

Kathy Shields and Christine Cugliari

# “Scholarship as Conversation”

## Introducing students to research in nonprofit studies

The ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education calls on librarians to work closely with disciplinary faculty to redesign instruction sessions, assignments, and even curricula that are appropriate for the local context.<sup>1</sup> In this example, the authors, a librarian, and a nonprofit management faculty member worked together to redesign an instructional sequence for an introductory nonprofit studies course. The frame, “Scholarship as Conversation,” informed the design of the sequence, which included an activity in the classroom, an activity in the library, and a subsequent reflection.

### Information literacy and disciplinary research

The authors had worked together previously to study how nonprofit students conduct research and presented on their findings at a conference for nonprofit researchers.<sup>2</sup> From their research, they learned that nonprofit management education (NME) can be a difficult discipline for students to grasp. The discipline itself is relatively young, and NME programs may be housed in various colleges within the university. In terms of research, while the true “nonprofit” journals are often indexed in business databases, relevant research can be found in journals across the social sciences. Lynn Westbrook describes disciplines such as NME as “high scatter”<sup>3</sup> fields that require conducting research across a wide range of sources, each of which may require the researcher to understand the

vocabulary of that particular discipline in order to create an effective search strategy. Furthermore, the discipline does not have a definitive term to describe itself, as terms such as *nonprofit*, *not-for-profit*, *charity*, and *philanthropy* are often used interchangeably. As a result, when students in an introductory course are asked to locate literature in this field, they have difficulty not only in determining the appropriate database, but also understanding how an article in a religion journal and an article in an economics journal can both fall under the umbrella of nonprofit studies research.

With this knowledge, the faculty member came to the librarian in the summer of 2015 to discuss how to redesign an assignment for students in an introductory NME course that introduced them to the nonprofit literature. In previous versions of this assignment, students were asked to find an article in a nonprofit journal and write a summary of it. The librarian would come in and show students how to locate specific nonprofit journals and talk about the difference between popular and scholarly articles. While students learned the mechanics of finding articles through this exercise, the faculty member was dissatisfied with students’

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overall understanding of how nonprofit research was produced and its interdisciplinary nature. In addition, the class was not limited to first-year students, so students came into the class with varying levels of experience with academic research.

As a result of their conversation, the librarian suggested using “Scholarship as Conversation,” one of the frames identified in the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education,<sup>4</sup>

as a way to structure the sequence. Part of the description of this frame states: “Developing familiarity with the sources of evidence, methods, and modes of discourse in the field

assists novice learners to enter the conversation.” The knowledge practices and dispositions further describe how students can demonstrate this frame.

For example, “Seek out conversations taking place in their research area.” With this in mind, the authors identified some specific learning outcomes for the instructional sequence. First, students would be able to analyze a given scholarly article from the nonprofit field. Second, they would be able to use that article to identify the conversations taking place around that topic. Third, they would be able to reflect on the value of those conversations to the field of nonprofit studies.

### Scholarship as a conversation in practice

The instruction sequence for the 75-minute class began in the students’ classroom, rather than the library. Instead of having students track down an article, the faculty member

chose a specific article from a nonprofit journal. Students read the article and responded to open-ended questions designed to facilitate their understanding of various components of the article. They turned in these responses on the day of the research session in the library. In that session, the librarian introduced the concept of scholarship as conversation and asked students to share what they knew about how nonprofit researchers and

practitioners share information, which led to a discussion of the differences between scholarly, trade, and popular publications.

Students then went into the NME re-

search guide and searched for an NME-related topic (such as fundraising or governance) in one of the databases listed. In the list of results, students identified the various terminology being used by different scholars writing about the same topic. The librarian asked students how the authors demonstrated that they were a part of an ongoing conversation about this topic. Students identified the reference list and noted some of the disciplines represented. The librarian asked students how they could find out if someone had continued this conversation, which moved to a discussion of the “Times Cited” feature in the database. The librarian then moved out to Google Scholar to show the “Cited By” feature.

This portion of the instructional sequence took 15-to-20 minutes, and then students broke out into assigned groups to work together around tables equipped with large monitors and laptop hookups. To facilitate peer-to-peer learning, the faculty member



Photo credit: Wordle.net, created from the table of contents for the August 2016 issue of *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*.

placed first-year students in groups with upper-level students, whom the authors expected might have a greater level of familiarity with academic research.

Each group was tasked with taking the assigned article (the one they had analyzed before class) and using it to investigate the scholarly conversation around that topic. Half the groups looked into the conversation taking place when the author wrote the article (using the References list). The remaining groups looked into the current conversation around the topic (using the “Times Cited” feature in the database or “Cited By” in Google Scholar).

As they worked, each group responded to a series of questions on a worksheet that asked them to consider the disciplines that the research was in, identify connections between the articles they found, and to find more information about the authors. The librarian and faculty member walked around and answered questions as needed, but allowed students to work mostly on their own. After students completed their worksheets, they met with a group from the other half to discuss what they found. Students each wrote a reflection on the experience as homework.

### **Faculty-librarian communication**

The faculty member and librarian communicated early and often about the goals for the session and the challenges regarding research in this area. In contrast to several examples of disrespect between teaching faculty and librarians, as noted by Heidi Julien and Jen Percoskie,<sup>5</sup> the authors respected the skills, knowledge, and talents the other brought to the exercise. While Julien and Percoskie also noted teaching faculty as the apex of a triangle involving faculty, librarian, and student, the relationship between the authors placed students at the apex with teaching faculty and librarian as the foundation and support for students’ success. This is also evident in the identified learning outcomes for the exercise, which represent both the discipline and information literacy.

From the faculty member’s perspective, the instructional sequence created a much stronger

learning opportunity for students. First, the change from a self-selected article to one pre-selected by faculty provided a more consistent means of evaluating students’ understanding of the article. When students selected their own articles and responded to provided questions, the volume of articles prevented the faculty member from adequately assessing student understanding. The use of one article allowed the faculty member the opportunity to thoroughly understand the article and respond more consistently and thoroughly to students’ work. The single article approach also permitted faculty to better determine which areas of the article were causing difficulty. What specifically emerged was that students’ primary difficulty was identifying findings. This discovery was significant for more appropriately adapting in-class instruction on understanding academic articles.

Through chaining, students discovered the evolution of academic literature and the value of following the trail, as addressed in the description for “Scholarship as Conversation”: “Providing attribution to relevant previous research is also an obligation of participation in the conversation.”<sup>6</sup> With the article specific to this exercise, students discovered that the author’s further research refuted the information originally put forth. This enhanced the lesson of research as conversation and the importance of conducting a thorough examination of the literature, as the conversation may change when further research is conducted.

From the librarian’s perspective, the instructional sequence provided a much more active learning experience for the students. The demonstration portion of the class was limited, and students were given an immediate opportunity to apply that knowledge. In addition, instead of giving students a specific series of steps to follow, the librarian modeled one method but gave students flexibility in their chosen method. Students could use the library’s databases, but they could also use Google Scholar, including its scholar profiles, to find out more about the authors. Although most students were familiar with the reference list, many were not familiar with the “Times Cited”/“Cited By feature,” and

this activity allowed them to see how they could use it in their own research.

## Lessons learned

The authors used this instructional sequence in both the fall and spring semesters, and learned from the experience each time. Each class had difficulty with a particular aspect of the assignment, but it was not consistent across semesters or even classes within the same semester. When asked to find another scholarly article written by an author, for example, some students found book reviews or newspaper editorials written by the author, which meant that some of the questions on the worksheet (e.g., find the reference list, identify the discipline, etc.) did not make sense. The authors found it was important to check in with each group during the activity to make sure they were on the right track and answer any questions that might arise.

Going forward, the faculty member identified two key changes for future library sessions. The first was to not only preselect the article, but also select an article that linked the class topic to a topic of student interest. Doing so would likely enhance students' interest in reading the article and provide sufficient connection, making the need to read carefully and thoughtfully more palatable. In addition, classroom time should be taken prior to the library session to review the structure of an academic article. This would aid in the students' understanding and provide the librarian as well as the faculty member an opportunity to better prepare students for entering the conversation.

Although this instruction sequence was developed for 75- and 90-minute classes, it could easily be adapted for a variety of instructional scenarios.

Overall, both the faculty member and librarian felt that the session achieved its desired learning outcomes. By using "Scholarship as Conversation" to frame the session, it moved the focus from the mechanics of finding an article to the larger picture of how scholarship is created and shared. Students were not just equipped with the skills for finding NME literature, they came away with a better

idea of how scholars (and particularly those in nonprofit studies and related areas) communicate. Through the chaining activity, they were able to demonstrate how scholars build on one another's work to generate new ideas, and how scholars across disciplines bring different perspectives to a shared topic, as seen in other fields such as gender studies and even library and information science.

Students were also given an opportunity to ask questions and reflect on their experience. Finally, the authors feel that the strength of this activity rests in the strong collaboration and communication between the disciplinary faculty member and the librarian. Although this article addresses instruction for a single course, it is an example of how these conversations and collaborations can begin. Dialogue and collaboration between librarians and disciplinary faculty are crucial in order to integrate this concept and others identified in the Framework throughout our students' educational experience.

## Notes

1. "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," ACRL, accessed December 13, 2016, [www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework](http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework).
2. Christine Cugliari and Kathy Shields, "An Examination of the Relationship between Nonprofit Management Education and Academic Libraries," paper presented at the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action 41st Annual Conference, Indianapolis, Indiana, November 2012.
3. Lynn Westbrook, "Information Needs and Experiences of Scholars in Women's Studies: Problems and Solutions," *College & Research Libraries* 64, no. 3 (May 1, 2003): 192–209, doi:10.5860/crl.64.3.192.
4. "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," ACRL.
5. Heidi Julien and Jen Pecoskie, Librarians' Experiences of the Teaching Role: Grounded in Campus Relationships, *Library and Information Science Research* 31, (2009) 149–154.
6. "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," ACRL. 