orthodox praxis in many institutions, with the exception of utilizing WPAs in contrast to librarians.

Rader(2002) noted the central role of librarians and their quest to integrate the teaching of information skills modules into the curriculum" (p. 243). Comparable actions could be taken by WAC focused WPAs aiding in constructing curriculum in their writing programs, building informational-bridges across disciplines, and aiding in reaching out to the greater community of people associated

with universities. As noted by Flammia (2015), there is already a lot of overlap between disciplines and utilized literacies when WAC programs are employed within an institution. Critical discussions on how to leverage this overlap with IL and ML in mind could aid in increasing their potency and institutional value of writing programs.

Misinformation and Disinformation

Misinformation and disinformation are often conflated terms. To simplify this, it is important to consider the intent of their creation and dissemination. To begin with, misinformation and disinformation are themselves often contested terms in relation to their formal definitions (Kavanagh and Rich, 2018). Looking at various dictionary definitions the conflation apparent in common usage is also represented in formalized definitions of the words.

For instance, Dictionary.com (2022) defines misinformation as, “False information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead.” Merriam-Webster (2022) cites a simplified definition defining it as, “incorrect or misleading information.” Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018), in their work *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, define it as “the unintentional spread of false beliefs” (p. 6). For our purposes these definitions will be simplified into the following definition: The consumption and dispersal of false information and/or beliefs that do not have malevolent intent. In short, misinformation generally stems from “good” or neutral, yet misinformed, intentions. Disinformation on the other hand has a much more malevolent purpose.

Disinformation is defined by Dictionary.com (2022) as, “deliberately misleading or biased information; manipulated narrative or facts; propaganda.” Merriam-Webster (2022) cites it as “false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order

to influence public opinion or obscure the truth" Returning again to Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018), they define it as "a subset of propaganda that includes dissemination of explicitly false or misleading information. The falsehood may be the origin of the information..." (loc 698). In short, disinformation is intentionally fabricated information that is disseminated to persuade people of some falsehood.

Methodology

This study aims to take an exploratory look into the attitudes of a diverse range of writing programs and associated disciplines through the eyes of administrators who operate them. Furthermore, it seeks to display perceptions of institutional awareness and action in relation to information and media literacy relating to mis/disinformation. Participants ranged from chairs of English composition programs, writing center directors, and others within the umbrella term of Writing Program Administrator. Initially 152 WPAs consisting of at least one WPA from across each R1 institution were contacted to participate in the study. Of those contacted 21 participated in the study from 20 different institutions (13.8%).

Participants were solicited via email with a survey embedded within the email or an email with an attached link (dependent upon the institutional email-related safeguards in place at each respective university). All identifying information, of both the institution and the participants, was anonymized after data collection in order to protect both parties.

The survey consisted of four primary questions revolving around their perceptions of IL and ML in relation to mis/disinformation and their programs' and institutional attitudes toward them (see appendix I for questions). Three of the questions were framed along a Likert-like scale to gauge participants' perceptions of IL and ML at their respective institutions and within

their writing programs. A Likert-like scale was chosen to, as Jebb et al. (2012) writes, "provide a convenient way to measure unobservable constructs" (n.p.). In short, it displays attitudinal perceptions that may be invisible without a ranged inquiry apparatus. The final question on the survey was a semi-open-ended question about the obstacles WPAs and institutions may face in relation to interdisciplinary approaches to IL and ML in relation to mis/disinformation. This final question was informed by the current literature and gave the option for participants to include their own insights if an obstacle was not listed.

Definitions of media literacy, information literacy, mis/disinformation, as well as interdisciplinary were purposefully withheld in order not to limit the frames of participant responses (see Tannen, 1993; Watanabe, 1993). This approach is in line with arguments set forth by Sullivan and Porter (1993) who note, "defining a concept is a limiting activity; trying to establish a common meaning can have the effect of excluding enriching diversities" (p. 391). As an exploratory research endeavor, a wide-net approach to terminology and participants was utilized as a method to increase participation and awareness of the subject matter. In short, any and all conceptions of the specialized terms were acceptable and participants' attitudinal perceptions were their own and not guided by the researcher's linguistic approach. As an exploratory research endeavor this wide-net approach was copacetic, though such tactics did limit the quantity and quality of data obtained.

Further research into WPAs and their role(s) in IL and ML would benefit from taking a more direct approach in relation to terminology and participant targeting. Furthermore, more specific criteria for WPAs (in relation to what kind(s) of writing programs they head and institutions they dwell within) could also shine a light on individual writing program genres.

Results

Through this exploratory research endeavor, despite the small sample size (N=20/21), trends did emerge among the data (See Appendix II for result graphs). One of the most important discoveries is the positive value of IL and ML in both institutions and individual writing programs. Participants' perceptions of their institutions and writing programs offers a first step into considering how best to frame and utilize modern theories of IL and ML in interdisciplinary ways. WPAs, being located among important hubs within an institution, have access to a wide range of interpersonal and institutional information. Most perceive their respective institutions and writing programs are tackling mis/disinformation through interdisciplinary approaches to IL and ML; either directly or serendipitously. Furthermore, common obstacles were observed among participants in relation to fostering further growth in this domain.

The initial question focused on perceptions of institutional value in relation to finding an interdisciplinary approach to IL and ML. 81% (n=17) noted high attitudinal value, displaying that participants perceive their institution to find such praxis valuable. In contrast 4.8% (N=1) perceived that their institution did not find it valuable. This could correlate to the decades worth of IL and ML programs in institutions of higher learning (Rader, 2002). A similar trend was uncovered in relation to perceptions of real-world praxis relating to interdisciplinarity and combatting mis/disinformation.

Among participants 66.7% (N=14) perceive that their institution takes an interdisciplinary approach to utilizing ML and IL to combat mis/disinformation. Similarly, 4.8% (N=1) perceive that their institution does not take an interdisciplinary approach. 28.6% (N=6) of participants gave a "neutral" response. In relation to the third question, participants' perceptions of their own

writing programs' interdisciplinarity within first year composition/writing classes a positive trend remained (N=20, one participant refrained from answering this question).

70% (N=14) of participants noted positive perceptions of interdisciplinary approaches to IL and ML. With 20% (N=4) noting that their programs directly utilize an interdisciplinary praxis in relation to IL and ML. 50% (N=10) noted that their program does utilize an interdisciplinary approach, but unintentionally. 10% (N=2) did not perceive their institutions to have an interdisciplinary approach.

The final question on the survey relates to obstacles writing programs face when attempting an interdisciplinary approach to IL and ML in the mis/disinformation realm. The most prevalent obstacles included faculty engagement 55% (N=11), academic load(s) of instructors 50%(N=10), personnel shortages and student engagement 25 %(N=5). Participants were also given the opportunity to voice their own unique obstacles faced. Several participants voiced that IL and ML were within the realms of other programs, were addressed after FYC courses in upper-division courses or as special topics, and that IL and ML is something that just has not been fully explored by their writing program (See appendix III for all individual responses).

In short, the data does display a positive perception of the value of IL and ML in relation to mis/disinformation. Also, there is some effort (targeted or serendipitous) addressing the plague of mis/disinformation. Furthermore, many WPAs are facing similar challenges in relation to fostering interdisciplinary approaches. This is a valuable first step helping to uncover institutional perceptions and lays down the groundwork for common understanding of where issues hindering interdisciplinary approaches may exist.

Discussion

Looking at the results of this exploratory study a promising notion appears. There is an agreed upon perception relating to the value of IL and ML particularly in relation to combatting mis/disinformation in both institutions and individual writing programs. Furthermore, IL and ML are generally being harnessed in interdisciplinary fashions either with intent or serendipitously. Nonetheless, their uses are important components for combating mis/disinformation among those who attend and utilize such programs. Turning an eye to the literature on mis/disinformation and its intersection with the work of a WPA, there are several suggestions that can be made at this point with the data harvested through this research endeavor. It should be noted that there is no holistic remedy to mis/disinformation, and that each program must utilize its own strengths and weaknesses with its own unique student and faculty population in mind (Jerit and Zhao, 2020). Even small amounts of progress aid in turning the momentum of this critical battle.

The first is the potential to leverage already in place WAC/WID WPA work to enhance the use and skill of literacies that cross, intersect, and mingle with their respective writing programs. In order to be utilized effort must be given toward discovering the unique literacy sets already in place (both anticipated and coincidental). For WAC geared programs, utilizing the unique skill sets of [contingent] faculty, and tutors may be a currently untapped wealth of information. Also, the unique emergent technological skills brought to the university by their student bodies may aid in creating up-to-date training mediums that students and non-students find engaging and worthwhile.

Through institutions discovering the necessary literacies and synthesizing that information new insights into how best to deploy IL and ML across disciplines can also be leveraged. For institutions/programs that focus primarily

on a Writing in the Disciplines (WID) approach, locating experts within each discipline and having conversations with them about what threshold concepts are keystones of their discipline and how various literacies interact with these concepts is an agreeable starting point (Malenczyk, 2016). Another option would be opting for a Writing across the Globe (WAG) focus in conjunction with their respective approaches. As Flammia (2015) has touted the power of such an approach noting that, “Globally competent individuals have the ability to think critically about global events and view them from an interdisciplinary perspective” (p. 702). Leveraging this global perspective in both disciplines and curriculum could have fringe benefits including resistance to mis/disinformation from and about places abroad.

This starting point of such an endeavor is labor intensive both emotionally and physically. As noted in the results of this study, garnering support via faculty and/or student engagement may not be an easy task to accomplish. Though if pulled together the results could be very useful for WPAs, institutions, and concerned citizens across the United States and beyond.

A secondary recommendation is more community oriented, but still utilizes the WPAs leverage as a hub within an institution. Universities are just one institutional assemblage among many in the cities in which they exist. They must, by necessity, entangle themselves across communities and cultures nearby in order to thrive. As a community assemblage, universities could offer free or reduced courses, programs, or training materials taught to increase various forms of literacy among both student populations and other folks within the community who may not have such opportunities. Private organizations and NPOs have already begun his work on a large scale (Center for Media Literacy, 2021; UNESCO 2020; UNESCO, 2021; Willie, 2021). Such global and/or national organizations may indeed help,

but they are not localized enough to aid in helping many of the people within reach of universities. As noted elsewhere (see Willie, 2021; Jerret and Zhao, 2020; West and Bergstrom, 2021) mis/disinformation affects people from across all socioeconomic spheres. It will take more than just IL and ML being taught to university students to combat its wide reach. To put it bluntly, cheap, easily accessible literacy tools that can be created (or discovered and utilized) by disciplinary experts at institutions of higher learning are entirely possible but are not utilized at this time within the communities in which they reside. Utilizing the unique knowledge gained within institutions of higher learning and bringing such knowledge to those who share similar spaces, but do not have access to them as a student or faculty member, may help shift the tide in relation to informational flow. Some organizations have already implemented such tools.

Entities such as the Center for Media Literacy (2021) have created an easily accessible and free program to help folks become media literate with a 90 minute publicly available online course. Other online courses are offered in IL, ML, and even various facets of mis/disinformation by Coursera, Class Central, and other online course programs. Such programs are a wealth of information, but not accessible by everyone, including some folx living within reach of a university/college. Drawing from Dembsey (2020), it is important to consider the accessibility of information for those who are not within an “abelist” camp.

Not everyone has access to the Internet, the extra funds to take courses, or the ability to utilize specialized hard/software to aid in their learning (Dembsey, 2020, pp.4-6). WPAs could aid in leveraging not only expertise across and within disciplines, but also the physical spaces and tools left unused (or free to be used) for the purpose of aiding the community in combating

mis/disinformation. For example, the utilization of empty classrooms to aid in community literacy programs. The option to include the creation or dispersal of such tools as a form of service for full-time faculty. Or even an opportunity to create non-credit courses taught by graduate students and/or non-academic subject experts. The possibilities listed here are but a few of those an entire writing program or institutions could create based on the needs of their community. Once again, this is certainly not an easy task, but perhaps a worthwhile one to invest time and effort into.

The suggestions left here are more than likely the pipedreams of a scholar outside the realm of WPA. Regardless, to help combat the growing use of mis/disinformation, minds across all academic fields will need to be utilized. The unique literacies and skill sets of people can be capitalized upon, perhaps with a very minimal financial cost.

Although the financials may not be costly the use of time and human labor are. WPAs are already tasked with a lot. The endless “to do list” grows longer by the term. The mental and physical labor is only enhanced by the large emotional labor toll of the job (Hochschild, 1983; Holt et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2016). To ask even more of these hardworking folx might be too much. But then again, they might just be the right folx for the job. The WPA, acting as a unique hub within the university/college network, may be the right person/people to begin these vital conversations and help move their institution and the world into a world worth dwelling in.

Appendix I (Survey Questions):

- 1) How much do you agree with the following statement: “An interdisciplinary approach to information and media literacy (particularly relating to mis/disinformation) is considered valuable to your institution’s writing program(s)”
- 2) How much do you agree with the following

statement: The University (at which you are a WPA) has an atmosphere that fosters an interdisciplinary approach to information and media literacy (particularly in relation to mis/disinformation) across all disciplines?

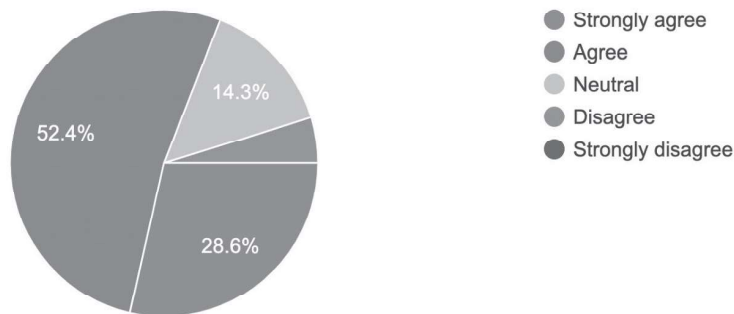
- 3) Does your writing program utilize interdisciplinary approaches to information and media literacy (particularly in relation

to mis/disinformation) in first year composition/writing classes?

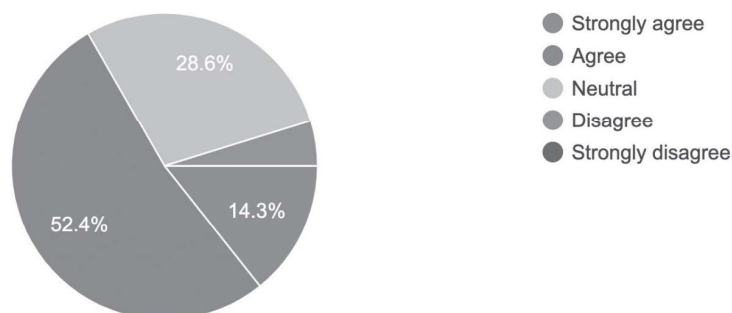
- 4) What obstacles hinder the potential for interdisciplinary approaches to information and media literacy (relating to mis/disinformation) at your university? Check all that apply.

Appendix II (Results):

How much do you agree with the following statement: “An interdisciplinary approach to information and media literacy (particularly relating to mis/disinformation) is valuable to your institution’s writing program(s)?
21 responses

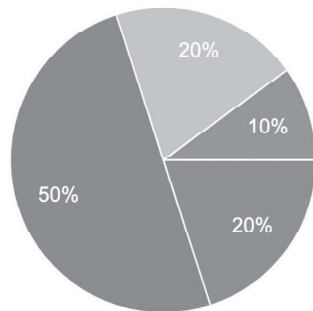


How much do you agree with the following statement: The University (at which you are a WPA) has an atmosphere that fosters an interdisciplinary approach to information and media literacy (particularly in relation to mis/disinformation) across all disciplines?
21 responses



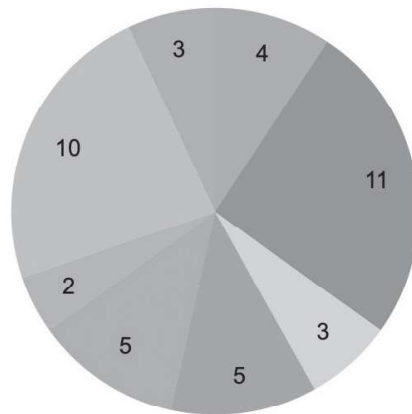
Does your writing program utilize interdisciplinary approaches to information and media literacy (particularly in relation to mis/disinformation) in first year composition/writing classes?

20 responses



- Yes, our writing program directly utilizes an interdisciplinary approach to inform...
- Yes, our writing program does utilize an interdisciplinary approach to informati...
- I do not know/ not applicable to the writing program(s) I lead
- Our writing program does not intentionally/unintentionally utilize an i...
- Our writing program is not interested in addressing information and media liter...

Obstacles



- Monetary obstacles
- Faculty engagement
- Educational resources
- Personnel shortages
- Student engagement
- Administrative Engagement
- Academic load (of instructors)
- Lack of information or pedagogical tools

Appendix III (Individual responses)

Our program includes many different approaches to teaching writing, some of which indeed take this approach; the majority don't, for the reason that their focus is elsewhere.	First-year writing does a lot, and this is just part of it. However, we actually have an upper division class on this very topic that was taught by two postdocs and a librarian. Special topics though. Might not be repeated.
Obviously media literacy is applicable to writing centers, but it's not something that we've dug into much.	Prioritizing other SLOs (process, rhetoric, research, argument); the library likely includes some of this in their supporting instruction
Not the primary objective of our writing courses, which are in the process of becoming less interdisciplinary and more disciplined.	The main issue we face is that FYW has so many purposes, including info/media literacy, and there are only so many weeks in a semester in which to meaningfully address it all. But at our university, I feel relatively confident that other courses (non-FYW) also discuss info/media literacy, and hopefully students are learning better skills as a result of our collective efforts.
Interdisciplinary work is difficult at our institution because of how writing in the disciplines is done at our university.	

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情報リテラシー、メディアリテラシー、 ライティングプログラム担当者の意識的位置づけ 誤報との戦い

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要 約

情報の流れは、対人コミュニケーションだけでなく、人々が市民として包括的な社会政治機構に関与することを可能にするマクロコミュニケーションの成功に最も重要である。情報の流れを阻害するものの筆頭に、誤報・脱字の障害がある。本研究プロジェクトは、R1研究機関のライティング・プログラム・アドミニストレーター（WPA）を対象に、その意識的位置づけを探索的に調査したものである。その結果、WPAの認識は、情報リテラシー（IL）とメディアリテラシー（ML）の価値と一致し、ポジティブに整合していることが判明した。さらに、WPAはILやMLを意図的・偶然的にプログラム内で活用していることがわかった。しかし、学際的なアプローチで誤った情報や誤解に対処しようとする姿勢には好感が持てるものの、参加者全員がILやMLをより集中的に実施するための障壁を指摘している。本論文では、ライティング・プログラムの管理者が組織のネットワークの中で、誤った／誤った情報との闘いを支援するのに適した立場にいる可能性があることを提案する。WPAは、大学内でその立場を活かし、分野横断的、あるいは分野内のマルチ・リテラシー（情報・メディア・リテラシー、その他）に焦点をあてることができるだろう。さらに、WPAは、より広いコミュニティがマルチリテラシーに基づいたトレーニングに参加できるような会話や行動を始めるためのハブとして機能することができるかもしれない。

キーワード：(1) ライティング・プログラム・アドミニストレーション、(2) 誤った情報、(3) 情報リテラシー、
(4) メディア・リテラシー