Rigging for Rigor: Guiding Classroom Faculty toward Richer Research Assignments with the Research Guidance Rubric

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Seeking to improve information literacy outcomes of the curriculum at their university, two librarians at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) created a tool for classroom faculty to assess and improve the research components in their assignment handouts. The Research Guidance Rubric (RGR) seeks to open a dialogue between the research expertise of librarians and the disciplinary and teaching expertise of classroom faculty. The tool was designed to accomplish this goal by providing a framework for that dialogue that 1) narrows and focuses the conversation; 2) depersonalizes any potential criticism; and 3) can provide the librarian's point of view to faculty even if they only use it as a self-assessment tool. This paper will contextualize the RGR both in the recent literature and local practice at GVSU while detailing its creation, promotion and the efforts taken so far to assess its use. Librarians' roles are expanding in information literacy instruction beyond the usual collaborations with classroom faculty and into collaboration on course materials that faces head-on the challenge of "selling" classroom faculty on information literacy.

Background

Grand Valley State University is a comprehensive university located at three campuses in and near Grand Rapids, Michigan with a student enrollment of just over 24,000. GVSU offers 78 undergraduate degrees and 29 graduate degrees. Each academic department is assigned a liaison librarian who works with departments and programs to provide library instruction

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and research consultations to students and faculty within those departments. Twenty library liaisons work on the Research and Instruction team.

There is tremendous variability across the experiences of liaison librarians at GVSU. Some departments, programs, and faculty are open to and welcome the expertise of liaison librarians, while others are more reticent to seek the involvement of librarians in the classroom or in developing classes or assignments. In an effort to address this variability and to empower librarians to provide the best possible support for students and faculty via instruction, an instruction program was developed and is currently being implemented. The RGR was created by two members of the instruction program's steering committee and premised on its core documents and the philosophy of curricular integration for information literacy that they embody.

The RGR was designed as a means of making more research assignment handouts like the best ones librarians see in the course of their work with students. Librarians at GVSU, who often encounter these assignment sheets in reference interviews or while planning instruction sessions, see a wide array of levels of guidance in these instructions to students. Students will often pull out the assignment sheet during a reference interview, hoping that the librarian can help them use the handout to piece together what the professor expects. Often, the assignment sheet delivers: it offers clear advice on what sources and discovery tools should be used, and even gives the student a process to follow to complete the needed research. Sometimes, though, the assignment sheet provides considerably less guidance. It may, for instance, emphasize product over process, implying or assuming that the student already knows or will "figure out" how to find and engage with appropriate sources.

This "hands-off" approach may be well-intended, but from the librarian's point of view in the trenches of student research practice, it may also be counter-productive to the full engagement with sources and the larger scholarly discourse that contextualizes them and consequently premises quality learning outcomes in information literacy. Leaving aside the role of librarians, an understanding of information literacy as a set of skills and concepts to be taught in conjunction with disciplinary content is still far from a consensus view among classroom faculty. Indeed, the Ithaka S+R Library Survey 2010 suggests a gap in how librarians and classroom faculty perceive the librarian's role in curricular support and instruction, with the latter understanding the library's work as primarily related to collections (2011). However, according to Michelle Holschuh Simmons (2005), librarians are uniquely positioned to help students enter into the scholarly discourse of the discipline they're studying precisely because of the librarian's positioning "outside" of the discipline. While professors are immersed as scholars within the discourse of their discipline and see the discourse as normal and natural, librarians are situated outside it, able to see, describe, and help negotiate the discourse with students. Simmons advocates for forging partnerships between specialized scholars and interdisciplinary librarians to benefit students and allow them to learn the discourse and engage in it (p. 299). This would seem to explain both the need identified in the creation of the RGR and provide a theoretical basis for its potential success.

The assignment handout itself was the focus of a recent study affirming the observations of librarians at GVSU that many assignment sheets provide minimal guidance on the research process, suggesting value in sharing the RGR beyond GVSU. The University of Washington's Information School's Project Information Literacy conducted analysis of undergraduate research assignment handouts from 28 colleges across the United States. Their findings indicate that often the handouts for research assignments provided to students don't discuss or guide them through the research process. Rather, handouts often focus more on the logistics and formatting of the final product created by the student (Head & Eisenberg, 2010). Another Project Information Literacy report indicated that over three quarters of students find written guidelines about resources to be one of the most helpful ways professors can guide students, second only to emails exchanged with the professor (Head & Eisenberg, 2009). Project Information Literacy's report on research assignment handouts suggests a wider status quo in research assignment design that extends beyond GVSU and affirms the utility of a tool that brings librarian expertise on research practice to the assignment design process that can be used across disciplines and beyond the confines of any one college or university in particular.

The Process Behind the Research Guidance Rubric

The RGR was created in tandem with a faculty development workshop designed for GVSU classroom faculty on the topic of research assignment design.

The original workshop description reads:

> Help your students write better research papers by giving them better assignments. Assignments that challenge students to critically engage with their research process can pre-empt the temptations of plagiarism and "good enough" while cultivating an information literacy that will serve them in the classroom and beyond. We'll focus on practical techniques with applications across the curriculum.

Initial planning had imagined a literal workshop in which faculty would bring assignments and, during the session, give and receive feedback for revision. Certain elements of such a workshop, however, presented challenges. Would requiring faculty to bring and share an assignment they wanted to improve raise the bar too high for their participation? Would the faculty who were designing the sorts of assignments that could be improved self-select for such an activity and, if so, would they be in a position to give each other the sort of advice that the librarians understood as both germane to the workshop's objectives and, in a more general way, wholly constructive? How, as librarians—tenure-track faculty themselves—both of whom have experience teaching college-level English but who are not currently teaching their own courses—would they effectively define and offer their expertise in a free-form workshop? Questions like these ultimately forced the adoption of a presentation/discussion format, a decision that in turn begged the question: what did the workshop-leading librarians believe were the elements of an effective research assignment and how could they most effectively communicate these elements to classroom faculty? The answers to these questions evolved during discussion and were eventually codified for distribution at the workshop as the original draft of the RGR.

Description of the RGR

The RGR (Appendix) is a grid rubric. The four facets that were identified as the distinct kinds of research guidance that an assignment can provide make up the Y axis. These are:

- Explanation/definition of sources and expectations
- Rationale and context for resource requirements
- Process-orientation
- Library engagement

Along the X axis are four levels of progressively fuller research guidance. The boxes of the rubric contain descriptions and examples of assignment components for each facet at each level of research guidance.

Evolution of the RGR

The early drafts of the RGR were reviewed for comment by other library faculty, library administration, and by faculty in the writing department. This process resulted in revisions for

clarity and tone. The most important of these changes calibrated the document's tone to balance the librarians' expertise in research practice while also avoiding any direct challenge to the disciplinary and teaching expertise of classroom faculty. From the beginning this had been addressed by narrowly defining the scope of the RGR's attention to areas of librarian expertise. In revision, the X axis scale was changed from "inadequate, minimal, adequate and full" to the significantly more neutral numerical scale of zero to three. To provide context and instructions for best using the RGR, a written introduction was added that summarizes the tool's purpose and explains how it can be used to evaluate and revise research assignments. One section of the introduction makes clear that while GVSU's librarians would advocate for the fullest level of research guidance possible for all four facets (a score of 12), they also understand that there are reasons why a professor might conscientiously (or pragmatically) choose to aim for a different level of guidance within individual facets.

PROMOTION

The summer between the first version of the workshop and the second saw many concurrent efforts to promote the RGR itself. This promotion occurred on two fronts. The RGR's creators promoted the tool directly to their liaison faculty and encouraged other librarians to do the same. A concurrent effort was made to work the RGR into the institutional framework of both the University Libraries and the larger university. This began with holding a version of the workshop for library faculty and by posting the RGR on the libraries' website but also included presentations to the unit's instruction program committee and the dean of libraries. The RGR's creators also asked the unit representative on the university General Education and Writing Skills Committee to share the tool with each body. The RGR was also presented at the University's assessment conference. In each of these efforts, it proved useful to highlight the RGR's link to the Information Literacy Core Competencies (ILCCs), a document defining information literacy learning outcomes appropriate to each level of GVSU's curriculum. This cohesion was not only instrumental to the RGR's underlying assumptions; it also contextualized its purpose within the previously successful promotion and integration of the ILCCs. While these individual promotion efforts have not been specifically assessed, in aggregate they have led to further opportunities like the current collaborations with the Writing Center.

ASSESSMENT

Informal assessment of the RGR and the faculty workshop suggests success. Enrollment in the workshop has been high relative to other workshops. Feedback forms for each of the five workshops have been quite positive, with the last round of workshops, which use the revised RGR, showing particular uniformity in their praise. Using the RGR in assignment design collaborations with faculty has produced assignments that do, as hoped, provide full research guidance. Student feedback on these new assignments has also been reported by collaborating classroom faculty as enthusiastic.

A review of the library website's traffic statistics shows that the RGR is being accessed most frequently at the beginning of the two semesters during which it has been available, a time when it seems fair to assume that many faculty members are designing assignments. The length of time people spend on the page has also increased, with the average time in the first three months of the Winter 2011 term equaling more than four times the previous site average. Going forward, more direct measures of the RGR's effect on student learning will be sought.

FUTURE PLANS

Plans for continuing work on this project include developing related tools and marketing and distributing the RGR and these tools to educators both at GVSU and externally.

GVSU's web librarian has been enlisted to help develop an interactive online tool for professors that will, based on the guidance levels and categories of guidance that are needed, offer samples of assignments from various disciplines that embody the particular qualities the professor would like to refine in his or her own assignment. Another possibility would be to create a tool that generates text to copy and paste into research assignment sheets.

Another tool in development is a companion document to the RGR for use by students. The creation of this tool is being embarked upon with the input of student consultants from GVSU's writing center. Its purpose is to empower students to ask questions of professors that help make the research process explicit. Often students don't know what or how to ask when they need research guidance. The hope is that this tool will lead the students to engage with the same aspects of research engagement that the RGR emphasizes. This tool is being developed both because of the inevitability of assignments that don't guide students through a process, and also so that students can engage with the questions that will help them learn from the research process. This tool could be distributed and discussed at service points in the library, writing center, and tutoring center.

CONCLUSION

Carving out a role in course materials and university curricula for librarian expertise is both challenging and necessary. In the current educational climate, librarians are often located outside of the classroom, placing them in the unique position where, in order to fully support student learning with their expertise they must first obtain buy-in from teaching faculty. The Research Guidance Rubric is a tool that not only assists faculty members with the creation of research assignment design; it also empowers librarians to initiate or enter conversations at a point where their particular skills and knowledge can enrich student research and learning.

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APPENDIX: RESEARCH GUIDANCE RUBRIC FOR ASSIGNMENT DESIGN

	Guidance Level (0)	Guidance Level (1)	Guidance Level (2)	Guidance Level (3)
Explanation and/or Definition of Sources and Expectations	The assignment does not describe or explain sourcing expectations.	• Some general guidelines for evaluating a source's appropriateness to the assignment are given. • Inexact quantities are given for the required number of sources (e.g., "several" or "an adequate number.") • Methods and tools for resource discovery are described in general terms (e.g., "use the library.")	• All relevant qualities of acceptable sources are listed (e.g., peer-reviewed /popular/trade, primary/secondary, qualitative/quantitative, recency.) • The required number of sources is stated as a number or range of numbers. • Methods and tools for resource discovery are described by broad type (e.g., "use a library database that includes scholarly articles.")	• All relevant qualities of acceptable sources are listed and clearly defined. • The required number of sources is given as a range or the assignment gives a clear explanation of how a student will know when they have an adequate number of sources. • Methods and tools for resource discovery are discussed and/or demonstrated in detail.
Rationale and Context for Resource Requirements	Resource requirements are neither linked to the assignment's learning objectives nor given any context-dependence.	• Resource requirements are described as having learning value (e.g., "It's important that you meet these requirements.") • Contextual exceptions to the resource requirements are mentioned as possible.	• All resource requirements are linked to the assignment's stated learning objectives. • Contextually exceptional sourcing scenarios are discussed hypothetically.	• Each resource requirement is linked to the assignment's stated learning objectives for reasons that are made clear. • Students are invited to discuss any unique sourcing circumstances with the professor and/or librarian.
Process Orientation	The assignment doesn't address the process of research, only the final product.	• The assignment acknowledges and perhaps even describes the research process but includes no components that require students show their engagement with the process. • The assignment is graded without particular consideration given to the quality of research.	Assignment includes at least one component that require students to make the process of research explicit and is evaluated by the professor. Examples include: • annotated bibliographies • paper proposals • literature reviews • research journals • online group discussion forums • wikis that show process	Process components require students to apply information literacy skills like those delineated in the ILCCs and are: • a portion of the assignment's final grade • evaluated in advance of the final product to allow student to act on feedback and guidance from the professor
Library Engagement	No engagement with the library resources or liaison librarian.	Students are given general instructions on library tools (e.g., databases, call number ranges) and resources, possibly including the name of the appropriate liaison librarian.	• Discipline-specific resources are identified (e.g., library guides, disciplinary databases.) • The liaison librarian is consulted for suggestions and possible collaboration.	• The most relevant library tools are identified and demonstrated to students in class. • If the liaison librarian is consulted or is teaching a session, s/he is made familiar with the assignment and is able to make recommendations accordingly.

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