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Teaching Information Literacy to the Advanced Writing Class in Three Sessions

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Introduction

As is the case at many universities, Northern Kentucky University's Advanced Writing class is often thought of as the "Research Paper class." Frequently, a research paper on a variety of topics is the capstone of the course and many of the other course assignments lead up to it. Students are usually brought to Steely Library for one class during the semester to be taught all the information competencies deemed necessary in one session. The classes are from 50 minutes to 75 minutes long.

The pilot program described here was a first attempt at an informal trial to determine whether three library sessions spread throughout the term, each concentrating on different information literacy competencies, would be more effective than the traditional one-session "library class" typically offered with this course.

The goal was to evaluate the three-part program itself, apart from typical evaluation categories such as the librarian's delivery, while recognizing that those categories will always bear on students' perception of the value of the approach. The results can be applied to courses offered in both traditional and online formats. Because the sample was small and the data collection unstructured, we used the results to identify questions, problems and ideas for further study and evaluation.

Background

At NKU, all library instruction is given within courses in other disciplines. There is no stand-alone library course or instruction. Steely Library's Research and Instructional Services faculty have created a sequential library curriculum for a core group of lower-division courses. This curriculum ensures that as many of our students as possible

receive instruction via a building blocks approach. In this way, students gradually become more sophisticated information users as they progress through their courses.

To that end, Steely Library created a guide to information literacy competencies specifically for the Writing Instruction Program's (WIP) College Writing and Advanced Writing course sequence. (Steely Library Guide) The guide ties the library competencies directly to the two courses' required *Objectives* and *Assignments to Achieve Course Objectives* as outlined in the WIP's *Faculty Guide to Writing Courses*. (Cullick)

The WIP's web site links faculty to both the WIP Guide and the Steely Library Guide. ("Information for Faculty") Thus, WIP faculty can readily see the synergy between the Advanced Writing course objectives and the library's recommended information literacy competencies for that course.

Course Objectives and Information Literacy Competencies

The Literature and Language Department's Writing Instruction Program faculty have identified the following objectives for the Advanced Writing Course.

- Create individualized strategies for generating topics
- Read print and electronic sources critically
- Use advanced search techniques in databases and Internet search engines to locate scholarly articles, books and web pages
- Document sources correctly in a prescribed format
- Define, identify, and avoid plagiarism (Cullick 13)

The WIP faculty also created a list of research sources that they would like to cover in the Advanced Writing courses. These are: general reference materials; general indexes; the library web site; the online catalog; periodical articles; newspaper indexes; specialized indexes; government publications; and organizational web sites. (Cullick 14)

With the above WIP guidelines in mind, the Steely librarians decided to teach the following five information literacy competencies in the Advanced Writing class:

1. Examine a range of specialized sources
2. Learn to use a broad range of specialized research tools to locate scholarly and primary information
3. Learn to perform effective online research
4. Prepare a research strategy for a topic

5. Learn that sources used in the research must be cited in the paper or project (Steely Library Guide 7-9)

Course Structure

The course was taught over a regular semester, from January 10, 2005 through May 6, 2005. Classes were held on Tuesdays and Thursdays and were one hour and 15 minutes long. There were 13 students in the class. The students were told that the three library sessions were a pilot project; this elicited their cooperation in filling out non-graded quizzes, evaluations, and giving feedback in general. Given the course assignments the students were working on following each of the three library sessions, the competencies were divided as follows:

Session 1, February 8:

- Prepare a research strategy for a topic
- Learn to use a broad range of specialized research tools, Part A

Session 2, March 1:

- Examine a range of specialized sources
- Learn to use a broad range of specialized research tools, Part B

Session 3, April 5:

- Learn to perform effective online research
- Learn that sources used in the research must be cited in the paper or project

Data Collection

At the beginning of Sessions 2 and 3, the students were given a non-graded review quiz over the previous session's material. These quizzes provided us with some indication of how well students had understood and retained the material. A brief review session covering the material on the quizzes was presented after the quizzes were turned in. Toward the end of the semester, once all three library sessions were completed, the course instructor had the students fill out a library-prepared evaluation of the overall process.

A primary goal of the data collection was to gain information regarding the students' actual learning and retention of the material, rather than simply their satisfaction with the sessions. Although some of the questions in the overall evaluation did solicit satisfaction information, the non-graded quizzes and a large portion of the overall

evaluation attempted to gain insight into what was learned. Warner has expressed a concern, reflected in the literature, that an emphasis on library instruction evaluation has been on assessing student attitude rather than on assessing student learning. (169) Like Warner, “we were more concerned about assessing actual learning rather than assessing the experience of learning.” (169-70)

The original idea was to spend 40 minutes minimum on class time each session and the rest on supervised hands-on work by the students in the library. The hands-on element did not occur, for several reasons. In Session 1, the instructor felt the students were not yet ready to begin hands-on work and wanted to spend class time with them discussing the assignment. In Session 2, the number of student questions and amount of student engagement in the instruction process did not leave enough time for hands-on work. By Session 3, the students indicated that they had received enough information from the first two sessions to complete their research and did not need hands-on time following the presentation. Again, engagement by the students during the Session 3 presentation resulted in a longer than expected session. Also, in Sessions 2 and 3, time was spent at the beginning of class administering the quizzes covering the previous session and giving a brief review session covering the answers to the questions. Actual time spent on new material in each library session averaged about 50 minutes.

The Three Sessions

During Library Session 1, students were preparing to write an argument essay on a topic they could later develop into a research paper. The following chart outlines the competencies addressed and the specific skills taught for each competency.

Library Session 1	
Competency	Skills
Prepare a research strategy for a topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and analyze issues • Identify possible keyword combinations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Use LC Subject Headings for ideas & controlled vocabulary possibilities • Choose among various kinds of information: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Editorials ○ Newspaper articles ○ Journal articles ○ Essays ○ Web sites ○ News transcripts ○ Newswires ○ Steely Library-specific Research Guides and Web Guides

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refine the topic • Re-examine the search tools in light of new information and perspectives acquired
Learn to use a broad range of specialized research tools, Part A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Search and compare several indexes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Historical newspaper indexes; local newspaper indexes ○ Finding editorials in indexes

During Library Session 2, the students were preparing to create an annotated bibliography of sources for their research paper with an analysis of how each source would contribute to the paper. The following chart outlines the competencies addressed and the specific skills taught for each competency.

Library Session 2	
Competency	Skills
Examine a range of specialized sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary vs. secondary sources • Scholarly, trade & professional journals • Government sources • Reference sources: both web and print
Learn to use a broad range of specialized research tools, Part B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Search and compare a number of specialized indexes • Search government indexes

During Library Session 3, the students were finishing up their research papers. The following chart outlines the competencies addressed and the specific skills taught for each competency.

Library Session 3	
Competency	Skills
Learn to perform effective online research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Search engines vs directories • Using a search engine more effectively; using the Advanced, power search features • Characteristics of a scholarly web site • Using Boolean operators • Difference between full-text searching and using search fields

Learn that sources used in the research must be cited in the paper or project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class discussion: Why must sources be cited? • Sources found via the Web must be cited differently • Journal articles found full-text online must be cited differently
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The first non-graded set of review questions on Session 1 was given to the students at the beginning of Session 2. They answered the questions immediately and turned them in to the librarian. Three questions were asked.

Eleven of the 13 students turned in responses. It had been three weeks since Session 1, and the students had written their argument essays since then. Since the questions were designed to elicit generalized responses, the answers were divided into three categories:

1. The answer was entirely off the mark, meaning the student had not understood the question or the concept referred to at all
2. The answer indicated some understanding, meaning the student had at least a partial grasp of the question being asked or the concept involved
3. The answer indicated good understanding, meaning the student showed strong familiarity with the point of the question and the underlying concept

The table below shows the questions asked and the number of student responses that fell into each category.

Library Session 1 Quiz	
Question	Student Responses
1. The Library of Congress Subject Headings helps librarians catalog books for libraries. How can you use it to help you with your research?	Answer was entirely off the mark: 3 Answer indicated some understanding: 4 Answer indicated good understanding: 4
2. Name four kinds of sources from which you might take information, or even quote, when preparing an argument essay.	Answer was entirely off the mark: 0 Answer indicated some understanding: 2 Answer indicated good understanding: 9
3. Name two databases/indexes you might use to find the sources you mention in number 2 above.	Answer was entirely off the mark: 3 Answer indicated some understanding: 3 Answer indicated good understanding: 5

The responses were fairly evenly distributed with the exception of Question 2, which dealt with the kinds of sources available. Nine of the 11 responses showed a good understanding of that concept. One possible reason for this favorable response might be the novelty factor: the kinds of sources introduced were new to the students and caught their attention. It is, of course, also possible that students came into the class already familiar with this material, although anecdotal evidence during the class suggests that this was not the case. Further study is needed on this point.

The second non-graded set of review questions on Session 2 was given to the students at the beginning of Session 3. They answered the questions immediately and turned them in to the librarian. Three questions were asked.

Ten of the 13 students turned in responses. It had been five weeks since Session 2, and the students had prepared their annotated bibliographies since then. The table below shows the questions asked and the number of student responses that fell into each category.

Library Session 2 Quiz	
Question	Student Responses
1. What is the difference between a scholarly journal and a trade journal?	Answer was entirely off the mark: 3 Answer indicated some understanding: 5 Answer indicated good understanding: 2
2. Name three types of specialized sources you might use to find information on your topic.	Answer was entirely off the mark: 4 Answer indicated some understanding: 5 Answer indicated good understanding: 1
3. How would you go about using Steely Library resources to locate scholarly articles on your topic?	Answer was entirely off the mark: 9 Answer indicated some understanding: 0 Answer indicated good understanding: 1

The responses for Session 2 showed a poorer grasp of the contents of the session than for Session 1. Several possibilities might account for this. It had been five weeks since Session 2. The “meat” of the actual research process was covered in Session 2, and both the session and the subsequent questions may have covered so much material that the students may simply have been overwhelmed by the breadth of the questions. In particular, responses to the question on locating scholarly articles suggest a possible disconnect between the assignment and the skills taught to complete the assignment.

It is interesting that the responses ran counter to the anecdotal comments received from both students and the course instructor. The instructor commented that many of the students felt that they did not need to attend Session 3 (where the questions on Session 2 were administered) because they had been able, following Session 2, to find enough material for their papers and felt comfortable with their research. Several of the students commented that the problem was the five-week lapse between sessions. Since they had not studied for this informal review quiz, they found it difficult to remember specifics from Session 2. It is possible that this evaluative technique is not suited to this kind of teaching process, as it requires students to think like librarians and remember the names of concepts, rather than measuring their ability to actually locate and evaluate the material they need. The problem may have been with the question rather than the students' actual learning.

Overall Student Evaluations

Once all three library sessions were completed, the course instructor asked students to complete an overall evaluation of the three-part library session approach. The evaluation was prepared by Steely librarians and was turned in to them by the course instructor. The evaluation contained 21 questions.

Nine of the 13 students turned in the evaluations. They had already taken an average of four semesters of college. Three students had already had a library session in another class. They attended an average of 2.5 of the three library sessions held. Their majors were: Public Relations, Political Science & Philosophy, Nursing, Education, Speech Communication, Business, Journalism, with two undeclared.

The evaluation questions were designed to elicit information in two areas: 1) student satisfaction with the approach, and 2) student retention of the information they learned to apply to future courses. A few of the questions and answers stood out. These are summarized here.

Overall Evaluation	
Student Satisfaction	
Question	Student Responses
What did you most hope to gain from the library session?	The most common answer was a variant on learning how to conduct more effective research
Did you gain what you hoped to?	Scoring: 1-5 with 5 being greatest gain Average score: 3.25

Did the three-part library session format contribute to your gaining the information you needed?	Did not contribute: 1 Contributed somewhat: 6 Contributed quite a bit: 2 Contributed a lot: 0
Would you have preferred one library session rather than the three sessions that were offered?	Scoring: 1-5 with 5 being greatest preference for three-part session Average score: 2.75
Would you recommend this three-session format to your professors in other courses?	No: 3 Maybe: 5 Yes: 1
Retention of Material	
Question	Student Responses
From which of the three library sessions did you learn the most?	Session 1: 2 (<i>with one person listing two sessions</i>) Session 2: 2 Session 3: 4 Not sure: 2
Did the three-part format, in which we concentrated on a different research area each time, help you remember the information?	No: 2 A little: 3 Yes: 4
What, if any, information do you think you will use again in future college courses?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scholarly journals; narrow search engines; better grasp of web searching • Unknown • How to search for information • I learned about Advanced searching • Research web sites; different databases • MLA and scholarly sources • Web directories • None • How to do research on the web
Name one specialized source that was particularly helpful to you that you would not have known about if you had not attended these library instruction sessions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web directories vs. search engines • Online catalog • Washington Post • The web being broken down in a fashion that is understandable • The citation site • Online catalog • Online catalog • Infomine

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student believed he/she already knew how to find anything needed on web
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Discussion

Students seemed ambivalent about whether the three-part format was more useful than one session would have been. We note, however, that what actually happened was that far more material was covered in the three sessions than could be covered in one session. The five information literacy competencies that Steely Library has identified as important for this course were given the chance to be fully covered in this format. Steely librarians have reported that they tend to only touch lightly on the competencies in the 50-minute format. What remains to be explored is which presents the best learning opportunity for students.

Were the students ambivalent because they were overwhelmed with too much information in this three-part session? Some anecdotal reactions from the students indicated that this might be the case. Several students said that the information was very good but was too much for one course. One student went so far as to write that a separate credit hour for the information covered should be added to the course program and required as a co-requisite for the course. Thus, it may be that students were not so much unappreciative of the material as overwhelmed by it.

Yet the university's course objectives, suggested research assignments, and information literacy competencies seem to suggest that this material is what both WIP and library faculty expect students to learn in this course. This raises several questions. Are we trying to accomplish too much in one course? Is the WIP expecting too much from a single library session?

The second interesting point that emerged from this trial is the strong favorable reaction to Session 3, the session that focused on advanced web searching. This favorable reaction was especially surprising considering that the course instructor said that many students were reluctant to attend Session 3 because they thought that they had already found enough material on their topics. Session 3 was cited by 4 of the 9 respondents as their favorite session. Five of the 9 responses to the question on what information would be used again could be said to relate to internet searching. To the question asking which specialized source was new to them and that they found especially useful, 4 of the 9 answers could be said to relate to internet searching.

It might be instructive to look more closely at what was covered in Session 3. A detailed description, including some historical perspective, on the different uses and structure of search directories and search engines was covered in some depth. The characteristics of

research-based web sites were discussed, as opposed to a general discussion of web site evaluation. Specialized search engines, particularly those that focus on abstracted, scholarly-oriented sites, were discussed. The necessity of having an awareness of whether one is searching in full-text or in certain fields in a search engine was demonstrated, with geographic terms used as an example. A brief class discussion on plagiarism and why we cite sources was followed by examples of how web sites and journals found in full-text through online databases must be cited. Further online help sites for citations were provided.

This interest in advanced web searching raises other areas for further examination with regard to our instruction program. Is there room in our information literacy curriculum for more concentrated sessions on web search topics? How can we integrate and use this student interest without sacrificing a necessary focus on proprietary databases and the other competencies covered?

Another possibility behind the relative success of Session 3 might be the developing relationship between the librarian and the students as a result of the cumulative impact of three sessions. The same librarian taught all three sessions, and by the third session, from an anecdotal perspective, students felt quite comfortable asking questions and voicing opinions. This is yet another area for further exploration.

The Future

Plans are underway to streamline this investigation further. The course instructor plans to work closely with library faculty to structure a course in which specific assignments and sequential library sessions are more closely integrated so that evaluation instruments can be more finely tuned. The instructor will also work with us to compare student learning and retention of material in a three-session class with an Advanced Writing class in which the usual one-session library instruction format is used. A one-year follow-up with students who participated in this initial trial is also planned to find out if and how they used what they learned in these library sessions. This can provide a better indication of learning than can be gleaned from a survey, given at the time, heavily influenced by satisfaction factors.

Conclusion

A beginning look at a three-part approach to teaching an Advanced Writing class in which a research paper is a capstone assignment has led to several traditional and nontraditional contrasts to be explored further with regard to student learning and retention of material: expectations vs. time allotted; in-class presentation vs. student hands-on time; and librarian focus on proprietary information vs. student interest in web research. As this process continues, we will be creating a database of information

sufficient to stimulate discussion within both Steely Library and the university's Writing Instruction Program.

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Appendix 1



Review of Steely Library Session One

Do not worry! This is not a test.

These are just a few questions to jog your memory about points we covered in our last library session. Please answer them as best you can. You do not have to put your name on the sheet.

1. The Library of Congress Subject Headings helps librarians catalog books for libraries. How can you use it to help you with your research?
2. Name four kinds of sources from which you might take information, or even quote, when preparing an argument essay.

3. Name two databases/indexes you might use to find the sources you mention in number 2 above.

Appendix 2



Review of Steely Library Session Two

Do not worry! This is not a test.

These are just a few questions to jog your memory about points we covered in our last library session. Please answer them as best you can. You do not have to put your name on the sheet.

1. What is the difference between a scholarly journal and a trade journal?
2. Name three types of specialized sources you might use to find information on your topic. (Example: a specialized encyclopedia dedicated to a particular topic)
3. How would you go about using Steely Library resources to locate scholarly articles on your topic?

Appendix 3

Student Evaluation of Three-Part Library Session by Steely Library

English 291: Advanced Writing

Spring 2005

Northern Kentucky University

General Student Information:

1. How many semesters of college have you completed? (either at NKU or at other institutions)
2. Have you had a Steely Library presentation before?
 - o If yes:
 - How many?
 - For which course(s)?
3. What is your major?

4. How many of the three library sessions for this class did you attend?

Student Satisfaction

5. What did you most hope to gain from a library session for this class?
6. Do you feel you gained it? Circle 1 2 3 4 5 (with 5 being the greatest gain)
7. Did the three-part session contribute to your gaining the information you needed?
 ○ Did not contribute
 ○ Contributed somewhat
 ○ Contributed quite a bit
 ○ Contributed a lot
8. Would you have preferred one longer library session rather than the three shorter sessions that were offered?

Circle 1 2 3 4 5 (1 being least likely to want one session; 5 being happiest with the 3 sessions)

9. How did you feel about coming to the library three times during your course for one class?
10. Would you recommend this three-session format to your professors in other courses?
 ○ No
 ○ Maybe
 ○ Yes
11. Please rate your confidence level in using Steely Library for research before attending these library sessions: Circle 1 2 3 4 5 (5 being most confident)
12. Please rate your confidence level in using Steely Library for research after attending these library sessions: Circle 1 2 3 4 5 (5 being most confident)

Student Retention of Information

13. From which of the three library sessions did you learn the most?
14. From which session did you learn the least?
15. Did the quizzes and reviews in the three-part sessions help you retain the information you were learning?
16. Did the three-part format, in which we concentrated on a different research area each time, help you remember the information better?
17. What information do you think you will use again in future NKU courses?

Questions on future use

18. In Sessions I and II, we covered finding an article in a scholarly journal in Stealy Library for your future courses at NKU. What database might you use for another class you might take at NKU?
19. Describe how you will make sure you find effective scholarly web sites for future courses at NKU.
20. Provide an example of a good type of primary source for a research paper on your topic.
21. Name one specialized source that you found that you would not have known about that was particularly helpful to you? (Ex: a specialized encyclopedia dedicated to a particular topic)

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