

2022

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Recommended Citation

Becker, Sam; Chibnall, Dan; and Dunham-LaGree, Carrie, "Leading Horses to Water: Constructing Courses to Get Students to Drink" (2022). *LOEX Conference Proceedings 2017*. 39.
<https://commons.emich.edu/loexconf2017/39>

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LEADING HORSES TO WATER: CONSTRUCTING COURSES TO GET STUDENTS TO DRINK

SAM BECKER, DAN CHIBNALL AND CARRIE DUNHAM-LAGREE

INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges of credit-bearing information literacy courses can be the inability to provide authentic context for students. Information literacy can be a hard sell no matter how well its importance is articulated. Students, even if they do well in individual courses with information literacy components, may not understand how skills transfer outside of the artificial contexts provided. In this paper, we will address the ways that course content can be used to provide authentic context by asking students to use non-traditional materials to consider research. We will demonstrate the way that individualized course content has impacted our design decisions, assessment, and instructional activities while still adhering to a common set of objectives.

BACKGROUND

At Drake University, there are two components to the information literacy requirements in the general education curriculum. In First Year Seminar (FYS), faculty engage students in written communication, critical thinking, and information literacy. Several members of the library faculty teach these courses, and we aim to work with each FYS at least once during the semester. Students must also complete ten Area of Inquiry (AOI) courses; one of the AOIs is Information Literacy. Library faculty teach many courses that satisfy this AOI, but a majority of these courses are taught by non-library faculty. In this article, the authors will discuss their individual courses, strategies used to help students connect information literacy concepts to later coursework and everyday experiences, and plans for future courses.

FAMOUS & ALMOST FAMOUS WOMEN

One of the benefits in the way Drake approaches information literacy is that faculty have immense freedom to create courses around ideas that interest them. The idea for the Famous & Almost Famous Women course stemmed from Meghan Mayhew Bergman's 2015 short story collection *Almost Famous Women*. Having long had a fondness for fiction based on real people, and real women in particular, this short story collection provides wonderful opportunities to think like a writer. While reading, a plan for a course emerged. We could discuss the author's choices of not only who to write about, but at what point in their lives. This book offers unique opportunities for the class to think about fiction and its intersection with fact, and it formed the foundation of this course.

For the first offering in Fall 2016, in addition to *Almost Famous Women*, I also chose two novels: *Euphoria* by Lily King and *Jam on the Vine* by LaShonda Katrice Barnett, and eleven films. Each week, students would watch a film, which we would discuss during Monday's class. For Wednesdays, students would read about 50 pages of fiction. Before each class, students also submitted an informal reading or film journal to help them begin to think about the texts more critically. The course attracted students who enjoyed reading fiction and watching films, and the journals helped them to think more critically about the texts, rather than simply reacting to them as a piece of entertainment.

Students weren't required to do research on each text, but many students found themselves curious enough to learn a little about the real women who were the focus of each text. Students did intensive research at five points during the semester. Students

picked one of the stories in *Almost Famous Women* to research, submitted an annotated bibliography, and wrote an essay comparing the information they found in their research to the information in the fictional artifact.

At the heart of this work are questions of authority. In class, we discussed what authority is and how it varies across history and fiction. We discussed at length what fiction writers who use real people and events in their work keep in mind. A central question of the course is if there is a line at which fiction about real people becomes too fictional, and if so, where is that line? Interestingly, students had varying opinions on this at different points in the semester. The first film we watched, *Agora*, about Hypatia, takes quite a few liberties in its storytelling, but it also has the least amount of surviving source material to work from. There are fewer accessible facts about Hypatia, as even historians are left to offer their best guesses about many key moments in her life. *Euphoria* is inspired by the work of Margaret Mead and her relationships with her second and third husbands, Reo Fortune and Gregory Bateson. Lily King, unlike the screenwriters of *Agora*, has immense source material to work with, but she chooses to give all of these characters new names, which clearly marks a distance between the real people and their fictional counterparts. As students researched these three characters, they discovered King is incredibly close to reality for much of the novel, but she chooses very different endings for her characters.

SCIENCE FICTION, SCIENCE FACT

Students often find learning scientific concepts and principles to be a difficult task. Issues arise, such as complexity of articles, technical language, or lengthy, data-heavy results sections. It is a necessity that students learn the foundations of their science courses before proceeding on to more advanced science courses. Learning in the science classroom can be more enjoyable and can happen more quickly by utilizing narratives, especially science fiction stories. The goal is to help ease students into the concepts, to see them from a different historical perspective, to connect them to current research, and to ask questions about underlying reasons why humans write and investigate these stories and scientific ideas.

The idea to connect a narrative to a scientific concept first arose in an honors course two years ago. The students read George Orwell's *1984*, which is not traditionally viewed as a science fiction story, but there are some elements of it that are ripe for this type of activity. For one of our lessons students were asked to consider the viewscreen technology present in the story, make connections to current similar technology, and write about the social, legal, and ethical issues of such technology.

Students were fascinated that Orwell invented these concepts in a novel written decades ago. One goal of the activity was to help students see past science fiction and link it to today's science. Students developed lists that included flat screen televisions, hard drives, flash memory, the Internet, and services such as Siri, Alexa, and Ok Google. We debated issues surrounding these technologies, and some students brought in outside research, including primary research on the effects of technology on the human brain. We discussed privacy, data ownership, government intrusion, and the future of where our devices are taking us in terms of our personal data and privacy.

The success of this lesson led to the creation of a set of lessons in a separate course, LIBR 046, focused on information literacy. This time students were asked to read two science fiction short stories, "The Feeling of Power" by Isaac Asimov and "The Lady Astronaut of Mars" by Mary Robinette Kowal. Students were asked to read the stories, compile a list of scientific concepts from the stories that they could potentially research, and locate one article to bring to class that discussed the science of the story. Over the course of two class periods students worked in groups, sharing their ideas, lists, and articles. Working together, we developed a comprehensive list of scientific concepts and discussed how to illuminate what they were and why they were important. Groups also reported back to the class, explaining why their science articles were valuable, what they learned from them, and how that related back to the concepts in the stories.

One of the goals of this lesson was to help students see how older science fiction stories could be predictive of current trends and technologies and to extrapolate ideas from a current science fiction story. The Asimov story relates how most humans have lost the ability to do mathematics as computers do all that for them, so students found articles showing how our reliance on technology has a negative effect on learning or adapting skills. This story was written decades ago, whereas the Kowal story was written in 2012. Students then had to think about scientific concepts that we would need to be concerned with in terms of interplanetary space travel, health effects involved, mental health issues, and being separated from family. The types of articles students researched were excellent and our class discussion yielded multiple enlightening moments, both for scientific concepts and current & future research opportunities relating to those concepts.

Students were assessed according to concepts from the ACRL Information Literacy Framework. Prior to these lessons, students worked on assignments relating to the concepts "Research as Inquiry" and "Authority is Constructed and Contextual." These concepts fit well into the science fiction lesson, as students were graded on their ability to choose high-quality authors for their science articles, draw conclusions from the stories, searches, and articles they discovered, and formulate questions based on gaps in the information retrieved (ACRL, 2016).

In Fall 2017, the concepts discussed above will be the context of a first-year seminar course entitled Science Fiction, Science Fact. In addition to stories, the course will focus on novels and films. There will also be a focus on differences between science and pseudoscience, how to communicate scientific concepts more clearly, and explore deeper questions about “forbidden knowledge,” peer review, and the scientific method. By taking the course students will better understand scientific concepts, how to communicate them, how to locate relevant research on those concepts, and develop the self-confidence to explain them to peers.

ONLINE DATING AND INFORMATION SEARCHING

In 2015, comedian Aziz Ansari partnered with sociologist Eric Klinenberg to author the book *Modern Romance: An Investigation*. Together, Klinenberg and Ansari investigate the changes in romantic relationships over time and how technology has impacted dating. In the first three chapters, Ansari and Klinenberg look at the history of marriage preferences, the expectations around asking a person out, and track the development and rise of online dating. In the process, they make use of scholarly sources and credible popular works, a task the students are asked to replicate in their midterm annotated bibliography. Additionally, the book integrates research in the form of snippets from the social media site Reddit, screenshots of texts and online dating profiles, and audience participation at Ansari’s stand up shows.

This book provided an excellent opportunity to connect research concepts to the lives and experiences of students, regardless of major. Through the use of the first three chapters, students were asked to think about how they found and used information in a completely different, nonacademic setting in the hopes of making connections between skills they apply effortlessly and more abstract research skills. Thematically, the class was broken into two pieces. The first half of the class focused heavily on library research and online dating through the content of the book while the second half focused on how information is represented through the process of replicating how the book communicates information in a way that is accessible and entertaining.

The idea for one of the early lessons came directly from the content of the book. In chapter three, Ansari talks about a person who met his wife on the online dating site Match.com by using the terms “Jewish” and his ZIP code (92). This is a comical moment in the book and Ansari treats it as such. However, it is also an example of a successful search. This man has a need, selects the most appropriate environment to meet that need, and then prioritizes his most important factors in order to conduct a search. He then, presumably, looks through the results and selects the people most relevant to his priorities. The discomfort of reducing humans to search results aside, it is exactly the behavior we ask students to engage in even if the factors, priorities, and environments are vastly different. The point of this lesson is not to create a perfect comparison but to give students a place to start, a familiar framework to which they can connect abstract concepts.

The lesson objectives were that students would be able to identify differences in online dating sites, describe the purpose of different search environments, compare skills required to utilize dating sites with those necessary for research, and, finally, to apply them to a database. In order to meet these objectives, students first broke into small groups and pulled out different concepts Ansari points to in the chapter. They then presented these to the class and we brainstormed different online dating sites together. In their small groups, they considered a few different forms of online dating, looking to break down what made them different from each other. They considered how the purpose of Tinder and Match.com are different or how Jdate targets a different population than OkCupid. They also thought about specific ways of searching each database, different ways to adjust the search and why they were important. Each of them was then assigned a database to evaluate for the same things. They presented out about the function, purpose, and audience of their databases. The final activity of the class involved looking at a specific record to see what information it contained.

The students were assessed through a pre-discussion writing and informally through their group presentations. They also took notes on each of the databases they were assigned, though those notes were not collected at the end of the period to be included here. This lesson marks one of the first times in the class that the idea of strategic exploration was prioritized. The driving knowledge practice behind this lesson and its associated activities is the ability to match information needs to appropriate resources (ACRL, 2016). A skill is considered first in a familiar context like dating and then applied to a much more complex context before students are asked to reflect and discuss.

This class will be expanded from a 2-credit, once a week class into a 3-credit twice a week class in Spring 2018. Some of the feedback from students this semester indicated several issues that will be addressed. One of these issues was pacing. In the next iteration of this class, this lesson will likely be cut into two separate days to allow for more time to discuss and make connections, particularly in the second activity. Students looked over records, but there was less time to draw comparisons between records and dating profiles than would have been ideal.

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