

Erin T. Smith and Dorita F. Bolger

Taking it personally

Using biography to create a common FYE information literacy assignment

The incorporation of information literacy objectives into First Year Experience (FYE) courses is nothing new. Since ACRL published its “Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education” in 2000, information literacy has become a standard component of FYE courses across the country.

What has not been standardized, however, is the nature of the FYE course. Some institutions offer extended orientation sessions; others employ common courses with uniform content; still others have topically oriented academic seminars.

The topical seminar format presents a particular challenge to information literacy instruction. Research and personal experience indicate that the most effective learning experiences occur within the context of a course at the “point of need.”

Because human resources are limited, the challenge is to create one assignment that can be tailored to fit multiple—often radically different—versions of the same course.

Context: Westminster’s FYE Program

Westminster’s First Year Program is composed of three courses: Writing, Oral Communication, and Inquiry 111: Introduction to a Liberal Arts Education. Inquiry lays the foundation: the desired outcome of the course is to develop students who are able to:

- articulate and practice the values and methods of liberal arts education;
- engage, experience, and explain different ways of knowing; and

- pursue interdisciplinary study and discussion of important issues.

Inquiry is a hybrid of the uniform content seminar model and the various topics seminar model. One-third to one-half of the readings are common to all sections of the course, while the remaining content is selected by the instructor. The course was designed to achieve two very different goals: to provide a unifying experience for students through common readings and requirements, and to allow instructors flexibility in tailoring their particular sections to fit their disciplinary backgrounds.

Each instructor creates his or her own themes for the course and supplements the common elements of the course with texts and assignments that support that theme. For example, a faculty member from the philosophy department can structure his course around the concept of knowledge, while a Biology professor can make hers about environmental issues. The result is a common course that varies tremendously from section to section in terms of themes, assignments, and activities.

The topical seminar FYE course and information literacy

The importance of information literacy development is reinforced in all three FYE courses, but information literacy instruction

Erin T. Smith is electronic resources and systems librarian, e-mail: smithet@westminster.edu, and Dorita F. Bolger is reference, interlibrary loan, and information literacy librarian, e-mail: dbolger@westminster.edu, at Westminster College

© 2010 Erin T. Smith and Dorita F. Bolger

is embedded in Inquiry. We were fortunate to have a librarian on the FYE program development committee, who successfully lobbied to incorporate information literacy as an explicit, required component of the Inquiry course, and also for librarians to control the instruction and the assignment. Inquiry instructors continue to endorse and value the information literacy component and to communicate its value to their students by being present for the sessions.

Currently, each Inquiry class spends one week in the library within the first month of the fall semester. The desired outcome of these three, consecutive 60-minute sessions is to equip students with the skills they will need to find, evaluate, and use information as first-year students. The skills that they develop in this course will be built upon throughout their college experience. This goal has remained basically the same since the introduction of the Inquiry course; however, the methods for accomplishing it have changed significantly over the years in response to changing technology and new pedagogical research.

For at least 20 years information literacy research has shown that the most effective learning experiences occur 1) within the context of the course and 2) at the point of need. The librarians also knew from experience that when students saw the library sessions as unrelated to the Inquiry course, they were less likely to take them seriously; but they lacked the staff to create individualized assignments to fit the context of each of the 18 to 25 sections of Inquiry offered each fall. So how could they design one assignment that would work equally well in a course about love and a course about the environment—and the myriad other topics and themes Inquiry instructors used to help their students understand what a liberal arts education is?

Finding common ground

For the librarians at Westminster, the answer was a biographical research paper that asks students to explain why a particular person

is important to society and how he or she relates to the liberal arts. The assignment stipulates they can only use information found in four types of sources: articles from an online reference collection, articles from a print reference source, books from the library's circulating collection, and journal articles. This approach enables the librarians to create one, discipline-neutral information literacy lesson plan that works in each and every section of the FYE course.

Inquiry instructors are asked to do two things in preparation of their "Library Week." One, they submit a list of people relevant to their theme that their students can research (one person per student). The staff then checks the library's holdings to see if an adequate number of print resources are available to ensure that all students can be successful in this first college research assignment. Two, they are to distribute the research paper assignment prior to the Monday that information literacy instruction begins so that students are coming to the library at a "point of need."

During Library Week, each day of instruction is devoted to a different source type. On the first day, students use the *Westminster Library Handbook* (a collection of disciplinary pathfinders) to find general reference sources in order to find basic information about their people.

On the second day, they build upon their knowledge by finding books about their people in the library's circulating collection. And on the third day, they use their findings from the first two days to construct a search strategy in order to find a relevant periodical article. With each new type of source, the students must find new (i.e., not previously recorded) information about their people and record the sources' citation information.

The learning experience based on biographical research encourages students to apply elements of all five of the ACRL "Information Literacy Competency Standards":

Standard 1: The information literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed.

- As students are frequently unfamiliar with the people they are researching, this assignment highlights the value of using general information sources to increase familiarity with a topic.

- Students must choose pathfinders appropriate for their people (American literature, psychology, biological sciences, etc.) in order to find print reference sources. Many of the biographical subjects could be investigated via more than one discipline, which illustrates how disciplinary differences can affect the way information is presented and accessed.

- The biographical research paper assignment requires students to use information from a variety of formats (databases, books, periodicals) and highlights the differences among the types of information found in each one.

Standard 2: The information literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently.

- Students are taught how to use appropriate keywords and synonyms in conjunction with basic Boolean searches.

- In order to focus searches on particular aspects of their people, students use LC subject headings in the online catalog, and the controlled vocabulary in periodical indexes and full-text databases.

- Students must learn how to read a LC call number in order to locate books about their people on the library shelves.

- Students must use indexes to find periodical articles about their people. The students who use disciplinary indexes that are not full-text also learn how to interpret citation information in order to find an article.

- Students record all pertinent citation information for each of the sources they use. Also, because they are required to use four different types of sources, they see how the elements of a citation vary depending on source type.

Standard 3: The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system.

- Requiring students to use both a journal article and a circulating book in their papers provides the opportunity for them to summarize longer works and extract the authors' main ideas.

- A biographical research paper is an excellent vehicle for evaluating both information and the sources of that information. This assignment allows students to consider important issues, such as reliability, accuracy, authority, timeliness, and point of view.

Standard 4: The information literate student, individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose.

- Students must use the information they find appropriately in their research papers, including quoting and paraphrasing sources.

Standard 5: The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally.

- This assignment is the first research paper of most Westminster students' college career; therefore, it is their first opportunity to use sources with integrity by citing them appropriately.

- For their papers, students must consistently and correctly use an instructor-specified documentation style to cite the sources they used.

Assessment

The biographical research paper was first assigned in the fall of 2004. Every year students are asked to complete a short evaluation of the information literacy sessions near the end of the semester rather than immediately following the sessions to ensure that the students have completed the paper. Data from the past five years indicate that students see value in the Inquiry Information Literacy sessions.

- 80 percent of students agreed or strongly agreed that the library instruction introduced them to new concepts, processes, and types of resources.

- 86 percent agreed or strongly agreed

that the examples used by the librarian helped clarify the material.

- 82 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the worksheet that guided them through the research process was helpful.
- 79 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the instruction helped them write the biographical research paper and subsequent assignments.

The evaluation instrument asks students to describe the most beneficial part or parts of the session in their own words. Students have consistently identified these program benefits: the introduction to the variety of resources available through the library, the opportunity to do research for a paper with librarians present, and the tour of the library. Students also frequently say that the things they learned in these sessions helped them do research for other classes, and that they learned that the librarians are there to help them.

Students are also asked to identify any way in which the sessions could be strengthened. Students provided limited suggestions with two appearing most frequently: One, there are too many sessions, and two, there are not enough sessions. This response suggests that a three-session information literacy

program is appropriate for the information literacy objectives of the course.

Conclusion

Framing the information literacy sessions around a biographical research paper allowed the librarians to create one lesson plan that works in each of the radically different sections of the FYE course offered every year.

This strategy ensures that all of the first-year students at Westminster are provided with the same foundation in information literacy and are introduced to the same types of resources, research strategies, and evaluation techniques, regardless of the theme of their particular FYE seminar.

Because the course instructors both choose the people their students will be researching and grade the resulting paper, the vast majority of students see the information literacy instruction as a helpful part of the Inquiry course—not unnecessary or a waste of time. And their evaluations indicate that they recognize that the skills they have developed in this course will be built upon throughout their college experience. Or as one student put it, “It taught me the basics of what I need to know for three more years.” ❧

(“Telling our own story” continues from page 243)

Library staff came together for a cause that was both fun and significant, and it instilled a sense of pride in working at the library. Staff learned new skills, not only working with video equipment, but also with scanning and editing photos, project planning, and more. Additionally, a request for photos and other memorabilia to supplement the project yielded previously unknown historical material that we have added to our archives.

The edited oral history video as it stands represents only one possible outcome from the original interviews. The library will continue to investigate ways to use the existing footage, perhaps remixing other sections

into shorter videos, possibly for publicizing the work of individual departments. We view this project as only a beginning, and we hope to film more staff at a future date as we continue to tell our story.

Resources

Fondren Library’s YouTube channel, www.youtube.com/user/FondrenLibrary#.

Rice University’s Media Release Form, edtech.rice.edu/Documents/MediaRelease.pdf.

Notes

1. New Media Consortium, *The Horizon Report: 2008 Edition* (Austin, TX: New Media Consortium, 2008), 10–12, www.nmc.org/pdf/2008-Horizon-Report.pdf (accessed October 29, 2009). ❧