

ADDING A BIBLIOGRAPHIC INSTRUCTION UNIT TO AN ESTABLISHED COURSE

In an effort to build a successful library experience for new students, the librarians of Jernigan Library, Texas A&M University-Kingsville, added a two-day bibliographic instruction unit to an already-established freshman orientation course. The sessions used a combination of lecture, tour, and exercises to introduce new students to the library. Our first semester was replete with both success and failure. We evaluated the program through a series of in-depth brainstorming sessions and made several changes in the assignment. We have used this brainstorming method of evaluation in subsequent semesters, and found that while it does not serve all evaluation needs, it is nevertheless an important step in the evaluation process. In this article we describe how we developed the course, our method of evaluation, and some of the lessons we have learned. Although our program was added to a freshman orientation course, we believe that our experiences are useful for those who want to add a library skills unit to any established course.

The Setting

Texas A&M University-Kingsville is a member of the Texas A&M system located in South Texas. We have an average enrollment of 6,500 students, approximately 65% of whom are Hispanic. Many of our students are the first in their families to attend college, or are returning to college after several years, and often have inadequate library skills. We feel it is very important to bring them into the library and to let them know that it is a friendly, welcoming place, and then begin to teach them how to find books and periodical articles.

As a library, we own over 400,000 volumes, subscribe to 2,200 journals, and are a 35% Federal Depository. Our building is very large; many new students find it intimidating. We have many computerized periodical indexes, and will soon convert to our first online catalog. The library is a priority in the University's strategic plan, and is in a period of rapid growth and change. An important part of our orientation is to let the students know that there will be changes while they are here, and to expect and welcome those changes. At the time we began these instruction sessions, we had eight professional librarians, three of whom worked in the reference department.

The Freshman Orientation Seminar

Texas A&M University - Kingsville freshmen are required to take a non-credit course known as "College I". It meets for one hour twice a week and teaches basic college survival skills with the goal of lowering college drop-out rates. It is taught by instructors from the different departments within the five colleges on campus. A standard textbook, *Your College Experience*¹, is used in the course. When our program started, no college credit was given for College I, and the students received only a pass or fail grade. Each class of College I consisted of students from all departments of the university. More recently, the sections have been divided according to general major (Arts & Sciences, Engineering,

Business, etc), and one hour of credit is given. Administratively, College I is independent of other departments; it has its own college and dean on the university campus.

Before we began our bibliographic instruction unit, coverage of library skills in the course had varied greatly from instructor to instructor. Some would bring their students to the library for a tour; others used an old, self-paced assignment no longer suited to our library; others did not include library skills in the course at all. When we designed our program, we chose to keep our goals modest. We felt that it would be better to teach the basics well than to overwhelm our students. Our defined goals for the library session were to make the students in College I feel welcome, to give them a general idea of what is in the library, to teach the basic skills of finding information in books, reference books and journals, and to let them know what the Reference Desk is and to encourage them to ask for assistance.

Literature Review

Support for including library instruction in the Freshman seminar setting is found in several articles. Kelly emphasizes the positive impact the academic library can have on student retention.² If the goal of the course is to help students adapt to campus life and to reduce drop-out rates, then addressing library anxiety and providing basic library skills is an important component. Coleman surveys research into the perceived needs of college freshmen. Many freshmen reported that they felt the need for instruction in using the library and participating “in the enterprise of scholarship.”³ Coleman continues, “Indeed, orientation seems an ideal time to provide a grounding in the most elementary BI concepts -- concepts which should be precursors to the practical discussion of reference tools, but are too often sacrificed to the constraints of a one-hour library-use session”⁴. It is not the time for focused, in-depth, subject-specific training, but a non-course-integrated introduction and orientation to the academic library setting.

Fenske and Clark recommend freshman seminars for library instruction because the other course commonly used to access the majority of new students, freshmen English classes, is often problematic. Not only are such classes not required for all freshmen at many universities, the students in them are not always required to do research.⁵ Dabbour asserts that providing effective non-course-integrated instruction during freshman seminars is not only possible but necessary.⁶ Meeting the librarians is another important goal.⁷

Creating and implementing a library instruction component that works is an ongoing process. Werrell found that the library component needed several revisions before it met most - but not all - of her goals for the project⁸. The revision included a growing familiarity with the course itself and especially its instructors and their needs. Revision and evaluation may take several semesters. Fenske and Clark found that in spite of major revisions and initial positive responses to their library skills instruction, student performance on post-instruction tests did not improve. However, other factors such as student attendance and attentiveness, faculty response, and the librarians’ enthusiasm can show support for revisions.⁹

Another factor to consider in planning freshman seminar library instruction is the expectations of the students themselves. Varner, et al, found that when students are not given a proper understanding of the goals of the course, they may resent those aspects of it they don’t feel belong. Therefore, “Library faculty should take an active role in advertising that a major benefit of the “gateway” course is learning to use the print and electronic resources of the library”¹⁰. It also means communicating with the teaching faculty just what to expect in the library component and suggesting ways to introduce it to the students.

Process

Our bibliographic instruction program began with a meeting between the bibliographic instruction librarian and a counselor from College I. Our goal at the time was simply to update the existing optional library assignment with one that fit the current library and that covered more library skills. During that meeting, two assignments were agreed upon: one for books, and one for periodicals. They were intended so that they could be used back-to-back or at different points during the semester. It was also agreed that library tours and instruction would be more strongly recommended to the professors teaching the class.

The bibliographic instruction librarian began creating these assignments. However, further discussions on this idea between the Director of the Library and the Dean of College I led to the Reference Team Librarians volunteering to teach two class sessions of the College I course in the library.

We decided to retain the two-assignment set-up that we had originally developed. After the bibliographic instruction librarian put these together, several of our recently-hired student workers were used to test the assignments, and some adjustments were made. Our student workers were able to bring up several questions about the assignments and alerted us to sections that were not clear.

Once we knew that we would be teaching two class sessions, we began our scheduling. We knew we would get the students on two days from the same week, either a Monday/Wednesday, or Tuesday/Thursday sequence. There were 35 separate sections of the class, each with approximately 30 students. Many met at the same time. Therefore, our instruction sessions took place over several weeks, with an average of 4 classes each week. Six librarians (from public services, access services, and acquisitions), along with one long-term staff member taught the sessions. The librarians, not the instructors, scheduled the times. We did take requests for class times, but could not accommodate every request.

Our assignments originally included exercises on the following skills:

- Locating books by given titles, authors, and subjects
- Locating items on shelves, given specific call numbers
- Locating call numbers for periodicals, with many varied titles
- Locating a certain article from one of those periodicals
- Identifying floor location for call numbers using the library location guide
- Using both print and electronic indexes to identify citations on a given topic, and identifying the parts of a citation

Contents of the Library Visit

In our first version of the library instruction unit, we brought the students to a classroom in the library for half of the class period. In the classroom, we presented the information needed to complete the day's assignment, using lecture, overhead transparencies, and sample items. We also covered information such as library hours, circulation policy, and food and drink in the library. The first visit covered finding books by author, title, and subject, basic filing rules, and locating call numbers; the second covered using both print and electronic indexes and finding journals using our Periodicals Holdings List. We followed the lecture with a short tour of the areas of the library mentioned. They were then allowed some free time to work on the day's assignment. Many of the students were able to

complete the first assignment during the class period, but the second one took longer to complete and was handed in at the Reference Desk later.

Evaluation

After one semester and 70 separate sessions of bibliographic instruction, it became clear our program needed revision. Due to time constraints, we had created no formal evaluation instrument. One result of our program was obvious: more and more people were using the library. Our time and energy was being used by our regular reference work. Nevertheless, we were in clear need of some form of evaluation. Our need for evaluation was verified later in the Spring semester when the Student Course Evaluation results were received from the College I office. Surveys were given to the students at the end of the semester, covering all aspects of the College I class. Sixteen percent of the students had rated our program among the "Topics found most valuable" - but thirty-four percent felt our program was one of the "Topics found least valuable". This ambiguous response - some students responding well, but many others not - matched our feelings about the program.

Our solution for quickly evaluating and revising the program was to hold some intensive brainstorming sessions with most of the librarians who had taught the College I program. Although we developed more formal evaluation instruments later, we have continued to use this method to reflect on our recent experiences and plan for any changes that are needed. Each revision has been an improvement on the last, and the students have responded well. Although we developed a more formal evaluation instrument, we strongly recommend the "structured brainstorming" approach for people needing quick evaluations of their existing programs. Parks and Hendrix describe a similar approach as part of their evaluation: "After the library component is concluded, the library director holds a debriefing session for all librarians and support staff who are directly involved in the symposium. The group meets to hear and discuss ideas for improving future library support of the symposium."¹¹

Our brainstorming sessions were held during the semester after the College I library instruction ended. These sessions were highly participatory. We discussed what worked and what didn't work during our the class sessions, along with what we thought was needed. We reviewed and resolved some differences of opinions among the librarians. Out of these sessions came the new format and questions for the subsequent versions of the assignment.

Some of the problems identified in the initial implementation of the library instruction units:

- poor attendance, especially on second day;
- many students not bothering to complete the assignments, especially the second one;
- we could not tell how much was getting through to the students;
- grading of the assignments was uneven and sometimes ambiguous;
- wide range of student ability - some were overwhelmed, while others were bored;
- many students do not seem to take the library session seriously

Steps taken to address these problems:

A. Poor attendance, especially on second day;

B. Many students were not completing the assignments, especially the second

one;

To increase attendance rates, we made the two assignments into one, and we made that assignment due at end of second day. We also revised the written instructions, removed some redundant steps, and allowed more options for completing some steps. Most students were able to complete it, but we did allow some extensions. We felt that completing the assignment was more important than meeting a deadline.

We began the first day of instruction with an outline of material that would be covered over both days, and referred to topics during the lecture that would be covered on the second day. We also emphasized the class time on second day as being useful for completing the assignment.

Another facet of the attendance problem was that it was persistent throughout the entire course - not just our unit. We knew this attitude was not entirely our problem. Based on our experience, we made some recommendations to the Dean of College I and were included in discussions leading to revisions of the course itself.

Finally, by the second semester, we were more "into it," more comfortable with the role. We weren't something new and possibly unimportant; we were established as part of the course and more confident as instructors.

C. We were not sure how much was getting through to the students

In some ways, we are still not sure about this. Like many freshmen, our freshmen are often unresponsive during class. However, they brought us many questions on the second class day and long after it. Their continued questions - and the fact that most of them completed the assignments - implied that many were interested in learning about library research and were comfortable approaching us. Also, a continued increase in library use has been noted, from number of questions asked at the Reference Desk to number of books circulated.

D. Grading of the assignments was uneven and sometimes ambiguous.

As a group, we decided on a set point value per question and included it on the worksheet. We made sure that the points added up to "100" for the whole assignment, so that the instructor could match the grade to their point system. When assigning points, we had to watch for questions that had several sections, and to define how many points to deduct for incomplete answers. Another problem we corrected was that some questions had been ambiguously phrased, so the answers were ambiguously "correct". We re-wrote these questions.

E. Wide range of student ability - some were overwhelmed, while others were bored.

We found that we could work with all of them. A student who knows the basics will pick up more details in class. If they talk to you during the hands-on period, you can share more details with them. A helpful thing to remember is that every class on campus has a wide range of student ability. Some students will adapt to libraries faster than others -- and these are not always the "straight-A" students. Finally, our library offers several other varieties of bibliographic instruction, including specialized tours, one-on-one consultation, subject-specific guides, various pamphlets, and Internet training.

The other side of this dilemma is the long-standing cliché that for every student that asks a supposedly stupid question, there are 4 or 5 others who are too shy to ask the same thing. It is easy for librarians to assume that the basics of finding call numbers in library stacks are easily learned. For many

freshmen, they are not.

F. The freshman seminar itself is a non-credit course, leading many students to not take it very seriously.

Probably our most important response to this problem was for us to take our program seriously anyway. If we didn't take our program seriously, it is doubtful anyone else would.

Needless to say, it is not in our power to change this course from non-credit to credit. However, with our support, the campus curriculum committee has strongly recommended that the class be offered for credit, and we expect changes to come about in the next year. A related change we supported is the arrangement of the freshmen by declared majors, so that each section of College I has a subject focus and is taught by a professor from that field.

Results:

Classtime went more smoothly, with more students attending both days of the workshop, and more completing the assignment. As teachers, we were more confident. Nevertheless, student response was again ambiguous about the perceived value of the library program. As in the previous year, more ranked it "Least valuable" than "Most valuable". We have continued evaluating and revising both content and presentation in order to meet our students' needs.

Recommendations:

For those who are planning to add a bibliographic instruction unit to an established course, or build a course of their own, we have several recommendations. These are based on our experience working with a required freshman orientation course, and so may not apply to all possible situations. Nevertheless, we believe they will be useful to many teaching librarians:

- Get to know the course and its contents. Since your unit becomes a regular part of the class, you should be more familiar with this class than those that get regular library tours.
- If the course is taught by several different instructors, find out who, if anyone, oversees the course and work with them first. A supervisor can put their authority behind your project, and they can offer insights into the course and the different ways some instructors teach it.
- Talk to several of the professors teaching the course, and take suggestions. Do not be discouraged by the occasional negative or uninterested instructor.
- Relate what you teach to their textbook, if possible.
- Be very clear with the instructors about the content of your unit. Include goals and objectives, such as are expected on a course syllabus. Give a written statement about your unit to the instructors and suggest ways for them to introduce these segments to the class.
- If there are assignments in the class that use the library, refer to them during your workshop.

TEACHING AND PREPARATION TIPS --

- A. Spread the instruction out over two class days, if possible.
- B. Be enthusiastic and genuinely interested in what you're teaching.
- C. Focus on learning, not on when the assignment was turned in or whether a student came to class or listened attentively, etc. Avoid statements like: "We covered that in the lecture, so you should know how to do it without asking."
- D. Use some of the class time to work on the assignment so that the students can ask you about items they don't understand. Many questions come up when the students begin to apply their new knowledge.
- E. Suggest that students begin with different sections of the assignment to prevent "logjams." Also, if a certain item, such as a periodical holdings list, is to be used by the whole class, try to get some extras made.
- F. Don't act as if anything - the library catalog, the location guide, etc. - is basic, first-grade level stuff that they should already know. This attitude can intimidate students.
- G. Don't be quick to judge just how bright (or dull) a student is.
- G. Assign a separate topic to each student. (We wrote them on slips of paper and students draw them from a box.) At first we used general-interest topics, but when the classes became assigned by department, we developed subject lists appropriate to the class.
- H. Check all the assignment topics in the catalog to make sure that you have materials on that topic.
- I. Double or triple-check all the questions and examples used. Mistakes are easy to make, and may cause many headaches. Beware of abbreviations that are misunderstood during typing. Also, beware of having too many people involved in typing the drafts and final versions of the assignment.
- J. Use two, three, or more versions of the same assignment with different examples on each so that students are more likely to do their own work.

ENDNOTES

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