Replacing Old Bridges with New – Stepping Up Student Learning by Rebuilding the Foundation with Faculty-Librarian Collaboration

Kristen L. Motz and Dr. Helen E. Woodman

Librarians seldom get a chance to work closely enough with classroom faculty to see the research process from start to finish. The opportunity to assess instruction results and then work together to improve student learning is the goal for an active and relevant information literacy program. This paper describes the improvement process built collaboratively between teaching faculty and instruction librarian for a critical reading methods course.

College Critical Reading is a learner-centered first-year course offered through the Developmental Curriculum in University College at Ferris State University. Course strategies propose to help students effectively deal with the wide variety of reading required in college content area courses. Students practice the development of college-reading techniques and critically assess, analyze, and evaluate reading materials in terms of accuracy, relevance and quality. Rich in active learning techniques, College Critical Reading has historically involved instruction librarians from FLITE (Ferris Library for Information, Technology and Education) working closely with the professor, Dr. Helen Woodman. Kristen Motz became the major instructional contact in 2007. Motz conducted one-shot database instruction sessions to support the main assignment of the course, a summative paper comparing elements from two works of literature: *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Our Town*. Library involvement also included the creation of a class help web page embedded in the University's course management system (Blackboard Vista), and, occasionally, a lecture about the evaluation of web resources. This process continued for several semesters.

***Motz** (Library Instruction Coordinator)* and
***Woodman** (Chair, Developmental Curriculum, University College)*
Ferris State University [Big Rapids, MI]

Throughout the Fall 2008 and Spring 2009 semesters, the summative paper assignment was not demonstrating adequate student learning. The quality of the papers submitted disturbed both professor and librarian. In Fall 2008, 72 students attempted to write a paper. Papers submitted were inadequately researched and poorly written with an average grade of 49.6%. Twenty six students received an F for their work. Results in the Spring Semester were no better. Students rarely contacted librarians for assistance, and only a few used library resources. After evaluating the minimal progress shown on both the course student learning outcomes and the information literacy assessment results, professor and librarian jointly agreed that changes were necessary to improve student learning.

Both enrolled in a summer faculty learning community, "Inquiries into Teaching and Learning," hosted by Ferris State University's Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning. While engaged in the community, Woodman and Motz brainstormed new ways to improve student learning by reengineering the course, retaining activities showing promise from earlier classes and adding strategies to incorporate newer theories and techniques inviting students to take charge of their own learning. The major reengineering changed the summative paper project to a short argumentative research paper that required students to include both views of "weird" issues. ("Weird" is explained later in this article.)

First, Woodman and Motz tied the paper to newly-developed departmental course learning outcomes.

As a result of the process of writing and completing an argumentative paper, students will be able to:

- Evaluate the relevance and importance of text (reading) material in various content areas;

- Recognize the various levels of validity of material found in textbooks and in other varieties of print material;

- Develop and practice summarizing skills, including annotating and concept mapping;

- Develop the ability to ask appropriate questions of print material leading to better understanding of the author's message and point of view;

- Recognize multiple points of view on a given topic and take positions in support of or in opposition of these viewpoints;

- Read diversely and deeply, applying literal and interpretative comprehension skills necessary for continuing college-level work

The short argumentative research paper assignment and the research process itself also addressed a growing campus engagement with assessment tied to the learning outcomes of the course.

Second, students chose their topics from one of the course textbooks, *How to Think About Weird Things: Critical Thinking for a New Age* (Schick & Vaughn, 2008). Following a structured outline, (Appendix A), students would select a "for" or "against" position about their topic as the paper's thesis statement and substantiate their statement with sources collected throughout the first half of the semester. The second text for the course, *THiNK: Critical Thinking and Logic Skills for Everyday Life* (Boss, 2009), also included information about the "weird things" topics. The connection between the topics and the textbooks provided an excellent reinforcement of the learning activities and gave new purpose for mastering course reading.

The texts introduced more than twenty topics, such as dreams, UFOs, and reincarnation. By class vote the topics were narrowed to six per section, and individuals were allowed to select a preferred topic, with approximately four people writing on each topic within a class. Each student maintained a research log/journal and prepared an individual argumentative paper, due Week 11. Groups of three to four students formed around each topic, and each group created a presentation shown to the rest of the class in Weeks 13 and 14. Given the chance to choose between a final exam and the construction of student-created games on their topics, all sections elected to create games. Students presented and played the student-created games during Final Exam Week.

Students collected six sources for their papers, one per week, during Weeks 3 – 8 and then added one source from each of the course textbooks for a total of eight sources in all. These eight sources were the framework for the research paper, outlining the history and background of the topic, explaining both sides of the weird things issue, and then supporting the position taken by the student author. Woodman created individual rubrics for each step: the research process, research journal, the research paper, the presentation, and the student-created game.

The strategies used in this course reengineering include:

From the professor: a course concept map, course timelines, rubrics, journals, student-created games, directed assignments, group presentations, sweat pages, and puzzle-me sheets

From the librarian: class web page, point-of-need ("just-in-time") instructions, individual research consultations, information literacy assessments

Third, as instruction librarian, Motz engaged the class with new information literacy tools, a major change from the traditional classroom visit. She interacted with the class in four shorter sessions rather than one class-long visit, focusing on "point-of-need" ("just-in-time") training when students needed to find and use the information.

Session One (Week 1): Motz and Woodman introduced the course concept map – a chance for students to see how the various assignments and readings within the class overlapped to build upon previous learning and to make visual how the librarian's involvement in the learning process reinforced the course outcomes. Motz also conducted a pre-instruction information literacy survey online using SurveyMonkey, which was linked to the class help web page. The initial session also included a timeline and presentation of a research log.

Session Two (Week 4): Motz demonstrated the two useful databases students would need to find sources. By this time, students had submitted their first article for the research paper, and, as expected, the graded articles taken from the Web were generally of very poor quality. Student desire to find better articles led to a natural interest in and engagement with the library databases.

Session Three (Week 5): Motz offered a hands-on Web evaluation activity involving a poorly-designed website that exhibited all the characteristics a student should consider when selecting quality materials. At the end of Week 5, Article 3 was due. By this time Motz and Woodman began to see an improvement in the quality of articles submitted.

Session Four (Week 7): Woodman and Motz expected to offer an interactive session covering APA citations. This did not happen in the first iteration of the course although it was well-received when offered during Spring Semester. During Fall 2009 students were required to use APA format; during Spring 2010 students could use a documentation format of their choice. As demonstrated in other courses at other campuses, student mastery of documentation skills takes time and practice. Assessment at the end of the semester determines whether skills in citations and bibliographies have improved.

Session Five (Week 15 and 16): Motz collected data through the post-instruction information literacy assessment and visited the class to see the student-created games.

Two new FLITE Library strategies were piloted dur-

ing this period. Switching from a paper-and-pencil information literacy assessment used previously, FLITE now runs its standards-based assessment program with the web-based survey software SurveyMonkey, providing a faster response rate, a quicker interaction with the results, and a much more robust opportunity to work with the data than before (Motz, Schroeder & Kermit-Canfield, 2009). The FLITE Instruction team had spent the summer of 2009 revising the first assessments and aligning them with the Information Competency Standards for Higher Education (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000). Assessments were given pre-and post-instruction. An example follows of a typical assessment result: when asked to choose between the library and the Internet as the better place to do research for a paper in history, students increased their selection of the library from 64.6% to 93.4%.

Also during Fall 2009 the FLITE Library initiated a research consultation service. In addition to using the help desk, telephone, email and chat reference, students were encouraged to sign up for individualized research sessions with a librarian. Students could sign up using a paper form and then return it to the reference desk, or they could use an online form, available from the class help web page and the library home page.

Experience shows (Fyre, 2009) most research consultation services begin slowly, starting with a few students the first semester and adding more exponentially as word-of-mouth spreads. At FLITE, the reengineering of College Critical Reading propelled the service into high gear. Woodman took paper copies of the form to class and distributed them twice. Motz mentioned them at each instruction. As the argumentative paper came due, the entire Reference and Instruction staff was soon busy researching weird things.

FLITE conducted 56 official research consultations during Fall Semester, with a majority of them involving students from the College Critical Reading classes. Other unofficial consultations took place over the phone, at the reference desk, and via email and chat. However, more important than the numbers, the positive interactions between students and librarians proved to be the building of new relationships. Several students returned to the library for help with papers in other classes, especially for the English 1 course. This seamless development of new ties between students and librarians became a major benefit for everyone involved.

The papers themselves showed outstanding improvement over the summative papers previously submitted. Dr. Woodman commented they were excellent overall, with some students writing the best papers she had ever received. The grade distribution was also excellent. Of the 113 students in four sections of the course, only 19 (16.8%) failed to complete the paper. 80.6% of the students turned in the Argumentative Paper and all of its components. Of those who turned in the Argumentative Paper and all of its components, 78.25% passed the paper with a C- or higher.

The introduction of the new assignment was not without complications. An unexpected effect was the flood of students to the Ferris Writing Center. Similar to their enthusiastic embrace of research consultations, students began to request help from the Writing Center staff in large numbers with needs that were complicated and time-consuming. For most students, the assignment was their first major writing project. By Woodman's estimate only one quarter of the students had taken English 1, the basic writing course. Also, students were now motivated to complete a quality project. To address the issue Woodman invited a para-professional from the Writing Center to the classroom during Spring Semester. She explained procedures and answered questions. FLITE and the Writing Center had also started to share resources so both support services could assist each other.

At the end of the semester, Dr. Woodman asked her students for input about the course and the Argumentative Paper Process. These were the consensus points:

- Keep the argumentative paper

- Make the paper at least eight pages long – it took that long to cover the outline

- Eight sources were reasonable – one per page

- Begin the paper's annotated outline earlier

- Cover APA citation format earlier and in more sessions

- Keep the Writing Center tutors involved

- Keep the FLITE librarians involved – students loved that part

- Make completing the Argumentative Paper and all of its components **a requirement for passing the course** – that way all students would take it seriously from the first day

Although all the students felt that writing the Argumentative Paper and all of its components was challenging, they felt they had mastered the six student learning outcomes. Even those who earned below a C- on the paper said that they had at least begun to master the student learning outcomes. They were proud of themselves and confident that since they could complete this project successfully, they could do well in all their courses. They had become not just critical readers, but critical thinkers – having learned what questions to ask and how to evaluate the answers and sources they found. They also felt that the connection they made with FLITE served them well, and they would continue to use the resource as well as the other support sources on campus.

At the end of Fall Semester, Dr. Woodman received an email from a student:

"Thank you for your teaching. . . .I think you should keep the length of your research paper the same next semester because it has helped me in Eng 150. I have an A in that class thanks to your teaching in reading sources and writing papers."

Anonymous for privacy (Personal communication, December 2009)

This example of shared collaboration should serve as an inspiration for other librarians who partner with faculty. Librarians know when students are engaging with the material presented. They have a vested interest in the learning that takes place within the classroom. By using some of the new strategies introduced in this course – concept maps, targeted assignments, point-of-need instructions, research consultations, and information literacy assessments – librarians can impact the engagement of students with the course content material and make a significant contribution to student learning.

Librarians can also contribute to students' meeting course student learning outcomes, assessment in and outside of the classroom, and library literacy.

REFERENCES

Association of College and Research Libraries. (2000). *Information literacy competency standards for higher education.* Chicago: American Library Association.

Boss, J. A. (2009). *Think: Critical thinking and logic skills for everyday life.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Frye, S. M. (2009, November). *Research consultations: Delivering personalized library instruction to students.* Conference presentation at Michigan Library Association Annual Conference, Lansing, MI.

Motz, K. L., Schroeder, R. L., Kermit-Canfield, M. E. (2009, November). *Assessing information literacy from the ground up – creating a culture of assessment.* Conference presentation at Michigan Library Association Annual Conference, Lansing, MI.

Schick, T., Jr., & Vaughn, L. (2008). *How to think about weird things: Critical thinking for a new age,* (5[th]ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Outlining the Argumentative Research Paper

Overview*
I. Introduction (10%) – at least 1 source
II. Support (80%) – 6 sources for support position &
    at least 1 source of the opposing view

III. Conclusion (10%) – may include additional sources

*2 sources are to come from the course texts
(*HTWT* and *THiNK*)

Breakdown

I. Introduction – (These subheadings may be used in any order or combination; you need not use them all.)

   a. Background and history (provide a brief overview)
   b. Statement of problem – (present both sides or positions)
   c. Definition of unusual terms – (parenthetical or sentence)
   d. Summary of opposing view – (specific or overview)
   e. Position statement – (also known as thesis or claim; **this is the side you support**).

II. Support for Position

   a. First major point (These subheadings may be used in any order or combination; you need not use them all.)
     1. Fact(s)
     2. Statistic(s)
     3. Example(s)
     4. Opposing view (briefly explain opposing point)
   b. Second major point
     etc.
   c. Third major point
     etc.
   d. Any additional major points

III. Conclusion (These subheadings may be used in any order or combination; you need not use them all.)

   a. Logical results – therefore or because statements
   b. Implications
   c. Predictions
   d. Recommendations