

Tiffeni J. Fontno and Dianne N. Brown

Putting information literacy in the students' hands

The elementary learning centers approach applied to instruction in higher education

Finding an information literacy approach that is both informative and engaging is a difficult task, especially with an indifferent academic student audience. Library instruction frequently entails a lecture-style, instructor-focused session where students are told about the availability and usage of library resources, but do not have the opportunity to make connections between the research projects they are working on and the lesson being taught.

In an attempt to refresh our information literacy instruction sessions and give students an opportunity for authentic learning, we looked back to our previous experiences as educators in K–12 classrooms. By adapting the learning center approach to meet the needs of our higher education students, we were able to design information literacy instruction sessions that were engaging, flexible, and offered students opportunities to better connect library skills and resources to their own research.

What are learning centers?

Learning centers have been used in K–12 education (primarily by early childhood educators) since the early 1970s. Learning centers are designated areas where small groups accomplish a learning outcome. The areas have activities that introduce, reinforce, or extend learning objectives with minimal teacher interference. This teaching strategy encourages

individual, active student learning, allowing the teacher to facilitate and guide instruction instead of using a traditional lecture format. Learning centers provide an opportunity for students to practice a skill to mastery with a hands-on activity.

The learning outcomes for learning centers:

- allow for experiential learning through discovery,
- reinforce a skill or concept, and
- self-evaluation of competency.

This teaching strategy can be easily transferred to an information literacy approach in higher education. Learning centers offer the librarian instructor an opportunity to facilitate learning instead of lecturing for an entire class session. When using this approach, librarian instructors provide a brief whole-class overview of the skills and resources to be taught. After the overview, students work on an activity at each learning center that reflects the learning objective of the session. The librarian instructor then has time to circulate freely, focusing on individual questions at the students' point of need. Because each learning center focuses on one skill or one resource,

Tiffeni J. Fontno is reference and instruction librarian, email: tiffeni@gmail.com, and Dianne N. Brown is research and instruction librarian, email: dbrown7@lesley.edu, at Lesley University

© 2015 Tiffeni J. Fontno and Dianne N. Brown

the librarian can immediately assess student success through informal observations or the activity outcome. Observing students while they work gives the librarian the ability to evaluate whether students are on task or need further assistance. It also provides opportunities for highlighting “A-Ha!” moments with individual students or the class as a whole.

Why learning centers?

The main benefit of learning centers is what they offer to students. They transform information literacy classes from dull lectures to an environment of active learning and authentic research experiences. With the goal of each center focusing student attention on using a particular skill or tool to answer a research question, these activities allow for experience-based learning and critical thinking. They reinforce a skill or resource in a practical way, and students learn research skills that directly support what they will need to do to complete a class assignment and research independently. These activities also allow for differentiation so students can work at their own pace. Extension activities or additional resources can be added for those who finish quickly, and assistance can be given to those who run into difficulty with the activity.

As students participate in the learning centers, they are fully engaged. Students become more communicative and begin to work collaboratively, as well. Learning centers allow students to discuss search strategies, to clarify parts of a citation or library catalog record, to notice features discussed in the mini lesson, and to critique or evaluate sources with each other. As they cycle through the centers, they experience using different resources and tools and can then compare those experiences to previous ones. Students are more focused and engaged during the centers as compared to traditional lecture sessions, where there are rarely questions asked and eliciting responses becomes difficult.

Learning centers for diverse populations

Learning centers give librarian instructors the

ability to break down information literacy concepts into individual tasks that teach skills or resources. This instruction strategy works well with students who have learning or language barriers. It creates a less stressful environment where students are encouraged to work collaboratively and increases the opportunity for practicing information literacy skills and concepts. For the librarian instructor, the learning center strategy simplifies information literacy topics to their most basic foundations.

For example, there can be a learning center that focuses specifically on identifying keywords in a sentence, a center where the activity involves identifying parts of a catalog record, a center for finding call numbers in the library, or a center for searching the library catalog. We are looking forward to using the learning center approach with students from Lesley’s Threshold Program, a two-year campus-based program that helps young adults with special needs transition to independent living and working.

How we use learning centers at Lesley University

We have successfully used learning centers for information literacy instruction. One of our most successful classes was Children in Global Perspectives, a 200-level class, with an audience of freshmen and sophomores.

The professor assigned a semester-long research paper for which the students were tasked with selecting a country and exploring an issue faced by children in that country. The professor requested an information literacy session to help the students find scholarly information for their projects and practice citing sources in proper APA format.

The professor wanted students to use books, scholarly articles, statistics, and advocacy groups for their research projects. These four types of resources then became our learning centers: one center for each resource. The library instruction session was 90 minutes long, so we planned for 20 minutes of direct instruction at the beginning, 15 minutes for each learning center (50 minutes

total), and 20 minutes for wrap-up discussion at the end. Students were split evenly into four groups, each group representing a specific geographic area. We assigned students a geographic area without prior knowledge of their chosen paper topics, wanting the students to experience using the resources without focusing on their individual research papers.

To begin the session, the librarian instructor spent 20 minutes demonstrating how to identify keywords in a research question, how to use the Boolean operator AND, and how to access the library's catalog, specific academic article databases, and statistical websites. The students were given their geographic area and started working on the research skill activity at their respective learning centers. Every 15 minutes the groups cycled to a different learning center where they worked on a different activity (the specific skill or database). The output of each activity was to post a card to the whiteboard.

Filling out a card and posting it served multiple purposes: it forced students to produce something tangible, it allowed students to get up and move, and it helped students visualize the complexity of the research process. (It also allowed for immediate assessment of student work.) Our students noted how quickly the books and articles section of the board filled up, while the advocacy group section took much longer.

The book learning center task was to search the library catalog for a book about the education of girls in their particular geographic region. Once students found appropriate books, they wrote the citations in APA format on preprinted sheets and taped them to a whiteboard under their team's heading. Similar to the book center, students found a peer-reviewed article on their topic, cited it in APA format, and posted it on the whiteboard at the article center. The students were tasked with finding an advocacy organization's report on the education of girls in their country, noting the title of the report and the name of the advocacy group to post on the whiteboard for the advocacy learning center.

Lastly, students had to find the literacy rate and school life expectancy of a country in their geographic region and write the statistics as well as the organization that provided them on a card to post on the board. As the students cycled through the learning centers at 15-minute intervals, the librarian instructor circulated throughout the room offering search tips, praising students who were finding excellent resources, and helping students who were having difficulty. Students asked questions of each other, their professor, and the librarian instructor throughout the activities, and the classroom felt energized with active learning.

At the end of the learning center portion of the session, the librarian instructor brought the class back together and asked for feedback. This gave the librarian instructor an opportunity to advertise our Ask A Librarian service as well as assess where students may have needed more structured instruction. We also handed out an informal two-question survey—asking What is one thing you learned today? What is one thing you have questions about?—and an information sheet noting the resources they explored in the learning centers. The feedback from the surveys was overwhelmingly positive. Additionally, we received the following commendation from the course faculty via e-mail:

Thank you so very much for a GREAT class! You clearly went out of your way to tailor to the needs of students in this particular class. I loved—and so did the students—the activity designed. It was library information at its very best: informative, interactive, engaging and fun (and I know you know there are those who would never put library instruction and fun in the same sentence).

Tips for implementing learning centers in your information literacy classroom

Learning centers require a lot of preparation on the librarian instructor's part. The

more planning ahead you can do, the more successful the students' experience will be. Things to think about:

- *Determine your learning objectives for the overall session.* Learning objectives for a general library orientation will be much different from a class session dedicated to finding resources for an upper-level research project. After you determine the learning objectives for your session as a whole, you can identify the skills you want to teach at each of your learning centers.

- *Determine if you are focusing on teaching specific skills (e.g., Boolean searching), specific resources (e.g., Academic Search Premier), or both.* Each learning center should have very focused learning outcomes (separate from your overall learning objectives for the entire session). Be careful not to ask students to do too much at one learning center, or they will get overwhelmed.

- *Determine the output for each of your centers.* The output should allow the librarian instructor to assess whether students have met the learning outcome for that center. Will students be working on a collaborative document that they then share with the rest of the group, or are they each working on their own document (e.g., annotated bibliography)? Will you have students practice creating citations by filling in a form, or will they be writing them based on an example on the board? Activities are not limited to citations. For example, if you are using business information literacy, company profile information can be charted.

- *Determine how many learning centers you will have.* The more learning centers you have, the more monitoring the librarian will have to do. We recommend starting out with two learning center activities, so that the planning and implementation are not overwhelming.

- *To ensure smooth transitions and fluidity through the centers, make instructions for each center.* Use printed directions or use chart paper to document step-by-step directions for your activities. Also be sure to include signage for each center to identify

what resource or skill will be used at the center (e.g., "Finding Scholarly Articles").

- *Determine how you will arrange your room.* Learning centers are noisy, collaborative activities. Will you have students posting their work on the outer walls or boards, or is the space better suited for students staying in their seats? Will students move through the centers or will you bring the activities to them?

- *Differentiate instruction within your learning centers.* For some students the activity will be just right, but others may find it too difficult or too easy. We planned for these instances: Students who needed more help can be paired up with a peer working on the same activity, while students who finish quickly can search for an additional book, explore another database, write a second citation, etc.

- *Collaborate with faculty.* Getting as much information from the faculty about the course and the students before you begin planning your learning centers is critical. Faculty can tell you the objectives of their course, the number of students currently enrolled and the academic level of the students. There's nothing worse than planning an introductory instruction session and then finding out the students are all juniors and seniors.

Conclusion

We have had excellent experiences using the learning center approach to improve our information literacy instruction sessions at Lesley University. We plan to design a more formal assessment for these sessions, to provide us with more qualitative and quantitative data than our current two question exit surveys. Our next step is to expand the learning center approach to teach information literacy concepts for different classes across the curriculum, such as science or business. The flexibility of this approach will make it a good fit in any information literacy classroom.

(continues on page 97)

I enjoy the challenge of recruiting unwilling library visitors and cultivating them into lifelong users. I'm very competitive, just like the young bridge inspectors who often debated which co-worker climbed the highest or fastest. Knowing this information gave me an idea of how to get my point across about the value of using the library and seeking out librarian expertise.

"I use Google every day just like you," I said to the EIT. "But I'll bet you that I can find information faster than you. Let's race!"

I sent him upstairs to get his laptop and the bibliography of articles he needed to study for his PE exam. When he returned to the library, he sat down at a nearby table, opened his laptop and smiled. I could sense he was confident he could beat the middle-aged librarian.

On your mark!

Get set!

Go!

We started typing, and it didn't take long for me to find the first article.

I turned and watched him as his fingers were flying across the keyboard and he frantically tapped the mouse pad. After several minutes, he stopped typing, turned to me, and asked, "How about best 2 out of 3?"

Even though he encountered failure looking for the first article, he was engaged enough to continue searching for the articles he needed. Alas, he lost all three rounds to the librarian.

Ultimately, he ended up the overall winner because he witnessed firsthand the

value of asking the librarian for assistance. He discarded his unsuccessful searching methods and increased the amount of time he spent working on his client projects.

He also ended up being one of my frequent library users and a strong library advocate. I experienced an increase in reference requests from young engineers after our "race," and I would like to believe it was the result of hearing about the value of the library from a peer.

I shared this story as part of my candidate presentation when I interviewed for my current position. I'm surprised at the number of colleagues who mention to me how much they enjoyed listening to the funny story, but, more importantly, that it served as a useful example of student engagement.

While my unconventional "Let's Race" technique may not work for every librarian with all users, it's a successful method to engage students anywhere and anytime, while challenging their assumption that librarians are not a necessary part of the research process.

Notes

1. "Neil Gaiman," Good Reads website, accessed September 4, 2013, www.goodreads.com/quotes/427823-google-can-bring-you-back-100-000-answers-a-librarian-can.

2. Lesley Moyo, "Perceived Ease of Use and Student Satisfaction and Engagement with the Library," in *Student Engagement and the Academic Library* (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2012), 46. *zz*

"Putting information . . ." (cont. from page 95)

Suggested readings

King-Sears, Margaret E. "Designing and Delivering Learning Center Instruction." *Intervention in School and Clinic* 42, no. 3 (2007): 137-147. <http://ezproxyles.flo.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/211755347?accountid=12060>.

Lovrien, Robin H. "Using Learning Centers in Adult ESOL Classrooms : A Disserta-

tion." Ph.D thesis, Lesley University, 2011.

Martin, Susan F. and Andre Green. "Striking a Balance: Advancing English Language Learners' Linguistic Fluency Through Learning Centers." *The Science Teacher* 79, no. 4 (2012): 40-43. <http://ezproxyles.flo.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1017897394?accountid=12060>. *zz*