

# **“THE ONLY PRESCRIPTION IS MORE COWBELL!”: COLLABORATING TO BRING YOUR INFORMATION LITERACY PROGRAM TO THE NEXT LEVEL**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Anyone who works with typical undergraduates, especially first year students, comes to realize how little experience many of these students have with researching and writing. Though they do not have the skills, they are unlikely to seek help for fear of appearing anything less than knowledgeable. As a result, novice researchers and writers are unlikely to turn to the people who are best equipped to help them through the rough patches: professors and librarians. Even after achieving 100% participation in the information literacy program from faculty in the First Year Experience (FYE) for multiple years, this phenomenon of few students seeking help continued at the Hiram College Library. In an effort to get more FYE students to seek help from librarians and professors, the Information Literacy Instruction Program at the Hiram College Library began to supplement the FYE library sessions by also becoming part of the training for teaching and writing assistants. (Teaching assistants (TAs) work with Freshmen Colloquia, the first semester in the FYE sequence, and writing assistants (WAs) work with First-Year Seminars, the second semester in our FYE sequence.) The immediate goal of this intervention was “training the trainers” – getting the WAs and TAs to recognize when their own students need help and, more importantly, to recognize when the help needed by those students was beyond the skills of the writing and teaching assistants. This specific goal was achieved, but other benefits have also been realized. This addition to the information literacy program improved relationships between the instruction librarian and everyone else involved (the faculty member who teaches the writing tutors; the administrator who trains the teaching assistants; and the students in both groups). Additionally, the writing and teaching assistants are now much better at recognizing their

own stumbling blocks in researching and writing and at realizing when they need help.

## **BACKGROUND**

I am hardly the first academic librarian to build a partnership with faculty. The main goal of information literacy programs is to impact the learning and information seeking behavior of the students at our institutions, so of course we want to partner with the people who can give us direct access to the students. A true scan of the literature on the topic is far beyond the scope of a conference paper (and could arguably be beyond the scope of even a dissertation), but I would feel negligent if I didn't at least share some of the literature that influenced my practice. One early piece from the literature that still resonates more than two decades after it was written is “Questions and Answers: The Dialogue Between Composition Teachers and Reference Librarians,” by Sarah R. Marino and Elin K. Jacob (1992). In it, they discuss how natural it should be for instruction librarians and writing instructors to collaborate since we have the same goals. The article goes on to discuss the main barrier: different pedagogical approaches. Librarians traditionally focused on the end result, whereas writing instructors tended to concentrate on the process. The article failed to suggest any solid conclusions for future action.

A more recent piece presented one possible solution to the predicament. In “Why Teach ‘Research as a Conversation’ in Freshmen Composition Courses? A Metaphor to Help Librarians and Composition Instructors Develop a Shared Model,” Paula S. McMillen and Eric Hill (2004) discussed their combined efforts to help students better integrate research and writing by presenting it as one process and by using a common pedagogical approach. Having since

adopted this metaphor for my own teaching, both in my role as an instruction librarian and in my secondary role as a writing instructor at Hiram College (more about this later), I can confirm the efficacy of this technique. When faculty and librarians have a common vocabulary, it has an obvious impact on student learning outcomes, and that is the point of these collaborations.

Around the same time that I was beginning to lay the groundwork for a collaboration of my own, two librarians at Muhlenberg College, Kelly Cannon and Jennifer Jarson, were publishing about their efforts at Trexler Library (2009). Similar to what I was attempting, Cannon and Jarson targeted “a likely collaboration: that of libraries and writing centers, in light of their corresponding missions and endeavors,” (p. 45). Unlike what I attempted, their program seemed to focus on providing advanced research and information literacy skills to their tutors. The impact of their efforts was not easy to discern, but the article itself is still encouraging in that it shows there are opportunities far beyond the typical mode of librarians working directly with the students they are hoping to influence.

Another way in which my constant consumption of professional literature influenced the evolution of the information literacy program at the Hiram College Library is wrapped up in the work of one researcher: Dr. Carol Collier Kuhlthau, Professor Emerita at the Department of Library and Information Science, Rutgers University. The model she identified, the Information Search Process (ISP), has been written about extensively, both by Kuhlthau and by others. If you are unfamiliar with this model which describes the real process through which people search for and integrate information into their existing knowledge base with some kind of report as the end goal, I recommend starting with Kuhlthau’s 1985 article, “A Process Approach to Library Skills Instruction: An Investigation into the Design of the Library Research Process.” For a more in depth analysis, try Kuhlthau’s 2003 book, *Seeking Meaning: A Process Approach to Library and Information Services*. For the purposes of this conference paper, the most salient findings from Kuhlthau’s work are: the concurrent emotional experiences that researchers have alongside academic experiences; and how more experienced researchers have an easier time with getting through the process, despite the emotional aspects.

When I had the aforementioned opportunity to work as a writing instructor in the FYE, I was finally able to test a theory I’d had for a while: that knowing ahead of time about the emotional rollercoaster would help novice researchers deal with the negative emotions and progress through the writing process more easily. The evidence I gathered through that (as yet unpublished) research, and during a follow up study I did with a broader group, was enough to support teaching the ISP to the entire FYE program. (Although their study did not mention Kuhlthau, a few academics in New Zealand and Australia were also coming to the same conclusion around the same time: that teaching students to be awareness of and how to cope with the emotions in academic pursuits can help

individuals be more successful (Cameron, Neirn, & Higgins, 2009).

Beyond my knowledge of the literature on the topic and my limited research, I also had personal experience that informed the program described in this paper. At a previous institution, I had unsuccessfully attempted something similar, but it was more closely related to the article that had first given me the idea to reach beyond the traditional modes of information literacy programs (working in the classroom, directly with the people who I was trying to benefit) in the first place. In that article, the authors’ described bringing information literacy instruction directly to the student: sessions held in the residence halls (Barnes & Peyton, 2006).

That inspiration came back to me when I accepted responsibility for coordinating the information literacy program at Hiram College. Once my initial goal of 100% participation by FYE classes had been attained, I was a bit discouraged to realize that we were not seeing more freshmen at the reference desk and/or seeking out librarians for assistance. These students obviously needed our help, if the grumblings of FYE instructors and professors were anything by which to judge, and simply making sure every freshman met at least one librarian in the course of each semester had not had the desired effect. It was at that point that I remembered my failed attempt.

## THE PROGRAM

I was fortunate at Hiram College to have a good relationship with the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Director, who is also the professor who teaches the WA class (at Hiram College, students who want to be writing tutors are required to take a four-credit, semester long class), from the moment I arrived on campus. So I pitched him my idea to him shortly after it occurred to me. I talked about how I thought we could further the aims of the program by making allies of the writing assistants, people to whom first year students are more likely to turn for help. After some initial successes, I expanded my efforts to include working with the teaching assistants as well, by getting involved with their training (a multi-day workshop).

### The First Try

As was previously stated, when working with the future WAs, my primary goal was to shift their perceptions of themselves from that of student to that of teacher. Both with the first group and with subsequent sections of that class, I always started the session by saying something like,

You already know most of this stuff. I know you know it because I taught it to you. The big difference here is that now we’re looking at things so you’ll be ready to help the freshmen with whom you’ll be working. Ready or not, you’re going to be teachers now.

And then I proceeded to do as I had promised. However, I shifted their perspective further by having them guide me through the basic research gathering and information literacy skills they had learned previously. Further, while discussing the ISP, their professor and I put a lot of emphasis on how their experiences had reflected the ISP. We also role-played, for the students' benefit, a sample reference interview, and then had them take turns pretending to help each other with research problems (the questions are in Appendix A).

The reactions and results from the first attempt were definitely positive, but not overwhelmingly so. The students found the information useful, and they immediately understood when we explained how the frustrations they experienced in their role-play should be translated into taking students for help. Two problems were noted. The first was that my means for presentation (relying heavily on PowerPoint) was not as well received. Second, the professor of the class was happy with the results, but asked that I spend some time showing his students at least one new resource the next time we teamed up.

### **The Second Go 'Round**

Buoyed by the initial success, I approached the Associate Dean of Students, who coordinates the training of the TAs. This workshop happened during the summer, just before the start of the school year, so had time to incorporate the feedback I had gotten. An improved PowerPoint and a supplemental handout (Appendix B) made my second attempt much more successful. The TAs' role in the FYE program is more about helping incoming freshmen adjust to college, so giving them another way to talk to students about emotional aspects of being an undergraduate seemed to be appreciated.

Likewise, the second time I ran this session with the class for WAs, things went a lot more smoothly. Beyond my own growing comfort with the material and the approach, the fact that I was also teaching them to use a new-to-them resource seemed to remind them of their own insecurities with research and of how even experienced researchers can get stuck in the emotional aspects.

### **Ironing Out a Few Last Wrinkles**

Lessons learned from the second year of this program highlighted the need for different approaches with each group. The session I ran for the TAs that year was almost identical to the one I'd run the previously, and it was made even better by the fact that there were a few repeaters in the group who were therefore able to help. However, with the WAs, I wanted to add something more to help focus their perspective on academics, so I asked for and got permission to assign a short reading: an article about reference interview best practices (Brown, 2008).

## **RESULTS**

Although it is difficult to know which aspects of our efforts are responsible for improvements – for instance, an increase in freshmen asking questions at the reference desk could be the result of a library loving incoming class – it can be easy to see immediate results. The benefit these sessions had on the WAs was most noticeable. The WAC Director, Dr. Jeffrey Swenson, saw a definite impact on the quality of the sources his writing tutor students were using and in how they were integrating them into their papers. He stated that my sessions influenced the “to think about the entire [writing] process instead of filling in the blanks and how they were involved in the process and directing the process instead of just being subjected to it,” (J. Swenson, personal communication, April 19, 2013). He also admitted that the sessions had influenced his own teaching. He had been aware of, and in the habit of teaching, writing as process, but listening to and working with me made him more “cognizant of the process, especially the emotional aspect” (J. Swenson). Apparently, watching me with his students emphasized what Swenson already knew, but it was not just Kuhlthau's findings that helped him, but also the way I would explain the pedagogy of something I had just demonstrated for his class.

When asked what impact he saw on the tutoring skills of the WAs, Swenson agreed with me that it is tough since you end up “observing these things second hand.” One result he did notice was how the WAs seemed to become more comfortable with the research process and that that comfort “bled over into how they talked to students about [research]. Ownership of their own process made them more comfortable with helping students to seek” help from librarians (J. Swenson). Swenson also shared an unexpected result with me: that he had started to see different interactions between the writing assistants and the professors with whom they worked, in the way the writing assistants helped professors teach research to their students and even in the design of the research assignments themselves. Despite the early hiccups, it is clear that the program became a success.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although the evolution of the program was a multi-year process, it was worth it. The acceptance with which my initial proposal was received was predicated upon the good relationship I already had with the professor (and the Associate Dean, for that matter) in question, but there are ways to overcome relationship barriers. By listening to feedback, I was able to improve what was already a good idea that had been well-grounded in personal experience and in the literature of this field. Further, the main goal of the program – of turning the writing and teaching assistants into my allies, was achieved. Now that I have moved onto another institution, I am already working towards modifying these ideas to suit my new circumstances. Any college or university that has a similar situation, with regularized first year experience classes and specific training required of writing and/or teaching assistants could do the same.

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## **APPENDIX A: SAMPLE REFERENCE QUESTIONS FOR ROLEPLAYING**

Question: You need information on breast cancer.

Background Information, not to be shared without prompting from your partner: You mostly need this information for a paper you're writing for a nursing-based FRCL, but you picked this topic because a good friend of yours was just diagnosed with breast cancer. The paper is due in 3 weeks but your bibliography is due tomorrow.

Question: You want to know where you can find *The Washington Post* archives electronically.

Background Information, not to be shared without prompting from your partner: You actually want the transcript of a speech given by then President Ford for homework that is due tomorrow in Communications 101, and figured you could find it there.

Question: When was Michelangelo alive?

Background Information, not to be shared without prompting from your partner: You have to research an artist from the Baroque period for a speech you'll be giving in Art History. You picked Michelangelo because you've heard of him, but don't realize that he was dead (in 1564) before the Baroque period began (in roughly 1600).

## APPENDIX B ISP HANDOUT

### Information Search Process

Adapted from *Seeking Meaning: A Process Approach to Library and Information Services*,  
2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, by Carol Collier Kuhlthau, 2003.

#### Step 1: Task Initiation

- **Goal:** Getting organized and beginning the process.
- **Thoughts:** The assignment and its requirements; related prior experience; possible topics.
- **Typical Feelings:** Mild apprehension and uncertainty.
- **Suggested Actions:** Discussing issues with others, exploring possible topics by browsing online or in the library or required/recommended texts.
- **Suggested Strategies:** Brainstorming; tolerating uncertainty.
- **Suggested Mood to Adopt:** Open to new ideas.

#### Step 2: Topic Selection

- **Goal:** Select a general topic.
- **Thoughts:** Weighing possible topics against multiple criteria; predicting outcomes of different choices; choosing topic with potential success.
- **Typical Feelings:** Confusion; anxiety; anticipation; relief/elation after topic selection.
- **Suggested Actions:** Making a preliminary search of the library (with help when appropriate), especially the reference collection, or of general websites/databases.
- **Suggested Strategies:** Taking a broad approach; keeping searching and browsing very general.
- **Suggested Mood to Adopt:** Focused.

#### Step 3: Prefocus Exploration

- **Goal:** Investigating general topic while considering possible focuses.
- **Thoughts:** Exploratory; seeking meaning; marked by an “inability to express precise information [needs].” (p. 47)
- **Typical Feelings:** Confusion; doubt; apprehension; uncertainty.
- **Suggested Actions:** Gathering general information; reading to become better informed about general topic; taking notes, most of which may not appear in the final product.
- **Suggested Strategies:** Tolerating inconsistency and seemingly contradictory information; noting successful search strategies, including search terms.
- **Suggested Mood to Adopt:** Open to new ideas.

#### Step 4: Focus Formulation

- **Goal:** Finding a focus.
- **Thoughts:** Weighing options and predicting outcomes of each possible focus using various criteria; “sometimes characterized by a sudden moment of insight.” (p. 48)
- **Typical Feelings:** Optimism and confidence.
- **Suggested Actions:** Choosing one focus while discarding others.
- **Suggested Strategies:** Reading through materials already gathered and notes to identify themes; combining similar themes; pro/con lists.
- **Suggested Mood to Adopt:** Focused.

#### Step 5: Information Collection

- **Goal:** “Gather information that defines, extends, and supports the focus.” (p. 49)
- **Thoughts:** Making connections between different sources; organizing information to best support the focus.
- **Typical Feelings:** Increased interest; confidence despite the realization of the amount of work to be done.
- **Suggested Actions:** Using appropriate sources to collect information; utilizing available help (professor/instructor, librarian); taking detailed notes.
- **Suggested Strategies:** Using advanced search techniques; finding the most pertinent information.
- **Suggested Mood to Adopt:** Switch between being open and closed to new ideas, as appropriate.

#### Step 6: Search Closure

- **Goal:** Ending information search.
- **Thoughts:** Time limits/due dates; diminished returns; redundancy; exhausted resources.
- **Typical Feelings:** Relief; satisfaction; disappointment.
- **Suggested Actions:** Going over sources one more time, checking for missed items; confirming bibliographic citations.
- **Suggested Strategies:** Creating an outline for the end product to find possible gaps in collected information; keeping sources together.
- **Suggested Mood to Adopt:** Focused.