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From the Frying Pan Into the Fire (and Back Again): Adventures in Subject-Based, Credit Instruction

Natalie Tagge

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[1]

In the Frying Pan / University of Washington Libraries Digital Collections

My best experience as a teacher-librarian was leading a credit, semester-long course while a librarian at the University of Illinois Springfield [2] (UIS) during which my students came to care deeply about the topical content and used their developing research skills to further their engagement. For librarians, though, this is the exception rather than the rule. Now I am at a new position at the Claremont Colleges Library [3]and am starting to translate the experience of having a whole semester to teach students into a more traditional environment of limited student-librarian contact. I have found that my credit teaching experience has provided me with insight into how to teach information literacy skills in any context. I'd like to use this post to reflect on my process of developing a credit course and to share a few insights on how the lessons learned from semester-long teaching can be integrated into more traditional library instruction situations.

Too often instruction librarians are dropped into the middle of a subject-based course and forced to integrate their lessons into its already established content and teacher-student dynamics. Or we teach semester-long information literacy courses that are either attached to a separately developed topical course or divorced from an academic subject altogether. The fundamental question about teaching information literacy in any environment is: How do we get students to

care? This is an important question that was on my mind throughout the development of my course, and continues to drive my instruction decision-making.

Developing the course

In the spring of 2010, the University of Illinois Springfield (UIS) Brookens Library [4] was working with the Associate Vice Chancellor For Undergraduate Education to develop a new Comparative Societies credit-bearing course within the general education curriculum. Comparative Societies courses aim to help "students begin to master tools and methods for becoming global citizens." One of the academic competencies students are expected to develop in such a course is to "demonstrate basic informational literacy." That being the case, pairing it with research skill development seemed like a natural fit: meaningful comparison necessitates skillful information discovery, assessment, and evaluation [5].

I agreed to teach the freshman-level, semester-long course in the spring of 2011. The experience would allow me to face the same challenges as full-time faculty, interact with students on a semester-long basis, and develop a view of the library and its resources from the eyes of a course instructor.

One of the first challenges in developing a course that was topical rather than library-focused was deciding on a content focus. I had previously co-taught a Library Research Methods class, and therefore knew that integrating content that was of interest to me personally was important. I arrived at the broad theme South Africa: Apartheid's Legacy [6] to create opportunities for students to compare apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa.

I was somewhat familiar with the topic based on my own undergraduate research [7], but presenting myself as an expert on a topic in which I only had a slight background was one of my biggest hurdles. It was somewhat similar to my anxiety teaching new instruction sessions, especially those out of my areas of expertise, and on a much larger scale. I had taught Chemistry instruction sessions without every having taken a college-level Chemistry course, and I tried to remember that professors often teach outside their expertise, especially within first-year courses (Myers & Kircher, 2009).

Once I determined my content focus, it was time to develop my first syllabus. I began by reviewing my previous experiences as a student. I considered classes I liked and didn't like in college, and I looked at some of the syllabi from these courses for themes, sources, and inspiration. Next, I evaluated the tools that were available to me, including my colleagues' expertise. A librarian who had been involved in the course before me had developed a framework. I met with my Library Research Methods co-teacher to brainstorm which of that course's components could be reused effectively.

After I had gathered as much material and inspiration as possible from my previous experiences, I started exploring additional resources. Knowing that most first-year students wouldn't have a working knowledge of South African history, I found a history text that was well-reviewed and fairly priced around which to structure my syllabus.

Not until fairly late in the syllabus development process did I really start integrating research skills into the course. I wasn't confident that these components would appear organically in the syllabus, and had feared the course would be boring (probably to the students, certainly to me) if there wasn't something topically interesting to provide structure for the research itself. I incorporated research skills in four ways: topical course readings, information literacy textbook readings, class discussions, and graded work. Some of these strategies were more successful than others, as I'll describe later in this post.

I know now that the key to developing a strong syllabus is confidence, enthusiasm, and agility. Librarians, based on our professional ethos [8], bring a long list of positive attributes that can

aid in this process. We can identify effective research assignments that use scaffolding and other techniques to guide the acquisition of information literacy skills. Plus, librarians are fundamentally good at research, able to locate excellent, appropriate readings and examples of syllabi and assignments as sources of inspiration.

Course readings

While the focus of the course's content was comparing apartheid and post- apartheid South Africa, I utilized the underlying course structure to explicitly expose students to different information sources and formats. I hypothesized that a basic understanding of a topic should help students work their way through difficult content, so the readings [9] progressed over the term from straightforward, popular writings to more sophisticated, academic articles. We started with reference works (Wikipedia, Britannica, atlases, etc.) and proceeded to reading books, magazine articles, government documents, and finally, scholarly articles. I introduced websites by content rather than form. For example, I presented the South African constitution as a government document that just happened to be available on a website.

Following this reading order made sense because it allowed students to get a basic descriptive orientation to South Africa from day one: where is it located?, who lives there? It also allowed students to warm up to the heavy critical thinking and reading skills necessary to read a journal article. This approach worked well at the beginning of the semester, but was less effective toward the end when the students were asked to read journal articles. The students often did not complete journal article reading assignments or found them difficult to comprehend.

Information literacy textbook

In addition to a South African history text with an emphasis on apartheid, I required the students to buy (or find in a library) a specific information literacy textbook. About 75% of their textbook was required for the course. Sadly, the research skills textbook was a bust. The students didn't do the reading from the book, partly because I didn't adequately integrate the readings effectively into the course. As Nancy Wooten Colburn notes, "Teaching is a combination of art and science. If the overall goal of teaching is student learning a teacher will work to find ways to affect change in student motivation" (Wootton Colborn, 2010, p. 237). I didn't give my students motivation to read about steps to use in evaluating information.

Late in the course, in an attempt to salvage the content, I discovered that students responded much better to a five-minute introduction to resource evaluation, followed by activities that incorporated evaluation skills. I ended up utilizing the book as a resource to develop in-class activities and to provide students with succinct definitions of types of resources.

Class discussion

Because I believe that research skills are only interesting to students when combined with interesting content, I tried to teach research in innocuous bites. The course catalog description [10] presented South Africa as the focus of the course, so I understood that many students were taking the course because of the topic being studied and not the skills being taught. When students read passages from a colonial-era travelogue, A Tour in South Africa by Joseph John Freeman [11], we spent a few minutes at the start of class discussing primary and secondary sources, public domain works, and Google Books. Surprisingly, most of my students weren't familiar with Google Books. The students' attention only lasted so long, so I made sure to redirect discussion to the "juicy" stuff, in this case the biased language the British explorer used to discuss different ethnic groups in South Africa.

My integration of research skills into the class sessions was grounded in the course content. I tried to consider every reading from the perspective of what information literacy lesson could be taught through discussion of the resource. Overall, this approach worked well and was an

interesting teaching method that helped students learn. In contrast, my students did not respond well to days when I did traditional library instruction, for example, demonstrating databases that might be helpful for their final research projects.

Graded work

All of the graded work [12] in the course required formal research. I tried to scaffold the assignments so that by the final research paper the students would be able to find, access, evaluate, synthesize, and cite information properly. I also often followed a teaching pattern where the students would need to find and use an information type outside of class prior to being assigned to read that type of source.

For instance, a short assignment comparing a popular and scholarly article followed this pattern: I had students complete a reading in the information literacy textbook about popular and scholarly articles, led a discussion about the two types of sources, added some information on the course LibGuide, explained the assignment, and made sure the students were reminded that they could ask me questions or visit my office if they wanted extra assistance. Students had been assigned popular article readings, but had not been assigned scholarly article readings at this point in the semester. Having students complete some assignments preceded only by brief introductions to the concepts was an interesting way to help them become independent learners. Inevitably, some of the students responded better than others to these independent learning tasks.

Challenges

I experienced a number of difficulties teaching in the topical for-credit environment; namely classroom and time management, issues related to classroom diversity, and emphasizing research skills. Whether a librarian is teaching for a full semester or entering a classroom for one class period I believe it is important to fully reflect on classroom dynamics and the potential difficulties instructors face. I know experiencing these difficulties has helped me better appreciate faculty resistance to "giving up" class time, but also has given me even stronger confidence that librarians are an important part of a course.

Classroom management and discipline were bigger challenges than I had expected. I had previously taught high school students for a year, so was able to handle simple issues such as students wandering into class very late or not turning assignments in on time. I had a harder time with larger issues such as academic dishonesty and, regrettably, lost my temper a few times. I had discovered from teaching a previous course, Library Research Methods [13], that you have to be very explicit with rules and expectations to fulfill the goals of the course and to keep moving through the syllabus. I often had to be stricter with due dates [14] and the structure of class sessions than I would have preferred.

Time was a huge issue. I fairly accurately predicted the amount of time necessary for lesson planning, grading, and interacting with students about their work on a one-on-one basis. I did not, however, truly understand the time-consuming issues I would encounter and their emotional impact. I spent many hours mulling over how to deal with students who didn't attend class or turn in their work, who plagiarized, were unable to read or write at a college level, and, in one instance, acted out aggressively.

Determining what boundaries to create with some students was challenging. For example, one student emailed me during class to ask for an extension on an assignment I had already graded–while I was handing them back to his classmates. In many ways, I discovered I was out of sync with the skill levels of freshman as well as the expectations of the institution where I was teaching. I found support in asking my colleagues for advice and in reading that other librarian teachers were also surprised by lack of student motivation (Blakeslee, 1998). It would have been very helpful for me to observe freshman classes and read freshman papers prior to

teaching. Not only would this have been extremely beneficial to teaching this course, it also would have greatly improved my work as a instruction librarian at UIS.

My class was extremely diverse, and from the beginning of the class this affected its dynamics in ways I had not previously considered. On the first day of class, a student asked me to step out of the classroom and directed me to assign seats in the class to prevent students from separating themselves based on race. It quickly became clear that I needed to reflect on my positionality as a white, young, middle-class instructor teaching on the topic of South Africa (Takacs, 2002). It was challenging to balance and respect all the voices of my class while still making sure to emphasize that opinions did not count as facts. Teaching a diverse group of students, many of whom had very different life experiences from my own, also reminded me that "interactions with information are highly personal and highly value-laden" (Swanson, 2010, p. 270). While "hot button" issues provide wonderful themes around which to structure a class, there will inevitably be emotional issues that a librarian needs to be ready to address. One effective way of dealing with emotional issues was to teach students to support their positions with research.

Finally and most importantly, I found it challenging to ensure that I allocated the amount of time to teaching research skills that I had intended when I first envisioned the course. When trying to help students become competent, college-level readers, writers, thinkers, and communicators, it can be challenging to emphasize research. I have always abstractly understood that prioritizing information literacy was difficult, but have always been a bit frustrated with faculty that fail to emphasize research in their freshman courses. Once I actually saw that many students in my class could not write a comprehensible sentence, it was hard not to abandon information literacy in favor of basic literacy.

Applying the lessons

After a full semester of solo teaching, I have newfound insight into how vital it is to have a librarian working with a course, especially at the freshman level (I would have loved to have had a librarian assigned to my class!). A Scripps College professor recently mentioned that he couldn't imagine any faculty not wanting a librarian working closely with his first year class. He felt that it was important to have a person whose clear focus was developing research skills. The bright spot in balancing all the literacies that need to be taught is that it points to the extreme need for librarian, faculty, and writing center collaboration (Diederich & Schroeder, 2008; Callison, Budny & Thomes, 2005). It takes a whole institution, in many cases, to teach students all the skills they need. I am also keenly aware that students generally don't enroll in a class because they are seeking to develop their information literacy skills; rather they choose classes based on the topic of the course.

I am now translating my experiences into a more "traditional" library instructional environment. I work for esteemed liberal arts colleges [15]and I hope information literacy instruction can be a critically engaging component of our academically rigorous courses. In the past, I often approached planning for an instruction session by developing tactics to get students to care about the library catalog, databases, and the activities involved in research. Now I'm shifting my focus from thinking primarily about the research and library resources to thinking, instead, about the student perspective. Instead of asking myself what research tools might be helpful to a class, I'm trying to focus on what students want or need to learn more about in a class, and what they want or need to research. Helping them find the information they need may sometimes mean teaching them how to use library resources, but sometimes it will mean other things.

One way I am attempting to learn more about student needs is by better understanding the topics they are being taught. I have made an effort to meet with every course instructor I have worked with this semester to learn more about their class and how I might help. I have rarely initiated this conversation in the past, feeling lucky when professors asked me to come into their

classrooms and not wanting to "push my luck."

I realize many librarians will not have the same experiences I have had, but I recommend that everyone seek out a teaching opportunity that is far enough beyond what we consider our area of expertise to be anxiety-inducing. That may mean designing a full-credit class, collaborating with a faculty member, teaching a one-shot for a discipline we are not familiar with, or trying at least one unfamiliar technique in a class we teach every semester. I think teaching beyond our comfort zone helps us to see students, faculty, and ourselves in different ways and makes us more effective instructors in our everyday teaching environments. I also believe the more experiences we have, the closer we come to realizing our best moments as a librarian.

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