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Building a digital repository of assignments

A collaborative initiative

Librarians are often exposed to a wide variety of assignments through their work. Beyond applying their firsthand knowledge to better assist individual faculty members with assignment design, what role can librarians play in campus-wide faculty development programs? This article describes such an initiative at Lafayette College. The assignment repository—a collaborative project between the Center for the Integration of Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship (CITLS), the College Writing Program (CWP), the First Year Seminar (FYS) program, and the College Library—aims to archive and showcase excellent faculty assignments. Furthermore, it hopes to generate conversations, inspire new ideas and approaches for assignments, and encourage creative options that "extend critical thinking and deepen learning."[1] In this article, we will discuss the development and promotion of the repository, its features, selected assignments, informal feedback from faculty members, and lessons learned.

Building the repository

At Lafayette College, librarians have been exploring their role in assignment design and faculty pedagogy through their work with first-year seminars and upper-level courses as well as their participation in faculty development programs.[2] The assignment repository grew out of a series of lunchtime faculty panel presentations entitled "My Favorite Writing Assignments," which are co-sponsored by CITLS, CWP, and the library. Inspired by these presentations and ensuing discussions, and motivated by faculty requests for assignments and more panels, we decided to create a central place to archive faculty assignments. Not only could we refer faculty members to the repository for assignment examples, we could also use it to initiate and support campus-wide conversations around assignment design, information literacy, and writing instruction.

We developed the repository in WordPress, a platform that was already widely used at Lafayette College and so familiar to faculty members. Equally important, we knew it could accommodate different types of assignments, such as presentations, group projects, traditional papers, and multimodal assignments. In order to encourage faculty members to use the repository to share ideas about assignments and teach research and writing on our campus, we kept the repository for internal use.

To test the feasibility of our idea and to work out any potential technical issues, we piloted the repository in summer 2019 with the FYS program. Taught by faculty members from across disciplines, FYS are writing-intensive, and they introduce first-year students to college-level reading and research, including basic concepts of information literacy.[3] Each summer, the FYS program director organizes a series of workshops for instructors who are new to teaching FYS, helping them develop writing- and information literacy-related assignments, among other things. This small group of faculty members provided an ideal trial ground for the repository. Faced with designing a new kind of course, and in some cases teaching writing for the first time, FYS instructors were looking for models and, consequently, were interested in how their colleagues had crafted FYS assignments.

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In fall 2019, we opened the repository to the entire campus. To acquire assignments, we rely on both formal and informal communications with the faculty. Each semester, we e-mail all teaching faculty, encouraging them to upload their assignments to the repository. Similar announcements are posted to two faculty Facebook pages monitored by the FYS program director. In addition to these formal channels, we also engage in targeted recruiting, taking advantage of our pre-existing partnerships with faculty members and our knowledge of their assignments. Each of us identifies faculty members whose innovative assignments we would like to showcase in the repository and contacts those faculty members individually. The targeted recruitment adds a personal touch and further motivates faculty members to share their assignments.

Using an entry form on the repository site, faculty members can submit information about their assignments, including the learning objectives, the actual assignment document, and any supporting files. They can choose categories and tags for their assignments, for example, the discipline, course level, and the type(s) of assignment. We review submissions and turn those entries into posts, adding additional tags as needed. Each post includes a description of the assignment and its learning outcomes, options to download the assignment and related materials, a link to email the assignment's author, and the opportunity to leave comments. Users of the site can look up assignments by clicking various categories and tags, selecting an instructor's name from the dropdown menu of contributors or using the search box.

Assignments

The repository currently has 27 assignments from 21 faculty members, representing 14 departments or programs. The majority of assignments are from FYS instructors, the pilot group for the project. Contributions to date include biography, autobiography, ethnography, field notes, and essay assignments. The featured FYS assignments reflect the program's emphasis on teaching critical thinking through interpretation and evaluation of a variety of texts, reconsidering assumptions to build informed perspectives, and information literacy. A short paper assignment, for example, asks students to imagine a discussion with family members about whether the Internet changes us, and to draw on course readings to address those arguments.[4] Another assignment asks students to "follow the footnotes" in an article to find its sources and evaluate the author's use of them.[5]

Assignments shared by other faculty members represent a diversity of traditional and nontraditional genres that engage students in producing different types of information. For example, students in a Second Language Acquisition class write a literature review and a proposal for future research—their methodology, expected results, and limitations and implications.[6] They complete the project in stages and describe in their exploratory essay the evolution of their thinking and the development of their project. An assignment for a geology class focuses on the Lafayette College's building stones.[7] It takes students on a virtual tour of the campus and asks them to describe and sketch the geological origins of the rocks. An Introduction to Art History assignment has students recreate famous works of art using ordinary, found objects.[8] Students reflect in writing on what they learned about the original artwork from their experience of recreating it.

Promoting the repository

Since we intend the repository to be a portal that faculty members can turn to for ideas and inspiration when designing assignments, we realize that promoting the repository is equally as important as building it. So far, we have used our professional roles to help spread the word about the repository. For example, during the new faculty orientation and the summer workshops for new FYS instructors, the CITLS director and the FYS program director, respectively, highlight the repository as an important resource. In her capacity as the assistant director of CWP, the FYS program director refers faculty members to this site when they contact her about developing writing assignments. Librarians recommend the site to faculty members with whom they partner on information literacy and assignment design.

In addition, the repository is featured on the websites of CITLS, CWP, FYS, faculty development, and the library. All of these efforts help to increase faculty members' awareness and use of the repository. Once faculty members recognize the value of the repository, we hope that they will not only use it themselves and tell other colleagues about it, but that they will also become more inclined toward sharing their own assignments on the repository.

Faculty feedback

Feedback from faculty members on the assignment repository has been overwhelmingly positive. When new faculty members and FYS instructors learned about the repository at their orientations and summer workshops, they commented that the repository helps them gain a sense of the types of assignments colleagues use in their courses. Other faculty members, through emails and informal conversations, also remarked that they find the assignments posted inspirational and that the repository is a great resource for them and the campus community. In addition, they appreciated the opportunity to share their own assignments. Moving forward, we plan to use a data analytics tool to examine the usage of the repository and share it with the faculty, in order to understand how often the repository is accessed and to further promote it on campus. As we deliberate on how to make the repository as beneficial as it can be for faculty members, we intend to use additional venues, such as focus groups, to seek feedback from those who visit the site.

Lessons learned

Creating an assignment repository requires time, patience, and close collaboration across different units. It is important to choose a platform that has technology support on campus and to test it with a small group of faculty members. Piloting the repository with FYS instructors allowed us to work out any technical issues and streamline the submission process before the full implementation. Acquiring assignments and promoting the use of the repository necessitates resourcefulness and persistence. The multiple venues we use—such as formal communications to the campus and outreach to individual faculty members—as well as the involvement of CITLS, CWP, the FYS program, and the library, help us reach more faculty members and reinforce that the repository is an important resource. Such a collaborative approach is key to building a robust and sustainable assignment repository.

Notes

1. John C. Bean, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom,* Second edition, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 52.

2. Lijuan Xu, "Lafayette College: A Non-Liaison-Based Information Literacy Program," in *Hidden Architectures of Information Literacy Programs,* ed. Rebecca Halpern, Carolyn Caffrey Gardner, and Elizabeth Galoozis (Chicago, IL: ACRL, 2020), 41–51.

3. "First Year Seminar Library Instruction," accessed February 23, 2021, https://library.lafayette.edu/services-help/services/instruction-and-information-literacy/first-year-seminar-library-instruction/.

4. Susan Wenze, "FYS 122 Psychology and the Media: How Does Internet Use Change Us?" (assignment, Lafayette College, Fall 2020).

5. Brett Hendrickson, "FYS 088 Communicating with the Dead: Follow the Footnotes" (assignment, Lafayette College, Fall 2020).

6. Han Luo, "FLL / PSYC 210 Second Language Acquisition: Literature Review and Research Proposal" (assignment, Lafayette College, Fall 2020).

7. David Sunderlin, "GEOL 130 An Introduction to Geology: Geology of Lafayette's Building Stones" (assignment, Lafayette College, Spring 2020).

8. Eric Hupe, "ART 102 Introduction to Art History: COVID Re-Creation" (assignment, Lafayette College, Spring 2020). ✂

sity of Editorial Boards and Gender Differences in the Peer Review Process at Six Journals of Ecology and Evolution," *Ecology and Evolution* 9, no. 24 (2019): 13636–49, https://doi.org/10.1002/ece3.5794; Molly M. King, Carl T. Bergstrom, Shelley J. Correll, Jennifer Jacquet, and Jevin D. West, "Men Set Their Own Cites High: Gender and Self-Citation across Fields and over Time," *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 3 (2017): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023117738903; "The Condition of Education 2020 (NCES 2020-144), Characteristics of Postsecondary Faculty," NCES Annual Reports, National Center for Education Statistics, May 2020, https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=61. ✂