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Collaborative Teaching of English and Information Literacy In the Community College Honors Program

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“**T**he honors program, in distinguishing itself from the rest of the institution, serves as a kind of laboratory within which faculty can try things they have always wanted to try but for which they could find no suitable outlet. When such efforts are demonstrated to be successful, they may well become institutionalized, thereby raising the general level of education within the college or university for all students. In this connection, the honors curriculum should serve as a prototype for educational practices that can work campus-wide in the future.” (NCHC. “Basic Characteristics of a Fully-Developed Honors Program.” National Honors Report 22(7), 42-43)

INTRODUCTION

The increased complexity of technology and the overwhelming amount of resources in print and digital formats have created an exciting learning arena in which students can grow and develop. But, as teachers expect students to excel in

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this new environment, new approaches are continuously needed to bridge the gap between information resources and the classroom. Previous evaluation of the Honors students at Hinds Community College showed a need for additional training in research skills and in effective selection and evaluation of appropriate resources. To meet this need, a collaborative effort between the faculty of the English and Library departments was initiated for Honors students. The goal of the collaboration was to develop the information-gathering and critical-thinking skills of the students and to assist them with their class assignments and research needs. An ongoing evaluation of this collaborative program has led to revision and upgrading of instruction in literacy skills. In the future, the collaborative format may be considered for implementation among all students.

DEVELOPMENT OF INFORMATION LITERACY COURSE

The traditional bibliographic library orientation/tour used by most educational institutions does not necessarily meet the needs of the community college student. Historically, this has been more a tour of the facilities than instruction in information-gathering and critical-thinking skills needed for lifelong learning. In addition to their traditional roles, librarians are now helping students develop information literacy skills such as locating, accessing, evaluating, and utilizing information in the new online learning environment. In 1996, several of the librarians at Hinds Community College recognized a need and developed a semester-long credit course (*Information in the Electronic Age*) to teach community college students to use the variety of electronic and other library information resources available. The course has been offered at all six Hinds Community College locations. To increase the flexibility of the course, it was transferred into an electronic format using Blackboard software in fall 2000. This software is a web-based course management program enabling instructors to integrate assignments, quizzes, discussions, group work, and a real-time virtual classroom.

Course participants have included faculty, staff, traditional and non-traditional students, local residents, and retirees. Faculty participants have included the Director of the Honors Program at Hinds Community College, Kristi Sather-Smith, and several members of the Honors Program faculty.

COLLABORATION

In the spring of 2000, Kristi Sather-Smith approached the Learning Resources staff about the possibility of collaboratively teaching Honors English (*English Composition II*) and the information literacy course (*Information in the Electronic Age*). Ms. Sather-Smith envisioned the course, *Information in the Electronic Age*, as helping the Honors students effectively articulate their information needs, identify appropriate sources, and evaluate and cite resources retrieved. In addition, the course would help the students utilize the technological advances of today and to locate information digitally as well as in the traditional manner. This course would also free

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the English instructor to work more with literature and composition during the class period than teaching basic library skills.

By structuring the two courses to work together, units from both courses coincided for maximum benefit for the students. The Honors English instructor, Jeanne Cook, collaborated with the information literacy instructors so the students would immediately use the research skills learned in the information literacy class.

In the information literacy class, the literacy skills are taught prior to the presentation of the research assignments. Before periodical articles are needed, the unit on online periodical databases is taught and the students locate articles for their research topic. Literary databases such as *Contemporary Literary Criticism Select*, *DISCovering Authors*, and *Contemporary Authors* are demonstrated by the librarians and accessed by the students prior to literary criticism paper assignments.

In the English class, research skills are used in writing research papers and in learning more about assigned plays, novels, and short stories. The English instructor and librarians carefully coordinate their semester plans so that what was learned in one class can apply to the other. Thus, research skills are gradually and sequentially learned from simple skills to more complex tasks. For example, at the first of the semester upon finishing *Medea*, students are asked to find a book and critical article about the play and a book containing the play. This assignment applies what they had been learning about using the electronic catalog. A later writing task requires that the students argue a controversial topic. To do so, they use what they have learned in the information literacy course to help identify controversial topics, narrow them, and then locate information related to the topic. When students study literature, they find sources about the author, the author's times, and important ideas related to the literature; they also consult critical articles about the literature. Through research and discussion, students expand their appreciation of the literature. The course's culminating writing task—the research paper—requires them to consult the variety of ways of locating a wide range of sources and to incorporate what they have learned into a lengthy paper.

The paired classes have many advantages. The pairing provides additional time to study more literature in class since time that would ordinarily be spent on research techniques can be used for discussing reading assignments. Similarly, more time can be provided for more in-depth research techniques. Best of all is the opportunity to interrelate the two areas and thus expand students' knowledge of the subjects.

CONCLUSION

The effort to develop a collaborative relationship between Learning Resources Centers and Honors Programs represents a new way of working. For two years at Hinds Community College, the library staff has collaboratively taught *Information in the Electronic Age* with the Honors' *English Composition II*. This type of collaboration has allowed students to learn more about library resources and research strategies and has freed the English instructor to spend more class time on other areas.

The positive response of students to this collaborative effort leads us to believe that, even though this experiment was done with the Honors Program, the paired

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classes might be used successfully with other departments. The students have expressed appreciation for the close coordination and relevance of the two programs. The instructors feel that a broader spectrum of expertise has been used in planning and implementing the course and that the students have benefited from more faculty/student interaction.

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