

GUIDING STUDENTS ALONG THE INFORMATION HIGHWAY: LIBRARIANS COLLABORATING WITH COMPOSITION INSTRUCTORS

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Library research is a complex process. It takes time to teach, for information has indeed exploded and it is packaged in an unprecedented number of formats: electronic networks, software programs, fax, video, interactive teleconferences, radio, television, film, and of course, books and periodicals.

As Brendan P. Kehoe observes, ". . . more and more professional people are discovering that the only way to be successful in the '90s and beyond is to realize that [informational] technology is advancing at a break-neck pace—and they must somehow keep up" (1).

Yet merely being aware of these vital avenues of research is not enough. Sloshing through the informational quagmire to capture relevant data—or worse, relying solely on the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*—no longer works. True, those individuals untrained in library research might find something pertinent using hit or miss methods. They, however, are at a distinct disadvantage compared to those who have been trained to "sort out meaning from the mire" (Bodi 70).

Identifying and manipulating relevant sources for information require intensive instruction in library research. The following discussion describes a highly successful library research skills component of the freshman composition course developed collaboratively by the instruction librarians and composition instructors at a medium-sized California university. Before discussing this program, however, I will

briefly discuss some of the obstacles to offering in-depth library research instruction to undergraduates.

A major challenge to teaching library research skills is countering tendencies in articles and composition textbooks, as well as in the classroom, that ignore research as a systematic process that demands intensive instruction. For example, in discussing term paper strategies, many instructors urge their students to follow the library unit in their textbooks. Yet, most of these units fail to incorporate search strategy into discussions of individual sources. Moreover, many of these library units are fraught with "errors, omissions, incomplete explanations, and inappropriate emphasis" (Teifel 500). Others insist upon treating library research as mechanical, that is, lumping library research skills with note taking, outlining and source citing, or reducing library research skills to an information-gathering task that is not directly involved with inquiry, problem-solving, and argument.¹ Treating research skills as a rote exercise negates its true nature, which demands a continual process of selection, elimination, and evaluation.

Another notion commonly held by instructors is implied in their command "go to the library and find something on...." This "go fetch it" approach implies that students' ability to research in the library is an innate trait; the assumption is that students have picked up these skills from "somewhere," thus, reinforcing the perception that "every normal person over the age of 12 knows how to use a library and should be embarrassed to have to ask for help" (McCarthy 144). As academic librarians will testify, the reality is that most students are not equipped for college-level research. Consequently, students face the college library with fear and intimidation, to which they might respond with ignorance ("Although this library is bigger, I can still do research as I did in high school—just stick to the *World Book* and the *Reader's Guide*") or with intimidation ("This place is too big and confusing; I'll just wait a few days to start working on this paper"). Constance A. Mellon conducted a qualitative study at a small southern university to determine the attitudes and feelings of the students toward the library. The responses were provocative but not surprising to reference librarians. The majority of the students polled responded that they had done a term paper in high school but

felt "their high school experience was either very superficial or easily forgotten" (*Library Anxiety*, 74). Most felt their research skills were inadequate compared to their peers and felt "shame" at their inadequacy. Furthermore, students felt that if they asked questions of either librarians or their instructors, their queries would expose their ignorance (75). Mellon "found that 75–85 percent of students . . . described the library in terms of fear or anxiety. Terms like *scary*, *overpowering*, *lost*, *helpless*, *confused*, and *fear of the unknown* appeared over and over again" (75).

And the final challenge to bibliographic instruction is that many faculty assume students will perform research as they themselves do—researching via the "invisible college." Scholars' research areas are narrow; therefore, their bibliographic methodology will be confined to a small core of relevant journals, discussions with colleagues at conferences, or swapping information on the Internet. Students lack the subject expertise to research by way of the invisible college. Unlike faculty, undergraduates do not concentrate on one specialized area of research. Whereas an instructor might publish solely in the area of Flannery O'Connor, lower division students write papers on a multitude of topics; they might write on the politics of acid rain one term and the next term develop a paper on the racial issues in *Othello*. Needless to say, the research methodology required for each of these topics is mutually exclusive; the tools and methods of approach are quite different depending on the discipline.

These attitudes about library research and its instruction fail to take into account that information access has drastically changed in the last few years. Increasingly, libraries are replacing traditional research tools (e.g., card catalogs and paper periodical indexes) with integrated computerized information systems that provide many more choices for students. These systems demand a new set of conceptual approaches unheard of prior to electronic access. Today, researchers must know Boolean logic² to retrieve data from an array of electronic databases.

Teaching students proper research skills requires the expertise of both bibliographic instruction librarians and composition instructors. Cooperation needs to go beyond a

tour or a one-hour lecture on library research, both of which fail to meet the research needs of the student for several reasons. First, one-shot sessions force the librarian to cram into one hour all that students need to know about identifying, accessing, and evaluating key sources, as well as providing a crash course on searching electronic sources. But such severe condensation of information leaves students too overwhelmed to assimilate much of the information.

Timing is another reason single library sessions fail. Typically, these sessions are scheduled early in the term; the instructors' reasoning is that students will begin researching the paper. Yet, most students put off developing the paper until much later in the term; consequently, they often forget much of what they learned during the earlier library session.

And finally, one-hour orientations fall short because they do not allow for reinforcement of learned skills and concepts. The nature of bibliographic instruction insists that students learn by doing—they must continually apply concepts and methods to actual research projects for library research to be meaningful to them.

After years of frustration and a multitude of revisions of the one-hour library unit, I developed the Library Research Lab program for English 110, the freshman composition course offered at California State University, Bakersfield, in cooperation with the English department. The Lab is a five-week component required of all students enrolled in English 110. Each section of English 110 is assigned a Research Skills Lab taught by instruction librarians. The Lab begins three weeks after the beginning of each quarter, so that the students have time to familiarize themselves with the course content and the composition instructors have time to deal with topic and thesis development before the students engage in library research. To ensure the students take the course content seriously, the Lab counts 10 percent toward the student's final grade. The goals of the Lab are for students to understand that library research is systematic yet a creative and proactive process. Students should be able to:

1. understand the nature of research and the role of the researcher,

2. plan a research strategy for the term paper,
3. select and narrow a researchable topic,
4. make informed decisions about the types of research tools to use,
5. substantiate the thesis and main points of the paper,
6. interpret and evaluate a variety of primary and secondary sources,
7. develop a critical understanding of research methods and techniques (e.g., use of library catalogs, bibliographies, periodical indexes, computerized databases, etc.) and to be able to apply these methods and techniques in researching primary and secondary sources, and
8. increase self-confidence in conducting research and using libraries and transfer these skills to projects required in future courses.

The structure and content of the Lab parallel the traditional research process as well as focusing on the basic requirements of the English 110 term paper. This paper requires students to write a ten-page, argumentative paper on a controversial social issue such as death penalty, euthanasia, or environmental racism. In addition, students must demonstrate knowledge in utilization of resources by incorporating a variety of sources, including books, periodicals (including at least one scholarly journal article), government documents, interviews, and statistical sources.

Each Lab session is tailored to the English 110 term paper, yet it can be adjusted to the requirements of individual composition instructors.³ The Lab sessions are based on the premise that students tend to involve themselves in library instruction only if it directly relates to an assignment required by their instructor. Closely tying library instruction to the students' assignments is a key factor. As instruction and reference librarians have observed for years, if students do not see immediate relevance to their required assignments, they tend to discount or ignore library instruction as useless.

The first session of the Lab deals with teaching strategies that enable students to conduct appropriate background research to select a suitable topic, which will then put them

in a better position to develop an informed thesis. During this stage, the Lab instructor can help students avoid a tendency to develop a topic fit only for a book-length paper (e.g., affirmative action, air pollution, civil rights) or topics so esoteric that they would be difficult to research (e.g., the phenomena of humans self-combusting or impregnating human males).

The second and third sessions of the Lab focus on periodical research, emphasizing Boolean logic to search electronic periodical databases. The fourth session deals with book research focusing on the logic behind the Library of Congress classification system, searching strategies for the library's computerized card catalog, and finding book reviews to ascertain a book's authoritativeness. In the final session students learn methods of searching government documents, bill tracing, and locating and verifying statistical information. The Lab instructor reinforces the concepts and skills discussed in class with outside assignments, most of which are directly tied to students' term paper projects for their composition course.

The conceptual framework underlying the Lab is the search strategy method that focuses on library research as a dynamic, creative process that demands critical and analytical skills as much as knowledge of individual sources—knowing the process is equally important as knowing the product. The search strategy method, which has been used by many instructional librarians for nearly twenty years, can be broadly defined as researching by a pyramid-like progression: locating information in general-to-specific-stages. First, students become acquainted with strategies of developing a topic and thesis and then progress to methods of locating the most relevant primary and secondary sources that will support specific arguments and statements. During each stage of the search strategy process, students learn how to approach research critically and become familiar with specific sources identified with each stage. As Stephen H. Plum asserts, "By making the student aware of the search as a process, by suggesting alternative routes or strategies to information, and by encouraging receptivity and curiosity in the student when confronted with unfamiliar reference tools, patterns of creative searching can be instilled"

(31). As mentioned earlier, library research is simply not an "information-gathering process." At each stage of the search strategy, students are taught inquiry, problem solving and critical thinking. For example, when students use information in a monograph to support an argument or statement, they are taught to consider the appropriateness of the information. For each book selected for the paper, the student is taught to ask: What are the credentials of the author? Is it biased? What else has he or she written? How old is the information? Is it still relevant? How was the book received by experts and scholars in the academic and popular press? What is the quality of the information?

These questions provide a springboard from which students can engage in methods to locate and search biographical and book reviewing sources to help them determine the credibility of an author's work. To help students consider evaluating sources a priority, the Lab instructor has them read a previously written term paper on vegetarianism in which the student based much of his arguments on John Robbins's *Diet for a New Planet* (1987), a book regarded by many as being superficial and anecdotal. Consequently, some of the facts and statistics from Robbins's book used by the student weakened arguments put forth in his term paper. As a result of the student's failure to investigate the authoritativeness of Robbins's book, his grade was affected, thus demystifying the notion held by many students that if it is in print it is valid.

Another important component of the Lab is to help students break some of their misconceptions about the press and become "critical news consumers" (Johnson 64-68). The Lab emphasizes awareness that news is rarely objective, that all news, to some degree, is subjective. Students learn how to research the political perspective of newspapers and magazines. Moreover, students are encouraged to broaden their research and seek out different points of view in the "alternative press" periodicals that provide opinions and perspectives unrepresented in the mainstream media, which by and large reflect the older, white male establishment. The Lab attempts to prevent what happened to one English 110 student who had an impressive bibliography of movie reviews for a paper she was doing on the image of African-American

males in the movies, the only problem being that all the reviews were written by white male critics! The Lab impresses upon students the need to be cognizant of and willing to read what people from various racial and ethnic backgrounds think as well as gays, feminists, atheists, fundamentalist Christians, Marxists, environmentalists, and anti-vivisectionists.

Requiring students to examine the views of a variety of people and organizations on a controversial issue attempts to change students' attitudes toward the purpose of a term paper and their role as developer of term papers. Beginning students tend to assume that the term paper is like a report: gathering facts and quotes that coincide with their thesis (assuming they have a thesis) and regurgitating the information to fit a prescribed term paper format. Students are primarily interested in how long the paper should be and how many sources they need. In short, students are concerned much more with form than content. The Lab at CSUB, however, moves students away from such prosaic attitudes and guides them towards thinking that the paper is a chance to discover, interpret, and analyze.

Through discussion and assignments the Lab compels students to re-think their assumptions about research; namely, that it is unacceptable research behavior to haphazardly pick a few sources and simply rephrase facts and ideas of others and fit the data into a term paper. The Lab presses students to assume the role of a responsible researcher, which demands that they examine points of view as well as verify facts and statistics from a variety of sources. To this end, the final Lab project requires students to demonstrate that they have:

1. researched whether Congress has addressed their issue and, if so, studied hearings that were conducted,
2. located and contacted a local, state, or national organization that supports their thesis,
3. located and discussed at least one relevant, scholarly journal article,
4. documented a verifiable statistic that supports a specific argument,
5. found and discussed sources that oppose the thesis,
6. interviewed a person, preferably an expert, related to the thesis, and

7. located scholarly book reviews of books used in term paper.

To satisfy the above requirements, students must exercise the knowledge and skills learned in the Lab to decide on the appropriate access tools and then manipulate them to locate the most relevant information.



Composition instructors profit from the Lab as well as students. The Lab saves the composition instructors preparation time. Prior to the Lab, for example, the CSUB composition instructors complained that the library unit in the textbook was ineffective in addressing students' research needs; consequently, their students bombarded them with research queries, many of which they felt unqualified to answer. Few instructors have the luxury to involve themselves in learning about and training themselves in library sources and processes. Instruction in research methods is labor intensive and obligates the instructor to use his or her skills regularly so as to maintain familiarity and currency with sources and searching methods—this is especially important as libraries increasingly replace traditional with computerized research tools. With the exception of reference librarians, however, few are able to maintain the breadth and depth of knowledge of research methods in a variety of subject fields. Thus, the Lab relieves pressure on the instructor to become an expert on research methods.

The Lab frees up valuable class time, which the composition instructor uses to concentrate on other aspects of the term paper. A change is welcome because as in most freshmen composition courses, the instructors must teach other modes of writing in addition to the term paper. As a result, some components of the term paper are minimized or squeezed out entirely—and one usual sacrificial victim is the library research skills instructional component.

Student evaluations over the last five years demonstrate that the Lab has been highly successful in meeting the research

needs of composition students. Even though they must devote an additional hour and twenty minutes for five weeks, most students comment that the Lab is useful if not essential. Many students wish for additional instruction, especially in some of the more complicated computerized sources. Students frequently remark on the evaluations that they have become confident in using the library, not so intimidated in asking for assistance, and that the Lab helped them write papers in other courses. As one student put it, "Where was this course when I was doing my paper on abortion clinic violence for Soc. 100?"



One strength of the English 110 Lab is its adaptability; it can be reconfigured to satisfy subject-specific needs of upper-division and graduate students. Unlike the English 110 Labs, these advanced labs focus on the research methodology germane to a specific discipline such as sociology, biology, or literature. I will soon teach one such advanced lab in cooperation with the University's English Department. The purpose of this course is to provide intense instruction in bibliography and research techniques of literary scholarship. The short term goal of the course is to enable students to create a substantial bibliographical essay as a final course project. Long term goals include preparing students to research issues in literary scholarship for future courses as well as readying them for the required comprehensive examination. And, thereafter, these students should be well-equipped to tackle the research problems they will encounter in their careers as teachers and writers, and in their lives as private citizens.

NOTES

¹There are many examples of the superficial treatment of library research skills such as: Toby Fulwiler's *Teaching with Writing* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1987), and Robert A. Schwegler and Linda K. Shamoony's "The Aims and Process of the Research Paper" (*College English* 44 [1982]: 817-824).

²Boolean logic is a strategy of logic used by a researcher to access relevant information on a topic in database indexes. For example, if one begins a search with the broad term *rhetoric*, the database will locate hundreds of entries. However, by applying Boolean features such as "and," one can add a term like *modern* to narrow the search to only those entries that include both terms.

³In place of the ten page term paper, some English 110 instructors have begun to require two or three shorter research-based papers.

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