

Fall 2010

Integrating Information Literacy Instruction in an Upper-Division Writing-Intensive Class

Ellen K. Wilson

University of South Alabama, ewilson@jaguar1.usouthal.edu

Jeffrey M. Blankenship

University of South Alabama, jblankenship@usouthal.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln>



Part of the [Instructional Media Design Commons](#), and the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wilson, Ellen K. and Blankenship, Jeffrey M. (2010) "Integrating Information Literacy Instruction in an Upper-Division Writing-Intensive Class," *The Southeastern Librarian*: Vol. 58 : Iss. 3 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln/vol58/iss3/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Southeastern Librarian by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

INTEGRATING INFORMATION LITERACY INSTRUCTION IN AN UPPER-DIVISION WRITING-INTENSIVE CLASS

Ellen K. Wilson and Jeffrey M. Blankenship

Ellen K. Wilson is an Instructional Technology/Reference Librarian at the University of South Alabama and can be reached at ewilson@jaguar1.usouthal.edu. Jeffrey M. Blankenship is an Assistant Professor, Dept. of Political & Criminal Justice at the University of South Alabama and can be reached at jblankenship@usouthal.edu.

Introduction

Writing-intensive courses are a required component of undergraduate education at the University of South Alabama, but often the courses are designed to test students' writing skills, rather than to teach the research and writing process. In the fall of 2008, an instruction librarian and an assistant professor in political science collaborated to redesign one writing-intensive course, Public Administration (PSC 401), in an attempt to address this dilemma. This project was born out of frustration – frustration on the part of the professor about the generally poor quality of writing and research skills by students in the course the previous year, and frustration on the part of the librarian at a lack of opportunities for integrating information literacy instruction (beyond one-shot bibliographic instruction sessions) into the curriculum. The project was also born out of optimism that a new approach could make a difference in improving students' abilities in terms of researching and writing papers.

Context

The University of South Alabama (USA) is a co-educational, public university located in Mobile, Alabama. According to the USA Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment (IRPA), the enrollment at USA in the fall of 2007 was 13,779 students, of whom 10,203 were full-time students. The entering freshman class in 2007 consisted of 1,529 first-time students, of whom 609 were enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences. Of first-time students in the fall of 2007, 71% were from Alabama and another 10% from Mississippi. Additionally, 6.3% of first-

time students were from foreign countries. The mean ACT composite score for first-time, full-time freshmen was 21.7, compared to 20.3 for Alabama and 21.2 nationwide (IRPA).

At USA, students fulfill the writing requirements for graduation by passing with a grade of C or better two semesters of English composition (EH 101 and 102) and two designated writing (W) courses, one of which must be within a student's major or minor area of study. The courses EH 101 and EH 102 are prerequisites for W courses; however, a student may be exempted from the English composition requirement with suitable scores on the ACT, SAT, CLEP, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams. The only course at USA with a required library instruction component is EH 102, where IL instruction is limited to a one class period with a reference librarian. Since some students are exempt from this course – or may simply be absent the day of the library session – it is possible that a student may reach an upper-division writing-intensive course without any past library instruction.

Political Science 401 (Public Administration) is an upper-level, writing-intensive course that focuses on “national, state, and local administration, with special attention to the relationship between formal agency structure and policy execution” (USA). Because it is designated as a writing course, students have traditionally been expected to complete a research paper through a process requiring an initial draft followed by revision of the final paper. This paper assignment accounts for a significant part of the course grade. However,

such an approach tends to test a student's research and writing skills, rather than teach the student much to improve his or her existing ability (Campbell and Stevens 2006, 10).

Literature Review

While the benefits of collaborating with academic faculty to teach of information literacy (IL) skills are widely touted in the literature of library and information science, examples of such collaborations in the field of political science are rare. Part of the reason may be that information literacy is a term that is used predominantly by librarians, and political scientists may be more apt to refer to research skills and critical thinking skills. However, Hubbell argues that undergraduate research methods courses should roughly mirror the research process itself, by providing students with practice in formulating a research question, conducting a literature search, collecting and analyzing data, and analyzing political phenomena (Hubbell 1994). Marfleet and Dille argue that such courses are ideal ground for developing ACRL targeted competencies (Marfleet and Dille 2005).

Many faculty members assume that students have learned these skills long before arriving in their classroom. However, as Parker-Gibson (2005) notes, several assumptions are implicit in many professors' research paper assignments, including that students will:

- use library resources,
- be able to distinguish between free Web site documents and scholarly publications,
- be able to identify scholarly databases available through library websites,
- know and be able to use databases that are important in the field of study,
- use print materials as well as those available electronically,
- and be willing and able to evaluate materials they have found in order to

decide what is appropriate for a particular project (85).

Furthermore, faculty may assume that students will be familiar with the research process and understand discipline-specific and research or library vocabulary (Parker-Gibson 2005, 85).

Notable collaborations between a political science professor and an instruction librarian have also taken place at the University of West Georgia, where Stevens and Campbell integrated IL instruction into courses in global studies, American government, comparative politics, and African politics (Campbell and Stevens 2006; Stevens and Campbell 2006; Stevens and Campbell 2007).

Study Design and Methodology

Following an approach similar to that used by Stevens and Campbell, this study incorporated research and writing instruction with assignments designed to provide students with guidance and practice using different research and writing skills based on the principles contained in ACRL's IL standards (ACRL). The class initially consisted of 14 students, but four withdrew early in the semester. The course met one night per week from 6:00 until 8:30. The first segment of the class period followed a traditional lecture format covering basic, introductory public administration concepts and theories. Following a short break, the second part of the class usually lasted approximately 45 minutes and was devoted to writing instruction.

A pre-test and post-test were given anonymously asking basic questions about the student, such as class standing, whether the student was a full-time or part-time student, and his or her general experiences using the library and past instruction involving the use of library catalog and databases to find sources. There were also 15 questions relating to specific knowledge about different types of sources and methods of performing research.

A basic "how to" manual on writing research papers was assigned as a required text. It covered the areas of: choosing and focusing a topic;

developing a thesis statement; types of sources and research skills; plagiarism; structuring and preparing a draft paper; and refining the final paper with emphasis on grammar, style, and proper citation form (Baugh 1996). Each week a reading assignment from the writing manual was discussed and students were encouraged to raise and discuss any questions or problems they were having as they researched and wrote their papers.

In addition to the assigned reading, weekly writing assignments were developed to ensure that students had practice utilizing many of the subjects covered in their readings, as well as developing skills and abilities identified in the IL standards. Campbell and Stevens (2006) note “students must be given opportunities to practice, receive feedback, and revise in order to develop their competencies. Several smaller assignments that take students through the steps in the research process ... are preferable to one large research assignment due at the end of the term (10).

Most of the assignments were designed to correspond with stages in the students’ progression in the researching and writing of their papers. On the first night of class students were instructed to write a three to four page essay on their future career goals. This initial assignment was intended to get a base-level measure of the students’ writing abilities using a topic that would only require them to think about what to write, rather than perform any research.

The second assignment was designed to assist the students in picking and focusing a paper topic. They were required to pick a topic and perform one of the methods for narrowing or focusing their topics as described in the reading assignment: freewriting, clustering, or listing (Baugh 1996, 13-15). Another assignment was to write an essay explaining their paper topics and thesis statements and why they had chosen them, all skills associated with IL Standard 1.

Several of the reading and writing assignments concerned knowledge about libraries and basic research skills. The students spent two class periods in the library computer lab where they were instructed on different types of sources,

how to find books and journal articles in the library, and how to perform computer database searches (IL Standard 2). In addition, the students were required to complete two research logs describing the process they went through in locating various types of sources and performing database searches in the lab.

The first library session focused on strategies for choosing research topics by investigating resources such as subject-specific encyclopedias and books, while the second session focused on conducting a literature review once the topic had been selected. In a one-shot session, normally the question of selecting a topic is not addressed. Students were also encouraged to make appointments with a librarian for further assistance with their topics, and two students did make such visits.

There were also assignments that required the students to: read sections of a website concerning plagiarism (www.plagiarism.org) and summarize the major points they learned from their review (IL Standard 5); use a library database to find an academic journal article, read the article, and write an essay analyzing the article (IL Standard 3); write an essay outlining and explaining how they planned to structure their research papers (IL Standard 4); practice proper citation form by creating a reference list from various sources provided and creating an annotated bibliography using the sources they had found and intended to use in their own research papers, including several sources they had examined but determined were not suitable (IL Standards 3 and 4). At the end of the semester, students were required to revise their original essays concerning career goals using the knowledge they gained in the course to improve their work (IL Standard 4). The longest of the assignments involved the writing of the research papers. Students were required to submit a first draft of their research papers and later revise the papers to a final version, using not only feedback received from the instructor but also their own reassessment of and improvements to the paper (IL Standards 1-5).

Each of the assignments was evaluated based on how well the students followed the instructions

given and the quality of their written work. To evaluate the final papers, a rubric was used to assign scores in the areas of: topic; thesis statement; content; organization; tone; sentence structure; word choice; grammar, spelling, and mechanics; use of references; quality of references; conformity to style manual; academic integrity; and evidence of revision based on feedback.

Results

The output obtained from the course using the methods discussed above produced mixed results. Some students failed to complete the assignments as specified, or even attend class, on a consistent basis. Others were much more reliable in both regards. Not surprisingly, student performance tended to vary greatly and better results were obtained by students who completed assignments over the course of the semester. Only nine of the 10 students who remained in the class at the end of the semester turned in a paper. One student failed to submit a final research paper without offering any explanation.

The data obtained from the pre-test and post-test are not very meaningful. Only six students completed both tests, and results between the two tests could not be compared at an individual level because of an IRB requirement that students be allowed to choose their own anonymous identifier, which most students forgot shortly after completing the pre-test. The percentage of correct answers to the 15 questions testing specific knowledge of research skills on the pre-test and post-test was 73% and 75% respectively. Some of the answers to the questions were contradictory, indicating at least one student did not understand the questions or did not take the test seriously. Furthermore, there was a noticeable disconnect between student answers on the tests and their actual information seeking practices, as evidenced by the types of sources selected.

The initial career goal assignments, which were not graded, were evaluated with feedback provided to the students concerning how well their thoughts were organized, whether they addressed the topic, writing style, and

grammatical or other problems that existed in the papers. The revisions of the career goal assignment that were written at the end of the semester were compared to the originals. Only six students completed the second assignment. Of these one was exactly the same as the original, with no changes whatsoever. Another was half the length of the original and, while it mentioned the student's career goal briefly, it tended to ramble and was focused on other things. The four assignments that were actual revisions of the original essays showed some improvement. However, almost all the students tended simply to correct only those grammatical errors or other problems that were specifically noted in the feedback they received. Suggestions that were more general in nature, such as advising the student to organize his or her thoughts more clearly, were for the most part not addressed in the revisions.

The two assignments intended to encourage the students to focus on their paper topics and thesis statements showed progress. Students were better able to express their topics and develop clearer thesis statements when they completed their essays in week four than they had been in week two when they performed and discussed the focusing exercises. Presumably, in addition to the readings and class discussions, the students had begun to do research during this time which helped them improve in these areas.

Researching and finding good sources were areas where the students showed the least amount of interest and effort. Only half of the class attended each of the sessions in the computer lab, with only one student attending both. While students claimed they already knew how to perform searches for academic journal articles and other sources, for most students there was little evidence to reflect this in their assignments and final papers. Only four students used appropriate articles in the assignment calling for them to analyze an academic journal article. The others either did not perform the assignment or used an inappropriate source. The final papers were heavily reliant on sources other than academic journal articles or other authoritative sources.

The exercise involving reading about plagiarism was in many ways the best performed assignment for most students. Their essay tended to focus on the main points made by the website and the students seemed to understand the various types of plagiarism and how and why one should avoid them. In addition, all students correctly answered the pre-test question about plagiarism. However, two of the final papers had large portions that were blatantly plagiarized, using large amounts of material, word for word, either from sources without citation or attributed to a source other than the one from which they actually obtained the information. There were also incidences where other students' papers contained citation errors which appeared to be unintended.

The first drafts of the papers demonstrated a wide range of quality. While only one student failed to submit anything for the required first draft, four of the nine drafts submitted were little more than outlines of the paper. However, the final papers were much better than those from prior classes. While the papers tended to rely too much on sources other than academic journal articles and other reliable sources, they were much better than the previous year's class papers in terms of expressing a thesis statement and supporting the thesis with an organized argument. Additionally, the content and tone of the papers were more of an academic research paper than the prior year's papers. Table 1 shows the rankings of the papers on 14 scored areas.

Table 1: *Performance on Final Research Papers*

AREA	Exemplary	Good	Acceptable	Needs significant work
Topic	1	4	4	
Thesis statement		4	3	2
Content		6	1	2
Organization		5	2	2
Tone	2	4	1	2
Sentence structure		5	3	1
Word choice		6	2	1
Grammar, spelling, and mechanics	1	6	2	
Length	4		2	3
Use of references		3	2	4
Quality of references	1	1	5	2
Conforms to style manual	1	4	2	2
Academic integrity	1	4	2	2
Revision		3	2	4

Overall the students' papers were acceptable or better in terms of the specified criteria for each of the different areas. In addition to the use and quality of references, some of the weaker areas for students included length of the paper, thesis statements, and evidence of revision.

Discussion

Attempting to design, implement and assess this project turned out to be an ambitious goal, and perhaps one that is best viewed through the lens of lessons learned. Overall, the experience was

one of some frustration, but also one that is believed to have represented some improvement in the overall quality of work submitted as evidenced by student progress over the semester and in comparison to other students' performance in more traditional classes.

A considerable investment of time was required to design the syllabus, assignments, and teaching plans. While further revision will also require additional time investment, much of this work can be reused, lessening the time commitment for

future semesters. The increased number of writing assignments, however, also required the professor to spend more time grading, a time commitment that will not decrease in future semesters.

The major source of frustration encountered in this project was the lackluster participation of some students. This problem is hardly limited to this class, but strategies for increasing student motivation and participation must be examined. The research paper was responsible for 25% of the final course grade, other writing assignments counted for another 25%, and the midterm and final exam each contributed 25% to the final grade. Perhaps some students took the course with the intention of simply getting by and fulfilling the W class requirement, and never intended to attempt full participation. Students may also have felt overwhelmed with the number of writing assignments. Another factor that may have played a role in the lack of motivation was that the class was a once-a-week evening class. Only one student in the class was a part-time student, and perhaps full-time students accustomed to daytime classes meeting more than once a week had difficulty with the format. It is also possible, of course, that the instructors simply failed to engage students or were poor teachers (though not for a lack of trying).

From an IL standpoint, a major problem was a serious case of “I Already Know This” (IAKT) syndrome. Steven Bell writes that IAKT syndrome “is fairly easy to diagnose. The next time a faculty member says, ‘I’ve invited a librarian here today to help you learn how to research our assignment,’ and the librarian hears a collective sigh... the librarian will know the students are suffering from IAKT syndrome” (Bell 2007, 100). Pre-test results indicated that ten of the 11 students had attended at least one library session prior to this course. From a student perspective, all IL instruction may appear the same, leading students to assume that the instruction provided for this course (both sessions of which were poorly attended) would be a rehash of earlier presentations from English composition courses, when in fact the sessions dealt with different types of resources.

How to combat IAKT syndrome? Bell writes that “the burden is on the librarian instructor to employ pedagogical methods that will enable students to distinguish between multiple sessions to recognize their distinctive and differentiated features” (Bell 2007, 99). Such methods would ideally demonstrate to students that they do not actually already know all that. Active learning techniques, such as having student volunteers rather than the librarian demonstrate the various resources, may be appropriate, although such methods do carry an element of risk.

Both library instruction sessions for this course were scheduled to be held during the second half of the class period in the library’s instruction laboratory. This location was chosen to allow students access to computers for hands-on instruction. However, since many students chose to skip the second half of class entirely, it may be preferable to instead hold the library session during the first half of class, and perhaps even conduct it in the regular classroom using only the instructor’s computer. The element of surprise might also be employed by leaving the librarian’s visits off the syllabus. While taking away the ability of all students to gain hands-on instruction at computers is a drawback, it may be worth it in order to address a larger captive audience.

However, such approaches still consign IL instruction to the dreaded library session. One possible remedy for this would be to extend the research log assignment into a semester-long activity. The research portfolio could incorporate both the weekly writing assignments and IL instruction by including a section requiring students to think and write about the information employed in the writing section. It would be essential to stress to students the importance of completing this portfolio over the course of the semester as a measure of the steps they have taken and the improvements they have made in their work as a result.

Another possibility would be to further integrate the research and writing components of the course with the substantive course material. Even in the better papers, students did not relate the topics of their research papers to the major themes and concepts covered in the course and its

readings. Revisions to papers also tended to focus only on specific feedback mentioned by the instructor, rather than more general suggestions to relate their paper to aspects of public administration. Perhaps dividing the course period into distinct public administration and writing sections contributed to this oversight.

Conclusion

While the overall experience of the semester involved some frustration, it is important to remember that the quality of student work did improve over the semester. The quality of the final papers was also an improvement when compared to those of the prior year's students, many of which showed signs of similar shortcomings that were not apparent until the paper was submitted for final grading. This indicates that small steps were made by this semester's experiment in restructuring the class,

and gives hope for future collaboration and experimentation.

This project was a time-intensive one, and for this reason, it was not repeated in the same manner with later classes. However, certain elements of the collaboration, such as involving librarians in the design of assignments and publicizing research appointments with subject-specialist librarians, have been implemented with success in other courses.

While the collaboration did not flow as smoothly as had been envisioned before the start of the semester, the experience gained from the project was valuable. Our advice to others interested in such a project is to step out of your comfort zone, try something new, and remember that there are lessons to be learned from both successes and failures.

References

- Association of College and Research Libraries. Information literacy competency standards for higher education. American Library Association.
<http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency.cfm>
(accessed April 20, 2010).
- Baugh, L. Sue. (1996). *How to write term papers and reports*. 2nd ed. New York: Glencoe/McGraw-Hill.
- Bell, Steven J. (2007). Stop IAKT syndrome with student live search demos. *Reference Services Review* 35(1), 98-108.
- Campbell, Patricia J. & Christy R. Stevens. (2006). Developing political science students' writing, research, and critical thinking competencies via course-integrated information literacy instruction. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL. April 20.
http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/4/0/9/2/pages140922/p140922-1.php (accessed April 20, 2010).
- Hubbell, Larry. (1994). Teaching research methods: An experiential and heterodoxical approach. *PS: Political Science and Politics* 27(1), 60-64.
- Marfleet, B. Gregory and Brian J. Dille. (2005). Information literacy and the undergraduate research methods curriculum. *Journal of Political Science Education* 1, 175-190.
- Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment. University of South Alabama statistical profiles, 2007-2008. University of South Alabama.
<http://www.southalabama.edu/irpa/highpriority/factbook0708.pdf> (accessed April 20, 2010).

Parker-Gibson, Necia. (2005). From the womb to the Web: Library assignments and the new generation. The Reference Librarian 44(91/92), 83-102.

Stevens, Christy R. and Patricia J. Campbell. (2006). Collaborating to connect global citizenship, information literacy, and lifelong learning in the global studies classroom. Reference Services Review 34(4), 536-556.

----- . 2007. The politics of information literacy: Integrating information literacy into the political science classroom. In Information literacy collaborations that work, ed. Trudi E. Jacobson and Thomas P. Mackey, 123-145. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc.

University of South Alabama. Undergraduate/graduate bulletin 2008-2009.
<http://www.southalabama.edu/bulletin/bulletin0809/> (accessed April 20, 2010).