

A Symbiotic Relationship: The Library as Client in Undergraduate Courses

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Although librarians champion forward-thinking concepts such as active and self-directed learning, from a relationship perspective we often play a traditional role in undergraduate instruction. The librarian-student information exchange is often-times still a one-way communication, with the students garnering most of the benefit from an instruction session. But what if the student-librarian interaction could be mutually beneficial? This article will describe one such relationship where librarians and library staff embedded themselves in an undergraduate communication course for a client-based usability assignment and will offer suggestions for librarians interested in seeking similar opportunities.

Embedded and Client-Based Assignments

Embedded librarianship has become a popular topic at conferences and in journals in the last decade, as librarians seek to build long-term relationships with students and extend their availability for assistance at the point of need. Brower (2011) identifies six characteristics of embedded librarians.

1. Collaborate with their users
2. Form partnerships on the department and campus level
3. Provide needs-based services
4. Offer convenient and user-friendly services outside of library settings
5. Become immersed in the culture and spaces of users
6. Understand the discipline including the culture and research habits of their users (pp. 4-5).

Often, an embedded librarian works with a class, either physically or virtually, for a full semester. However, depending on class needs and librarian availability, a semester-long collaboration may not be necessary or feasible. Thus, one might consider the creation of an embedded assignment. An embedded assignment will involve librarians who perform all (or most) of the actions Brower identifies, but for a shorter length of time than the traditional embedded relationship—in this case, the span of a single assignment from creation to delivery and assessment.

A client-based assignment, much like an embedded assignment, involves close collaboration among the course instructor, students, and chosen client. However, whereas an embedded assignment focuses on providing students with the resources and services they need in order to be successful, a client-based assignment benefits both the student **and** the client. Waldner and Hunter (2008) define client-based courses as ones that are “structured to produce a useful report or product for a client” (p. 219). Broader than service learning, which often partners with nonprofit organizations, client-based learning widens the scope to include for-profit clients as well (Waldner & Hunter, 2008, p. 220). A client-based assignment, like a full client-

based course, can still be mutually beneficial, but the client-student relationship is generally shorter than a full semester.

When the library becomes a client for student-based projects, students can reap the benefits of embedded librarianship while at the same time providing a service, product, or insight to the library in return. While careful planning and commitment are needed to form a successful symbiotic librarian-student relationship, the rewards on both sides make the effort more than worthwhile.

Origins of the Partnership & Creation of the Assignment

As the First-Year English Instruction Librarian, I work closely with the Writing & Communication faculty to provide research support and information literacy instruction for students enrolled in required communication courses. In the fall of 2012, I had the opportunity to embed myself in one section of a freshman English class taught by a faculty member with whom I’d worked in the past. My embedded relationship that semester could be considered traditional—I attended classes, engaged in discussions, provided online and in-person support for their research-based assignment (e.g., on the silent film era), and helped in evaluating students’ research-based abstracts and presentations. When the instructor began preparing for the next semester, we spoke about the opportunity to collaborate again. In the spring of 2013, however, her course would be quite different, focusing on the rhetoric of interaction design. Students would study various digital media artifacts and evaluate how they successfully (or unsuccessfully) presented their content to users. A primary goal of the course was to have students “develop a sound understanding of digital and visual rhetoric that [would] make them better software/platform/media producers and consumers” (Jakacki, 2012). The instructor also wanted the students to learn about the library and its resources, but the class did not include a research assignment that would warrant traditional library instruction. Brainstorming, we hit on the idea of having students analyze some of the library’s digital resources and provide recommendations for improvements. The students would benefit from both scrutinizing a library resource and presenting for a client audience of librarians. The librarians, in turn, would gain valuable feedback on the design of particular sites and services.

She would be teaching three sections of the course, each with twenty-five students. Five person teams often are the norm for group projects, so we decided we would need five library online resources, one for each student group to analyze. I offered to coordinate the library-side of the project, while the instructor would focus on the rhetorical components of the assignment and rubric for assessing the presentations and products. I approached my Library’s User Engagement Librarian for help in identifying library resources for usability testing and review. We also wanted to give students the chance to work

with library staff with the most expertise and investment in these resources, so we identified one to two librarians/library staff members as the clients for each resource. Our final library resource selections and client experts were as follows:

1. **Mobile website:** one Digital Library Developer and one Communications Officer
2. **Institutional Repository:** the Scholarly Communication Librarian
3. **Get Help Features:** one Communications Officer and one Information Associate
4. **Science Fiction Collection site:** the Undergraduate Programming and Engagement Librarian and the Web Program Manager & Systems Librarian
5. **Popular Reading/Media Collection site:** the Access Services Librarian and the Web Program Manager & Systems Librarian

The entire assignment sequence would last the entire month of February. The faculty member crafted the assignment and sent it along for review, and then all involved met a couple weeks before our first class visit to discuss the assignment and the expected contributions of everyone involved.

Assignment Logistics and Librarian-Student Partnerships

In order to introduce the assignment and teach the students about the different resources for review, the library clients involved in the project visited each of the instructor's three fifty-minute sections at the beginning of the month. Each client or client pair from the library presented a brief overview of the resource and addressed possible issues they hoped the students might consider. For example, after giving an overview of the key features of our library's mobile site, the library clients wanted to know both what was missing and how to make the site more attractive to students, their primary target audience. Students were also given the opportunity to ask initial questions for help in understanding the resources. For instance, students wondered why we had chosen a mobile website rather than creating a library app. After the session, students signed up for a particular resource team based on their interests and preferred group members. A week later, the Digital Library Developer and I visited the classes and worked with the teams, answering questions, giving initial feedback on their ideas, and helping them to pinpoint sticking points they should address¹.

As part of the assignment, each group was required to contact their client(s) via email within a week and a half of our initial presentation with at least three relevant questions regarding their resource, its value, and/or their recommendations. For example, one of the groups working with the Popular Reading/Media Collection site found that they needed to better understand how popular reading and media were selected and when something was classified by librarians as popular rather than regular fiction. The instructor and I were copied on all correspondence in order to track and give credit for this part of the assignment. Student groups were also encouraged to set up meetings with their clients for in-person feedback, which some of them did.

About three weeks into the assignment, the groups' created a mock-up of their site design recommendations to present to the clients. The recommendations were meant to focus on how each resource conveyed its information to its audience, and what changes to the design or content of the resource would make it both easier to use and more attractive to potential users. We split the presentations between two class meetings to accommodate all groups and client availability. The instructor created a client feedback form for clients to fill out. Requested feedback focused on both the students' recommendations and their preparation and communication skills in presenting and answering questions. I filled out a form for each group. All client feedback was submitted to the instructor, and she prepared a feedback summary for each team.

Students then had a week to revise their recommendations and mock-ups based on client feedback. Final submissions had to include a bibliography and brief report that addressed the group's work process over the course of the assignment and how they would further address client feedback given more time and resources. Students also graded each other and themselves based on their contributions to the project.

The final mockups were shared with the library clients for our internal use, and we met once more with the course instructor to debrief and reflect on the assignment.

Reflections & Suggestions for Similar Projects

Successes

All involved agreed that the assignment collaboration was a success. Students learned valuable communication skills as well as in-depth information about specific library resources. Although the library instruction was nontraditional, it was still there, as the librarians introduced students to many new resources, and through the assignment and multiple interactions, encouraged the students to critically think about all of the groups' resources. In order to make solid recommendations and address questions and concerns posed by the client, students had to understand the functionality and purpose of each resource as well as its intended audience. During the group presentations, clients expected students to be able to justify the credibility of the sources which aided them in crafting their recommendations. From the initial library client resource presentations and through instructor and client feedback both in-person and via email, multiple ACRL information literacy competency standards were covered during the course of the assignment. Example performance indicators addressed included: 1.2 Identifying a variety of types and formats of potential sources of information; 2.3 Retrieving information online or in person using a variety of methods; 3.6 Validating understanding and interpretation of the information through discourse with others; 4.3 Communicating the product or performance effectively to others; 5.1 Understanding many of the ethical, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and information technology (ACRL, 2000). The instructor found that students really valued the project because it had real-world implications.

(Symbiotic Relationship...continued on page 3)

about pedagogical best practices, as I typically just focus on the importance of learning objectives and lesson plans. Finally and perhaps most importantly, many of the recommended strategies are painlessly, immediately employable: providing prompts in-class to jog students' memories of knowledge already learned (p. 120), furnishing an outline of what you plan to teach at the beginning of class (p.61), showing both model and unsatisfac-

tory examples of what you're looking for in a particular assignment (p. 147-8). The book will therefore be of great use to librarians of all experience levels and class types—any book with this depth of research that is also practical, while being eminently readable, deserves a spot on any instruction librarian's shelf.

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In addition to teaching students about new resources (e.g., none of them knew what an institutional repository was when we started), we also hoped the students would spread the word to friends about the resources and the approachability and helpfulness of librarians and staff. The groups' recommendations and mock-ups were invaluable, as they suggested new design features to garner interest, increase ease of use, and even pointed out inconsistencies that had previously gone unnoticed. Our User Experience Librarian noted three valuable insights our library gained from the experience:

1. How first year students prefer to access information (e.g., QR codes were not as popular as we expected).
2. Their emphasis on the need for visually engaging browsing interfaces (Netflix and iTunes were commonly cited exemplars).
3. The need to create "clean," clutter-free entrance experiences into digital portals (such as SMARTech [our institutional repository]) (A. Doshi, personal communication, 2014).

In addition to the tangible recommendations, the library staff really enjoyed working with the students. Several of the library clients were from departments that typically do not interact directly with our users, so this was a rare opportunity for them to elicit undergraduate students' perspectives.

Recommendations & Challenges

Librarians can be creative in pitching client-based assignments to potential faculty collaborators. Perhaps a social psychology course could conduct a study of behavior in a particular library environment, or an environmental science course could recommend ways to make the library building and services more environmentally-friendly.

One major challenge for me was coordinating and overseeing so many clients. We ended up with ten library employees involved, including myself and the User Experience Librarian. In part this was due to our desire for really invested clients, and in part it was to divide up the labor. Others could surely implement a similar assignment with fewer librarians and/or staff, though the workload for each would increase based on the number of groups involved. It is also important to select clients who will work well with the students. In our case, having the professor summarize the feedback for the students acted to mediate any potential issues.

Another challenge was teaching the students all the minute details that must be taken into account when developing a library resource. On the first iteration, several groups offered beautiful mock-ups that in no way would fit into the coloring and branding of our library's site. Some suggestions showed that the students' concept of the capabilities of certain resources – the library catalog, for example – might not be realistic. Even though a month seems like a lengthy period of time, not every nuance and policy can feasibly be covered in the student-librarian interactions. Expect that not all recommendations will be able to be implemented as is, but be willing to take the ideas they convey to benefit the library in some way.

Not all groups had the same level of technical expertise. We were working with classes of mostly freshmen with a wide range of skills with computing and design software. Some were able to code flashy graphics for their mock-ups, while others stuck to listing recommendations using the basics in PowerPoint. Regardless, the focus of the assignment should be on the quality of the recommendations and the communication skills the students exhibit in presenting the recommendations to the client, rather than on the complexity of the medium through which they created their presentation.

Finally, it is important to have a close working relationship with the faculty to whom you propose such an assignment. I would not recommend this be your first time working together, as you'll want to feel comfortable contacting - and being contacted by - the professor many times throughout the course of the assignment. Unfortunately, the faculty member I worked with finished her fellowship and moved on to another university, and so far other obligations and opportunities have not allowed another collaboration at this point. However, a little creativity and determination can open up opportunities for mutually beneficial class assignments across campus.

References and Footnote

For references, see here: <http://bit.ly/1K02h1C>

- 1 This class visit was not in the original timeline, but the instructor had to be away suddenly, so we led the group work session. In order to keep the students on track, the instructor had prepared a worksheet for the groups to complete. Information about their team's structure, their chosen resource, potential challenges, and initial recommendation ideas was required. Having one of our Information Technology & Development team developers with me in this class was particularly useful, as he had the back-end knowledge to help with the technical questions that arose.