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Cultivating the Librarian Within: Effectively Integrating Library Instruction into Freshman Composition

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Abstract: It has become common practice for library instruction to be included in lower-level college composition courses. Students are typically required to visit the library once or twice a semester to receive instruction on how to find books and journal articles for an upcoming writing assignment that incorporates formal research. But does this current model of instruction truly address course outcomes that seek to produce students who are information literate, critical thinkers and life-long learners? Faculty who teach such courses are often reluctant to surrender precious class time to a librarian, but this paper argues that the merging of bibliographic instruction with composition curriculum can more effectively tackle course goals with minimal interruption to the class schedule. The aim of this paper is to challenge the conventional relationship between library instruction and lower-level composition courses by assessing and discussing the implementation of a new freshman writing course that fully integrates library instruction into the course and into the classroom.

Keywords: Information Literacy, Information Fluency, Life-Long Learning, Bibliographic Instruction, Libraries, Librarians, ESL Classroom, Critical Thinking, Academic Collaboration, Freshman Composition

Changes in the way information is disseminated and gathered have altered the function of the library in society and academia, and by extension, the role of the librarian. The Internet has made information available anywhere, anytime, making the librarian less tied to the physical space of the library. Though users are no longer forced to travel to a library to access books, journals and other sources of information, they still need a librarian’s expertise to locate and evaluate this information. The vast amount of information online makes finding relevant and accurate information an even more complex task, and a librarian’s assistance in sorting through it even more necessary. Indeed, critically evaluating information has become as important as locating it. To stay relevant, librarians have followed information outside of the library to work in classrooms, student centers, even local coffee shops. In college settings, library instructional sessions are the normal course of action, and what librarians call “one-shots” are the most common form of instruction. These are usually intensive, assignment-driven modules taught once a course. Students are shown how to search the databases and online catalogs needed to successfully complete an assignment. In this role, the librarian usually teaches alone. Yet, given the increasing importance of producing information literate college graduates, librarians and teaching faculty must work together to move past the “one-shot,” lone-librarian model of instruction towards a more effective integration of information literacy instruction.

In fall 2008, at an American university branch campus in Doha, Qatar, library instruction was embedded into a new freshman composition course. The success of this faculty-librarian
collaboration reveals that the foundation of an effective approach to embedding library instruction requires a mutual understanding of the relationship between instructional goals and information literacy. This experimental model serves as an example of library instruction that moves beyond traditional practices and towards a more effective integration of information literacy into mainstream coursework.

Educational Context

Qatar is a small peninsula approximate in size to the U.S. state of Connecticut and is bordered by Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Gulf. The population of Qatar is 1.6 million people; the majority reside in the capital city of Doha (Qatar Statistics Authority). One-third of the population is native Qatari while the remainder is made up of low-wage, expatriate workers primarily from the Indian subcontinent. Before independence in 1971, Qatar was a British protectorate and its main industry was pearl diving. Oil and natural gas have generated substantial wealth and made Qatar one of the fastest growing countries in the world. According to the CIA World Factbook, Qatar boasts the world’s second highest per-capita income.

Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar (VCUQatar) is a branch campus of Virginia Commonwealth University’s School of the Arts in Richmond, Virginia. The university is located on the grounds of Education City, a 2500-acre multi-college campus situated on the outskirts of Doha. The institution was established in 1998 through a partnership between VCU and the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development. The mission of the university is to provide a high level of design education for the citizens of Qatar by offering Bachelor of Fine Arts degrees in Communication Arts and Design, Fashion Design and Merchandising and Interior Design. A Painting and Printmaking program was recently added as well as an M.F.A. program in Interdisciplinary Design. VCUQatar is a small university with approximately 205 students and 40 teaching faculty. Fifty-seven percent of students are native Qatari; twenty-nine nationalities are represented at the school, and most students hail from the surrounding Middle Eastern countries. The language of academic instruction is English and most of the students speak English as a second or third language. The school began as a female-only institution, but became co-educational in fall 2007; males now constitute six percent of the student body.

The VCUQatar library offers a focused collection of over 20,000 books and DVDs that support a curriculum in art and design. Unlike many university libraries, the VCUQatar library is located within the school building itself. Students who have studied in Arab schools traditionally learn by rote and memorization; the textbook may be the only book used in class. Critical thinking and problem solving are not required or expected in course work. Many local schools do not have a library and those that do may have a closed-stacks policy, allowing only library staff to access the collection. A TOEFL score of at least 500 is a requirement for admittance to the university and students’ scores range from 500 to over 600. As a result, the school features students with a wide range of reading comprehension and writing skills, which affects their ability to conduct library research and to succeed in English courses.

To satisfy the English requirements at VCUQatar, students must pass three composition courses and one literature course. Library instruction was integrated into the first part of Focused Inquiry (FI), a sequential, two-semester freshman English course developed by faculty at VCU in Richmond and subsequently adopted by VCUQatar. FI focuses on developing a set of learning skills that contribute to life-long learning, including written commu-
communication, oral proficiency, critical thinking, information fluency, ethical and social responsibility, and literacy.

Library Instruction: Problematic Practices and Perceptions

“One-shot” bibliographic instruction is often limited to a “how-to” sequence of actions and strategies on locating and retrieving different forms of information. The nature of these sessions tends to reinforce the image of the librarian as an information locator rather than as a shaper of information literate, life-long learners. Many college librarians are valued as little more than service-providers, but in many institutions they have assumed the additional role of educators with faculty status, some on a tenure-track. Despite the professional elevation of many college librarians, many faculty continue to regard librarians as “academic pariahs” who are tolerated but not embraced (Hauptman 93). That many librarians do not publish or have formal teaching experience are two reasons commonly given for why faculty fail to consider librarians as academic equals (McGuinness 575). Librarians, conversely, believe that most faculty fail to understand what is involved in shaping information literate students. To make matters worse, many faculty persist in the belief that assignments alone, without formal bibliographic instruction, are enough to help students develop research skills (McGuinness 577). Successful librarian-faculty collaborations that do occur tend to be individual-based rather than department initiated, and as a result, lack continuity when the “library-friendly” professor leaves the university (McGuiness 574). Recent evidence suggests that not only faculty but also students perceive librarians as service workers rather than as trained experts who work within an established discipline.

The Undergraduate Research Project, a two-year long ethnographic study conducted by members of the University of Rochester River Campus Libraries in Rochester, New York, sought to understand the relationship between how students engage in academic work and the role of the library. This study offered, in the words of the librarian-researchers, a “sobering” reality in terms of how some undergraduate students perceived the role and status of university librarians: “We observed that the professor, not the librarian, is typically seen as the expert, and that in the eyes of many students, librarians are still associated only with books” (Briden, Burns and Marshall 7). Furthermore, according to Betsy Barefoot, the co-director and senior scholar of the Policy Center on the First Year of College, many freshmen believe the library is irrelevant (B16). Barefoot attributes this reaction to the nature of first-year courses and the lack of information literacy instruction. Ironically, freshmen are the ones who stand to gain the most from working with librarians. At VCUQatar, the small student population makes it possible for faculty and librarians to work closely with students, and the implementation of a new freshman-writing course created an opportunity for a new way of teaching library skills to freshmen.

Library Instruction at VCUQatar: A More Effective Integration

Inviting the librarian into the composition classroom to discuss her own academic background with the students at the first point of contact was an innovative feature of this integrative model. Most students are simply unaware that librarians hold advanced degrees, and most were surprised to learn that their librarian held a master’s degree in library and information science (MLIS), the same degree-level, in fact, as their professor. The goal of this instruc-
tional feature was to encourage students to view the librarian as an academic equal to the professor. Our decision to conduct these discussions in the classroom rather than the library was intended to undermine pre-existing stereotypes held by students that often compromise the credibility of the librarian. Always holding library instruction in the library, as most one-shot sessions do, implies that the librarian’s proper “place” is in the library and not in the classroom—a practice that is out of step in an age where information is no longer physically tied to the library. If IL programs are to make a lasting impact on the lives of students, if students are to become truly engaged in learning the processes of research, then the actual physical space itself must be considered—what associations it tends to embody and how these associations might impact learning.

Despite countless testimonies by librarians confirming that the most successful attempts to integrate library instruction is with the full involvement and support of faculty, many faculty continue to resist embedding library instruction into their courses. Some have argued that IL courses should be stand-alone classes taught by librarians, but as Arthur Sterngold points out in “Rhetoric Versus Reality: A Faculty Perspective on Information Literacy Instruction,” this option “may not be as effective in developing students’ IL as some anticipate. Even if faculty do support this approach, students and faculty may not take the instruction seriously if it is not integrated into regular academic courses and grading” (86). Sterngold’s point begs the question: how can faculty motivate themselves and students to fully invest in library instruction even when woven into coursework? In the case of this project, a shared understanding of the concept of information literacy and how it related to course goals was a key component.

Librarians and faculty naturally tend to speak to each other in the vocabulary of their disciplines, a fact that can quickly lead to confusion and misunderstanding. In 1989 the American Library Association’s (ALA) Presidential Committee on Information Literacy defined information literacy (IL) as the ability to recognize an information need and in turn find, evaluate and effectively use that information. These IL skills form the basis for lifelong learning. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), the division of ALA dedicated to academic institutions, built on this definition in 2000 by developing the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. These standards form the basis for much of the current library instruction in academic institutions. ACRL distinguishes the concept of information literacy from information technology skills; the former involves “broader implications for the individual, the educational system, and for society” (3). Information technology skills, on the other hand, “enable an individual to use computers, software applications, databases, and other technologies to achieve a wide variety of academic, work-related, and personal goals” (3). These two concepts are closely related, for one cannot hope to exercise or understand the broader implications of information literacy if one is unable to apply basic technological skills. However, in practice, most faculty arrange library instructional sessions that emphasize technological literacy (e.g. how to access library databases) over information literacy (e.g. how to critically evaluate information).

To better understand ACRL’s IL standards, faculty should rethink the notion of IL from a narrow skill-set to a broader liberal art as proposed by Shapiro and Hughes, who posit that IL should be conceived broadly as “the critical reflection on the nature of information itself, its technical infrastructure, and its social, cultural and even philosophical context and impact” (“Information Literacy as a Liberal Art”). This approach is “essential to the mental framework of the education information-age citizen.” Central to approaching IL as a liberal art is the
goal of creating “intelligent shapers of the information society rather than its pawns,” wise and informed decision-makers who consider information as part of a “meaningful existence rather than a routine of production and consumption” (Shapiro & Hughes). Understanding IL as a liberal art will help faculty gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between information literacy, the goals of library instruction and the value of a college education. In this collaboration, the language of IL as a liberal art aligned more closely with the language of the primary goals of Focused Inquiry: to generate substantive critical responses, both written and oral, based on evidence, facts, logical conclusions and reasons rather than on personal assumptions and assertions.

Facilitating class discussions on the role of libraries in society and culture was another innovative feature of this project. Shared notions of information literacy were enacted by co-leading class discussions on the role libraries have played in the development of different civilizations. The discussion prompted students to think critically about the relationship between IL and the development of society, another goal of Focused Inquiry. The conversation was framed around four images of libraries: the Hogwarts library in the popular Harry Potter films, the ancient library of Alexandria, the James Branch Cabell Library located on the Monroe-Park campus of VCU in Richmond, Virginia, and a rendering of the Qatar national library to be built on the grounds of Education City. These images were discussed in terms of the past, present and future of the library in the context of VCUQatar. Also discussed was Thomas Cahill’s *How the Irish Saved Civilization* and the important role that the wandering Irish monks played in collecting and preserving much of the valuable knowledge of the ancient world lost in the destruction of the library of Alexandria in ancient Egypt.

The example of Alexandria as a depot of ancient wisdom and knowledge resonated deeply with students, many of whom expressed in class a powerful sense of transnational Arab identity. According to Cahill, these librarian-minded monks and their efforts to fan out over Europe to collect and preserve classical manuscripts were instrumental in fueling the rebirth of classical learning in the Renaissance. Thinking broadly about the roles libraries and librarians have played in some of the master narratives of world civilizations constructed a more meaningful context in which to situate library instruction. Engaging students in participative discussion promotes deeper, engaged learning “that results in a meaningful understanding of material and content,” which occurs when learning is social, active, contextual, engaging and student-owned (Carman, Haefner 29). Adopting this approach to library instruction rather than a traditional lecture allowed the students to assume ownership of their learning. Students were encouraged to think about libraries and information outside of their immediate situation. Moreover, the professor served as an involved, co-participant in the conversation, as opposed to the way in which many faculty assume passive, “sideline” roles in library sessions. This model of instruction was also intended to, again, encourage students to regard the librarian as an intellectual equal to the professor rather than as a glorified book-locator or academic service worker, perceptions held by many students that unfortunately compromise library instruction.

The conversation about the relationship between the library and society also addressed the problem of students seeing the library as only a place to access the sources necessary to write a research paper. Furthermore, the discussion conveyed the idea that information comes from many sources, not only books and the Internet. Assignment-driven, instructional sessions unnecessarily restrict the way that students can and should think about information and libraries. If the goal is to produce life-long learners who are able to effectively use information
throughout their lives, faculty and librarians need to move beyond the traditional ways in which students are taught to experience the library within the limits of formal education.

Evaluating resources on the Internet was the next library-related topic addressed in class. As part of this theme, the class evaluated the Wikipedia entry on Qatar. Here was a project that truly captured the students' interest. Not only were the population statistics inaccurate and the official languages of the state incorrect, but this information changed from one class period to another. Students recognized first-hand the unreliability of Wikipedia as a source of information. The entry on Qatar generated so much interest and enthusiasm that additional time was devoted to updating the Wikipedia entry. The class chose three inaccuracies that they considered the most important and spent an additional class period researching their topics to locate valid information in reliable sources. A Wikipedia account in the class's name was established and the webpage was updated.

The Wikipedia project strengthened the students' ability to think critically and evaluate sources as well as to make a contribution as citizens of the region. Freshman Lowla Al-Khater proudly remarked, "As a Qatari I'm always keen to raise the name of Qatar by ensuring that people receive accurate and reliable information...the Wikipedia entry on Qatar serves as a welcoming gesture to the country, so all the information should be accurate and current in order to avoid misleading readers worldwide." Updating information on Qatar gave students the satisfaction of providing a more valid picture of their home or host country while learning about the importance of accurate information and increased their level of information fluency.

Assessment and Findings

To assess the impact of integrating IL instruction into the freshman composition curriculum, we developed a series of questions to identify and evaluate student levels of information literacy. Measuring how well students were able to define information was not the goal of the assessment; rather, the goal was to measure how well students were able to recognize the different roles information played in their lives. These questions were posed at the beginning and end of the semester via the discussion board function on the online course management system Blackboard. The four questions were as follows:

1. What is information? Where does information come from?
2. How can you tell if something you read or hear is the truth?
3. If posed with a general question you cannot answer, where is the first place you usually look for answers? Why do you look there first as opposed to some other place? Do you look some places for certain types of questions and other places for other types of questions? Why?
4. How important is it to know if something you read or hear is accurate? Why?

Students' answers at the end of the course demonstrated a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of information. "We receive information through our senses without realizing; we detect sounds, we feel the difference in temperatures, we see things all around us, we taste different food, and we also smell different scents," wrote one student in response to the first question. Months earlier she had defined information as "knowledge that could be gained in many ways." A deeper realization of information, the different types and places
it comes from, forms a solid base that can be further developed in subsequent composition courses and library instructional sessions.

Students' understanding of how to gauge the accuracy of information also evolved during the semester. "If what I read is from a book and a famous writer, I know what he is writing is true or why would he be that famous," wrote one student at the start of the semester. Another student wrote, "I will think about it, if it makes sense or not, if it [is] logical." Later this last student wrote, "In order to know if the information is accurate, we need to question where it comes from. For instance if the information is coming from Qur'an, we cannot evaluate this source because it [is] God's words but there is always a chance that a human do [sic] mistakes therefore, sometime we find inaccurate information." In the later answers, several students also talked about following the path of information while updating the Wikipedia entry on Qatar to verify the accuracy of given facts.

The place where most students prefer to look for information did not vary from the beginning to the end of the semester (question three). "The first place I usually look for answers if posed with a general question would be the Internet... because it has a wider range of answers and comes from many different sources." Students are satisfied with the information they get from the Internet for their academic needs, although from a librarian/faculty perspective the information students access via the Web is not normally sufficient for these purposes. At the end of the class, the same student echoed her initial response, "Most of the time, I prefer using the Internet since the library and bookstores are not always open the times I want to go and also its location may cause some trouble. Whereas with the Internet, the laptop is with us most of the time and wireless network is available almost everywhere nowadays, therefore we can easily access the information we need." The student did not demonstrate any change in depth of understanding from the first response to the second, but this was found to be typical of students and makes information literacy initiatives even more important. There is plenty of relevant and authoritative information on the Internet, and one could argue that instead of insisting to teach students how to search fee-based databases we should also be teaching students how to more effectively search the Web.

Students showed very little difference in the level of understanding of the importance of accurate information in their earlier and later responses. They answered question four by making a clear distinction between the necessity of accurate information for academic purposes versus information for personal purposes. According to most students, factual information for personal use is not as important. "It depends how and in what way I am going to use this type of information, if I am reading something for entertainment this won't matter much, but if I am reading or hearing information that I am going to use in my paper or build on it, it must be accurate," wrote one student at the end of the semester. This black and white view of the importance of accurate information suggested something that needs to be addressed in subsequent FI courses. Updating the Wikipedia entry, however, gave many students a first-hand understanding of the importance of accuracy in sources that are commonly referenced, especially by students like themselves, and how easy it is to start and perpetuate a chain of misinformation.

Conclusion

This model of integration serves as an example rather than a template and should be adapted to serve different educational contexts. A common problem at institutions with high student
populations is that there are not enough librarians to teach the requisite number of freshman composition classes. In this case, a relatively small institution and the support of the administration created a viable model and eliminated many of the obstacles faced at larger institutions.

Composition instructors can help deepen and enhance librarian-student and librarian-faculty relationships by more effectively and more fully integrating library instruction into their courses. A collaboration between a librarian and a composition instructor at an American branch campus in the Arabian Gulf has demonstrated how to integrate library instruction into freshman composition in ways that positively impact course goals and lead to more fruitful professional collaborations.

References


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*Nancy Fawley*

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