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Reading is Research : Promoting Critical Reading Through Embedded Librarianship

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BACKGROUND

While reading is an essential part of the research process, it is a skill that is often overlooked in library instruction programs. Though learning how to utilize databases, the library's catalog, and other resources is important to student success, they must also be able to read and evaluate the information they access. Without being able to read, process, and analyze information, students will be unable to effectively synthesize information to arrive at their own conclusions about the topics and questions they explore. There are a variety of factors that could explain the relative paucity of critical reading instruction in the library classroom, including a classroom focus on final products rather than specific parts of the research process, inherent constraints of the one-shot instruction format, and a lack of library involvement in course and research assignment design. Regardless of the causes, the need for reading instruction in the library classroom presents librarians with a variety of opportunities to rethink face-to-face instruction, experiment with new teaching methods, and collaborate with faculty in designing instructional initiatives.

The *Reading is Research* initiative at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte is one academic library's response to a substantial instructional need. The initiative aims to incorporate critical reading and thinking skills into library instruction through methods such as embedded librarianship, multiple instruction sessions, and librarian involvement in assignment design. *Reading is Research* is founded on the belief that the cultivation of critical reading and thinking skills not only prepares students to be effective researchers during college, but also helps build essential information evaluation competencies that can be transferred to the professional world.

The initiative was started through a librarian-faculty partnership with a professor in the Global Studies department to better integrate critical reading instruction into a Global Studies course. The faculty member recognized that students were struggling with understanding concepts and theory found in academic sources. Additionally, students were finding it difficult to apply such concepts and theory in their own writing. At the same time, an instruction librarian was evaluating the effectiveness of library instruction sessions that focus on accessing resources rather than other parts of the research process. From that initial collaboration, *Reading is Research* has evolved into a full instructional philosophy that aims to promote critical reading education throughout the library's instructional program.

Reading is Research encourages students to process and connect information from a variety of sources to explore higher-level concepts such as conflict, narrative, and identity. By illustrating how to look beyond the most superficial aspects of information to discover how sources in an academic conversation connect to one another, students are prepared to become more efficient information analysts and creators. The presence of a librarian as a guide and resource throughout the semester helps students as they interact with information and build their own lines of inquiry. By seeing the artifacts produced as a result of reading and research, librarians can have a better understanding of how their instruction methods can be tailored to best meet student needs.

ASSIGNMENT DESIGN

One of the two main pillars of *Reading is Research* is assignment design. Assignments in *Reading is Research* courses do not fit the traditional research paper model. The suite of *Reading is Research* assignments includes a variety of different methods

for slowing down the research process. Assignments include key terms journals, annotated bibliographies, research question essays, and response papers. The overarching goals of the research assignments are to encourage students to focus on the meaning and purpose of the sources they find and consider how these sources correspond and communicate with each other. By focusing on these specific goals, assignments help students build critical reading and thinking skills throughout the research process.

No matter what format a particular assignment takes, the initiative aims to slow down the research process and is focused on source analysis and building a web of knowledge about a topic. Additionally, assignments are designed to fit together in a coherent way, so that that the lessons learned during an assignment or class can be built upon as a student progresses in the course or discipline. For example, a student in a Senior Seminar course might begin by finding and summarizing an article before proceeding to higher-level assignments such as annotated bibliographies and research presentations later in the semester. Assignments do not exist in a vacuum and are paired appropriately according to the overall needs and goals of the specific course. Assignments are designed in close collaboration with faculty to ensure they meet the goals of the course and the *Reading is Research* instructional philosophy.

LIBRARY INSTRUCTION

The other key element of *Reading is Research* is face-to-face library instruction. For a *Reading is Research* affiliated course, librarians typically work with a class four to six times during a semester. This gives the librarian the opportunity to guide and assist students through every stage of the research process. While the frequency and design of instruction sessions inevitably varies according to need and course requirements, the goal of *Reading is Research* library instruction is to cultivate critical reading and thinking skills throughout the research process by being a presence in the course.

During instruction sessions, the librarians make an effort not to present themselves as experts. They engage learners by frequently asking questions about the topics they are exploring and the information they have read rather than simply demonstrating library resources. These questions are often intended to lead students back to the sources they are reading. By asking students to find where the author makes their argument and then state the argument in their own words, the librarian incorporates active reading into the instruction session.

Rather than focusing heavily on how to use library resources, *Reading is Research* sessions primarily focus on critical reading and thinking skills. Handouts that focus on how to properly read academic sources also play an important role in the process. Students are encouraged to read a source at least three times to get a full understanding of the material and how the theory found within it can be synthesized and applied to other situations. In many ways, the instruction sessions become a partnership between librarian and students as they work together in figuring out how to understand and utilize information.

For the Senior Seminar course in Global Studies, the initial library instruction session takes place at the beginning of the semester when students are beginning to develop inquiry questions for their projects. They might be asked to bring an article they have found in their background reading or a previous piece of writing to discuss with the class. This gives the librarian the chance to illustrate how topic ideas and questions are generated from the information students read and analyze. From here, students are asked to build their initial idea into researchable questions. They are asked to consider the questions they might have and the sources that would be necessary to provide answers to their questions.

Subsequent instruction sessions build on the initial session. As students build their critical reading and thinking skills throughout the semester, sessions will focus on topics that engage those skills. The goal is also to seamlessly integrate library instruction into regular class meetings.

Librarians also read and evaluate annotated bibliography and/or article summaries submitted by students. After evaluating such assignments for the strength of the resources used and how sources connect with each other, librarians will also meet with students one-on-one or communicate with them via e-mail to discuss the strengths of the sources they chose, how they fit into the larger conversation surrounding their topic, and directions they can take with their further research. In courses that involve a final presentation, such as capstone courses and senior seminars, librarians attend presentations whenever possible. While librarians are not involved in grading these presentations, this experience gives librarians another chance to see the direction student inquiries took from their initial research questions and how they analyzed and connected information from diverse sources. This provides librarians with a valuable opportunity to reflect on their instruction and develop ways to improve it for future semesters.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As with any instructional initiative, *Reading is Research* has been adjusted over time to enhance its effectiveness and relevance. For example, librarians are reading and assessing more assignments than when the initiative began. This presents librarians with more opportunities to evaluate student work and provide suggestions before the student turns in assignments for a final grade. Additionally, librarians are consistently reviewing assignments for specific courses to ensure they correspond with each other to

promote critical reading and thinking skills. Consistent assessment of instructional methods and assignments has proven to be a major component of the initiative's continued success.

The philosophy of *Reading is Research* will continue to be implemented on a wider scale in the library's instructional program. As such, the initiative continues to grow through individual collaborations with teaching faculty and academic departments, including First Year Writing, Anthropology, English, and Honors courses. The current plan is for the initiative to expand in the fall semester to include an introductory level Global Studies course for the first time. This will also mark the first time that *Reading is Research* has been fully integrated into a program's curriculum. With the increasing importance of online learning, there are also opportunities for *Reading is Research* to expand into distance learning courses and flipped classroom models through the creation of digital learning objects.

The library also promotes *Reading is Research* as an example of effective librarian-faculty collaboration. Through workshops and other promotional avenues, the goal is to encourage library staff and teaching faculty to collaborate with each other to build innovative instructional programs. Though customized to fit individual courses and programs, the underlying instructional philosophy of *Reading is Research* is one that can be applied to a variety of instructional contexts at libraries of any size.