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Bridging the Gap: Integrating Information Literacy into Communication Courses

Lisa M. Sjoberg & Stephanie L. Ahlfeldt

Courses: *Introductory Public Speaking, Introductory Small Group Communication*

Objectives: *Students will locate, analyze, evaluate, and utilize secondary sources through an in-depth research process. They will complete a comprehensive research portfolio. Students will practice effective group dynamics skills. They will demonstrate effective oral presentation skills in a panel presentation.*

Rationale

In many ways, today's librarians serve as mediators between faculty and students as they negotiate different notions about what it means to conduct good research. Many professors we have encountered tend to think of the research process as beginning in the library and being very labor intensive. Lecki (1996) argues, however, that faculty fall prey to the expert researcher syndrome in which they assume that their sophisticated approach to research is the same method being used by their students. Most college students today, however, have little or no experience with research beyond using internet search engines. Many have never used library catalogs or databases and even fewer are familiar with microfilm, microfiche, or print periodicals. Even those students who used library resources before attending college may lack the skills necessary to use them most effectively. The dramatic transformations in how we access information and in research methodology make the task of conducting effective research more challenging. When information can be found in a matter of seconds with the click of a keystroke, why take the time and put in the effort to find better sources?

Enter the librarian and information literacy instruction. Information literacy programs focus on teaching students how to conduct effective research. Perhaps even more important is that they teach students how to critically evaluate the information

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they find. Successful learning, therefore, is accomplished through interplay among students, faculty, and librarians in the classroom and in the library.

Partnerships between instructors and librarians are invaluable for integrating information literacy into course curriculum. Grafstein (2002) argues for such a discipline-specific approach to information literacy in order to provide students with “knowledge about the subject-specific content and research practices of particular disciplines, as well as the broader, process-based principles of research and information retrieval that apply generally across disciplines” (p. 197). Sonley, Turner, Myer, and Cotton (2007) discuss the implementation and assessment of a portfolio to accomplish information literacy goals. Their assignment served as our inspiration to create a research portfolio requirement for an introductory communication course.

One of the first classes undergraduate students typically take is a basic communication course. In it, students are required to use information literacy skills as they prepare speeches. Engaging students in a significant information literacy unit helps them realize the value of the research process and the limitations of relying solely on internet search engine research. In addition, the research portfolio process exposes students not only to a variety of sources but also to criteria for evaluating sources effectively. Learning how to conduct effective searches, locate and evaluate sources, and select appropriate material from sources are important skills in the speechmaking process that are transferrable to other kinds of assignments.

We designed the research portfolio assignment as a group project because working in groups assists students not only in sharing knowledge and workload, but also in learning effective group dynamics skills. As a group project, students apply theory related to decision making, leadership roles, and conflict management as they decide how best to accomplish this project. This assignment requires groups to consistently interact with their topic and develop more awareness of its issues, controversies, and ramifications. This in-depth engagement assignment allows groups to gather a wealth of evidence to use as they create a well-documented speech.

Having a close relationship with a librarian is an important component of this project. Ideally, the class will meet with a librarian shortly after the research portfolio is assigned to receive instruction on the following elements of the research process: developing search terms and a search strategy; determining periodical types; locating a variety of source types (e.g., books, articles, and websites); understanding the difference between library databases that are delivered over the internet and searching for websites via a search engine; and evaluating sources. These library instruction sessions work best when they are offered in the form of short 10- to 20-minute sessions spread over the first couple weeks of the course.

The Activity

Topic and Search Term Identification

The first component of the research portfolio assignment requires each group to provide an overview of its topic. The goal is for groups to spend time brainstorming

about their topic and narrowing it down to a manageable focus. After they write a thesis statement and describe the topic, we ask them to conduct some preliminary thinking about the concepts and keywords for which they might try searching. First, we ask groups to identify two to four concepts associated with their topic and then to list synonyms for each concept (Burkhardt, MacDonald, & Rathemacher, 2003). For example, one group chose to investigate alternative energy sources and their impact on the economy. Their two concepts were alternative energy and the economy. Some synonyms for the first concept are wind energy, solar energy, energy, etc. Similarly, synonyms for the second concept include market, financial, industry, etc. Through this process, the groups develop search terms they can combine in multiple ways and use in various databases. This process helps students avoid approaching the databases with too many words or ideas for effective research.

Source Analyses

After the groups narrow their topics and identify search terms, we instruct them to locate three books, three articles, and three websites. They use the online library catalog to find three relevant books, one of which must be a reference source. They must include the catalog record printout for each book. Groups use the library databases (e.g., *Academic Search Premier*, *Proquest Newspapers*) to locate articles. For each article, they must print out and include the accompanying database record. A minimum of two different databases and at least one peer reviewed journal article are required. Finally, groups are instructed to use at least two different search engines to find three websites relevant to their topic. They must print out and include the first page of each website. We require groups to print the item records and the first page of each website so we can check citation information and verify that the students located the required sources.

For each source, groups then provide relevant APA citation information, describe their search strategy, and evaluate the source based on criteria delineated in the assignment description. To analyze their search strategy, groups are asked to document their search terms, describe any revisions they made as they conducted their search, and identify relevant subject headings they found useful in their search process. Finally, groups must annotate each source for their bibliography, which helps them think about the relationship between their sources and their final product. To prompt critical evaluation of the sources, students are asked to consider authority, objectivity, currency, and relevancy, which they received specific instruction on during their library instruction sessions.

Annotated Bibliography

The primary component of the research portfolio assignment is an annotated bibliography of the sources gathered in the research process. Each source is first presented in APA format followed by an annotation of approximately 150 words. The annotations include a summary of the content, a discussion of the usefulness of the

source to the speech topic, and an examination of the connection among the sources. Writing the annotated bibliography forces students to read and analyze; thus, the annotations assist the groups in thoughtful and appropriate use of sources. The annotated bibliographies are approximately 2–4 pages in length.

Analysis Essay

The final component of the research portfolio is a 2–4 page analysis essay that requires students to evaluate their research experience by discussing their successes, areas for improvement, and what they learned. We guide their essay by offering several question prompts:

- How did your perceptions of research at the close of this assignment compare to your perceptions of research when you started the assignment?
- What did you find the most challenging about researching your topic?
- What strategies will you employ as you continue to research in your academic and professional careers?

Debriefing

The research portfolio is a time-intensive project. Class time is necessary for information literacy instruction sessions, portfolio instruction, and debriefing. Typically, the information literacy instruction occurs early in the semester. However, the portfolio project can occur at any point and for any duration thereafter. We recommend using the portfolio for at least one speech, but it is most beneficial to weave the work into multiple projects or even a semester-long assignment. Although the project takes class time, considerable time outside of class, and significant time to grade, the positive reflection statements and improved use of sources make the project worthwhile.

We used a group-based approach; however, it could also be done as an individual assignment. Or groups could have a shared topic for the panel presentation, but complete the portfolio individually. We do not recommend having groups divide the work by source type (e.g., one student locates and analyzes books while another does the same for articles). If students divide the labor by source type, not all students get a chance to work on all segments, thereby, missing an important learning opportunity.

Appraisal

The knowledge gained about the research process and the speech topic is apparent in the reflection papers. One student commented, for instance, “I find myself more conscious of making sure that the information that I gather is accurate and current and that I find information from a variety of different sources.” Another stated, “I have learned how to use different wordings, symbols, Boolean operators, etc. in order to narrow my search terms.” Students also commented on being more comfortable

with research after completing the assignment: “Before, when I would do research, I would get frustrated with book sources or didn’t know how to find magazines or journals and would end up resorting to the internet . . . Now I feel comfortable using trustworthy database websites like PsycINFO or others that give more accurate and scholarly information . . . Overall I feel much more secure in my researching capabilities.”

Even though first-year students continue to use the Internet to locate information, many commented on their new understanding of the Internet’s limitations, as well as knowing how to use it more effectively. One student wrote, “Prior to college the Internet was the main mode of research that I used. After a semester of college I have been exposed to many more ways to conduct research.” When completed as a group project, the research portfolio assignment encourages effective group dynamics. Students reported, “Putting a portfolio together helped us as a group access many different types of sources . . . It exposed us to many aspects and views of the topic. This also caused us to learn what types of sources worked best for our topic and also filled us with information that will benefit us with later research,” and “Not only did it teach us how to research properly, it taught us how to work in a group in a manner beneficial to us as individuals and to the group as a whole.”

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