

Integrating Information Literacy and Writing

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Abstract

Information literacy and writing instruction are a perfect fit. Both involve critical thinking, evaluation, integration, and research. Teaching information literacy in the context of a first-year writing course is often an ideal collaboration. This article describes an extremely successful example of such a closely integrated collaboration between the library and the campus writing program, particularly in the freshman-level writing course. The four elements of this collaborative information literacy instruction program are online reading themes, an extensive online tutorial, library seminars, and a Research Center.

Introduction

Information literacy instruction is currently being handled in many creative ways around the country. Some libraries rely on nonintegrated instruction such as the stand alone presentation. Many librarians teach the commonly used one shot instruction sessions, either in general education programs or first-year experience classes. Others teach credit courses in information literacy. Some fortunate librarians are able to collaborate closely with campus departments for integrated, programmatic information literacy instruction.[1] The University of Colorado at Boulder (CU) Libraries provide an example of a very fruitful, successful collaboration of this kind in its relationship with the campus writing program. It is a mutually beneficial relationship for all parties involved.

Background and history

CU is a Research I, doctoral-granting institution with 26,400 FTE students. In the last several years, the freshman class each year has hovered just above 5,000 students. The university has several colleges, one of which is Arts & Sciences, which encompasses disciplines in the sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. One of the many programs housed in Arts & Sciences is the Program for Writing and Rhetoric (PWR). The PWR is the newest generation of an existing campus writing program. A previous iteration of the program was called the University Writing Program (UWRP). A program review of the UWRP served as the inspiration for the creation of PWR. The UWRP conducted many writing courses, almost entirely at the upper division level and dominated by literature themes. Demand from the students, their parents, and the faculty for a lower-level, more interdisciplinary writing requirement developed over time. The PWR, as one of its most visible efforts, created a first year writing course that was targeted toward more levels of students, and reaches more incoming students. The course is currently required of 100% of incoming Arts & Sciences freshmen, which encompasses the majority of incoming students at the university. Talks have begun to expand the course requirement to all the incoming students in the colleges of Business and Engineering as well.

The goals and objectives of the course were developed originally by a campus wide committee. The stated purpose of the course was “to help students think critically about the texts they read and the writing they produce, and to enable them to shape and express ideas with clarity and grace, whether in academic, professional, or civic contexts.” The original committee included a librarian who successfully introduced the committee to the concepts of information literacy. Over time the original committee became committed to integrating information literacy into the first year writing course. This commitment was demonstrated by three decisions made early on. The committee decided to use the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards[2] as a

foundation for the library component in the first-year writing course. After the first year, PWR also agreed to pay for part time staffing to help with the information literacy program. Third, the committee agreed that a portion of each student's overall grade would derive from student participation in the information literacy program. Having a librarian on the committee helped ensure strong support for collaboration from the teaching faculty, a common problem mentioned in library literature. Larry Hardesty wrote in his article detailing faculty culture that "the wide-scale acceptance by faculty of bibliographic instruction has not occurred." [3] With intense pressure to publish scholarly research, teaching is no longer emphasized in today's academic environment. Hardesty believes that as a result, faculty often do not consider librarians as peers and are hesitant to collaborate with them. Evan Faber provides a history of this common obstacle and believes that the solution lies in active librarians pursuing a course-related information literacy model. [4] Articles by Patricia Iannuzzi and Ruth Ivey provide further strategies to turn faculty into active participants in integrating information literacy. [5]

Information literacy, as many librarians have discovered, fits snugly into courses on writing, and this course is a shining example of that useful cooperation. CU does not have a freshman orientation course or other universal course into which information literacy might be integrated. A writing course on the scale of the first year course offered at CU raises the spectre of thousands of students per semester descending upon the reference desks in mid-October and early March. Working closely with the writing course allows librarians to teach information literacy in manageable portions, spread out over time. In addition, the information literacy program at CU allows librarians to introduce students to the basics of information literacy early in their college career. CU reference librarians have noticed that students who have participated in this instruction are asking more sophisticated research questions at reference desks.

Goals and objectives for the course are based upon the Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition by The Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA). This statement includes several outcomes that revolve around critical thinking, critical reading, and critical writing. [6] The WPA's heavy emphasis on critical thinking dovetails ideally with information literacy instruction. At CU, information literacy is woven tightly into the goals and objectives of the first year course. The first year writing course at CU began as a pilot course with only 7 sections of 15 students each in Spring semester 2001. It quickly burgeoned into a robust program of nearly 100 sections of 18 students each in the Fall 2004 semester. The information literacy instruction integrated into the course has been well received and highly valued by instructors and students. Particularly grateful are the upper classmen who take the course later than usual in their college career. They are the most likely to approach the librarian at some point of the semester to express their regret over not learning these concepts earlier. Most PWR course instructors believe that information literacy instruction is indispensable for a writing course, and they integrate information literacy into their upper division writing courses, as well as the first year course, even without the prompting of the librarians. The course goals and objectives are now managed by a committee of PWR faculty, in addition to two librarians who are standing members of the committee.

Elements of the Program

The four components of the information literacy program are the online reading themes, online tutorial, library seminar, and the Research Center.

Reading Themes The reading themes are a collection of articles from the University Libraries online databases used by the PWR instructors as an alternative to a traditional writing anthology. [7] Currently there are 11 themes ranging from such topics as the environment and intellectual property to scientific literacy. All parties involved in the first-year writing course agree that the reading themes are extraordinarily useful. Instructors appreciate the flexibility of the readings, which can be changed and updated frequently. Students are grateful for the reprieve from purchasing an expensive print anthology for the course. Librarians know that the reading themes help familiarize students to the rich resources available at the library. Reference librarians work with instructors from PWR to find, select, and then upload themed articles to a web page.

The themes are used as close readings, as topics to discuss in class, or as a starting off place for research assignments.

Research Instruction Online Tutorial The Research Instruction Online Tutorial (RIOT) is comprised of four modules designed to teach information literacy. Module 1 “Think” teaches students how to clarify their research topic by developing good keywords. Module 2 “Find” introduces the library catalog and two subscription article databases. Module 3 “Evaluate” explains how to evaluate sources for author credibility, research validity, and topic relevance. Module 4 “Cite” discusses plagiarism and how to cite sources. Interspersed throughout each module is a set of quiz questions. Modules 1, 2, and 4 utilize multiple choice questions graded automatically by the tutorial. Module 3 requires short answer responses, which are submitted electronically and graded by library staff. To access RIOT, students must log in with their student identification number and password. This information ensures that RIOT records the correct quiz scores for individual students and sends the scores to the proper instructor. This also allows for the quiz scores to be automatically sent to the students via their university e-mail addresses. Quiz scores are automatically mailed weekly to the course instructors. Instructors can also log in to the tutorial at any time. The e-mailed scores provide convenience for the instructors so they can include the students’ quiz scores in the course grades. The quiz scores help provide assessment for the tutorial, and guide the librarians in making changes to quiz questions and tutorial content. The overall average score for the tutorial is 80.6%. Average scores for each module are 83.3% for Module 1, 81.9% for Module 2, 82.9% for Module 3, and 71.9% for Module 4.

The tutorial tracks information about every question in the tutorial. For frequently missed questions, the librarians were able to rearrange earlier elements of the tutorial to make the proper strategy more clear. The most missed question in the entire tutorial follows. Each answer is followed by the percentage of students who chose that answer. “Keller, George. (March 2001). “The New Demographics of Higher Education.” *Review of Higher Education*. Volume 24, Issue 3, 219-235.” To find out if our library has a copy of this article, the first thing you should do is:

- a. perform a periodical title search for *Review of Higher Education* (31.5%)
- b. perform an author search for Keller, George (15.6%)
- c. perform a periodical title search for *The New Demographics of Higher Education* (28.1%)
- d. perform a title search for *The New Demographics of Higher Education* (15.3%)
- e. perform a title search for *Review of Higher Education* (9.4%)

Only 31.5% of the students correctly answered the question by choosing option A, the “search for [the periodical title]” option. Nearly as many of the respondents chose the “search for [the article title]” option. More students chose the “search for [the author’s name]” answer than the option to perform a general title search.

Seminar Instructors can schedule a library seminar for any time after students have completed RIOT. This ensures that students have some basic library skills, allowing the seminar to focus on more advanced search techniques. The library also requests that seminars be scheduled for a time when students have individual research topics, since they benefit most from a seminar when they have an immediate need for researching skills. To guarantee a course-integrated seminar, the library staff member and instructor discuss the student assignments and topic selection. During the seminar the library staff member reviews the main points of RIOT, assists students in the most effective search strategies, and guides them to the proper sources. The purpose of the seminar is to build on the concepts introduced in the tutorial. The seminar focuses on discipline-based research, guided by the librarian. Then students work individually on their research topic under the direction of the library staff member.

Research Center The drop-in Research Center offers one-on-one assistance exclusively to students enrolled in the first-year writing course. The Research Center helps with accessing the reading themes, completing RIOT, and finding resources for the students’ research projects. The Center is open eight hours a week and is staffed by the graduate assistants. Over four hundred students visited the center in 2003-2004 and nearly all agreed in their evaluation forms that the service provided was extremely beneficial. The Research Center and the University Writing

Center are co-located in a large multi-purpose library computer lab. This is an ideal situation since the two groups offer complementary services; students can receive both writing and research help in one location. The Research Center and University Writing Center are slated to move to a new shared space, in which it will be possible to keep the Research Center open for longer hours, which is a popular student request.

Conclusion

The outstanding collaboration at CU between the library and the Program for Writing and Rhetoric enjoys a bright future. The PWR continues to grow, and will eventually encompass Business students, and maybe Engineering students. The course, so expanded, would reach almost all incoming students at the university, or approximately 5,000 students per year. The librarians plan to continue refinement and development of the self-grading online tutorial. In addition, the librarians intend to create a public, non-grading version of the tutorial for those not enrolled in one of the PWR courses. The PWR faculty has agreed to work with librarians to create new reading themes. Librarians continue to play important roles in the PWR program, particularly by serving on curriculum committees such as the First Year Course Committee. Most importantly, the librarians and PWR faculty will continue to nurture the collaboration of our programs, one that so tangibly benefits the faculty, the librarians, and most of all, the students.

Endnotes

[1] For examples of various kinds of integrations, see Rosemary M Young and Stephena Harmony, *Working with faculty to design undergraduate information literacy programs: a how-to-do-it manual for librarians*. (New York: Neal-Schuman, 1999); G. Sonntag and D.M. Ohr, "The development of a lower-division, general education, course-integrated information literacy program," *College & Research Libraries* 57 (1996): 331-338; and C. Boff et. al., "The library and first-year experience courses: a nationwide study," *Reference Services Review* 30 (2002): 277-87.

[2] Association of College and Research Libraries (2000), *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, available at <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.htm> (accessed 20 November, 2004).

[3] Larry Hardesty, "Faculty Culture and Bibliographic Instruction: An Exploratory Analysis," *Library Trends* 44 (Fall 1995): 339-367.

[4] Evan Farber, "Faculty –librarian cooperation: a personal retrospective," *Reference Services Review* 27 (1999): 229-234.

[5] See Patricia Iannuzzi, "Faculty Development and Information Literacy: Establishing Campus Partnerships," *Reference Services Review* 26 (Fall/Winter 1998): 97-102, 116; and Ruth Ivey, "Information Literacy: How Do Librarians and Academics Work in Partnership to Deliver Effective Learning Programs?" *Australian Academic & Research Libraries* 34 (June 2003): 100-103.

[6] Council of Writing Program Administrators, *WPA Outcomes Statement for First-year Composition*. WPA: Writing Program Administration 23 (1999): 59-66.

[7] For more explanation of these, see Jennifer Knievel, "Library Databases as Writing-Course Anthologies: Implications of a New Kind of Online Textbook," *Public Services Quarterly* 1 (2003): 67-79.