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Teaching Information Literacy at Delta State University

Michael Mounce

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Introduction

LIB 101: Fundamentals of Information Literacy is a one credit hour course which has been designed at Delta State University to provide DSU students with information literacy skills needed for conducting research. Information literacy skills taught in this course include skills such as performing effective searches and evaluating resources. This course is a general education requirement elective. Although it is an elective course, it is highly recommended by DSU reference librarians to students, since information literacy skills are necessary for research.

In the Fall of 2004, the LIB 101 course began to be taught at DSU. During the fall 2004 and spring 2005 semesters, DSU reference librarians were available to teach sections of this course. They were responsible for teaching LIB 101 whenever five or more students had registered for their section of this course. One section was offered for each summer session of 2005. The purpose of this article is to discuss the author's experiences of preparing for, teaching, and evaluating the LIB 101 course during the fall 2004 and spring 2005 semesters. The other purpose of this article is to discuss improvements to be made to the LIB 101 course in response to evaluation forms, pre-tests, and post-tests.

Literature Review

In 1987, the American Library Association established a committee to begin discussing the topic of information literacy. The committee, known as the Presidential Committee on Information Literacy, began its work by defining what an information literate person is. For example, this committee mentioned that an information literate person would be someone

who would know how to locate needed resources and know how to use information effectively. A report issued by the committee called on library associations and educational organizations and groups to support information literacy in educational institutions. Regional accreditation agencies throughout the United States also called for the support of information literacy in educational institutions (Thompson 2002, 219-221). For example, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) requires colleges and universities to provide their students with "regular and timely instruction in the use of the library and other learning/information resources" (SACS 2004).

In academic libraries throughout the United States, information literacy programs have been established. A few examples of academic libraries which have implemented information literacy programs at their own institutions include the libraries of the University of Rhode Island and the University at Albany State University of New York. At the University of Rhode Island, instructional librarians teach a course titled "LIB 120: Introduction to Information Literacy." This course is offered to URI students in both the traditional face-to-face format and online (Ramsay and Kinnie 2006, 35). Topics covered in this course include methods of searching, types of information resources, evaluating information resources, the research process, and citing sources. Assignments given to students include assignments such as "annotated bibliographies, writing to learn/minute writing exercises, and reading responses." According to the instructor, the writing to learn/minute writing exercises had been designed to help students remember what they learned in class and give them practice. The reading responses required the students to give their own responses to required readings (MacDonald 2004). No information

was found regarding pre-tests and post-tests, or other methods of evaluating students' learning in the LIB 120 course at URI.

At the University at Albany State University of New York, librarians are teaching a course titled "Information Literacy", which is also known as UNL 205. Topics covered in this course include conducting research, evaluating sources, citing sources according to citation styles, methods of searching, and several other information literacy topics. Some assignments given to UNL 205 students include homework assignments and an annotated bibliography (Burke, Germain, and Xu 2005, 354-355). Other assignments include quizzes and a class presentation. Instructors of information literacy courses, in many cases, give their students pre-tests and post-tests in order to help them assess student learning in their courses. An instructor of UNL 205 is among those who gives students pre-tests and post-tests (Bernard).

Instructional librarians in academic institutions in the Southeast have also contributed to information literacy. At Eastern Kentucky University for example, the instructional librarians work together with teaching faculty who are part of a NOVA program. According to Marcum, ECU's NOVA program is part of a federal program designed to help "first generation students in their transition to college life." The instructional librarians and NOVA faculty provide instruction to first-year students at ECU. This information literacy program includes an emphasis on career information and finding career resources. Although ECU's information literacy program includes some unique characteristics, such as working with NOVA faculty, it also contains some characteristics of traditional information literacy programs. Topics covered by instructional librarians include search strategies, evaluation of sources, using the Web, distinguishing between scholarly journals and magazines for general readers, and other topics. Assignments given include those pertaining to career information and those related to the traditional information literacy topics, such as

search strategies. The instructional librarians give their students pre-tests and post-tests in order to help them determine the efficiency of their instruction and assignments (Marcum 2005, 17-18).

Preparing for the Course and Advertising

To prepare for teaching this course, the author attended library meetings with reference colleagues and library administrators to discuss the content of the course and other relevant topics. During meetings, the author and library colleagues reviewed a draft of a syllabus and discussed possible revisions or additions. Topics for class meetings and assignments were discussed during meetings. The ACRL's "Guidelines for Instructional Programs in Academic Libraries" (June 2003) and "Objectives for Information Literacy Instruction: A Model Statement for Academic Librarians" (Jan. 2001) were consulted during the planning phase of the LIB 101 course.

Another step in the preparation for this course included WebCT training. In the spring of 2004, the author attended workshops to become familiar with WebCT. WebCT is an instructional technology used at DSU to allow students to access course information online. It was necessary for the author to become familiar with WebCT, since LIB 101 was a WebCT enhanced course. For this course, WebCT was used by the author for posting the course syllabus and assignment information. WebCT was also used by students in posting some assignments, since there was a discussion board available in WebCT.

In order to make DSU faculty and students aware of the upcoming LIB 101 course, the course was advertised. In the Spring 2004 semester, the author assisted in writing a news article for the DSU campus newsletter, *The Campus Connection*. The purpose of this article was to make all faculty and staff at DSU aware of the course. Other advertising efforts made by the author's reference colleagues included distributing LIB 101 flyers across campus,

asking faculty to recommend our course to students, and advertising LIB 101 on the library Web site.

Teaching the Course

As previously mentioned in this article, the LIB 101 course was designed to teach students information literacy skills. In this course, the author taught the following information literacy skills: performing effective searches, evaluating resources, and citing sources according to accepted citation styles such as MLA style. The author also taught students how to find resources in the library, how to distinguish between various types and formats of information resources, and how to avoid plagiarism.

There were four class meetings devoted to the skill of performing effective searches. During these class meetings, the author taught students how to effectively search the online catalog, databases, and the Internet. In regard to the catalog and databases, skills such as using Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) and search limiters (e.g. full text only) were taught to students. In regard to the Internet, the author taught students how to distinguish between search engines and directories, familiarized them with four types of Web sites (.com, .edu, .org, and .gov), and introduced them to discussion lists, email, and netiquette.

In one class meeting, the author discussed the topic of evaluating resources. In this class, students were taught how to evaluate books, periodicals and Web sites according to evaluation criteria. The evaluation criteria used for the lecture in this class came from the book *Teaching Information Literacy: 35 Practical, Standards-Based Exercises for College Students* by Joanna M. Burkhardt. Some examples of criteria for evaluating books included currency and relevance to the topic of one's paper. Evaluating periodicals included criteria such as authorship, length of articles, availability of abstracts, and availability of references. The main differences between

scholarly journals and other types of periodicals were emphasized. Examples of criteria for evaluating Web sites included purpose, intended audience, accuracy, reliability, and authorship. During the class, the author also pointed out that Web sites should be used with caution, since many Web sites are not checked for accuracy before being made available on the Web.

During two class meetings, students were taught how to cite sources according to accepted citation styles. The citation styles taught included APA (American Psychological Association), MLA (Modern Language Association), Chicago, and Turabian styles. The author taught students how to cite commonly used resources, such as books, journal articles retrieved from databases, and Web sites. During the citation classes, the author taught students how to create in-text citations, which are to be found within a paper, and how to create "works cited" list citations. During the Spring 2005 semester, the author gave students handouts containing citation examples. The examples came from the following citation manuals: *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA)*, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, and *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (Turabian).

Early in the fall and spring semesters, the author taught students the information literacy skills of finding resources in the library and distinguishing between various formats and types of information resources. In order to teach students how to find resources in the library, the author familiarized students with the Library of Congress, Dewey Decimal, and Superintendent of Documents (SuDocs) classification systems. Students were also taught which classification system was used for each section. For example, students were taught that Reference books and general collection books are arranged according to the Library of Congress classification system. In order to teach students the various types of information

resources, the author taught students how to distinguish between primary and secondary sources. Examples of primary and secondary sources were given.

The skill of avoiding plagiarism was also taught in this course. As many professors will affirm, the importance of avoiding plagiarism cannot be emphasized enough. Since the topic of plagiarism is very closely related to the topic of citing sources, the author covered the topic of avoiding plagiarism immediately before the topic of citing sources. In the lecture pertaining to plagiarism, students were given a definition of plagiarism according to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* of the English Language. Then students were taught how to distinguish between plagiarism and proper use of resources by being given examples of plagiarism and examples of proper use. The author also gave students tips for avoiding plagiarism.

Giving Assignments

The author gave the following assignments to LIB 101 students: weekly assignments, article summary assignments, a mid-term exam, and an annotated bibliography. To help reinforce what students were taught in class, the author gave weekly assignments based on class lectures. For example, Weekly Assignment # 2 was based on the catalog lecture. One question of this assignment asked students to perform a title search for a certain book, then list the call number and the subjects covered in the book.

The article summary assignments required the students to read two articles and to summarize them in two separate paragraph-long summaries. The author chose the following articles for the course: "What is Information Literacy in the Digital Age?" by Rob Darrow and Cynthia MacDonald and "A New Frontier for Research Dissemination: The World Wide Web" by Nancy Martland and Fred Rothbaum. The author chose these articles for the course, since they pertained to the relevant topics of information literacy and the Web. Students

were required to post their summaries of the articles online in the discussion board of WebCT. The purpose of having students post these assignments online was to help them become familiar with posting assignments in WebCT.

The midterm exam was given during the middle of the fall 2004 and spring 2005 semesters. It covered the subjects that had been covered up to the time of the exam. Similar to the weekly assignments, the midterm exam was given to reinforce what the author had taught in previous classes.

The author also gave students an annotated bibliography assignment. This assignment required students to provide citations for twenty to twenty-five resources. The resources cited had to include at least one of the following types of resources: books, e-books, print-based journal articles, electronically accessible journal articles, government documents, and newspaper articles. For citing sources, students were to choose from one of the four citation styles discussed in class (APA, MLA, Chicago, or Turabian). Students were allowed to pick their own topics, but all resources cited had to be on a single topic. The author required students to provide a brief annotation (summary) with each citation. The purpose of this assignment was to give students practice in citing sources for a works cited list at the end of a research paper. The assignment was also designed to familiarize students with various formats of resources and to help encourage them to not rely solely on Web sites.

Evaluating the Course

At the end of the fall 2004 and spring 2005 semesters, the author gave students an evaluation form, on which the students evaluated the author and course. The students were asked to rank the author by various criteria, such as "knowledge of subjects," "teaching methods and contribution to student's learning" and "ability to communicate clearly." The students also evaluated the course by

answering questions such as “Did you learn anything in this course?,” “How might this course be improved?,” and “What parts of this course would you prefer to cover in more depth?” To create the LIB 101 evaluation form, the author reviewed various evaluation forms available on the Web which pertained to library instruction. One particular example which the author relied upon for assistance in creating the LIB 101 evaluation form’s criteria and questions was the “Library Instruction Evaluation Form” created by a librarian from the Andrew L. Bouwhuis Library at Canisius College.

Before the spring 2005 semester began, the author and reference colleagues decided that in addition to giving the evaluation forms to students at the end each semester, students would also be given a pre-test and a post-test. The purpose of the pre-test was to help determine how much LIB 101 course knowledge students have at the beginning of the semester. The post-test was given at the end of the semester in order to determine how much LIB 101 course knowledge students had at the end of the semester. The results of the pre-tests and the post-tests provide additional help in evaluating the LIB 101 course. It should be noted that the pre-test and the post-test were actually the same test. Some of the pre-test and post-test questions included the following:

- What classification system do we use for our general collection?
- A publication with articles of a scholarly nature is a _____ ?
- What are some criteria for evaluating sources?
- What is the best place to find **books** on abnormal psychology?
- What is the best place to find **articles** on abnormal psychology?
- Which of the above entries refers to a book or parts of a book about sleep disorders? (citing sources question)

The author reviewed the fall 2004 and spring 2005 evaluation forms. In both semesters, students indicated on the evaluation forms that some changes could or should be made to the LIB 101 course. For example, some students answered “somewhat fast” to the evaluation form question “For me, the pace at which the instructor covered the material was. . .” To help improve in this area, the author will make sure that he asks the question “Are there any questions” at the end of each class and continue to offer additional one-on-one assistance to anyone who needs it. The course content question “What parts of this course would you prefer to cover in more depth?” had answers such as “Internet sources” and “Annotated Bibliography.” To help improve in these areas, the author will observe the Internet resources presentations of reference colleagues and add any information which may have been left out. Also, the author will devote an entire class meeting each semester to the annotated bibliography assignment. This class meeting will include explaining the assignment to students and giving students the class time to work on it.

The pre-tests and post-tests also provided useful data for helping to determine which improvements need to be made to the LIB 101 course. The pre-tests and post-tests each had 25 questions. The author observed how each student answered each question on both tests. The author recorded how each question was answered based on the following criteria: Correct on Pre-test Only, Correct on Post-test Only, Correct on Both Tests, and Correct on Neither Test. When recording the data, the author knew that having a majority of students in the “Correct on Pre-test Only” category or “Correct on Neither Test” category would indicate that a majority of the students either did not learn or retain the skills presented in the question. Before the Spring 2005 semester classes began, the author ensured that all topics or skills mentioned in pre-test and post-test questions would be covered at some point during the spring 2005 semester. However, observing the data of the test questions revealed that most students were found in the categories

of “Correct on Pre-test Only” and “Correct on Neither Test” for some topics. For example, most students were found in these two categories for the following question:

Using the Library of Congress Classification System, which of the following sequences is in the correct order?

- a. L27.3 F5 – L27.3 F33 – LA23.6 – LB5
- b. L27.3 F33 – LA23.6 – LB5 – L27.3 F5
- c. L27.3 F33 – L27.3 F5 – LA23.6 – LB5

In order to improve the LIB 101 course, the author will add or modify information presented in the problem subject areas, such as the order of call numbers presented in the pre-test/post-test question above. In response to other pre-test/post-test data, other improvements that the author will make to the LIB 101 course will include going into more detail about the elements of a citation to a periodical article, defining the terms “abstract,”

“encyclopedia,” and “handbook;” more strongly emphasizing the differences between a citation to a book and a citation to a periodical article; including the use of proximity operators, quotation marks, and parentheses in searches; and emphasizing more strongly that students can do an interlibrary loan request if an article is not available electronically or in the library’s journal collection.

Conclusion

Overall, teaching LIB 101 has been a rewarding and enriching experience, both for the author and LIB 101 students. The author and reference colleagues will continue to offer LIB 101 to students in the future, and the author hopes that many students will choose this course, since it offers students vital skills that are essential to doing research. Also, the author will continue to seek ways to improve the course in order to better enhance DSU students’ research skills.

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