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From the Outside Looking In

Lessons Learned about Library Instruction from Working as a Composition Instructor

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Librarians often teach instructional sessions through the one-shot model. While this model allows the library to embed itself into many courses, it leaves the librarian with a very limited view into how their instructional sessions fit into an overall course. The author, having a unique perspective as both a composition instructor and librarian, reports on her experience having viewed library instruction sessions through both lenses. The author describes lessons learned from her experience along with specific enhancements that she made to her library instruction sessions. While her experience is institution-specific and offers just one perspective, the article addresses how one could apply the lessons learned at other institutions.

Introduction

Library instruction in the university setting frequently occurs in the context of a one-shot session during a required course such as a freshman seminar or composition course. This is the case at my place of employment, Penn State University, where library instruction typically occurs during a single session of either the freshman composition course or the freshman speech course. One drawback of this approach, as many librarians will agree, is that the librarian is given a limited window into the course. Such limited contact with the course instructor and students can lead to miscommunication, frustration, and even despair that a library session may not have had the desired impact.

For the past three years, I have worked as both a freshmen composition instructor for the English department and as an instruction librarian whose primary audience is the freshmen composition course. Therefore, I have had the unique opportunity to see more fully how library instruction fits into an overall course. Seeing library instruction through both lenses has been eye-opening in many ways, particularly in terms of understanding the needs of composition instructors and the impact on students from one-shot library instruction. I wrote this article to share what I have learned along the way.

Literature Review

Interest in how course instructors view library instruction is nothing new; a review of the library literature over the past 20 years reveals a number of studies that have examined faculty beliefs, views, and attitudes concerning library instruction. These studies have typically used survey and/or interview methodology, and the results have been used to identify general trends in how faculty view library instruction and information literacy.

Hrycaj and Russo (2007) conducted one of the larger studies to focus on perceptions of library instruction. In this study, the researchers surveyed 188 faculty members across disciplines at Louisiana State University to gauge their attitudes on various aspects of library instruction. Their results indicate that faculty feel library research skills are very important for their students, but very few faculty—only 12 percent—actually take advantage of class-related library instruction sessions. The authors of the study expressed concern over this contradiction between faculty's stated attitude toward library instruction and what the faculty actually practice.

Vander Meer, Perez-Stable, and Sachs (2012) came to a similar conclusion in a survey of 118 faculty members at Western Michigan University. The focus of this study was to understand both faculty perceptions of library instruction in general and their preferences for technology use in this type of instruction. Among the pertinent findings, the researchers reported that faculty value information literacy skills such as finding, evaluating, and using information sources, but almost 41 percent of the respondents have never taken advantage of library instruction. When asked why, the most commonly cited reasons for not using library instruction are lack of awareness of the service, not wanting to give up valuable class time, and not feeling like the session would be relevant for the course.

A handful of studies have looked more generally at how faculty perceive the overall goal of library instruction—information literacy. A notable study by DaCosta (2010) compared faculty perceptions of information literacy at an English institution with those at an American institution. The results show a gap at both institutions between the value that faculty said they placed on information literacy and their actual incorporation of it within their courses. Bury (2011) came to virtually the same conclusion after conducting an online survey of faculty across disciplines at her institution in order to understand their perceptions of and experiences with information literacy. She found that professors are concerned that their students are not sufficiently information literate and like the idea of collaborating with librarians to address this. However, almost 50 percent of the faculty surveyed did not actually include any type of information literacy instruction in their courses.

Expanding on the work of DaCosta and Bury, Saunders (2012) investigated perspectives on information literacy from nearly 300 faculty members from multiple disciplines across the nation. Saunders also found that disciplinary faculty say they value the teaching of information literacy skills, but they do not have a systematic way to integrate this type of instruction into their courses. Saunders argued that the responsibility lies with the librarian to start conversations with faculty about how to integrate information literacy more regularly into the curriculum.

Some recent research has taken a closer look at how faculty perceive information literacy by using interview and case study methodologies. One such study by Cope and Sanabria (2014) used in-depth interviews to compare librarian and faculty views of information literacy. Their findings show that faculty see information literacy as being firmly rooted in their disciplines and are, as a result, not likely to seek the help of librarians to teach information literacy. Using case study methodology, Kim and Shumaker (2015) compared faculty, student, and librarian perceptions of information literacy in a first year experience program at Catholic University. As in the research findings by Cope and Sanabria, this study found that both librarians and teaching faculty see themselves as having a role in teaching information literacy skills; however, the roles that each should play were not clearly defined. To avoid duplication or omission of instruction on specific information literacy topics, the authors argued that communication and collaboration are paramount.

Collectively, these studies highlight a persistent disconnect between librarians and course instructors. The instructors say they highly value information literacy skills. Librarians specialize in teaching these very skills, but instructors do not necessarily avail themselves of the instructional services that librarians provide. While these studies consistently show the disconnect between course instructors and librarians in the teaching of information literacy, there is not much in the literature in terms of specific suggestions to improve the situation.

My hope in writing this article is to help bridge this gap between librarians and course instructors by sharing my dual perspective on the one-shot library session. What follows are the major lessons I have learned from my experience as both a course instructor and librarian along with the specific enhancements I have made to my own library sessions as a result.

Lessons Learned

Lesson 1: Students really do use what they learn in the library instruction session, and they value the session for both its immediate and long-term impact.

The lasting impact of a library session is hard to see from a librarian-only perspective, but the value is abundantly clear from the course instructor perspective. For one, source quality increased dramatically when I started including a library instruction session in my composition courses. Despite being a librarian and highly valuing library resources, I did not include a library session the first few times I taught composition. Due to the intense workload of being a new composition instructor, scheduling a library session was simply one of the things that fell through the cracks. When I did add a library component to my composition classes, however, there was a notable shift in the quality of my students' bibliographies. Previously, they consisted almost exclusively of websites, many of questionable legitimacy; the inclusion of actual research studies was a rare phenomenon. After including library instruction, their bibliographies were, as one would hope, full of reputable sources from library databases. Students still included some web sources, but because the librarians addressed source quality in their sessions, they no longer included sources from commercial sites and low quality content farms. This held true not just for the immediate assignment but also for a research paper assigned later in the semester.

The course instructor perspective has also shown me that the library session has considerable long-term value for the students. As part of the students' final assignment, they have to write a letter in which they explain what they learned in the course. In this letter, the library session frequently makes an appearance because the students realize that they can use these resources not just for their composition course but for their entire college careers. The students also often report in this letter that the library session helped them better understand what professors mean when they ask for credible sources.

Lesson 2: Much of the miscommunication between librarians and course instructors revolves around assignment details.

Any librarian who has taught can surely come up with at least a handful of stories about miscommunication with teaching faculty resulting in a less-than-rewarding instructional experience. My experience having librarians teach for my composition class revealed that much of the miscommunication results from a breakdown that occurs when trying to convey assignment information. Even though course instructors ideally provide the librarian with a copy of the assignment that students are working on, there are often many unwritten details about the assignment. Thus, if the librarian relies mainly on a written description of the assignment, he or she may teach the library session based on incomplete information and may unknowingly present irrelevant information.

One frequent source of miscommunication has to do with the scope of the assignment. At Penn State, students in the composition program typically have one paper that focuses on a local issue, requiring students to find at least a few local sources of information. However, not all instructors require students to take this local focus, and some instructors even change their mind about requiring it mid-assignment if the students are struggling to find enough research at the local level. As a librarian, I have found myself on more than one occasion presenting how to find local resources only to learn that these were not necessary; at other times I have found myself presenting how to find global resources and later learning that the students only needed local information. In all of these instances, I had read details about the assignment in advance of the library session, yet those details changed before the library session. As a composition instructor, I have always tried to communicate these details to the librarians I work with, but there have still been times when the scope of the assignment was miscommunicated.

Another area in which communication often breaks down involves which library skills are most needed in order for students to complete their assignment. Traditionally, library sessions highlight how to select and access articles from library databases. The information literacy skills taught during these sessions often include narrowing or broadening a topic, identifying appropriate sources of background information, choosing effective keyword combinations, and using effective search strategies in databases. However, many composition instructors at Penn State—probably the majority—do not require library sources. They only require that students find a few credible sources.

Because the students are not confined to using library resources, I have found that if the librarian jumps right in to the mechanics of how to use databases, it can go unheeded. Rather than focusing on how to use the library, course instructors and students alike first need to hear why to use library resources. For example, how will using library resources enhance one's credibility as a writer? How will using library resources save the student time and perhaps even money? There is little use in pouring over how to use a database if a student is not convinced that library sources are, in fact, worth the effort of learning to navigate.

Perhaps also because students are not confined to using library resources, I have noticed that the composition instructors at Penn State get especially excited when librarians focus on source evaluation. While standard activities to practice evaluating websites may seem over-used and even trite to librarians, college freshmen and their teachers often find these sorts of activities eye-opening. Many still rely on the old rule ".org is good, .com is bad," so website evaluation practice reminds students and instructors alike that source evaluation is a much more complex endeavor.

Lesson 3: Collaboration with course instructors is certainly possible, even desired, but be careful of overreach.

One of the downsides to being on both sides of the library instruction fence is that I hear frustration from both sides when it comes to collaboration. When among my library colleagues, I often hear frustration that the composition instructors do not see them as partners but rather as a support service. From my English colleagues, I sense frustration that librarians are sometimes on a different wavelength in terms of what they think the students need. On both sides, I see a desire to collaborate, but there are often very different views on what this collaboration should look like.

In general, I have learned that collaboration works best if the librarian/course instructor relationship has time to grow first. The workload for new composition instructors is intense and the pay is low, so it is important for librarians to be respectful of their time. If the instructor senses that working with a librarian will take a lot of time, the instructor will understandably shy away from it. It is not a required part of the instructor's job, so it is incumbent on librarians to show how they can help with course goals and even save the instructor time. Once instructors have had a chance to see the value of including one-shot library sessions in their courses, then they are much more open to larger collaborations.

Once a relationship is established, it is still important for the librarian to avoid overreach. At large institutions such as Penn State, the composition program is somewhat standardized and individual instructors do not have control of the curriculum or the standards used to grade assignments. For this reason, requests from a librarian to co-write assignments or help grade them are often met with resistance. It is not at all that the instructor looks down on the librarian's skills or abilities; it is that the instructor has been given limited flexibility with how assignments are written and graded. Long-time course instructors may be given more flexibility in partnering with librarians, but they still have to abide by the curriculum guidelines and established grading procedures. Thus, collaborations on the level of assignment writing and/or grading are best left to library administrators. Partnering on teaching specific information literacy skills, however, is usually welcomed as long as it aligns with the goals of the course and there is an established positive relationship with the librarian.

Specific Enhancements to Library Instruction

I learned the above lessons over the course of a few years, having viewed numerous library sessions in my composition class. As I began to see library instruction through the course instructor lens, I began to make changes in how I planned and taught my own library sessions. Next, I describe a few of the specific enhancements I have made to my own instruction.

Changes to Class Content

Before this experience, I had a very library-centric approach to what I included in the one-time session, focusing largely on how to use individual databases. Now, seeing the class through the eyes of the instructor and students, my focus is more on teaching the value of library resources. While there are many ways to do this, I have often found it particularly helpful to emphasize the reliability of library sources. To that end, I often begin my library sessions with a discussion of the challenges to conducting research on the web. Inevitably, a student will mention that it can be difficult to tell whether a website is trustworthy or not. This usually serves as a nice transition to discussing how library sources are different from websites, including the fact that library sources are pre-selected to a certain extent.

I also now highlight the long-term value of learning to use the library's resources. While the focus of my one-shots is still on the assignment at hand, I now know that long-term utility resonates with the students. As freshmen, they are eager to hear about anything that might help them navigate their college careers successfully, so I try to capitalize on this. For example, I will mention how we have subject-specific databases and research guides. While not needed for an immediate assignment, such resources are helpful once they choose a major. If time allows, I will also show our library's Research Project Calculator, which is a time management tool especially useful for the longer research assignments that students will have as they get further into their college coursework.

Improvements to Communication

Because miscommunication over assignment details seems to be so common, one change I have made in my own library instruction is to treat the instruction request transaction as a reference interview. I recast what the instructor has asked me to do to be sure I understand; I probe the instructor for missing details—especially about the scope of research and the types of sources required; and I ask for specific examples of topics that I can use during the library session. Once I have this information, I present a tentative lesson plan to the instructor and we further negotiate what will occur in the session. This process, though it sounds tedious, has become so routine that it feels quite natural to me, and instructors seem to appreciate that I am putting in the effort to truly understand what they need. Additionally, the time I put in to the negotiation process pays off in terms of less frustration over communication gone wrong.

New Approaches to Collaboration

Having experienced library instruction through the eyes of a course instructor, I now approach collaboration much differently. I have a better understanding of what instructors are looking for, and I have adjusted my expectations of how we can work together. Too often, I hear fellow librarians say that they think teaching faculty look down them, viewing librarians as a support service rather than as equal partners. My perspective is that faculty do respect us—many even revere us—but they do also expect us to support them with their course goals if they allow us into their classrooms.

What this has meant for my own collaborations is that I now have much more empathy for the course instructors with whom I work. Their time is limited, and the pressure on them from both students and administrators is great. I also realize they are under no obligation to work with me as a librarian. Thus, my focus for collaborating really is all about support: How can I support their teaching? Their students? Their course goals? In other words, support is no longer a bad word to me. Rather, the support I can offer teaching faculty is a key ingredient to successful collaboration.

Implications for other institutions

The above lessons learned and changes to instruction represent my personal experience at one institution, so it is possible that another librarian/course instructor would draw different conclusions from the experience. Librarians at other institutions may want to investigate if teaching faculty at their institutions share this perspective before applying these lessons in their own environment. In other words, these lessons learned can at least serve as a starting point for conversations with faculty about their perceptions of library instruction.

If there is one overall lesson from my experience that likely does apply across settings, it is this: As librarians, we must be proactive in reaching across the aisle to teaching faculty. We cannot assume that we know what instructors really want from library instruction unless we probe for the missing details. We cannot assume that students know the value of library resources unless we teach them how library content is different from web content. We cannot assume that faculty want to work with us unless we prove our value to them in terms of making their work easier and saving them time in the long run. Of course, the need to be proactive has been advocated in the library literature for many years, but I hope that the lessons shared here offer some specific areas in which to focus efforts when it comes to library instruction.

Conclusion

Just as an anthropologist can provide the outsider perspective on a culture and thus highlight facets that may go unnoticed by an insider, my hope is that my experience can highlight facets of library instruction that insiders—librarians—may not notice in their day-to-day work. In the future, there is room in the library literature for more reports from the trenches: reports from librarians who have taught semester courses and experienced library instruction from the outsider perspective. Collectively, their experiences will complement the current literature on faculty perspectives that is currently limited for the most part to survey and interview studies. These studies, while very valuable in providing the broad view, do not provide the rich, in-depth perspective on library instruction gained by working as a course instructor.

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