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Lessons learned from teaching

Reinventing the librarian in credit-bearing courses

Delaware Valley University is a private university located about one hour north of Philadelphia in bucolic Bucks County. The librarians at its Krauskopf Memorial Library have faculty status, which allows us to serve on faculty committees and teach credit-bearing courses. Despite this, librarians have only taught the first-year experience course, which is otherwise taught primarily by staff. This course is heavily scripted and not owned by the faculty, unlike other courses. It does not offer opportunity for course development or for building relationships with teaching faculty, both of which are important for instruction librarians. Most of our instruction librarians only have experience teaching one-shot information literacy sessions and are rarely embedded into a course. Much of the literature on semester-long library classes focuses on information literacy skills. These courses are designed by librarians as an antidote to the one-shot. But what if the information literacy was incorporated into course development? Could students learn research skills in a way that supported the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education and inspired students' interests?

I was invited to coteach an honors colloquium with an assistant professor in the Plant Science department in fall 2020. We had previously worked together in her other courses. However, I had always been a guest in her classroom. Honors colloquia are one-credit classes that meet 50 minutes per week. These classes are required for freshman and sophomore honors students across all majors. Typically, honors colloquia are discussion-based courses designed to stimulate students to engage in analysis and critical thinking about an interesting topic. My coinstructor wanted to explore how ecosystems change and to cover a handful of specific incidents. The working title was "Pests and Plagues: How Natives and Exotics Shaped our Ecosystem." I hoped to use this as an opportunity to teach students how to research while thinking critically about our global ecosystem.

Course development basics

While I have tried to incorporate the ACRL Framework into much of my instruction, this was a chance to delve into the threshold concepts more deeply. Typically, during a one-shot information literacy lesson, I try to balance an instructor's request to teach students about the library databases with the real needs that students have. I've noticed that students often lack the skills to form an interesting question and to assess a scholarly article quickly. The Research as Inquiry frame was never far from my mind during the course development. My coinstructor hoped to help students

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understand what it means to contribute to research and how it fits into the bigger conversation, which is part of Scholarship as Conversation. I also hoped to add concepts from *Searching as Strategic* to the course, as well.¹ The goals were framed more specifically as:

- finding, reading, and distilling peer-reviewed research;
- demonstrating critical thinking in writing and discussion to show connections between historic and current events;
- recognizing intentional and unintentional consequences of human actions on ecosystems;
- questioning sources of knowledge; and
- telling great campfire stories and winning trivia games.

In December, we met to discuss themes and gather readings. I found it a great learning experience, as I had never collaborated in course development. We built a list of animals, bacteria, and plants, both damaging and beneficial. Gathering readings plays into a librarian's skillset. We decided to cover famous and forgotten incidences, both natural and manmade, which have shaped the human experience. We included the story of the Colombian exchange, which brought smallpox to the New World and potatoes to Ireland, and the infamous story of the Irish potato famine. We hoped students would apply those lessons to new pests such as the spotted lanternfly and brown marmorated stink bug. We wanted to have conversation about the benefits that have come from moving biologicals around the world, such corn's global impact from its origins in Mexico to citrus and apple production from crops originating in Eurasia.

My coinstructor and I were in a plant-themed book club together and already frequently exchanging articles, which we incorporated into the course. We collected sources, including books in the library collection, NPR, Smithsonian Magazine, and *The New Yorker* to name a few. At the time, I did not know how much reading was appropriate to assign let alone what needed to be on the syllabus.² I had never considered that the syllabus is a student's first impression of the course and the instructor. My coinstructor clarified ways in which we could both use the university template but also tell our students about our expectations.

Framework in action

With goals and readings in place, we could move into structure. Structuring the course was not something I had experience with.³ We set the tone with discussions on the first day rather than "reading the syllabus." We wanted students to be prepared to engage and be challenged. We had built a large list of potential topics and decided to allow the class to select those that were most of interest to them during the second week. I led with an activity called "How to be a Librarian in 4 Easy Steps," designed to familiarize students with the different approaches to researching a challenging topic. It was built off the Framework concept of Research as Inquiry. I hoped to show students how to ask increasingly complex questions and to find gaps in the literature. It gave me the opportunity to discuss different source types and their respective values.

I showed students simple tricks, such as first reading the abstract, then moving onto the results and conclusions, rather than reading the whole article to determine if it was valuable. I also helped students strategize different ways of finding information. I wanted students to understand that searching is nonlinear. The mental flexibility needed is more effective through experience, but I hoped a live search would show students how to identify new avenues.

We also talked about the interested parties on a given topic and how to find their research.

Each consecutive week, we provided a “popular” source. A group of students would each find a correlated peer-reviewed article to share with the class and lead a discussion on the topic. We wanted students to be able to read and summarize a research article but also to discuss how their research article contributed to the conversation and what lessons could be learned going forward. This was the Scholarship as Conversation frame in action. Weekly, I provided feedback and guidance to students on finding appropriate research, while my coinstructor acted as a sounding board for students struggling with the data.

My coinstructor and I led the classes in a very conversational manner, which allowed us to teach collaboratively. I was initially concerned and hesitant to “take up space” in a realm that I did not feel I owned. While I would encourage students to reach out to me for help finding research, I didn’t feel confident helping students parse articles or understand the “hard science.” Fortunately, I had a very collaborative coinstructor who encouraged and commended me. As the weeks went by, I felt more comfortable jumping into the conversation.

Lessons learned

We asked students to reflect on each topic and shared how it affected them, what they thought could or should be done, and what additional questions they had. Surprisingly, many students felt the historical events had no impact on them. This led to fruitful discussions about how the Irish potato famine and other food shortages have impacted migration. We stressed that poverty, illness, and food insecurity are global issues. I was also surprised by how many students suggested legal actions, such as closing borders, to prevent outbreaks. Again, we were able to use it as a learning opportunity. We shared examples of how increased restrictions led to smuggling and worse outbreaks. We also encouraged students to think more globally in their solutions.

Overall, I found it to be an incredibly valuable experience. Many of my former students have reached out to me for help with research in other courses. I have learned about research assignments I didn’t know existed and have been able to reach out to faculty to offer more support. I also feel like I can contribute to conversations with faculty more, having been in the classroom. I can talk, knowledgably, about what makes an assignment successful and where students struggle in the research process. Our student evaluations mentioned how much they enjoyed the discussions. They particularly liked having input into the course topics and listening to their peers’ presentations.

I had originally been concerned that students would find the weeks of presentations dull. Instead, peer learning proved to be a tool I will work to incorporate into library instruction. By the end of the course, the students felt more comfortable finding and reading scientific sources in a range of fields. While this course was an elective in the honors program, I think the format has value for the greater student body. I am looking into teaching additional sections of this course, solo, in the future.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the work of my coinstructor Sarah Dohle, assistant professor of Plant Science, who was instrumental in shaping the course and making it run so smoothly.

Notes

1. ACRL “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework> (accessed February 24, 2022).
2. K. Gannon, “How to create a syllabus,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-to-create-a-syllabus/>.
3. R. Lyons, M. McIntosh, and M. Kysilka, *Teaching college in an age of accountability* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003). *zz*