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# Can only Librarians do Library Instruction? Collaborating with Graduate Students to Teach Discipline-Specific Information Literacy

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# **Can only Librarians do Library Instruction? Collaborating with Graduate Students to Teach Discipline-Specific Information Literacy**

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## **Introduction**

At many libraries the ratio of students to librarians is in the neighborhood of thousands to one; teaching these students information literacy requires a creative approach to library instruction. To expand the reach of information literacy in challenging situations, we should rethink the idea that only librarians can teach information literacy. There is a role for librarians as collaborators and teachers of information literacy pedagogy which can multiply their reach. Many instruction programs already apply similar methodologies for large first-year experience programs, but this strategy can be expanded to amplify introductory subject-specific library instruction as well.

There is a need for this basic subject-specific library instruction that scaffolds advanced upper-division classes. Our proposed solution is a creative collaboration between librarians and graduate students to integrate information literacy into introductory disciplinary classes. The required World Art Studies I & II classes are one of the best ways to reach all CU-Boulder art undergraduates, but we felt giving a lecture would be ineffective. On the other hand, teaching every recitation would be too much for one art liaison librarian. By using a train-the-trainer model to teach the TAs how to conduct an information literacy session, we were then able to reach students in small interactive classes led by graduate students. We gathered assessment data from students and the TAs to study the effects of the program and identify areas for improvement. Not only was the collaboration successful for the undergraduate students, we found that collaboration also had benefits for the graduate students. It introduced them to

information literacy and honed their pedagogical skills. Since often the best way to learn is to teach, they found that their own research skills improved. The graduate students expressed enthusiasm for collaboration with the library, and we believe our program is the start of many library partnerships throughout the careers of these future art professionals and faculty.

## **Literature Review**

Our initiative is in accord with recent trends towards more collaborative forms of librarianship. Contemporary literature acknowledges, in the words of Scott Bennett, that “the key to success in programs of information literacy is that they become institution initiatives rather than solely librarian initiatives” (Bennett, 2007, 162). Cooperative engagement between librarians, teachers, and students has integrated the library into the life of the university. Bennett and Caro Pinto have identified this as a “paradigm shift” in the field towards readers’ informational productivity rather than the library’s own modes of efficiency (Bennett, 2007, 147; Pinto, 2013).

The literature arguing for more collaborative library instruction has highlighted the benefit of training teachers in information literacy. Maggio and Posley propose that training instructors in information literacy helps them to provide more efficient and thorough feedback for their students (Maggio and Posley, 2011, 259). The literature has emphasized the classroom instructor’s engagement with the explanation of information literacy so that both librarians and teachers are focused on the students’ reception of these skills. Steve W. Witt and Julia B. Dickinson argued for the pedagogical importance of cooperative librarianship following a study at Illinois Wesleyan University. They claimed that the integration of information literacy in pedagogy enhanced teachers’ abilities to create assignments that best assessed students’ research skills (Witt and Dickinson, 2003, 78). Examples such as these illustrate a trend in the contemporary literature to emphasize the librarian’s role as facilitator rather than sole instructor. Although studies show the benefit of having instructors trained in information literacy, many of these same reports focus on the challenges of cooperative librarianship. Badke in particular bemoans faculty’s tendency to territorialize their own discipline and their unwillingness to cope with changing technologies (Badke, 2005). By instructing graduate students, the World Art Studies program was able to break through some of these traditional barriers, as the graduate instructor responses show in the Results section below.

The literature has also stressed the importance of subject liaisons in the creation of collaborative relationships between librarians and instructors. Lynn Lampert emphasizes the growth of scholarly interest in collaborations between teachers and librarians as a way to shift the discourse from the “bibliographic instruction model” of library science to a more dynamic model of information literacy (Lampert, 2005, 14). In this paradigm, librarians do not simply help collect sources, they help to give students the tools they need for comprehension and cognitive analyses of their sources. To this end, Lampert and others whom she cites articulate the importance of discipline-specific librarians in the collaborative instructional process (Lampert, 2005, 14; Daugherty and Carter, 1997).

We wanted to use small hands-on sessions for teaching World Art Studies, rather than a lecture model because conversations surrounding information literacy education in recent years have emphasized the effectiveness of active teaching and learning. The literature has stressed the

importance of librarians in helping students distinguish between different types of sources through hands-on and interactive methods (Blummer, Kenton, and Song, 2010; Cannon and Jarson, 2009).

And finally, past studies have demonstrated the value of a train-the-trainers approach that integrates information literacy into a course's goals and the course instructor's feedback (Witt and Dickinson, 2003; Cannon and Jarson, 2009; Maggio and Posley, 2011). We extended this idea by putting graduate students directly in charge of the library session. We wanted to assess the effectiveness of library classes taught by disciplinary graduate students (art history in this case). But further, one of the major goals was to evaluate how this impacted the graduate students' skills. Did they become better researchers and teachers who will be more likely to collaborate with librarians in their future careers?

### **The World Art Studies Train-the-Trainer Program at CU Boulder**

The information literacy train-the-trainer program we implemented at the University of Colorado Boulder was tailored to the circumstances at the University library and the curriculum in the Art & Art History Department. Our target was the introductory art history survey classes: World Art Studies I & II. This series is required of all studio art and art history majors, and it represented the best opportunity to introduce students to art historical research methods and prepare them for more advanced concepts in later classes. These freshman level classes are taught by a single faculty member who delivers lectures to the entire class (between 250-400 students per semester). Between 15 and 18 recitation sections per semester are taught by six art history graduate students who serve as teaching assistants (TAs). Each semester the TAs attended a train-the-trainers session on teaching information literacy, and they then taught a research skills class for their recitation section. This research skills class took place in a library classroom.

For the first semester, we scheduled the 17 World Art I recitation sessions to visit the library over the course of a week, reserving one of the library's instruction classrooms exclusively for this purpose. The sessions were timed to coincide with when students would be working on their research assignment. About a month before the session the TAs attended training led by the Art & Architecture Librarian on information literacy instruction and were assigned readings on information literacy. They were provided with a sample lesson plan, tips, tricks, and information about what to expect. For the first semester's learning goals we focused on developing keywords and finding books. In the 50 minute sessions, the TAs led a class where students completed a keyword exercise, used the catalog to identify books they were interested in, and then located the books in the stacks.

In the second semester, once again we scheduled the 15 World Art II recitations sections for a library visit. We conducted a second train-the-trainer session, and discussed a draft lesson plan. This time there was more back and forth with incorporation of suggestions from the TAs. The TAs expressed a desire for more discussion of class readings, so we decided to incorporate the course readings into a section on the evaluation of sources. Closer to the session we had another meeting to discuss the revised lesson plan. We settled on having the undergraduates get into small groups and evaluate and compare two reading assignments, one a scholarly art history article and the other an article from the New York Times Magazine. Each group was responsible

for comparing the two articles based on different criteria: the credentials of the authors, the audience, the visual design, the use of evidence, and how they might use them differently in a paper. Each group then presented their results and the class as a whole discussed them. This more naturally integrated the library session into the class as a whole, and at the same time it made the students think about the course readings in a new way. Due to time constraints we removed a section on keywords; instead a keyword worksheet was handed out as homework to be brought, completed, to the library session. In the second half of the session, the TAs demonstrated how to find articles using art history databases, leaving time for students to look for useful articles for their assignment using the keywords they had come up with at home. This built on the first semester's in-class keyword exercise.

## **Research Methodologies**

In order to gauge the effect of the library sessions on student learning we used both feedback forms completed by students and interviews with the TAs (see appendix). In the first semester, we used an online form that asked the students what they learned and what questions they still had. The low response rate of 11% for this questionnaire led us to use paper forms distributed in the recitation sessions in the second semester. This form asked similar questions, asking them what research skills they had learned and what questions they still had. We also asked if they had taken World Art Studies I in the previous semester. The response rate was much higher using this method, gaining responses from 40% of the students. The responses were coded for several themes that we saw mentioned, such as "finding books" or "evaluating sources." This allowed us to gauge what percentage still had questions and what most students felt like they learned so that we could match their responses with our learning objectives. In the TA interviews we asked what effects they saw on student assignments and behavior, and used this information to supplement the student surveys.

The recorded interviews with the graduate TAs were conducted after the end of the spring semester. The series of questions was meant to discover both how they felt the program went and how they thought the program affected them. We asked our questions with an eye to evaluating the program, asking how satisfied they were with the training they received, what they felt the students learned, and what they thought could be done to improve the classes. But we also wanted to know what effect the process of teaching information literacy had on them as graduate students and future professionals. To this end we asked the graduates about effects the program had on their own research skills, their pedagogical approaches, and their future likelihood of collaborating with librarians.

## **Results**

### *Undergraduate Learning Outcomes*

In order to develop basic information literacy skills, the World Art Studies 1300 session devoted a significant amount of time to educating students in finding and checking out books. The post-library session survey suggested this learning outcome was largely achieved as 30.8% of respondents indicated that finding books in the catalog was the most important thing they learned while 59% of student respondents thought the most important thing learned was finding books in

the library. 15.4% of student respondents specified that keyword generation in catalog searching was the most useful. When considered alongside graduate instructor responses indicating their own levels of confidence while teaching, these numbers point to the success of the graduate-student-led library sessions.

Responses to the World Art Studies 1400 library session show a similar success in improving students' research skills. Importantly, 87.3% of students reported learning the research skills of finding articles and databases through the library website. 17.6% of responses indicated that keyword generation and search refinement were the most important skills they learned.

Students in the World Art Studies library sessions also learned to use available services in order to support their research process. One student in World Art Studies 1300 and four students in World Art Studies 1400 responded that using librarians as a resource was a significant learning outcome. In addition, two students in World Art Studies 1300 said they would like to learn more about one-on-one help with library staff in the future. These numbers may be deceptively small because of the survey's phrasing did not lend itself to this kind of response. The graduate instructors' responses supports this conclusion, one said, "I think that knowing there are subject librarians ... who are open for consultation and involved in the research process made the library seem more user-friendly," while another provided evidence, "I know that a few of my students asked me for [the librarian's] email after the session, so they were eager to work with him."

Anecdotally our interviews with the graduate teachers suggested that the sessions reduced students' library anxiety. Students' anxieties regarding using the library and its services act as a "psychological barrier to academic success among college students, particularly first year students" (Lavoie, 2008). One TA thought the sessions "helped them realize that [the library is] not a scary thing." While another TA felt the students learned that the library is there to support them: "they learned that the library [has] their back."

The graduate student teachers also expressed confidence in the success of the sessions. Nearly all the graduate instructors responses stated that without the library sessions, most undergraduate students would not have been able to utilize articles in their papers. On a more advanced level, evaluation of student work demonstrated the importance not only of finding articles, but also of integrating them into their research products. The graduate instructors observed students utilizing better scholarly articles in their research after the World Art Studies 1400 session. One instructor specified that these articles were found through the library journal databases as opposed to broad Internet searches. Another emphasized not just the quality of cited articles, but also the relevance of these articles to the students' themes: "I was really impressed with some of the articles they used in the last assignment that kids found—really high quality, really relevant to their theme."

Undergraduates were similarly aware of the importance of finding particularly relevant articles. One student in World Art Studies 1300 remarked that the most helpful tool of the library session was the use of research guides to find the "most relevant databases to search" in order to narrow search results. Several other students emphasized the importance of finding a narrow yet pertinent selection of sources for research, rather than gathering a large amount of broad sources. These results demonstrate critical self-awareness in undergraduate students regarding the research process. Graduate instructors regarded these steps in information literacy as a tool to

overcome library anxiety. One instructor noted, "...just learning how the library operates on a basic level...was huge for them," while another expressed how "empowering" information literacy and library instruction was for the students.

### *Improvements to Graduate Information Literacy*

Graduate student instructors for World Art Studies found that training and teaching information literacy sessions was beneficial for their own work. Several instructors reported that training with librarians acted as a "refresher" for their research skills, including keyword search generation and article database usage. Moreover, demonstrating these skills for undergraduate students in the classroom required instructors to understand them on a more granular level. As one instructor remarked, "It [the library training sessions] really helped me understand what resources we have, and then conveying that to the students helps you learn it in a more intimate way." Creating sample searches, for instance, required the instructors to follow through a research trajectory while explaining the features of the library website, catalog, and article databases.

In their responses, graduate teachers highlighted the importance of mocking up searches in multiple databases in order to better understand the nuances of each. In helping students to create efficient keyword searches (including the usage of Boolean operators and truncation), graduate instructors better learned how to "more quickly and effectively go through these scholarly articles and find the articles that matter." Following interactions with their students, the instructors emphasized the importance of explaining information literacy concepts more simply, as many undergraduates knew "next to nothing" about their research topics. Due to this, teachers had to help students realize a research plan from its infancy. Instructors, then, had a model for constructing their own graduate research plans. Progressing from the first stage of research, graduate instructors also helped students to critically engage with the articles they found and to analyze them in terms of authorial voice and intended audience. This level of analytical thought in the research process was constructive for the instructors. As one response stated, "The activity and resources we provided regarding distinguishing scholarly and popular sources was helpful for formulating my own literature reviews." Comments such as this demonstrate the value of the train-the-trainer program for graduate students in conducting their own research.

Graduate instructors further experienced mutual benefit with their students in the reduction of library anxiety through familiarity with library services. Graduate students are not immune to library anxiety. Several instructors reflected on their own experiences with the issue. One remarked that helping undergraduates deal with their fears was powerful and "helped me to start working on diminishing that fear ... of the institution." In addition to searching the breadth of available article databases, graduate instructors also spoke to the "empowering" effect of finding books in the stacks and ordering publications through interlibrary loan. In their responses, graduate instructors spoke to the wide reaching benefit of accessing librarians for help in these matters. Instructors pointed to the helpfulness of a responsive subject librarian to ease their own anxieties and the anxieties of their students. One response enthused, "I don't think I really got to know any librarians when I was in college, so having information from [the art and architecture librarian], who you know you can always go to with questions ... it's a life-changer." This demonstrates the benefit of interacting with a librarian across different levels of learning. Furthermore, by collaborating in library instruction, graduate student instructors for World Art

Studies learned to take a multifaceted approach to explicating library services for their students. This, in turn, helped the graduate instructors understand their own research processes more comprehensively.

### *Improvements to Graduate Pedagogy*

The graduate students felt that the train-the-trainer program helped them with their teaching overall, not just in the library session. The graduate students now integrate information literacy concepts into the class. Particularly the activity and discussion around analyzing sources helped the TAs discuss the readings in other sessions. One TA felt this activity “was helpful in organizing recitations where we were discussing readings, because before that, nobody was thinking about who wrote these things or where they were published.” Another graduate student reiterated this point, saying the session, “helped me to analyze sources with them more articulately and thoughtfully.”

The session also helped the TAs think about the detailed steps students have to take to complete assignments, skills they had taken for granted before the training. Now they are more likely to think about the the skills the students will need in order to complete assignments. As one graduate student said, she thinks “about what it actually takes for the students to accomplish the assignment successfully.” Another graduate student said the classes have “definitely helped me concretize just how much detail and instruction [students] need on assignments and class materials.”

### *Graduate Students and Future Collaboration*

One of the goals for this project was for the library to start building relationships with graduate students that would last their entire career. Many masters students in Art & Art History will go on to careers as faculty or museum professionals. By demonstrating the benefits of library collaboration and the importance of information literacy early we hoped this would lead to new partnerships as they move to other institutions and positions. Our evidence suggests that this relationship building will lead to a richer model of collaboration, where graduate students are likely to work with a librarian both for their own research and in their teaching.

The graduate students we interviewed all expressed increased likelihood of collaborating with libraries in the future. The response was even greater than we might have predicted. There was recognition of the necessity of library classes and an information literacy component in courses: “I think the training and classes have made me realize how necessary library collaboration is in teaching.” There was also an appreciation of the expertise that librarians can contribute to a research partnership; one graduate student was impressed by “how vast the expanse of information that librarians now have to deal with is. Librarians really need higher-level critical thinking...” One graduate student might even have been converted to the profession, saying the collaboration “makes me want to *be* a librarian in the future.” The graduate students’ feedback made it clear that the train-the-trainer program had a very positive impact on both their view of librarians and the necessity of library collaboration. We feel the program was successful in predisposing future professionals to working with the library.

## **Areas for Improvement**

While we felt the program was an overall success, there were many areas that could be improved. The most common suggestion for improvement was to cover more areas by integrating information literacy throughout the semester. We see this as evidence of the effectiveness of the sessions in convincing the graduate students of the importance of information literacy. One graduate student said, “Instead of one big recitation in the library, we could work on certain skills as the semester goes along. I think the students need to scaffold their learning rather than having it all at once.”

This desire to incorporate information literacy throughout the semester may have been driven by the time constraints faced by the library sessions. We consistently had to cut content from the 50 minute classes: there simply was not enough time for everything we wanted the students to learn. The graduate teachers felt this acutely as one said “time restraints made it more difficult to be clear and comprehensive,” another said “I’m not sure all the students took away all the learning goals though, again just because of time.”

One of the biggest changes between the first and second semester was the incorporation of course reading in the second semester class. The success of this session design has led us to emulate this approach in more recent semester, by incorporating information literacy topics through reading discussions as a way to integrate library instruction more comprehensively throughout the course. The recitation sessions can move beyond just talking about the content of the articles and talk about their context: how the authors find and use evidence, how they present their findings, how they construct authority. This has introduced students to the ways scholarly discourse is conducted in art history, and helped them conceptualize their own research as part of this conversation.

One area singled out for improvement was student engagement. Following the World Art Studies 1300 library session, 28.2% of students claimed to have no further research questions; after the 1400 session, 38.2% of students claimed the same. And there still were some students who did not use appropriate sources. Rather than a reflection on the library session as a whole, these instructors noted that limitations centered on student engagement. As one response noted, “The ones that were there and listening and trying were really successful.” One graduate student suggested “making it fun and showing that it is a resource for life.” For future sessions we may want to incorporate even more active learning. We will also want to make sure the TAs emphasize the transferability of library skills outside of art history.

## **Conclusion**

Transitioning to more of a train-the-trainers role allows librarians to multiply our effects and has many secondary advantages for the trainees. By expanding the pool of library instructors, we were able to teach information literacy more effectively than would have otherwise been possible. While having a librarian teach each session would have resulted in more professional information literacy instruction this level of staffing is unlikely. Additionally, important semester long benefits such as incorporation throughout the course discussions and more skillful feedback on research papers would be lost. Moreover, collaborating with graduate students also provides

them with important research and teaching skills, as well as predisposing them to working with librarians in the future. It is certainly challenging to forgo being in charge of information literacy sessions and to let graduate students make mistakes or struggle with a demonstration. But the difficult work of letting go of control of the library classroom is rewarded by seeing the graduate students become passionate library teachers in their own right. Can only librarians teach library instruction? Not if we want to expand our reach and empower the next generation of scholars.

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## **Appendix**

### *World Art Studies I Assessment Questions*

1. What section are you in? (Day & Time)
2. What were the most important things you learned today? Why?
3. When it comes to doing research, what questions do you still have or what would you like to learn more about?

### *World Art Studies II Assessment Questions*

1. What section are you in (Day & Time)
2. Did you take World Art Studies I last semester? Yes/no
3. What research skills do you feel like you learned in this class?
4. When it comes to doing research, what questions do you still have or what would you like to learn more about?

### *Graduate Student Interview Questions*

1. What do you think your students learned or took away from the library sessions?
2. Did you feel like you were able to convey all the skills that you wanted students to learn?
3. How do you think the classes affected your students' view of the library/librarians?
4. What effect if any did you feel like the classes had on your students' work?
5. How effective did you find the training sessions in improving your ability to teach information literacy?
6. Have conducting the library classes altered your their teaching methods or style? How so?
7. Has the training and teaching the classes had any effect on how you conduct, think about, or approach research? How so?
8. How has the classes affected your view of the library/librarians?
9. Do you think these classes and trainings would make you more likely to collaborate with librarians in the future?
10. Overall do feel the program was successful?
11. How could the collaboration be improved?