

Research Notes

Relevance in Library Instruction: The Pursuit

Sonia Bodi

THE CHALLENGE

"Instead of just filling in the blanks to questions, it would help to know when we could use the information. Make it more important and meaningful or don't do it at all. It appeared to be 'busy work.'" That is a summary statement of 27 percent of the freshman students who took bibliographic instruction during the 1982-83 academic year at North Park College and found it a waste of their time. The criticisms are valid.

The 1982-83 academic year was the first time bibliographic instruction was provided to freshmen at North Park. Because most freshmen are required to take English, the instruction was provided through the English composition program, which consists of three levels of courses. The most-able students can choose one of four subject seminars, the least-able students are in a skills-development program, and the rest of the students are in English Composition 101. Research papers are not written in any freshman composition course; instead, the students read primary sources and begin to develop critical thinking by writing about what they have read without depending on secondary sources. Consequently, we, the librarians, were faced with the challenge of providing bibliographic instruction that was unrelated to

the course in which it was taught.

We chose a self-instruction workbook as the main teaching tool, as it had the potential of being easily administered through the English composition courses, it could teach the freshmen how to use the college library, and it could introduce them to unfamiliar library resources. The questions in the workbook were generated by computer; for every question there were twenty variables so that each student had a different workbook. The workbook was organized by type of reference book, and the students had to answer questions about each type. Not until the students were in a class that required library research would they use their newly acquired skills, and it was questionable whether those skills would be retained, particularly by the students who did not perceive the instruction as relevant. Almost ten years ago it was generally recognized that "library instruction is effective only at the time of need," and that "instruction in the use of specific references must be relevant to assignments of the moment."¹ James Rice in 1981 stated "the major theory that has emerged from library instruction to date: library instruction is most effective when it is accompanied by library use."²

The pursuit of relevance is an ongoing one. Students perceive relevance differently from faculty and librarians because

the students do not always know enough about a subject to see how various bits of knowledge relate to each other. The pursuit of relevance in bibliographic instruction is probably no different from the pursuit of relevance in any area of education; however, it is difficult to discern the kind of instruction that will ensure the transfer of skills from one learning experience to another.

TRANSFER OF LEARNING

Transfer of learning is a fundamental assumption of education. It refers in a general sense to the influence of prior learning on later learning. The major prerequisite for the transfer of learning is that something must first be learned, and that whatever is learned must be remembered.³ According to Herbert J. Klausmeier, "The influence of prior learning may be such that (1) the learning of one task facilitates the learning of some subsequent task (positive transfer), (2) subsequent learning is impaired or inhibited as a result of prior learning (negative transfer), or (3) prior learning results in no measurable influence upon subsequent learning (zero transfer)."⁴ Library instruction does not necessarily result in the ability to find research materials for another assignment; in addition to learning the task, broad transfer effects, such as confidence or knowledge of a general approach, may be retained after the details of the initial assignment are forgotten.⁵ Numerous studies have provided convincing evidence that there is a positive relationship between bibliographic instruction and attitudes toward and use of the library.⁶

Transfer of learning also depends on mastering skills in a hierarchical sequence. The intellectual skills learned in such a pattern form a structure that serves as an instruction guide. In the hierarchy, the lowest level skills should be identified and taught first, then the skills above them, until the top level has been reached and mastered. The superiority of the transfer of learning in a hierarchical structure has been demonstrated.⁷

Various educational psychology studies have shown how the learning of concepts

facilitates this transfer of knowledge; major concepts and principles in a subject show greater positive transfer to other tasks in that subject matter than does specific information. A variety of experiences must be provided so that students can learn the concepts that are being taught.⁸ Many experienced instructional librarians can attest to the success of teaching search strategies and concepts rather than concentrating on specific titles. Anne Beau-bien and Mary George, among others, have researched the theory and methods of teaching search strategies.⁹

The question I grappled with for a year was how to present a bibliographic instruction program at North Park College that freshmen could use without an accompanying class assignment, that had a hierarchical structure, and that would be perceived as meaningful and relevant by the students so that as they mastered various library skills there would be a positive transfer of learning to other library assignments.

THE PURSUIT

North Park College and Theological Seminary is a four-year liberal arts college and graduate seminary affiliated with the Evangelical Covenant Church of America. The college has an approximate enrollment of 1,150 full-time equivalent students. Located in Chicago, North Park offers its students access to major research libraries and to other college and medical libraries through the library's consortia membership. Direct access and interlibrary loan enhance our bibliographic instruction program, although the short academic term of ten weeks places some constraint on those students borrowing items from other libraries.

Several events occurred during the 1982-83 academic year, which provided the opportunity to shape a new bibliographic instruction program—one that would have a sequential, hierarchical structure, and which the students would probably find more relevant than the existing program. A pilot project to award five \$1,000 faculty development grants was initiated during the 1982-83 academic

year. I was awarded one of the grants for a proposal to research bibliographic instruction and to shape a program that would be appropriate for North Park. The grant provided an opportunity to observe library instruction at area colleges and to attend Earlham College's annual Bibliographic Instruction Workshop. The library director and five faculty members accompanied me to Earlham. It was at Earlham that we found the annotated bibliography. The grant also affirmed the librarians' status as full members of the faculty and gave recognition to us as partners with the teaching faculty. Although the faculty was supportive of our initial freshman bibliographic instruction, they were willing to support a change in its format if the librarians felt it would improve instruction.

Another significant event at North Park was the implementation during 1982-83 and 1983-84 of new general education requirements for graduation. Science and the Natural Order is a new freshman course for nonscience and nonnursing majors and taught during winter and spring terms. Each term a team of four professors from the sciences and the social sciences will teach the course. A library component was integrated into the course as the course was being planned. Traditions of the West is a new sophomore course team-taught by four professors in the humanities, social sciences, and fine arts. As this course too was being planned, library instruction was included. If it is true that one measure of success of a bibliographic instruction program is the involvement of librarians in course planning, and if library instruction is considered an integral part, then perhaps we are already experiencing some measure of success. We would also continue to include library instruction in the freshman English courses during fall term.

Before planning the new program of instruction, the librarians distributed questionnaires to faculty and students. Faculty questionnaires assessed perceptions about students' ability to use the library; student questionnaires assessed their own ability to use the library. The ques-

tionnaires helped direct us as we established goals and objectives and helped us to understand what the perceived needs were. Fifty-two percent of the faculty questionnaires were completed and returned, and 7 percent of the student questionnaires were returned. The tables are broken down into three groups: biology, nursing, and combined subjects. The rationale for this grouping is that the nursing students, who begin their program spring term of their sophomore year, currently receive bibliographic instruction introducing them to health sciences literature. A course introducing biology majors to the biology literature will be planned during 1983-84, and offered during the 1984-85 academic year.

Generally, the faculty did not expect students to do, or to be able to do, research in lower-division-level courses. However, the students were expected to know how to do research in upper-division-level courses, even though there is no systematic method at the college for teaching research skills to students (table 1).

We felt that by completing these questionnaires, the faculty would have to consider what library resources their students actually know how to use (table 2), and that they would recognize the need for bibliographic instruction that was neither haphazard nor nonsequential.

Questionnaire results did not significantly help us decide what to emphasize in the various levels of bibliographic instruction, but they did confirm what we already suspected: what students do and do not know and the kinds of library tools they use and do not use. We did get a better idea of the kind of preparation needed in the lower-level courses so that students will be able to do responsible research in upper-level courses. The questionnaires were perhaps of more value in helping us formulate goals and objectives for each level of instruction in a hierarchical structure.

THE HIERARCHY

Given our problem of providing bibliographic instruction to freshmen through an English composition program that does

TABLE 1

"WHEN YOU ASSIGN A PAPER OR PROJECT DO YOU ASSUME THAT THE STUDENT KNOWS HOW TO USE LIBRARY RESOURCES?"

	N	Yes (%)	Lower Division		Yes (%)	Upper Division	
			No (%)	Don't Know (%)		No (%)	Don't Know (%)
Biology	6	0	100	0	57	28	15
Nursing	7	0	100	0	100	0	0
Total faculty	32	15	42	43	64	15	21

TABLE 2

"A STUDENT SHOULD USE THE FOLLOWING REFERENCE SOURCES WHEN DOING A TERM PAPER:"

	N	Yes (%)	Lower Division		Yes (%)	Upper Division	
			No (%)	Don't Know (%)		No (%)	Don't Know (%)
<i>Biology</i>	6						
Bibliographies		57	43	0	85	15	0
Periodical indexes		71	29	0	85	15	0
Subject dictionaries and encyclopedias		85	15	0	57	43	0
Primary sources		100	0	0	100	0	0
<i>Nursing</i>	7						
Bibliographies		28	72	0	100	0	0
Periodical indexes		28	72	0	100	0	0
Subject dictionaries and encyclopedias		28	72	0	57	14	14
Primary sources		85	15	0	85	15	0
<i>Total faculty</i>	32						
Bibliographies		47	13	40	80	6	14
Periodical indexes		13	6	81	86	2	12
Subject dictionaries and encyclopedias		64	8	28	62	6	32
Primary sources		53	15	32	75	6	19

not have a related library assignment, we were interested in the annotated bibliographies done by freshmen at Earlham College. This approach has the potential of achieving our goals of structuring a hierarchical bibliographic instruction program, and of being perceived as relevant by the students. The freshmen will learn to use basic reference sources: encyclopedias, bibliographies, biographies, periodical indexes, book review indexes, *Library of Congress Subject Headings*, and the card catalog. The instruction also leads students through a basic search strategy and can serve as a basis for transfer of learning to other library assignments. It should be perceived as relevant since the instruction itself is a library assignment related to the course work.

During the summer, the incoming freshmen were sent a rather extensive library handbook along with a welcoming letter encouraging them to read the handbook in preparation for bibliographic instruction. They were also told that they would be given a pretest on their knowledge of the card catalog and *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, which are necessary tools for compiling an annotated bibliography. Students not passing the pretest will be required to attend a brief class on the card catalog and *Readers' Guide* during the first two weeks of school.

Each freshman English class will be given a list of suggested topics for the annotated bibliography relating to the subject of the class. For example, the seminar entitled, "Health Issues of the Eighties,"

has topics such as genetic counseling, folk medicine, euthanasia, and the right to die. The instructor will introduce the assignment and give the students a booklet leading them step-by-step through the process of creating a bibliography. The students will work in groups of four and will divide the work among themselves. First they will look in general or special encyclopedias for an overview and a bibliography. Next, they will choose appropriate subject headings from the *Library of Congress Subject Headings* and then try to find bibliographies on their topic through the card catalog. Finally, they will consult the *Essay & General Literature Index* and a variety of periodical indexes for articles on their topic.

Each group is to choose twenty of the best and most useful books, essays, and periodical articles on the subject and write annotations for eight of the items. The students will not be required to read the books or articles; the purpose is to show them how to evaluate resources and how to discern different points of view when preparing to write a paper. To evaluate the books, the students will consult book review indexes, biographical sources for information about the author, and read the preface and table of contents, if they have access to the books. To evaluate periodical articles, they will read the abstract, which frequently accompanies the article, and use biographical sources to find out about the author.

A work sheet is to be completed as the group proceeds through every step of the search, and it is to be handed in with the bibliography. Two weeks before the bibliography is due, each group will schedule a time to meet with the librarian, who will check the work sheet to determine if any important items are missing, or if any steps in the search strategy have been overlooked. The bibliography must be done in correct bibliographic form. The librarian will read each bibliography and comment on the annotations and work sheets, and the professors will give the groups their grades. Besides teaching students about library use, this assignment will also promote the role of the librarian.

Although most freshmen will take the

instruction during the fall term, one group will wait until spring. Beginning with the 1983-84 academic year, North Park will embark on an extension program in three Chicago neighborhoods. Two of the extension programs will be bilingual, English and Spanish. The students at all three locations will have the same pretest, basic instruction for those who do not pass the pretest, and instruction that campus freshmen receive. The extension students will be given the instruction during the spring term, because they will not be using the library for research before then, and it will give the librarians time to work out the logistics of transporting these students to the library and determining their needs more precisely.

The freshmen not planning on being science or nursing majors will take Science and the Natural Order winter and spring terms. During the winter term, the students will compile another annotated bibliography that will build on previously acquired skills. They will work individually rather than in a group and will annotate a minimum of five references. They must read the periodical articles. A list of suggested topics will be given to the students; the topics will relate to a portion of the course investigating the social implications of medical advances. The students will be introduced to the limitations of the subject card catalog. Although the students will not be required to meet with the librarian, they will be required to hand in a search strategy work sheet with the bibliography.

The bibliographic instruction in Science and the Natural Order during the spring term will expand on what was learned during the fall and winter terms. Students will be introduced to primary sources and government documents. The assignment will be a five-page paper on a topic related to the effect of competition on science and technology, or urbanization and quality of the environment. The paper will include a brief history, current status, and the student's assessment of implications for the future. Primary sources, books, periodical articles, and government documents must be cited in their bibliography, which will

be a major factor in the paper's grade.

The sophomore bibliographic instruction will be given through a two-term course, *Traditions of the West*. The format of the instruction has been adapted from the University of Texas at Austin Undergraduate Library study guides. These study guides are among the best I have seen; they are comprehensive, well written, and interesting. The assignment for the sophomores will be a ten-page term paper. The students will be instructed in topic selection, finding background information, restricting the topic, formulating a thesis statement, and proceeding with the search strategy. Finally, they will be introduced to online searching. The evaluation will be based on rhetorical and composition skills, footnote and bibliographic format, and the bibliography, which must include six to ten citations, including an encyclopedia, books, and periodical articles.

Such instruction was given as an experiment last year to a freshman class who had finished bibliographic instruction the previous term. Ninety-three percent of the students in the class considered the instruction valuable, compared with 73 percent who thought that freshman bibliographic instruction was useful. A comment made on the evaluation supported the premise that instruction is useful only in the context of library-based research: "This instruction was helpful in this class, but it was disruptive in English 101."

Elizabeth Frick has identified four distinct levels of bibliographic awareness that need to be developed: "1) awareness of particular reference sources, 2) awareness of types of sources, 3) awareness of the ways in which reference sources reflect the nature of the disciplines they serve, and 4) awareness of the information structure in the society."¹⁰ The students will advance through the first two levels in the proposed freshman and sophomore bibliographic instruction programs (see table 3). The third and fourth levels are only beginning to be addressed at North Park. Our goal is that all students will be given instruction on the literature of their major. Carolyn Kirkendall recommends that to use library resources effectively, students must connect the resources with a basic understanding of how knowledge is created, communicated, and synthesized within subject disciplines, how knowledge differs structurally from one field to another, and how bibliographic resources reflect the various stages of the learning process.¹¹

Nursing majors are the only students who receive an introduction to the literature of a specific discipline. Their major begins spring term of their sophomore year. During the first two weeks of that term, we show the students the basic medical encyclopedias, dictionaries and drug formularies, and how to use the *Library of Congress Subject Headings* to find medical and nursing subject headings. They are also given instruction in the use

TABLE 3
SEQUENTIAL LIBRARY INSTRUCTION AT NORTH PARK COLLEGE

	Fall	Winter	Spring
<i>Freshman Year</i> Course	Freshman Library Instruction	Science and the Natural Order (for nonscience and nonnursing majors)	Science and the Natural Order
Assignment	Annotated Bibliography	Annotated Bibliography	5-page paper
<i>Sophomore Year</i> Course	<i>Traditions of the West</i>	Biology majors	Nursing majors
Assignment	10-page term paper	Scientific paper	10-page term paper Research for process recordings

Course related instruction continues throughout the four years.

of *Cumulative Index to Nursing & Allied Health Literature* and *Cumulated Abridged Index Medicus*. Their course will be somewhat restructured during 1983-84 to include an exploration of the major channels of scholarly communication within the health sciences, and the formats in which this communication appears in the literature. Online literature searching will be demonstrated and its appropriate uses will be explained.

The biology department has asked that we design an instructional component of a required seminar for all beginning biology majors. This will be implemented in 1984-85. Plans are sketchy at this point, but we hope to introduce students to the channels of scholarly communication in biology. The students will also learn the process of writing a scientific paper.

Other course-related instruction continues to be offered. Sometimes a professor confers with a librarian before the term begins, and together they plan their instruction. The library component is included in the course syllabus. Sometimes, library instruction is requested because the students will be writing a paper, but the instruction is not considered part of the course by the professor.

CONCLUSION

We foresee that in two years most students at North Park will be instructed through three freshmen terms, as sophomores, and as nursing and biology majors. In time we hope that all students will be instructed in their major field. We believe that this sequence of instruction will achieve our goals, be perceived as useful and relevant by the students, and result in transfer of learning to other library-based assignments.

So, you may ask, why am I writing about something that has yet to happen and has yet to be proven successful? There are two reasons. First, if it's a flop, I certainly won't write about it. Second, the title of this article includes the word *pursuit*, which implies something that is yet to be captured or achieved. Do we ever achieve the "right" library instruction program? It seems that librarians shall always be in pursuit, because library instruction must be dynamic to be relevant and must always strive to meet the current needs of students.

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