

No Time, No Problem: Using Blogs To Build Upon Face-To-Face Instruction

Harold Goss, Jr., Samford University

“We need more interactions with our students.” Most instruction librarians would likely agree with that statement. One of the biggest challenges in library instruction is knowing you may only have one or two 45-50 minute sessions to teach a student everything they need to know about the library, resources that would be helpful to them, and information literacy. We are forced to make tough choices and emphasize the concepts we think are most valuable to the student. This is particularly tough if the group in question is freshmen. There is a lot for them to learn in their new environment, and it may be the last time they see you until their senior capstone course. What are we to do? A for-credit course covering multiple class sessions would be great, but library courses are not feasible for many libraries because of budget and personnel limitations. Thus at Samford, we wanted to come up with a way to build on that initial, face-to-face instruction session in a way that was simple, effective, and efficient.

The Challenge

Like many other institutions, we have library instruction connected to freshmen writing courses during the first two semesters students are on campus. At Samford, students are required to take UCCA (Communication Arts) 101 and 102. Unfortunately, time permits for only one library session in the fall and one in the spring. Librarians introduce students to library resources and services in the fall and in the spring put more emphasis on advanced search techniques, resource evaluation, and ethical use. It is no secret that two hours total of library instruction are not sufficient to teach our students all that we would like to. That is where the opportunity exists!

How could we expose students to information that would help make them more information literate? We have a limited number of instructors; each has duties other than instruction; and professors also want to use as much of their allotted class time to work on material needed for students to become better writers and communicators (i.e., not on “library” activities). With limited librarians and limited opportunities for face-to-face instruction a creative solution was needed.

The Solution

At Samford, we have come up with an effective option: using blogs to help us fill in the gaps after a face-to-face session. There are approximately 40 sections of

UCCA in the fall and we experimented with four of them. A librarian is assigned to each class and that librarian conducts a traditional library session. The session includes an introduction to our services and resources, along with an overview of basic search strategies. During that session, the class is introduced to the blog for their class. We inform them of the expectations:

- Respond to each post from the librarian (10 total posts, one a week)
- Communicate with their assigned librarian with any questions (phone, e-mail, in-person)

We also tell the students when the posts will occur and encourage them to subscribe to the blog if they would like to. The students are also informed that their efforts will be a part of their participation grade for the course. This is a very important component to the success of an initiative like this. Faculty support in this regard is necessary to ensure interest and participation.

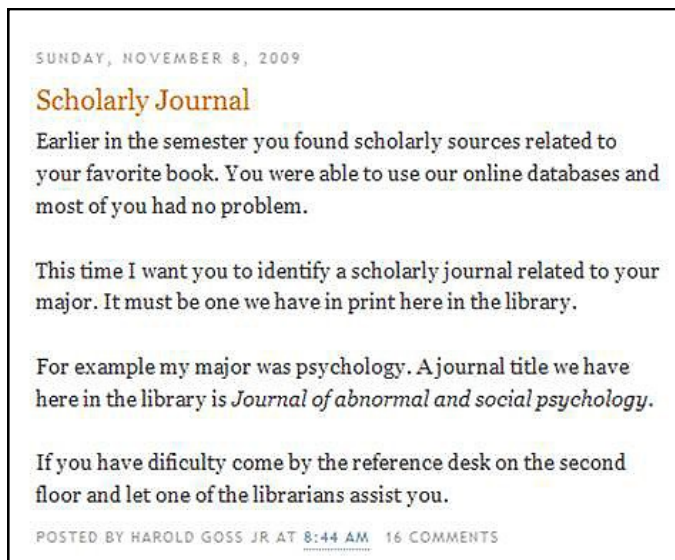
This is the third semester we have worked with faculty on this initiative. Our initial effort in the fall of 2008 was very similar. The primary difference was the type of question/statement we had the students respond to each week. In 2008, we attempted to connect questions each week to assignments they were working on. It worked well but going forward we decided it would be better to have them respond to questions related to the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards. In particular, we are now most interested in Standard Two (ability to access needed information effectively and efficiently). The decision to emphasize Standard Two was made based on the priority that we want our 1st-year students to be thoroughly equipped to use Samford library resources to locate information for various purposes. Long-term we hope to build on that foundation with emphases on the other standards as we interact with them in their 3rd and 4th years.

It is also important to note we also experimented with the delivery mechanism for these questions. In the fall of 2008 and spring of 2009, we used Samford’s Learning Management System, Blackboard. While these students were given the same instructions, similar questions, and we had the same support from professors, we have found participation to be far greater using blogs. It may be that posting on a blog involves fewer clicks than getting to

that point in Blackboard. Also, blogs have a very familiar look to students which could have been a factor. Whatever the reason, students have participated in far greater numbers when we connect with them through blogs as opposed to Blackboard. The librarians also prefer blogs to Blackboard: It is very easy to set-up, maintain, and comments from students can be sent directly to your RSS feed reader. At this point we are using blogs exclusively.

The Method

Each week students respond to posts by the librarian. As stated earlier, we are primarily interested in their ability to locate resources so most of the posts are written with that in mind. For example, a post from fall 2009:



All of the posts during the semester focus on students being able to determine what they need and then find it. The idea here is to get them into the library's resources. The above example is reflective of the type of posts we have them respond to each week. We explain to them what we want, give them an example, and point them in the right direction, but we leave the details to the students to learn on their own. It is pleasantly surprising how much students can do, as long as you give them enough to get started. We have also had them respond to questions about their favorite book and then identify primary sources, scholarly sources, and book reviews that are related to it. The idea is to use simple tasks to keep library resources in front of them, to reinforce what we teach them in the live library session, and in the long term develop relationships with the students.

Also, credit must be given to the faculty members with whom we are working. Their support is a key component to this effort working. The primary reason students have responded is that it's part of their participation grade. We simply let the professor know at the end of the semester how many weeks each student posted. For example if there are 10 posts and a student responds to 9 of them he/she gets a grade from us of 90%. As a rule, the grade is based on participation not on the quality of comment they make (unless it is clearly egregious or nonparticipatory). If the students are missing the mark, an e-mail is sent to the class for clarity.

The Result

There are several positives we are discovering to this experiment. The first is time: Setting up the blog is very simple and takes very little time. Monitoring student comments is not time consuming either. Each of the librarians uses Google Reader which alerts you when there are new posts and thus takes out the guesswork. This also requires virtually no time from the faculty member. The most important thing the faculty member has to give is their support to us by making this effort a part of the students' grades. This is not a burden to them at all. Another benefit has been relationship building: We've had several students seek out their assigned librarian in person, through e-mail, and on the phone for help on various assignments. That is not typical with 1st-year students so we are very excited this has made them more comfortable with the librarians.

The Potential

Thus far our effort has worked quite well. The students are exposed to library resources all through the semester so the gap between a single fall session and a single winter session is being reduced. We are also excited about the potential to expand. This could be a meaningful way to involve librarians into other classes and to ensure information literacy is not just something students are exposed to in rare bursts, but continually, making it a more integrated part of their daily school life.