

Library Databases as Writing-Course Anthologies: Implications of a New Kind of Online Textbook

Jennifer E. Knievel

ABSTRACT. At the University of Colorado Libraries, thousands of students are using a collection of readings drawn from our full text online databases. These readings were prepared in close collaboration with a large campus writing program. They are used in place of, or in addition to, a course textbook. Other libraries may want to consider similar projects, which will allow them to make use of the rich resources available from the library, familiarize students with library resources, and foster collaboration with campus programs. Projects like this encourage outreach from libraries to the university community, and help build strong ties with potential campus allies. This project may also have implications for course packs, e-reserves, and student textbook sales. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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INTRODUCTION

Information and research resources have changed, and library instruction has changed with them. Instruction librarians continuously attempt

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to strike a balance between skill-based and concept-based instruction (Oberman 1996; Gresham 1997); the terminology of the field has migrated from Bibliographic Instruction to Information Literacy Instruction. University libraries have had a teaching mission for some time, but our focus has changed. Students have gone from finding too little in the card catalog to finding too much on the Internet; they have transformed from relying on books to depending exclusively on the Internet. The development of the Association of College and Research Libraries' *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* is an indication that the real deficiency in students still is not traditional library skills but critical thinking and the ability to approach research in a critical, evaluative way. Along with changes in library resources have come changes in instruction in other disciplines as well, specifically in writing courses. Critical thinking is also the major concern in many writing programs. The Council of Writing Program Administrators' *Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition* prioritizes critical thinking, reading, and writing in first-year writing courses as an essential element of effective writing skills. The goals of these two groups are often so similar that writing programs and libraries constitute a natural collaboration. One example of a successful, large-scale collaboration is provided by the University of Colorado at Boulder, where the Program for Writing and Rhetoric and the University Libraries are very tightly integrated. There are many elements to this collaboration, one of which is helping to provide course readings for students taking the first-year writing course.

HISTORY

In the literature of education, there is some discussion of what current anthologies for writing courses include, and whether or not those collections meet the needs of a writing class and of writing students (Figg 1992; Langley 1990; Besser, Stone, and Nan 1999). Besser et al. conclude that students do not respond well to a textbook they consider out of date. Of course, a static textbook can only be up-to-date for a very short time. If it excludes current topics, the absence will cause students to perceive it as outdated. If it includes current topics, however, students will consider it out of date as soon as those topics have fallen out of favor. Another evaluation of handbooks hypothesizes that reader anthologies should be separate from grammar or mechanics handbooks, so that both can be more effective (Figg 1992). One problem identified in textbook evaluations is that writings in anthologies often appear to the stu-

dents as essays “designed . . . for writing courses and writing students,” rather than “texts . . . written for real-world occasions” (Langley 1990). There has been very little discussion of the use of online anthologies for students in writing classes, or of integrating course readings with library instruction, though it is mentioned by Martin and Emmons in a recent article. They suggest that librarians might want to be involved in choosing readings for a first year writing course as a way to smooth library instruction and make it more effective (Emmons and Martin 2002).

Information literacy has gained widespread acceptance in higher education “as making an important contribution to decision-making; problem-solving; independent learning; continuing professional development; and research” (Bruce 1998). For several years there have been widespread calls for more integration of information literacy skills into university curricula, and many success stories that focus on the importance of collaboration with faculty (Information Literacy Competency Standards Task Force 2000; Sonntag and Ohr 1996; Arp and Wilson 1989; Iannuzzi 1999). Librarians continue to emphasize the importance of increasingly tight integration and more collaboration with faculty (Emmons and Martin 2002). An online anthology for writing classes, like the one created at the University of Colorado, is a fruitful opportunity for collaboration that has been minimally explored.

DEVELOPMENT OF READING THEMES

The University of Colorado at Boulder’s Program for Writing and Rhetoric (PWR) recently initiated a required writing course for all incoming freshmen—approximately 5,000 students per year. The course currently reaches 70% of the incoming freshman class, and will soon reach nearly 100%. Sections of the course are limited to 15 students per section. Instructors for the course include full-time, part-time, and adjunct instructors, and graduate students. Until this course was developed, there was no single course required of all students. The campus and the PWR are committed to information literacy for their students. As a result, the curriculum, goals, objectives, and grading standards of the course include information literacy components. Using a series of assignments, seminars, and a drop-in help center, librarians teach course-integrated information literacy units over the entire semester. A unique element of this collaboration between the libraries and the PWR is the development of several “topic themes” of full-text online articles, which the PWR instructors use in place of, or in combination with, a traditional writing anthology. Anthologies are gener-

ally collections of articles designed to teach elements of writing (e.g., style, voice, audience, context, evaluation). At the University of Colorado (CU) the Libraries have begun to provide similar collections online, solving a number of problems for the faculty of the Program for Writing and Rhetoric, and raising some questions for librarians.

Why the Textbook Wasn't Quite Enough

The first semester of the writing course at CU Boulder was a pilot semester. Seven sections of the course were created based on a common set of goals and objectives, including information literacy. The instructors appreciated the strengths of using an anthology; they could ensure that students had read several articles on a common theme, and use those articles to discuss elements of writing, however, they were frustrated by the lack of choices in the anthology. They did not like the subjects offered in the anthology, and neither did the students. Besser et al. point out that "students consider textbooks an integral part of the course learning experience." Besser et al. also caution that "the cost of the book is a potentially negative factor as is dated material" (Besser, Stone, and Nan 1999). Some instructors collected other readings to use in class, but those who used the textbook only minimally felt guilty about the cost the students incurred for a book they hardly used. Choosing a different reader would not solve the problems, since other readers would have the same drawbacks of static content, rigid topic selections, and dated material. They wanted collections of readings that were flexible, could be changed and updated, and most of all, they wanted online access. Their students were familiar and comfortable with online materials, and the instructors preferred the idea of online sources to reserves in the library. It was the perfect opportunity for the librarians to combine their intimate knowledge of the course objectives with their expertise in searching and using online databases. CU librarians offered to collect online full text sets of readings for the course, with each set centering on a specific subject theme.

Creating the Reading Themes

The librarians in the reference department of the CU Boulder Libraries worked with the Interim Associate Director of the PWR. With an overall idea of literacy for all the reading themes, librarians began with a collection of eight themes:

1. Science Literacy
2. E-literacy

3. Public Literacy: Old and Modern Chautauquas
4. Environment: Water and the West
5. Language and Gender
6. Learning Technology
7. Visual Literacy
8. “Dancing with Professors” or the relationship of students to the greater university culture

Librarians collected only articles on these subjects that were available full text online from one of our aggregate databases, which are large, varied collections of article citations. For this project, we primarily used articles from FirstSearch Periodical Abstracts, EBSCO Academic Search Premier, Infotrac Expanded Academic ASAP, and JSTOR. From lists of citations provided by the librarians, the associate director of the PWR culled out the articles that best served the purposes of the course. The librarians and the associate director looked for articles that provided opportunities for careful, close reading, for interesting subjects that would stimulate discussion of both the topic and the writing elements employed, and for articles that could be the seed for other interesting topics the students would use in their own writing as the semester progressed. The head of reference secured permission from our database vendors to place on our web page a durable link, or stable URL, for each article. A stable URL allows a student to click on a link from a web page and move directly into full text of an article housed in an online full text database, bypassing the intermediate steps of searching through the index for the appropriate citation. This is particularly important for freshmen, most of whom do not know how to use a database to find a cited article. Since the articles still resided on the vendors’ servers, students could not gain access without an approved IP address proving their affiliation with the University of Colorado. This ensured that use of the articles remained consistent with our license agreements. Once librarians had identified stable URLs for each article, the links were compiled into a series of web pages for the different themes. Librarians attempted to integrate the themes as closely as possible with course content. See the University Libraries PWR website for more details (Reference Department 2002). Duin and Gorak, while working on a different kind of technologically integrated text, underscore the importance of this integration of course content and online textbooks. “As college instructors seek to incorporate computer applications into their teaching and their students’ learning processes, we will need to develop textbooks that are highly integrated computer . . . documents” (Duin and Gorak 1992).

Reading Themes in the Classrooms

Instructors for this course used the themes in several ways. Some assigned specific articles from a theme for students to read, or to use for close-reading exercises in class. Some deliberately chose articles from the themes that failed in some aspect of argument, and asked students to critique those articles. This was a useful exercise that promoted critical thinking (Gareis 1995), an essential ingredient of information literacy. Other instructors assigned a certain number of articles from a specific theme, but let the students choose which articles were most interesting to them. Other instructors assigned articles from the themes as starting places for research assignments. As the course progressed, instructors suggested new topics, and offered suggestions for additional articles in existing themes. Some instructors established overall topics for their entire course (environment, health and the body, etc.), and used the reading themes as springboards for these topics. Several instructors have created entire new themes on subjects of interest to their students; "Terrorism" and "Images of Society" are two examples.

Typical Technical Troubles

As always, there are technical problems associated with online projects. Each semester, some students have trouble accessing the articles from off campus. This obstacle is standard for students attempting to use the databases from off campus, but the problem was more immediate for these students, who needed to access the themes early in their first semester. The problem is usually easily solved, and is almost always one of user authentication as a member of the university. The other technical problem was some bizarre behavior from the stable URLs. Some links mysteriously redirected themselves to other copies of the articles that were not full-text. Those were easily fixed as soon as the librarians heard about them. The problem was apparently temporary, as it has not recurred since the first few weeks of the Fall 2001 semester.

Why Not E-Reserves or Course Packs?

This online anthology, in many ways, plays the role of a course pack or a collection of articles on electronic reserves. The reading themes cannot be nearly as broad as a course pack can be. The themes are limited to book chapters or articles that are available full text online in one of CU's aggregate databases or online journals: a criterion that still limits them to a relatively small portion of the library's total holdings.

Course packs escape this restraint. The reading themes are also similar to e-reserves. They particularly share the benefit of 24 hour online accessibility for many students, simultaneously. The chief advantage of using online articles from aggregate databases instead of articles on e-reserves is technology. We are not responsible for digitizing the articles in our online databases. Currently, we are digitizing the materials in e-reserves. While CU's e-reserves software was new and unstable when this project began, the library's online databases (with a few exceptions) were stable and tested. Another advantage reading themes hold over both e-reserves and course packs is that copyright has already been paid for in the large fees to database vendors. Using online full text articles to create reading themes gives librarians the ability to avoid one instance of paying several times for the same material.

GOOD IDEA OR BAD IDEA?

Good Idea: Flexibility, Cost, and Collaboration

One of the primary successes of this project was the way in which the library's collections met the needs of the instructors in the Program for Writing and Rhetoric. It is easy for librarians to change and remove articles in the themes. Librarians can tailor the themes to local interests requested by the students and tailor other themes to the teaching strengths of the faculty. These are needs a static textbook cannot meet. The themes allow librarians and faculty to create timely topics for research. After September 11, 2001, many of the students wanted to write about terrorism, Islam, or the Taliban, all of which were previously infrequent topics. The speed with which librarians can create new themes allowed us to meet that need by adding a theme on terrorism. The themes are easy to update and add to as new articles become available. This flexibility also allows the reading themes to interact with the course discussion, which leads to stronger research papers. Interaction like this has been successful in other information literacy programs (Sonntag and Ohr 1996).

Another benefit of this project is cost to the students. For instructors who choose to use the themes without a paper anthology, the students have fewer textbooks to buy. At the University of Colorado, it is currently cheaper to print than to copy, so if students would like a hard copy of the article, it is cheaper for them to print it from online than to have to copy it from an item on reserve. Another chief benefit is the online availability of the articles. Students, especially those who do not live on or near campus, appreciate the freedom of getting the articles off a web site at any time,

and from any location, provided they can authenticate themselves as members of the University of Colorado. Even on-campus students prefer to do their work from their dorm rooms when they can, and it is helpful for students to be able to get the articles when the library is closed.

A more subtle, long-term benefit is the relationship the themes create among the library, the instructors, and the students. Some students can be intimidated by library research simply because they are unfamiliar with library resources or the library environment (Dorner, Taylor, and Hodson-Carlton 2001; Maughan 2001). With the themes as their anthology, students become accustomed early on to working with library resources, and they become familiar with the appearance of articles from some of the library's databases. The themes set up a close working relationship among the librarians and the instructors; the instructors have direct influence on the content of the themes. Emmons and Martin, in discussing the effectiveness of information literacy instruction programs, argue for the value of collaboration among writing instructors and librarians in topic choice (2002). Finally, using the themes early on lays the groundwork for the students and instructors to work with the library over the course of the semester to provide information literacy instruction. For more information on the collaboration between PWR and the CU Libraries, please see the PWR web page (Program for Writing and Rhetoric 2002).

Bad Idea: Maintenance, Time, and a New Vendor

The problems with the themes are, perhaps, predictable. While updating and maintaining the themes is simple and quick, it still requires staff time in an already tightly staffed university library. This problem is partially mitigated by enlisting the help of graduate and undergraduate student employees, and the Web master. Also, when CU librarians initially collected articles for the themes, it took more time than anticipated. There were several reasons for this. The biggest reason was that the purpose and use of these themes was still becoming clear as the librarians were attempting to build them. For the first few themes, the goal was not as clear as it was later on, and that made it difficult to determine which articles were most appropriate. Another barrier librarians did not anticipate is the switch of database vendors. Some of the databases changed platforms in the course's third full semester, which meant the existing stable URLs in proprietary databases were no longer accessible. Overlap allowed us to replace many of the URLs with full text articles in the new database, but some slight modification of the themes was required for articles that students no longer had access to online.

Assessing the Reading Themes

CU librarians conducted a formal assessment of the reading themes with the PWR faculty. However, feedback from the faculty was not extensive enough to allow us to effectively assess the success of the themes. We are discussing better assessment methods, working closely with faculty, and planning to evaluate data measuring the hits in each reading theme to get a better idea of what is being used and what can be eliminated or modified. This focused evaluation will also allow us to measure usage of the reading themes to support the time and effort involved in maintaining them.

DISCUSSION: IS THIS OUR JOB?

Perhaps the biggest question of this project is whether or not the project of creating reading themes for the Program for Writing and Rhetoric is really an appropriate role for librarians. This collaboration encourages interaction among librarians and faculty, and helps us reach out to teaching faculty more effectively. However, it assumes an understanding of pedagogical theory on the part of the librarians. Given the typical academic reference librarian's teaching experience and training in critical analysis of sources, this may not be an unreasonable expectation. As the faculty of the PWR becomes increasingly involved with this project, this concern is minimized.

Some libraries, for various reasons, have attempted to adopt the traditional responsibilities of publishers. This could be viewed as a similar project, designed to take on the role of publisher. However, an idea like this is different in that its content is customized based on the holdings of the university, and even more importantly, the interests and involvement of the faculty. This is a project publishers are unlikely to want to adopt because of the sheer complication of managing so many different collections that are of value to only one campus. Assuming this is a logical arena in which libraries may want to develop similar projects, there is also a question of whether or not this is an effective use of staff time. Even if faculty are providing the citations for new reading themes and making the requests, are we agreeing, by hosting the reading themes, to take on another duty that is peripheral to the mission of a university library? And yet, it may be less peripheral than it appears, since a project like this can support not only the goals of information literacy, but the relationships of libraries and other campus departments; an effect that should not be ignored. One could argue that too much of a project like this is duplicated in e-reserves. However,

there are clear advantages for library and student finances and efforts invested. One major consideration is the possible implications of this project were it to develop into a widespread use of library resources. At CU this online anthology is limited to the use of one course, though it has many sections. If this became a standard approach to collections of readings for many courses, the related workload for librarians would be significantly increased. Further study is warranted to discover the real value of a project like this to determine if it justifies such an investment.

A clear indication of the success of a program like this could be use. A close look at the use of these reading themes may provide justification for this project. The strongest statement from the PWR of faith in the value and success of this project would be the decision to abandon the idea of a handbook that includes an anthology; a move the program has not yet made, although some individual faculty have made the leap to not using a reading anthology.

There is great overlap in the discussions among librarians of information literacy, and the goals and objectives of writing instruction. The Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) *Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition* includes several outcomes that revolve around critical thinking, critical reading, and critical writing (Council of Writing Program Administrators 1999). The WPA's heavy emphasis on critical thinking dovetails ideally with information literacy instruction. Compare the "Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing" section of the WPA Outcomes with the ACRL *Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education* (Information Literacy Competency Standards Task Force 2000).

WPA	ACRL
<p>Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing</p> <p>By the end of first-year composition, students should</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating • Understand a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources • Integrate their own ideas with those of others • Understand the relationships among language, knowledge, and power 	<p>Information Literacy Defined</p> <p>An information literate individual is able to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine the extent of the information needed • Access the needed information effectively and efficiently • Evaluate information and its sources critically • Incorporate selected information into one's own knowledge base • Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose • Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally

Collaboration with writing programs is natural, maybe even critical, and successful collaboration begins with building strong ties between the two entities. Librarians need to work with courses like a freshman writing course because instruction is so much more effective in the context of a student's real research investigation than as a general introduction to research tools (Sonntag and Ohr 1996). This is particularly true of freshmen, who often have difficulty seeing the application of research among courses and specific assignments. Writing courses need to work with librarians because critical reading, research, and writing, cannot be effectively taught in isolation from information literacy. Projects like this carry the intangible value of strengthening those important ties. The involvement of the library is particularly important because, as Emmons and Martin point out, many writing and rhetoric instructors are very familiar with rhetoric research, but sometimes not sufficiently well-versed in the rhetorical approach to teach research in other areas. Angelo argues that we need a "learning community-like culture" to really transform learning into a student centered exercise. We need "shared trust . . . , shared visions and goals . . . , shared language and concepts . . . , [and] shared motivation" (Angelo 1999). Writing programs and librarians already share goals, concepts, and some language in their mutual desire for teaching students to think more critically and evaluate effectively. Even where our language is different, conceptually we agree and need only to expand our definitions. Where trust is absent we need to recognize our mutual goals and our shared expertise in different facets of critical thinking and evaluation instruction. This sharing allows us not only to work together, but to use assessment of our collaboration to create better learning for the students.

WHAT NEXT?

Though the first eleven themes were compiled by librarians, we increased the participation of faculty in the content of new and existing themes, so that most of the new themes are collected by the faculty in their area of expertise, and existing themes are modified based on instructor feedback. It is important the faculty see this as a collaboration, rather than as a librarian project. Since many faculty members would not be sufficiently familiar with the online aggregator databases, or the relevant licensing agreements, to initiate a project like this on their own, it was important that the librarians began this project. As the program becomes more mature, faculty has taken substantial ownership of this

online anthology, which has decreased the burden this project originally placed on librarians' schedules. We have formally and informally solicited feedback from instructors on the themes. We are also considering increasing the subject overlap with the themes and the course textbook, so that instructors can use combinations of readings in their courses if they decide to include a textbook.

CONCLUSION

The University of Colorado at Boulder maintains a very successful information literacy component in the required first-year writing course. One element of this collaboration between the library and the writing program has been to create an online anthology of reading themes for use in teaching the writing course. So far, creating reading themes with articles from aggregator databases has been very successful. As the project matures, the faculty is taking increasing ownership of the content in the reading themes. This project allows students to gain increasing familiarity with library resources, saves students money when they are not required to purchase a textbook, and nurtures the relationship between the University Libraries and the large Program for Writing and Rhetoric. Libraries of all sizes interested in strengthening outreach to the university community and broad campus programs may want to consider similar projects.

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