“GUN CONTROL” IS NOT A RESEARCH QUESTION! PARTNERING WITH TEACHING FACULTY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS AND REFRESH LIBRARY INSTRUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

As library instructors, we aspire to successful partnerships with teaching faculty. We are more effective when we work in concert with professors and curricula to deliver exactly what students need when they need it. At the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, librarians have partnered with the Freshman Composition faculty for over 30 years to deliver library instruction to first-year students. Through this partnership we reach nearly 80% of first-year students in two library instruction sessions. In spring of 2010 we wanted to refresh those sessions and we held faculty focus groups to identify problems, brainstorm possible solutions, and create an implementation plan.

A PARTNERSHIP OF DECADES

University of Tennessee Chattanooga is a metropolitan university serving Chattanooga and the surrounding area. In fall 2010 UTC enrolled nearly 11,000 students, with 1,948 first-time freshmen. UTC’s Lupton Library has six instruction librarians who deliver between 300 and 400 library instruction classes each year. A couple hundred of those classes are usually English 101 and 102 (Freshman Composition) which are required of all first-year students. Library instruction is integrated into each course. The Library and Freshman Composition have a long history of cooperation and mutual respect that serves us all well and makes us more effective for students.

Good partnerships, whether they be between individuals or groups, have certain basic characteristics: they require trust and cooperation, but they also require respect for the other party, willingness to give feedback and listen to one another, and flexibility to change course as needed. Partnerships, like friendships, are living organisms that grow and change. Our partnership with the Freshman Composition program has deep roots but still requires attention and nourishment. When we library instructors decided to revamp and revise our instruction, we wanted to involve the teaching faculty in the process.

THE WAY WE WERE

For the past couple of years our ENGL101 and 102 library instruction looked like this:

ENGL101

• Introduce students to the library website
• Active learning exercise to help students discern differences between sources on the Internet and sources from library databases (Cairns, 2009, p. 36)
• Keyword searching exercise in library database
• Introduce Gale’s Academic OneFile database using a video
• Time to search

ENGL102

• Discuss different features of scholarly and popular literature with a video (Carter & Kutz, 2008)
• Show them how to use our open URL link resolver (GetIt@UTC) with a video
• Active learning exercise to practice using GetIt@UTC
• Time to search

Classes were fun and effective, but we had delivered them approximately 400 times over the past two years and we were definitely suffering from content fatigue. Thus, at the end of our usual 2-year cycle of instruction, rather than just creating new activities and videos for the existing structure, we decided we wanted more substantive change and to solve some problems. The most serious problem was that students were coming to library instruction with no topics, inappropriate topics, or topics about which they knew very little. For the session to be valuable for students, they must already have an assignment, have selected a topic, and done some preliminary reading to gain greater understanding of issues surrounding that topic.

First-year students struggle with choosing a topic. When professors don’t take an active role in vetting freshman topics, then the result is often something like “Is it okay for a girl to pay on the first date?”, or they fall back on common issues like abortion, gun control, or steroids in sports. Their understanding of these issues is often limited to a right and wrong perspective, and they are frequently ignorant of the surrounding issues, background and history of a topic.

We aren’t alone in dealing with topic issues. According to an ACRL report on undergraduate research (Foster & Gibbons, 2007), two of the obstacles to good research papers are “poor choice of topic and lack of focus,” and “problems with formulating arguments and developing a topic.”

The second issue was the timing of library instruction with the assignment. Early in the semester, professors schedule their library instruction classes to coincide with the research assignment. However, snow days or illnesses may change the course schedule. If the professor doesn’t reschedule library instruction then we find ourselves meeting with a class who doesn’t have a research assignment or hasn’t considered topics yet.

Calling on our Partners

We wanted to reformulate our instruction, address problems, and engage the Freshman Composition faculty in the process. We decided to conduct focus groups to see what problems faculty were seeing and how we could work together to address all these issues – ours and theirs. Our first step was to contact the head of the Freshman Composition program. We discussed the problems we wanted to address and our proposal for inviting faculty to focus group sessions. She agreed enthusiastically and put out a call for faculty participation.

The response was gratifying: we had a total of seven faculty members attend the two focus groups. This is approximately 20% of the Freshman Composition faculty.

The Focus Groups

To kick off each focus group session we used a PowerPoint presentation to refresh memories of our current (old) lesson plans and ACRL standards addressed. We reviewed our guiding principles for creating instruction:

• keep content fresh, fun, engaging and entertaining
• make content relevant to the assignment at hand (as well as transferable to future assignments)
• use active learning
• use multimedia

We offered some suggestions such as creating a pre-class worksheet or tutorial to help students select and explore a topic. We also showed faculty our new clickers: the choice of using clickers in class opened up a whole new set of possible activities. And finally, we looked at some sample online tutorials dealing with researching library databases (http://prezi.com/wbt7jex2qtfw/engl302h/) and the information publication timeline (http://www.lib.unc.edu/instruct/tutorial/searching/timeline.html).

After presenting this foundational background, we asked the focus groups three questions:

Now it’s your turn

What works?
What doesn’t?
What else?

What Works?

According to faculty, one thing that was working well was that librarians connected well with students in a short period of time (usually 50 minutes). In particular, faculty liked that librarian instructors employed name cards so that they could use the students’ names during discussions. Several faculty mentioned the current video tutorial on using our open URL link resolver to find full text of articles. Faculty felt that the tutorial did a good job of familiarizing students with this tool, and said students reported finding their articles and using interlibrary loan. These are first-year students, many of whom
are learning about databases for the first time, so widespread use of a link resolver and interlibrary loan was fairly impressive.

**WHAT DOESN’T WORK?**

Topics! Faculty were concerned that students need more help understanding what makes topics or issues meaningful. They struggle to identify those “enduring ideas” and major issues surrounding any controversial topic. One suggestion was to develop a topic from a current news story. Another suggestion was to have students interview a professor from their major department for insight into hot topics in the discipline.

Timing! For those faculty members whose schedules change during the semester, library instruction (scheduled weeks in advance) may not coincide with the appropriate writing assignment. Faculty asked if it was possible to create a public calendar so that composition instructors can view the availability of instruction rooms on alternative dates. (Actually, this tool already existed so we needed to raise faculty awareness.)

**WHAT ELSE SHOULD WE BE DOING?**

Faculty also suggested that we complicate the Scholarly/Popular binary to better represent the breadth of information sources that students are faced with today. Life is no longer as simple as popular publications vs. scholarly and faculty wanted us to address some newer media and other grey areas.

**SUGGESTIONS FROM LIBRARIANS**

To address the bad topic/lack of topic problem, we suggested restructuring ENGL101 library instruction to include a pre-class worksheet or tutorial that would help students choose and understand a topic. We also introduced faculty to LibGuides and suggested developing course-specific LibGuides which recap information presented and provide links to video tutorials and forms used in class.

**OVERALL RESULTS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS**

We came away from the focus groups with a clear directive from faculty to provide some sort of pre-class exercise or tutorial to help students select and understand research questions. We also got

- a green light for using the clickers in active learning exercises
- a request to broaden the discussion of different types of information sources
- a request to help faculty with library instruction timing

**MAKING A PLAN**

We developed a framework for each course, identifying the major objectives.

ENGL101 (first-semester freshmen)

1. Use a pre-class tutorial or activity to help students select and understand a writing topic
2. Introduce students to the library website, showcasing how to get help and where to find library databases and research guides
3. Use a clicker game to spark discussion about finding information on the web vs. library sources
4. Introduce students to a multidisciplinary database
5. Time to search

ENGL102 (second-semester freshmen)

1. Show a “world of information” video to illustrate the great variety of information sources and discuss selection criteria
2. Use clicker game to stimulate discussion of different types of information
3. Show video tutorial to introduce students to another multidisciplinary database and illustrate the use of the open URL link resolver, GetIt@UTC
4. Time to search

**THE PRE-CLASS RESEARCH QUESTION WORKSHEET – OUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE**

The puzzle was how to help first-semester freshmen choose an appropriate topic and get background information on issues surrounding their topic before they come to their first library session. Our two design goals for the exercise were flexibility and simplicity.

**Flexibility:** This exercise had to be flexible enough to accommodate a variety of assignments. All ENG101 assignments involve writing and a moderate amount of research (usually 3-6 sources), but each instructor designs his or her own assignment and there are sometimes significant differences among these assignments.

**Familiarity/Simplicity:** We considered using current newspaper articles, web news sources, or constructing a list of possible topics, but none of these approaches appealed to us. We decided to use Points of View Reference Center, a database that discusses multiple viewpoints on current controversial issues.
The first screen presents categories of topics. Once students select a category such as Crime & Punishment (see Figure 1), they are presented with a number of possible issues to explore, including “gun control” (see Figure 2).

Figure 1

The guide to critical analysis offers practical help in analyzing the issue of gun control.

**Points of View Reference Center** gave us a good start but we wanted something more – another source for students to learn more about their topic and to gather potential keywords. **Wikipedia** (www.wikipedia.com) met our criteria – it was familiar and simple to use.

**The Instruction Group Swings into Action**

With a plan in place, we were ready to go. We made a to-do list for all the pieces that needed to be created to put these classes together. We had videos to find or create, a pre-class worksheet to make, LibGuides to make for each class, and clicker questions to write.

**BACK TO THE COMPOSITION FACULTY**

By the end of summer, the plans were solid, the videos created, the clicker questions tested, and the worksheet ready (see Appendix A). It was time to go back to the teaching faculty. We met with the head of the Freshman Composition program and introduced her to the new class layouts, demonstrating the pre-class worksheet, the videos and the clicker games. She put us on the agenda for the all-faculty orientation scheduled just before the new academic year began. We presented the class layouts along with a discussion of instructional objectives. We also showed snippets of the new videos and demonstrated clicker activities. Most importantly, we gave faculty the pre-class research question worksheet and discussed how it was to be implemented in ENGL101. The success of this venture rested almost entirely in the hands of the faculty. Their willingness to assign and use the worksheet would determine its success or failure. Much to our relief, they were very enthusiastic!

**Results**

Overall the new library instruction design for ENGL101 and 102 has been a resounding success. The key issue, adoption of the pre-class worksheet, absolutely exceeded our expectations. Of the 95 ENGL101 library sessions this year, nearly 100% of instructors used the worksheet. Even those instructors whose assignment didn’t initially fit well with the worksheet collaborated with us to modify the process. Most instructors did exactly as we asked – requiring that students submit their completed worksheets to them for review before the library session. Even with classes where students were responsible for bringing their own worksheets, we saw an amazingly high number who actually arrived at the library with completed worksheet in hand.

Using the worksheet, students not only come to class with a topic, but they’ve often discussed it with their instructor, they’ve read various points of view and they understand some of the surrounding issues. They also have a set of keywords ready to use. As a result, we saw significantly better searching results in the classroom. Most students had several appropriate
articles in hand by the time they left the library session.

Even more gratifying was seeing students use the worksheet on their own for other assignments, and having faculty ask us if they could use it for different courses. Several faculty told us that they had been looking for such a method for years! (See faculty survey results in Appendix B.)

Clicker activities have proven to be a fairly reliable way to spark discussion and avoid lecturing. Students love to vote and often passionately argue their position on a question.

The LibGuides and videos, tailor-made to support these courses, have been very effective. LibGuides with video links can be found at http://guides.lib.utc.edu/ under “Find Your Course.” Course guides are labeled ENGL1010 and ENGL1020.

CONCLUSION

Leveraging our partnership with the Freshman Composition Faculty has helped us improve our instruction across the board. Using focus groups, we developed a new set of teaching tools that has significantly improved instruction and solved long-standing instruction problems. As a bonus we’ve forged a deeper relationship with teaching faculty and have improved our first-year student experience.

REFERENCES


Exploring a Subject Area and Identifying a Research Question

1. A good way to get started thinking about a research question is to explore broad categories using the library database Points of View Reference Center. Pick a broad category that interests you in POVR and then browse through the subject areas listed under it to find one you would like to explore for potential research questions. Once you have settled on a subject area to investigate, click through and look for the article labeled An Overview. Each subject in the Points of View Reference Center should have one.

2. Read the Overview to gain an understanding of the scope of the subject. You'll need to get a feel for the different issues, opinions and perspectives surrounding your subject in order to be able to frame a research question. As you read, look for Keywords that describe core concepts and issues of your subject. List at least 12 below. You'll use these keywords to search library databases when your class visits the library.

   - schools
   - violence
   - drugs
   - gangs
   - uniforms
   - dress code
   - students
   - individuality
   - safety
   - free speech
   - discipline
   - private schools
   - gang clothing
   - fashion clique
   - efficacy

3. After you are done reading the Overview, look up your subject area in Wikipedia and explore further by reading one or more articles there for background information. List additional related keywords below. These can sometimes be more specific things like the names of key figures, laws, places or events.

   - gang clothing
   - fashion clique
   - efficacy

4. After reading these 3 selections, draft a potential research question for your writing assignment and upcoming library research session.

   Do school dress codes reduce school violence?

   Turn this worksheet in to your instructor.

Research question worksheet requiring students to contextualize a topic and develop possible keywords
APPENDIX B

Quotes from the Fall 2010 Freshman Composition Faculty Survey

• I am so appreciative of the librarians' expertise and willingness to share their knowledge with the students. I learn new things every time I'm in an orientation session. The vital information dispersed with professionalism and humor is a gift to the English department.

• It seems more fast-paced. It is less likely that students will lose interest or start searching the web during the orientation. It is broken up nicely with opportunity for student participation.

• It is an overall quality experience for my students. They get good instruction and time to practice their new skills. They leave feeling productive and informed.

• Introducing the students to the idea of a research method that they can refer to whenever they need to write a paper.

• I appreciate the time the librarians spend putting together the sessions and teaching them with such enthusiasm. I thank them for their service, and for the opportunity to share my views here.

• Thanks again for helpful, informative sessions. I learn something every semester, even after 9 years!

• We are all so grateful to the reference staff. You are professional, compassionate, devoted and forgiving. We love you.

• As always, the BEST part of library instruction centers upon our excellent reference librarians who lead the sessions and who work endlessly with the students to help them find their sources as well as narrow their topics to something manageable and interesting.