

FROM LECTURES AND QUIZZES TO WIKIS AND BLOGS IN THE LIBRARY CLASSROOM

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INTRODUCTION

The American University in Cairo (AUC), Egypt requires all undergraduate students to attain a certain level of information literacy, either by exempting out of or taking Libraries and Learning Technologies (LALT) 101, a semester-long information literacy class taught by AUC librarians using a common curriculum and lesson plans. LALT 101 sections, usually 12-14 each semester, meet once per week for 50 minutes in this pass/fail no-credit course, which is the only time librarians have guaranteed access to the majority of AUC students, many of whom graduate from high schools without libraries or research paper requirements, and most of whom speak English as a second or third language.

LALT 101, THEN

In the fall of 2007, a set of newly hired instruction librarians inherited curriculum and lesson plans that featured PowerPoint lectures, group activities, and weekly quizzes for homework. The semester ended with a required research project in which students identified a research question, crafted a Boolean search statement, and used at least two databases to generate a bibliography of sources that addressed the research question. The course looked great on paper, and indeed pre- and post-test results indicated an average student improvement of 20 percent.

Yet some librarians were frustrated. The class typically met 12-13 times a semester, with the first and last classes devoted to testing. Of the ten regular class sessions, students could miss five without major penalty. Further, the final project failed to inspire sophisticated research on the part of students; some were still unable even to construct a basic Boolean search statement. Ultimately, librarians were not convinced that students who passed the course could use a library database or catalog with much skill or competence.

Predecessors had worked to incorporate active learning into LALT 101, hence the weekly group activities, and Web 2.0 technologies, specifically Flickr, as described by Bussert, Brown, and Armstrong (2008). But a big stumbling block was librarian resistance to new technologies and an increased instructor workload. Public services librarians at AUC typically teach two sections of LALT 101 each semester, with a total of around 40 students, along with regular responsibilities for course-integrated library instruction, reference hours, and collection development—so the workload concerns were not frivolous.

So, while most librarians were unhappy with the class (and, so it seemed, were most of our students, who were quite anxious to pass the exemption exam), the bigger frustration was that our students were not learning basic research skills. Thus began what became a major overhaul of a course that appeared, based on assessment data, to be successful, but in actuality was failing many.

Our initial forays into Web 2.0 were inspired by a *Chronicle of Higher Education* Wired Campus blog post, which discusses a course in which students were required by their professor, Martha Groom, to write a research article for the class and then publish the article on Wikipedia. Most no-

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tably, “By the end of the term, all of the papers had met her standards — in fact, she said the papers were generally the best she had ever had, since students worked harder knowing their work would be seen by a wide audience” (Young, 2007). We wondered, then, if our students would work harder with a real audience. Ultimately, however, we decided not to have students edit Wikipedia as many of Martha Groom’s students’ articles were rejected—given our students’ first-year standing and limited English-language writing skills, we suspected their work would meet the same fate.

But the seed was planted. We created a wiki with Wetpaint.com and used it internally to begin revising the curriculum. Three librarians, Nancy Hughes, Engy Fahmy, and Joan Petit, whose job responsibilities were the most instruction-heavy, contributed most of the content; although all LALT 101 instructors had writing and editing privileges, most edited only pages for their own sections. Our primary goal was to introduce databases earlier in the semester, since that seemed to be where students had the most trouble. We revamped the schedule, replacing PowerPoints with basic outlines for librarians to adapt to their own individual styles. Students still took weekly quizzes and completed a revised final research project, along with pre- and post-tests. We also changed the attendance policy: students could miss only two classes before failing. Unfortunately, our course revisions did not generate better results from students. They met the criteria to pass, but librarians still felt students lacked basic competence in library research. Librarians agreed that our energy for the wiki did not translate into student learning.

LALT 101, Now

In Fall 2008, AUC opened at its new location east of Cairo. In the midst of a stressful move to a campus that was still under construction, instruction librarians met to discuss the semester ahead. Most significantly, our classrooms were not yet ready. But more importantly, we wanted to find a way to improve student learning. We were frustrated by the testing, not just the pre- and post-tests, but also by the weekly quizzes, which we felt taught students only how to answer test questions.

Perhaps because of the chaos of the move, we made an impulsive decision to upend the curriculum. We eliminated weekly quizzes, scaled down the final project, and implemented blogging in LALT 101. The beginning of class was devoted to lecture and discussion, but most of each class period focused on active learning, with students practicing new skills and blogging the results. Part of the change included assessment: we made it easy for students to pass, with heavy emphasis on attendance and blog entries, with the idea that less stress about passing the class might result in better learning. We also hoped students would be inspired to work harder since their blogs would be published and read by both their instructor and classmates, which seemed to work in Martha Groom’s class. Our initial plans called for students to blog, read their classmates’ blogs, and comment on each other’s work. Librarians were concerned about tracking students’ work on others’ blogs however, so we abandoned the commenting requirement and instead assigned one blog entry—

generally regarding a new database or research strategy we had discussed in class—each week.

Blogging is itself controversial in Egypt, a country that has been declared by President Hosni Mubarak to be in a “state of emergency” since 1981. Citizens do not enjoy free speech rights. Yet some Egyptians do blog, especially about politics, including with criticism of Mubarak himself, a crime for which one can be sentenced to a year in prison. In fact, a few months after our students began to a blog, an AUC graduate student, Philip Rizk, and another prominent Egyptian blogger were arrested (Slackman, 2009). This was in a series of events seemingly intended to silence political bloggers, and very much discussed by students and Egyptians everywhere. However, we clearly explained to students that their blogs were to be academic in nature—there was no intention of them taking any risks through this course. Though, given the controversial nature of speech in Egypt, we felt students would benefit from understanding the accessibility of blogging technology.

Librarians remained concerned about the increased workload required by weekly blog entries—previously quizzes were graded automatically through WebCT—as well as by the need to learn a new technology. They also were reluctant to have yet more changes in the course after the previous semester’s wiki introduction and schedule reorganization and were not convinced students learning would increase. We felt, however, that librarians would gain time at the end of the semester not spent grading an ungainly final project, and we worked to streamline grading with tools through Blackboard (to which our campus had newly switched). We were careful to ensure that instructors were adequately supported with technology training. Ultimately, we hoped improvements in student learning would compensate for these changes and challenges.

In fact, librarians correctly anticipated some of the biggest issues of the semester. The technology, in particular, proved to be a major stumbling block for some of our instructors. While learning and teaching blogging came naturally to some, the WordPress.com interface (which we used for blogging) was quite a struggle for others because they had to learn it not only well enough to use it, but to teach it. Our technology problems were compounded by our transition to the remote new campus, where internet connections were still inconsistent. And although course prep was limited by a unified curriculum and syllabus, instructors did have to learn all new units.

Late in the semester, an instructors’ meeting revealed that most hoped to eliminate blogging for the spring semester, either by using Blackboard exclusively or with a return to weekly quizzes, primarily because they saw no benefit from the blogging itself. It seemed like we might head in that direction until the students’ final blog, in which they answered questions like, “What did you most like about blogging through WordPress?” and “What did you dislike the most about blogging through WordPress?”. Students—to the great surprise of several librarians—reported high satisfaction with blogging: they said the technology was easy to learn, they enjoyed using it, and they were almost universally enthusiastic about their blogs.

This—more than any other issue—ultimately convinced all of us of the value of blogging. Testing revealed the same score increase, while students’ work throughout the semester indicated a deeper understanding of the material. Students were also now enthusiastic about a class that had previously engendered disdain.

LESSON PLANS AND STUDENT WORK

Currently, LALT includes eleven units, covering topics such as understanding citations, identifying scholarly and popular sources, building a search statement, and avoiding plagiarism. Following are descriptions of two units, to show more clearly the structure of the course.

Unit 3, “Beginning Your Research,” focuses on choosing and narrowing a topic, selecting keywords and considering synonyms, and the use of the Boolean operator ‘and’ to construct a simple search statement. Using the wiki as a guideline, the librarians provide specific examples to demonstrate this process. Students then use a suggested topic and write a blog entry. The Unit 3 assignment is this:

Choose one of the sample research questions and answer the following:

1. What is your research question for this activity?
2. What are the two most important keywords in this research question?
3. Are there any synonyms or related terms that you need to consider? What are they?
4. How would you narrow this topic? Broaden it?
5. Give two possible search statements for this topic.

Here are two students’ blogs for Unit 3:

Student 1

1. My research question for this activity is: What are the last effects of colonization on Egypt?
2. The most important two keywords in this research question are: Colonization and Egypt
3. Synonyms or related terms that need to be considered are: Colonization: expansion, settlement, and occupation
4. Narrowing the topic: What are the economic effects of the British colonization on Upper Egypt?

Broadening the topic: What are the effects of colonization on the third world countries?

5. Two possible search statements for this topic are: Colonization And Egypt

(Colonization or occupation) And Egypt
(El Shenawy, 2010)

Student 2

1. My research question is: What effect does violence in the media have on children?
2. The three most important keywords in this research question are: violence, media and children.
3. There are some synonyms and related terms that I will need to consider here. For instance, for the word media, we have as related terms mass communications, while for children, we have some synonyms like youth, child and kids.
4. We could narrow this topic by asking: What effect does violence in the media have on children in primary schools?

We could broaden it by asking: What effect does the media have on children?
5. The first search statement for this topic is: violence and media and children.

The second search statement for this topic is: mass media and youth. (Moussa, 2010)

Unit 6 covers locating periodicals and determining if a source is popular or scholarly. The class meets in the periodicals room, and students pair up to locate two publications in the stacks: one that they identify as popular and one as scholarly. They work together to make a list of characteristics for each publication and share these results with the class, and the librarian leads a discussion of popular and scholarly characteristics. The class returns to the classroom, where the instructor demonstrates using the E-journal Finder and library catalog to locate periodicals. Students then complete the following assignment, and post it to their blogs:

1. Find the following article in Academic Search Complete: “Arabic Hip Hop: Claims of Authenticity and Identity of a New Genre.” Is this from a scholarly journal or a popular magazine? Give three reasons that you can tell.
2. Find the following article in ASC: “The Sound of Love” by Hisham Matar. Is this from a scholarly journal or a popular magazine? Give three reasons that you can tell.

Here are two student blogs for Unit 6:

Student 3

1. Scholarly journal
Reasons:
 - It has references
 - Focuses on a specific topic
 - The author who wrote it is professional in this field

2. A popular magazine
Reasons:
 - Colorful pictures and photos
 - No references
 - It's short and the topic might be of interest to anyone, it's not a professional thing.
(Mostafa, 2010)

Student 4

1. "Arabic Hip Hop: Claims of Authenticity and Identity of a New Genre" is from a scholarly [sic] journal because it is published in *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, which is an academic journal. Furthermore, the article ends with a bibliography, and it has author affiliation from California State University, Long Beach.
2. "The Sound of Love" by Hisham Matar is from a magazine since the article doesn't have any [sic] bibliography. Besides, the article is short and it holds many pictures. Furthermore, it is published in *New Statesman* which is a popular periodical. (Moussa, 2010)

CONCLUSION

The success of the LALT 101 changes implemented over the last three years has inspired additional change. The 2010-2011 academic year will see a much-needed departmental restructuring and the reinstatement of the LALT Task Force, whose charge is to assess the success and efficiency of the current information literacy program. The focus does seem to have shifted from merely passing the class to learning actual research skills. The movement from quizzes to graded blogs, and the addition of in-class work time, contributed to this positive change. In general, we are confident that the use of Web 2.0 technologies has enhanced the learning of our students. A typical AUC student has grown up in an educational culture that does not encourage critical thinking, and our information literacy program will continue to evolve to help them become lifelong learners.

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