

Dory Cochran and Sidney Horrocks

Our powers combined

Helping students see how writing and research fit together

At Utah State University (USU), we are exploring how the university's writing center and the Merrill-Cazier Library can work together to help our students become better writers and researchers. Currently, the writing center and the library are housed in different buildings. Despite this physical separation, one of our major goals has been to help students see how services offered by the library and the writing center complement one another. Students typically view researching and writing as two separate activities, and by extension, the library and the writing center are often seen in the same way. While librarians and writing tutors offer different areas of expertise, we both help students develop the critical thinking and information literacy skills needed to succeed during and beyond college.

Several schools have already begun integrating writing tutors and librarians into classrooms and shared spaces in innovative ways. At New York University-Abu Dhabi, librarians and peer tutors have collaborated to help students curb procrastination.¹ Taking a different approach, librarians and writing center staff at Vanderbilt University collaborated within the context of a specific department and undergraduate curriculum.² And, at Grand Valley State University, library and writing support is also now offered in the same space and promoted through a peer-learning service.³ These are just a few examples where collaborations between the library and the writing center have led to new

programs and approaches to teaching writing and research. Still early in our collaboration efforts, our approach at USU has been to develop an ongoing partnership one small step at a time. Currently, librarians attend trainings once a semester for writing center tutors and share a LibGuide on library services, which they can reference during writing sessions. In addition to these meetings, we hold an event called Write Now!, where writing center tutors provide extended hours for writing help in the library before finals week. This event is always highly attended, but aside from meeting in the library there has been little librarian involvement.

A recent project, however, offered greater librarian and writing tutor integration. Two librarians teamed up with two writing tutors to provide help for a large online English literature course. The positive outcome of this partnership is that librarians and writing tutors worked together and helped students in the same online space, but aside from this shared space there was still little interaction between librarians and tutors. Since these collaborations, our goal has been to look for ways to work more closely together.

While conversations exist about teaching writing or information literacy independently

Dory Cochran is reference and instruction librarian, email: dory.cochran@usu.edu, and Sidney Horrocks is undergraduate writing center tutor, email: sidneyhorrocks@gmail.com, at Utah State University

© 2016 Dory Cochran and Sidney Horrocks

of each other, little has been written on how librarians and writing tutors can create lessons and activities together. In “Librarians as Writing Instructors: Using Paraphrasing Exercises to Teach Beginning Information Literacy Students,” Karen Bronshteyn and Rita Baladad argue that the library instruction session is a perfect space for addressing writing due to its focus on “technical instruction, practice, and feedback.”⁴ Librarians can certainly consider writing in the library classroom, but if we want our students to understand how research and writing fit together, it makes sense to find opportunities for writing tutors and librarians to develop and teach lessons together. In spring 2015, an opportunity for such a collaboration arose when a Family, Consumer, and Human Development professor requested a library session that provided information on library resources and strategies for developing writing skills.

Our approach and the result

After brainstorming possible ideas for a lesson co-led by a writing tutor and librarian, we decided to use our class time to highlight the services offered by both the writing center and the library, as well as emphasize the connections between writing and research. With these goals in mind, we created the following learning outcomes: students would be able to identify subject-specific library resources, describe how the writing center can help them, discuss what the writing and research process can look like, and describe strategies or tips for tackling writing bottlenecks.

As we prepared our lesson, we met three times before the actual class. In these meetings we created and structured our activity, discussed our teaching styles, and outlined time between the two of us. Perhaps more importantly, our discussions went beyond our upcoming class, and we took time to learn about the types of work and questions we both respond to in our respective areas.

On the day of the class, we learned that approximately two-thirds of the students

had already received a library session in another class and over half the students had previously visited the writing center. In order to familiarize all of the students with our services, we began by quickly reviewing an online class library guide tailored to their assignment and acting out a mock writing center visit. The purpose of beginning in this way was to establish that when meeting with a librarian or a writing tutor there are no bad questions and that students can visit with both of us at any time in their writing and research process. Also, by modeling a writing center visit, we wanted to boost students’ comfort level by showing them what to expect.

We spent the rest of the class period in class discussions and a small-group activity to help students reflect on their own writing preferences and habits. For the activity, we gave each group a poster board and several colored note cards with various steps of the writing and research process written on each card (i.e., find articles or sources, pick a topic, visit the writing center, etc.). In addition to these specific cards, we also included two or three blank cards and asked students to add steps that we had omitted.

Students were then tasked with arranging the cards in a visualization that represented their research and writing process. Throughout this activity, students discussed their own writing skills, which in turn helped them articulate what they already do successfully and why. After the students displayed their notecards, we discussed each group’s arrangement as a class. The students noticed that their card placements differed and as the discussion progressed, we asked students to share tips and successful strategies for tackling each step of the research and writing process. Occasionally, we supplemented the student comments with additional explanation, but the primary goal of this activity was to create a space where students were teaching and helping each other. Throughout this discussion we took notes on the students’ tips and strategies and then after class added these suggestions to a new page

on the class' online library research guide, along with links to writing examples and the university's writing center website.

Some important take-aways from our lesson reflect students' perceptions of the research process and where the library and the writing center fit into that process. As to be expected, the majority of students placed library-related cards towards the beginning of their arrangements and the writing center at the end. These placements surprised us, however, since we emphasized throughout the lesson that librarians and writing tutors could be useful resources at any stage of the writing and research process. One possibility for these placements could be connected to how students view the writing and research process as one that is linear and step-by-step. Students arranged their cards from left to right, diagonally, and in a flow chart form, but the representations were overwhelmingly linear. Though we do not have any data indicating whether this instruction session bolstered research consultations or writing center visits, our primary goals of initiating a new collaboration, addressing a professor's need, and raising awareness of campus services were a success.

Lessons learned

- *Emphasis on application.* We had a productive discussion during the lesson and students were engaged in the notecard activity, but the opportunity for students to directly apply the ideas to their current writing assignment was missing from the lesson. For future sessions, it would be beneficial to incorporate a structured reflection or homework assignment that would help students apply the ideas discussed to their own work. Also, moving the class to a computer lab instead of meeting in the regular classroom would allow for individual work time on writing or research during the last half of class.

- *More group work, please.* As to be expected, students were much more engaged and involved during the small group activities than in the large group discussion. One

approach to expand this engagement and to help students further apply the ideas might be to include a follow-up activity where students bring an excerpt of their writing assignment and conduct small, focused peer writing workshops.

- *Flip it.* While the majority of our lesson focused on writing and research strategies, a flipped learning approach would free up more time for group activities. Instead of showing the course LibGuide during the class, students could be asked to explore the guide or watch an informative video prior to the class meeting, and come prepared to ask questions.

- *Learning outcomes.* We felt that our learning outcomes provided a solid foundation for our lesson, but in retrospect it would be beneficial to reduce the number of learning outcomes and further target activity time to specific outcomes. If more class time is available, another option would be to have a second library session that scaffolds the learning outcomes from one class to the next.

- *Notecard activity.* Students predominantly used the notecards to represent the writing and research process in a linear fashion. Possible revisions of this lesson plan could complicate this step-by-step process and ask students to think about how to visualize the back and forth nature of writing and research.

Conclusion

To help our students understand how research and writing are connected, librarians and writing tutors need to work together to create and teach meaningful activities. Many of the published discussions on partnerships between libraries and writing centers focus on big projects like curriculum-level integrations, writing centers moving into the library, or collaborations surrounding specific events. Our approach in working one request and one class at a time allows us to hone our areas of expertise together and leverage time and resources in a meaningful

(continues on page 37)

bases, and focused more on choosing and narrowing topics, concept mapping, and developing search terms. Each of these adjustments has required plenty of flexibility to navigate the balancing act between not assuming students know things about research, while also not insulting them with overly rudimentary information.

Fully integrate information literacy and course material

When libraries and information literacy are authentically integrated into a course, students realize that it is not a separate module or something that does not require their complete attention. It demonstrates that the subject faculty member values these components and sees them as integral to the course, which students are keenly sensitive to. For students to fully appreciate the information literacy aspects of a course, those aspects need to be a part of the grade, included on the syllabus, and integrated with the course content as much as possible. This requires planning on the part of the librarian and subject faculty member. Some of the ways in which we have worked information literacy into the grading is through quizzes, points

for consulting with the librarian, and points for completing the various assessments. We have integrated the course content by making sure our examples, exercises, and activities were relevant to key topics covered throughout the semester. We have also used our ongoing research project as an example for students to model as budding sociologists. For example, we have been transparent about our methods as we research them doing research, and used this transparency to share our process as well as teach topics such as informed consent.

Conclusion

Librarians should be proactive on their campuses to find collaborators who are interested in exploring ways to teach and evaluate information literacy and focus their attention on cultivating those partnerships. In our case, sociology and information literacy have been a natural fit. Building on our shared interest in improving students' research skills, and applying the lessons above, we have evolved our collaboration from an ineffective traditional one-shot session to a successful fully embedded team-taught model. *~*

"Our powers combined" (continues from page 33)

way. By working in a collaborative manner, we not only provide needed outreach about library and writing center services, but we also help students think critically about how they write and, hopefully, see that research and writing are not separate entities, but integral parts of a larger process. We look forward to further collaboration between the writing center and the library at USU and implementing formal assessment surrounding coteaching opportunities and lesson plan creation.

Notes

1. Ilka Datig and Luise Herkner, "Get ready for a long night: Collaborating with the writing center to combat student procrastination," *College & Research Libraries News* 75, no 3

(2014): 128–31.

2. Leslie Foutch, "Joining forces to enlighten the research process: A librarian and writing studio integrate," *College & Research Libraries News* 71, no. 7 (2010): 370–73.

3. Mary O'Kelly, Julie Garrison, Brian Merry, and Jennifer Torreano, "Building a Peer-Learning Service for Students in an Academic Library," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 15, no. 1 (2015): 163–82, doi:10.1353/pla.2015.0000.

4. Karen Bronshteyn and Rita Baladad, "Librarians as Writing Instructors: Using Paraphrasing Exercise to Teach Beginning Information Literacy Students," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 5 (2006): 533–36, doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2006.05.010. *~*