

Finding Meaningful Research Assignments: Collaboration as a Way to End the "Scavenger Hunt"

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In 2006, the Graduate School at the University of Georgia (UGA) began a new interdisciplinary program, the Certificate in University Teaching, to improve the teaching skills of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) and prepare them for future academic positions. We saw this new program as an excellent opportunity to introduce GTAs early in their teaching careers to information literacy and instructional collaboration with librarians like ourselves. To this end, we created an active learning workshop on designing meaningful research assignments, emphasizing how instructors can integrate information literacy into coursework without requiring a traditional research paper.

Where We Fit In - GRSC 7770

To receive the Certificate in University Teaching, participants must provide instruction in at least four course sections at UGA (either as the teacher of record, or as a discussion or laboratory GTA with significant responsibilities). In addition, they are required to complete nine hours of course work in the areas of pedagogy, assessment, technology, and professional development. One course, GRSC 7770, is a teaching strategies seminar that gives participants the opportunity to explore effective teaching methods at the college level, analyze and evaluate their teaching assignments, and become familiar with the campus-wide teaching support services that are available to them. This course seemed like the ideal environment for introducing them to librarian collaboration and information literacy.

Making the Connection

We contacted the coordinator of the program, inviting him to meet and discuss the idea of a hands-on workshop for GRSC 7770 on designing effective, active learning research assignments. We explained that instructors of introductory courses (who are often GTAs) frequently think library research is irrelevant to their course if students are not required to write a research paper. Early in their studies, however, is precisely the time when students need to be exposed to the research process in preparation for large-scale research and writing projects. Once the coordinator was convinced of the merit of such an intervention, we worked with him to delineate our goals and create learning outcomes and teaching strategies for the workshop.

We identified three overall goals: to demonstrate how librarians can be collaborators in instruction; to "teach the teachers" about what constitutes an effective research assignment; and to give participants an opportunity to learn as both a student and as a teacher.

In support of these goals we sought to:

1. Generate discussion about what makes a good research assignment
2. Combine GTAs' past experience and expertise with examples of dynamic information literacy exercises in order to create new assignments
3. Learn more about GTAs' experience in the classroom to better support their teaching
4. Approach the GTAs as *collaborators* in teaching

Presenting the Workshop

Our workshop was listed as one among several 'guest speaker' options GRSC instructors could offer to their class. We asked for sixty to ninety minutes of class time for our workshop. During the first semester we offered the workshop, we received invitations from four GRSC 7770 sections, both discipline-specific and multi-disciplinary.

What We Did

The workshop centered on designing and teaching in-class research exercises based on active learning principles and best practices in information literacy -- many gleaned from our own ACRL Immersion Program experience. Together with each GTA, we worked to create assignments that asked their students to use critical thinking skills in order to find, evaluate and use information wisely, outside the traditional format of a research paper. Our collaboration produced a number of engaging assignments to enhance course content, promote active learning, and foster information literacy in undergraduates. The assignments are cross-disciplinary and provide models for instructors and librarians seeking ideas for everything from psychology to history to computer science. We created a website to act as a repository for these assignments, in hopes that current and future GTAs will use them or be inspired to build upon them.

The following are the specific steps we followed in conducting the workshop.

1. Explained what we hoped to accomplish in the workshop and a brief overview of UGA Libraries' research sources
2. Discussed GTA expectations of student research behavior and presented challenges to meeting those expectations
3. Used a "real life" example of a library scavenger hunt assignment to discuss the assignment's strengths and weaknesses and then brainstormed how we could improve upon the design of this assignment by adding active learning elements
4. Discussed other examples of creative research assignments (given as a handout)
5. Presented an active learning exercise in which participants designed a research assignment for their discipline using the ideas and active learning principles we had just covered
6. Provided time for students to share their assignments with the group and discuss its strengths and possible problems in execution.

Assessment

"Thank you again for organizing our session this morning. I think you gave us all some valuable information. I will certainly be tying library work to my courses more enthusiastically in the future!" ~Teaching Assistant, Comparative Literature

We assessed the workshop by examining the assignments created by participants. We also asked for feedback from the GRSC Coordinator. Based on the coordinator's surveys after our first semester, half of the GTAs found the session to be applicable to their work and said that it was a useful exercise in assignment development and a good way to learn about creative assignment design in their own discipline and that of their peers in other academic departments. However, the other half of the GTAs felt that research assignments were irrelevant to the courses they taught (for example, introductory language courses). Another common critique was that the discussion of library resources was remedial and had already been covered in other library sessions they attended. Nearly all respondents felt that with a few changes and a little more time, the workshop would be helpful in developing a reflective teaching practice. Dr. Paul Quick, the coordinator for the program, states: "Having library professionals come in to profile and workshop assignments

helps to focus instructors on the construction of better assignments for greater student learning."

Changes Based on Assessment Findings

In order to address the gap between those that found the session useful and those that did not, we implemented several changes to the workshop for the next GRSC 7770 sessions. We now omit discussion of library resources and include more examples of typical library research assignments that are currently in circulation on campuses across the country. These real life examples offer a concrete starting point for discussing the merits and pitfalls of each design and brainstorming ways to make them more active and engaging. By critiquing other assignments, participants can begin to think critically about the importance of articulating clear learning goals and effectively assessing whether those goals are met. We also discuss examples of "best practice" assignments from the sciences, social sciences and humanities.

In the revamped workshops we now ask students to work in pairs or small groups for the active learning exercise rather than individually. Working in teams has generated livelier discussion and is a more effective use of limited workshop time. In GRSC sections where more than one discipline is covered, participants create either a multi-disciplinary research project or choose one person's discipline and create an assignment suited to that course of study. We also make a particular effort to point out that active learning research assignments foster higher order skills, such as critical thinking, and give undergraduates a chance to role play future professional activities. Last but not least, active learning exercises benefit the GTA by giving them a break from being "on stage" and allow them to observe their students in the act of learning.

Although the actual number of workshops we give each semester has not increased, we have expanded our reach to include new disciplines. We hope that revising our workshop description will help participants better understand our goals and see that this is not just another "library session" of the type they had as undergraduates. We are finding that once we get in the door, our workshops facilitate dynamic discussion and promote creative ideas that support the Teaching Certificate program goal of improving GTAs' teaching skills and preparing them for future professional success.

Library assignments that are not explicitly applied to course content can unintentionally fix the library in stu-

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dents' minds as the home of frustrating, useless busy-work. It is our hope that by working with emerging professors we may help foster engaging and thoughtful practice in regards to creating the library assignment as well as foster good will with these GTAs so that they seek out their librarian colleagues when they eventually reach their own academic institution to take their place at the front of the classroom.

Overview and example assignments are available on the workshop home page:

<http://www.libs.uga.edu/ref/grsc7770/>.

(Providing the "Right"...Continued from page 5)

that they actively contributed to instruction related blogs. Other resources mentioned for class preparation included colleagues at other institutions, experience teaching in other disciplines, literature from other fields (especially education), instructors and assignments for the classes they are teaching, and list-servs, resource directories, and books.

While many of the respondents were satisfied with the instructional support that was currently available to them, such as the informal help from their CU colleagues, a greater interest in interactive, in-person resources came through in the survey answers. Everyone who completed the survey said they were interested in more collaboration and discussion with other librarians; 79% said they'd be interested in a discussion group that shared literature and experiences. Respondents reported that they'd like to see other resources developed like workshops (on topics like assessment, technology, and active learning), and organized discussions on the mechanics or "how" of library instruction, including individual experiences and tools used. When asked why they would or would not use the resources that were previously developed, the answers addressed general themes of time constraints; many indicated that discussions focused on practical classroom strategies, as opposed to just generally discussing trends, would be preferable because they lacked the time to read articles or monographs and they would benefit more from a casual discussion that may inform and inspire their own instruction preparation.

Next Steps for the Instruction Program

The results of the survey showed that discussions focused on current instruction practices and brainstorming ideas, as well as targeted skill-development work-

shops on topics related to instruction, would best suit the time-strapped librarians and staff at the CU-Boulder Libraries. It became apparent that some instructional support tools will be more readily used than others. Based on this feedback, it would be advantageous to spend more time and energy developing structured workshop and discussion sessions that provide overviews of alternative teaching methods combined with a discussion element to encourage the development of new ideas and skills.

The survey illustrated the need to fully understand the actual needs in order to spend the resources and time available to create relevant support mechanisms, rather than resources that appear to be valuable and end up seldom used. Since most librarians and staff have primary responsibilities other than instruction, making the resources easy-to-use and pertinent to their job duties is vitally important. Crucial to the future success of the instructional support program will be buy-in and participation by the other librarians and staff at the institution. Informal feedback after the survey indicated that most people are excited, so now the goal is to capture that excitement and momentum by setting up a new, more focused instructional support program soon.

The next steps will be for the authors to draft a concrete and developed plan to support on-going workshops and discussions. The authors will initiate the change by establishing three annual instruction discussions strategically placed before and after semesters. Continued development of collaborative interaction and conversation will ideally impact the overall effectiveness of the University Libraries instructional programming as the authors continue to mold instructional support resources based not on just hunches or the latest trend, but on the survey's results.