

ASSESSING ONE-SHOT INSTRUCTION: USING POST-ASSIGNMENT EVALUATIONS TO BUILD BETTER ASSIGNMENTS

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BACKGROUND: RANDOLPH-MACON COLLEGE'S FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE AND WRITING COMPANION COURSE

At Randolph-Macon College (R-MC), all freshmen enroll in a two-semester team-taught interdisciplinary First-Year Experience course (FYE). There are two sections of each FYE, and each section spends one semester enrolled concurrently in a writing companion course, English 185: Seminar on Exposition and Argument. Because each FYE has two sections, one section takes ENGL 185 in the Fall semester and the other in the Spring. This means that half of the freshman class does not have their introductory writing class until their second semester of college. It is up to the ENGL 185 professor how much she wants to coordinate her class with the topic and assignments of the FYE. In general, ENGL 185 professors have a great deal of freedom when considering whether to use an overarching theme for their course: they may choose one of their own interest, they may use the FYE subject, or they may not have a theme at all.

One of the assignments required in ENGL 185 is an annotated bibliography for which students must find at least one example of several types of sources. This assignment may or may not precede a written paper, and it may or may not relate to a theme in either the FYE or English class. So although the assignment varies little among the classes, the professors' approaches to it vary a great deal. In most cases, ENGL 185 professors choose to bring their students to the library for a one-shot instruction session targeting the annotated bibliography assignment.

THE EVALUATION

Fall 2005 was my first semester as R-MC's Instruction Librarian and liaison to the English department,

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and it was also the first semester of full implementation of FYE and ENGL 185 for all incoming students. Over the course of the semester the other librarians and I observed that the requirements of the annotated bibliography assignment were unsuited to the available resources and tools. While we had ideas for how to improve the assignment, I wanted to gather feedback from the students before approaching the faculty.

Before the Spring semester began, I developed an evaluation tool designed to fulfill two goals: give students an opportunity to reflect on their completion of the assignment and evaluate my teaching effectiveness (see Appendix). I hoped the evaluation would supply evidence for my discussions with the faculty and also help me identify areas in which I needed to change my approach to the library instruction. The evaluation included open-ended questions about both the assignment and the instruction, and Likert-scale ratings of various elements of the instruction. The evaluation was unique in that students did not complete it until they had turned in their annotated bibliographies; at this time they were able to contemplate the library session and how they applied its material when they completed the targeted assignment. As Ragains (1997) wrote, "Timing evaluations to occur after students have had an opportunity to use sources or search techniques covered in a session may allow students more fairly to assess the benefits of library instruction" (p. 165).

The process for administering the evaluations was straightforward. When professors scheduled their classes to come to the library, I told them about my evaluation, and all were open to administering it in their classes. A few days before their students' bibliographies were due I sent the paper evaluations to the professor through campus mail along with an e-mail reminder. The professors administered the evaluations in their classes and returned them to me. I chose to use paper evaluations because students could complete

them in class, which guaranteed a near 100% response rate. This model worked very well at our small college, where there were fewer than 10 sections of ENGL 185 completing the evaluation each semester.

THE RESULTS

Beginning in Spring 2006 I used the evaluations for four successive semesters as I refined my teaching and worked with ENGL 185 faculty to improve their assignment. In Spring 2006 I had not yet discussed possible changes to the assignment with the faculty; I simply wanted to see what students' impressions of it were. It was reassuring to see that the average rating of every factor on a five-point Likert scale was above 3.0 (moderately helpful).

Most students had also taken the time to respond to the open-ended questions, from which the most interesting trends emerged. For example, more than one student commented that the annotated bibliography assignment was "tedious," and several identified particular kinds of sources as hard to find. In analyzing the data from the evaluations, it became clear not only that there must be better communication between the librarians and the ENGL 185 faculty, but also that there were steps the professors could take to alleviate some of their students' problems with completing the assignment. To this end, I compiled a list of comments and recommendations to share with the ENGL 185 faculty in the Fall semester:

Tips for approaching the annotated bibliography in class:

- Explain the purpose of the assignment, particularly when there is not a final research paper connected with it.
- Define each kind of source ahead of time with the students.
- Schedule the library session after students have research topics and near the due date (no more than a month out).
- Schedule a second library session very near the due date as an opportunity to address locating hard-to-find sources, how to cite sources, or other issues students are having.
- Add me to your Moodle [learning management system] class and open a discussion board in which students can post questions for me to answer.

Suggested changes for the assignment:

- Don't divide sources into "print" and "websites" groups because many "print" sources are found electronically (such as through LexisNexis).
- Add blogs to the requirement for a "discussion

board, listserv, chat group, or other online discussion."

- Eliminate the requirement for "an article or essay that does not exist in print form."
- The requirement to find "a text by a corporation or organization" is confusing for students. Do you mean for them to find a work with a corporate author but no personal author? These are extremely difficult to locate, but many books have a personal author in addition to a corporate author, though the "corporate author" is more often the publisher or sponsor of the source. Clarification is needed, or the requirement could be removed.

At the beginning of the Fall 2006 semester I shared these comments and recommendations with the chair of the English department and with faculty as they scheduled their classes. In the middle of the semester, the earliest opportunity for me to present at a department meeting, I was invited to share my findings and suggestions with ENGL 185 professors. Attendance at this gathering was low, but those professors who were present were appreciative of my work, and we had a fruitful discussion. They approved of my recommendations for their approach to the assignment in class, and we debated the merits of my suggested changes to the assignment. For example, the professors agreed that blogs were an appropriate source to fulfill one of the requirements. They also clarified to me the requirement for a journal source that is only available electronically, explaining that it was not necessarily intended to be a scholarly article, but rather one from a publication such as *Salon* or *Slate*. We agreed that it was very helpful to get perspective on the assignment from the "other side."

For the Fall 2006 evaluations, I added to the evaluation a question asking how helpful the library's ENGL 185 webpage was. This webpage is designed as a digital handout linking students to useful resources for their bibliographies. One reason for this addition was that in this semester we placed a prominent "ENGL 185" link on the library's homepage, and I also updated the page by linking to *Salon's* and *Slate's* websites and to a new glossary of library terms. Otherwise, the evaluation was identical to the previous semester's. Likert-scale ratings in the Fall were significantly higher than those from the previous semester, and I like to think this was due in part to my increased collaboration with the faculty.

The following Spring (2007) brought no changes to the evaluation or their administration, though I continued to emphasize my previous recommendations and update the ENGL 185 webpage as needed. Ratings were slightly lower than they had been in the previous semester. I suspected that students may have already had library instruction with a class in the previous semester, and that perhaps they were more bored by my introductory session in the Spring. The

numbers supported this hypothesis: 40% of the students in Spring 2007 responded they had had other library instruction classes, compared to 34% in Fall 2007. Also in the Spring, some of the Likert-scale evaluated items averaged lower ratings than they had in the Fall, though all but one were still higher than in Spring 2006. This led me to consider that perhaps my instruction would benefit from a different approach in Spring semesters than in Fall semesters.

Prior to the beginning of the Fall 2007 semester I met with new and repeating ENGL 185 professors. We discussed the librarians' views of the assignment and problems that have arisen with it in the past. I spoke about timing the library instruction in relation to the assignment's due date, tying the assignment to the students' FYE courses, and what material the library session covers. I also told the new professors about my continuing work with the post-assignment evaluation so they would know what to expect when I asked them to administer it during the semester.

Despite this cooperation, the ratings were not dramatically different from those in prior semesters, and students' responses to the open-ended questions continued to address many of the same things mentioned previously. A frequent complaint was that the assignment was tedious and time-consuming (not something I had any control over). They also were quick to share which sources were difficult to find, such as "a text in an alternative media format." Unfortunately, there is not a lot I can do in the library session in order to help them discover these; there is still much basic information I need to teach. I have continued to add links to the course's library webpage to address this issue, such as NPR's website and Google's and Yahoo's video searches.

SUMMING UP: HOW THE ASSIGNMENT AND INSTRUCTION CHANGED

In the most recent semester, Spring 2008, I have not asked professors to administer the evaluation. I have seen the numbers and comments "plateau" and most professors seem unwilling to drastically modify the assignment. Instead, this semester I have conducted a shorter, different evaluation. I simply asked students to write answers to two questions at the end of my hands-on lecture-demonstration: "Please tell me one or two things you learned today" and "Please tell me what questions about the library or about doing research you still have." Responses to the former have been remarkably repetitive, making evident the portions of my presentation that are most memorable. Most students do not answer the latter statement, which may indicate that they do not know what they could ask about.

The ENGL 185 faculty and I continue to work together to refine our approach to the annotated bibliography instruction. Some professors have been more willing than others to make changes to the assignment itself, such as eliminating difficult sources or clarifying confusing requirements, in the interest of improving their students' understanding of the research process. I have noticed fewer students who are unsure of what

the requirements themselves mean, suggesting that professors are taking my suggestion of defining sources with the students before they come to the library.

Some professors began consistently bringing their students to the library for two or more one-hour sessions. In this case, I spend the first session in the traditional hands-on lecture-demonstration format. The second hour provides time for students begin their research with a librarian "on hand," a practice that has elicited positive responses on the evaluations: over the course of three semesters, at least eleven students have commented that they would have liked even more time to work on the assignment during class in the library.

I have made a few changes to my lecture-demonstration in order to address students' comments, though the necessity of covering introductory material remains. While I have tried to reduce the amount of time I spend demonstrating the catalog in response to students who say they have already used it, I always spend a few minutes explaining how to use it to identify an anthology. This is a required source and is consistently identified on the evaluation as a hard-to-find source. For sections with students I have been able to recognize as having already had library instruction from another R-MC librarian, I have reorganized my presentation to focus even more directly on the ENGL 185 webpage and using it to fulfill the requirements of the assignment. Finally, I spend longer describing the links on the ENGL 185 webpage in all classes, even though I do not have time to demonstrate all of them.

CONCLUSION

Asking students to evaluate library instruction after they have completed the assignment that the instruction targeted allows them to reflect on how helpful the content of the library session was. This feedback informs the instruction librarian's teaching and also provides faculty with evidence of students' difficulties that would be appropriate for them, rather than the librarian, to address. In this way, assignments can be revised so that students gain the most from them.

Administering such post-assignment evaluations need not be difficult. R-MC's freshman class is small enough that using paper surveys is not an undue burden on the faculty or the librarian, and the librarian is guaranteed a near 100% response rate. Such an evaluation could also be posted on the web, linked from the library's website or a learning management system, or perhaps administered through the learning management system in order to guarantee student response. No matter the specific method, post-assignment evaluations are a valuable tool for facilitating collaboration between faculty and instruction librarians.

REFERENCE

Ragains, P. (1997). Evaluation of academic librarians' instructional performance: Report of a national survey. *Research Strategies*, 15(3), 159-175.

APPENDIX

Randolph-Macon College
McGraw-Page Library
ENGL 185 Post-Assignment Evaluation of Library Instruction Class

Professor's Name:

Date of Library Instruction:

Today's Date:

1. Please rate the extent to which the presentation of the following topics helped you complete your annotated bibliography assignment. Select DK if you don't know.

	1	2	3	4	5	
	not at all helpful	not very helpful	moderately helpful	very helpful	extremely helpful	
a. using the library's website	1	2	3	4	5	DK
b. using reference sources	1	2	3	4	5	DK
c. searching MaconCat	1	2	3	4	5	DK
d. searching a library database for an article	1	2	3	4	5	DK
e. distinguishing scholarly and popular sources	1	2	3	4	5	DK
f. evaluating internet sources	1	2	3	4	5	DK
g. citing sources	1	2	3	4	5	DK

2. If other information was helpful, please list it below.

3. What was particularly helpful about the library instruction class?

	1	2	3	4	5	
	not at all helpful	not very helpful	moderately helpful	very helpful	extremely helpful	
a. learning how to develop a good search	1	2	3	4	5	DK
b. learning how to locate an article in the library	1	2	3	4	5	DK
c. learning how to locate a book in the library	1	2	3	4	5	DK
d. learning where to look for more help online	1	2	3	4	5	DK
e. meeting a librarian	1	2	3	4	5	DK
f. working on the assignment	1	2	3	4	5	DK

4. What would make the library instruction class more helpful in completing the annotated bibliography assignment?

5. What, if anything, was difficult about completing the annotated bibliography assignment?

6. To what extent did the library's ENGL 185 webpage help you with the annotated bibliography assignment?

1	2	3	4	5
not at all helpful	not very helpful	moderately helpful	very helpful	extremely helpful

7. Now that you have completed the annotated bibliography assignment, how would you rate the library instruction class overall?

1	2	3	4	5
poor	below average	average	very good	excellent

8. To what extent did the library instruction class help you with research in other classes? Select N/A if you did not have to do research in other classes.

1	2	3	4	5	N/A
not at all helpful	not very helpful	moderately helpful	very helpful	extremely helpful	

9. Have you had other library instruction classes?

yes no

10. Please make any additional comments in the space below.