2022

Enhancing Our Supply Chain: Working with Faculty to Embed IL Threshold Concepts

Amanda K. Izenstark

Mary C. MacDonald

ENHANCING OUR SUPPLY CHAIN: WORKING WITH FACULTY TO EMBED IL THRESHOLD CONCEPTS

AMANDA K. IZENSTARK AND MARY C. MACDONALD

INTRODUCTION

At the University of Rhode Island (URI), the need for information literacy instruction (ILI) has outpaced librarians' ability to supply support across disciplines. An increase in the number of students, a revision of the General Education program, and a slight decrease in staffing added to the challenge and required exploring new strategies. Instruction librarians at URI currently provide ILI for over five thousand students annually. Prior to 2016, we reached nine thousand students, or over half of the URI student body. Our desire to sustain—and even increase—ILI for students is the driver that helped us to create the Researching Across Disciplines seminar for URI faculty. Increasing our supply chain would benefit more students and faculty.

URI is a medium size public flagship research university serving approximately 17,000 students based in Kingston, Rhode Island. The University Libraries has 14 librarians serving the students, faculty and staff of the seven colleges that make up the university. Currently there are five and a half librarians in the Public Services Department, down from eight librarians in 2015.

Additionally, one author's 2016 sabbatical research focused on the gap between high school information research skills and what would be needed when students entered college. Results of this research jumpstarted the design of a workshop for faculty to enhance the information literacy supply chain.

COLLABORATING WITH THE OFFICE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Librarians had previously collaborated with staff in the Student Learning, Outcomes Assessment, and Accreditation office and also faculty developer staff from the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (ATL) group, beginning with building a URI wide information literacy rubric for the General Education Program. Based on that successful collaboration, along with structural and financial support from ATL, the seeds for a series of seminars were planted.

DESIGNING THE SEMINARS

The First Version

The first version of the seminar, designed by the faculty developer and one information literacy librarian, was held biweekly over the course of Spring 2018 semester. To develop interest, faculty were invited to attend a Fall 2017 workshop, "Towards Effective Information Research: Faculty Expectations, Student Abilities, and Strategies to Close the Gap." Some of these attendees subsequently applied to attend the Spring 2018 Teaching Effective Information Research (TEIR) seminar. Other faculty responded to a general call for faculty who wanted to improve their students' research skills.

During planning, *Teaching Information Literacy Threshold Concepts: Lesson Plans for Librarians* (Bravender, McClure, & Schaub, 2015), was selected for its concise style that would allow subject faculty to learn about IL threshold concepts and then explore several possible lessons for applying the concept in their own classes. Each biweekly session would include a brief discussion of the concept, followed by faculty sharing their lesson plans using the ATL's High Impact Teaching (HIT) Activity Worksheets as a basis. (See Appendix)

Seven faculty participated in the TEIR seminar. Four of these faculty members attended all sessions, completed activities, and submitted their final Action Plan, making them eligible for stipends furnished through the ATL's 2016 Davis Grant, Initiative to Impact: Delivering an Exceptional General Education Program. The grant's goal was to support transformative teaching within URI's 2016 General Education Program, which includes twelve required Student Learning Outcomes, one of which is information literacy.

While the majority of Spring 2018 participants were successful in their work, most found that the biweekly meeting pace hindered their ability to stay focused and engaged. Results overall were positive, however, due to the four faculty making substantial changes to incorporate information literacy skills and concepts in their course assignments. At the end, faculty provided feedback suggesting that an end of semester three-and-a-half-day seminar would be more engaging and productive.

The Second Version

In Spring 2019, two instruction librarians (the authors) and a new faculty developer began building the next version of the program. To align the seminar with other efforts spearheaded by the ATL, we changed the name from Teaching Effective Information Research to Researching Across the Disciplines to parallel the title of their writing-focused program, Writing Across the Curriculum. Based on the feedback from previous participants, the session would run for 3.5 days in the summer. Participants would receive a copy of *Teaching Information Literacy Threshold Concepts* and be expected to read two chapters of the book each night, explore example lessons from the book, and complete HIT Worksheets for the relevant threshold concept to submit to the conveners. ATL organized the call for applicants. Seventeen faculty members applied, and ten faculty from social science and life science disciplines were accepted to the seminar.

The 2019 version of the seminar began with a brief orientation meeting held a month ahead of the rest of the seminar so that participants could meet, participate in an icebreaker activity to help them remember what it was like to be an undergraduate faced with more challenging research, have a preliminary discussion of the frames, and receive the textbook for the seminar. The main portion of the seminar took place on consecutive days, with a half day dedicated to each of the six frames. Sessions ran from 9:30-2:30 with a break for lunch. Participants from the first version of the seminar were invited to share their experiences and subsequent course changes in a brief lunchtime presentation. The ATL was able to provide funding for lunches each day for participants. During each half day, participants would engage in a discussion of the selected frame, consider how it connected to their own disciplines, and spend some time using the HIT Worksheet to adapt a current assignment or envision a new one that would integrate into their course and support student development of information literacy skills in that area. The final day of the seminar would have participants sharing their new knowledge with each other via a virtual poster session, showcasing an exercise they planned to introduce into their courses.

After the seminar ended, the conveners set up meetings with each participant to review and share ideas about implementing the Action Plans. During these meetings, participants would be invited to share their work at a larger spring Teaching Showcase organized by ATL. Upon completion, participants would receive $1000 in faculty development funds from the ATL's Davis Educational Foundation Grant for the completion of an Action Plan for their course.

THE SEMINAR IN ACTION

While participants used the Bravender, et al. text as a springboard for their own course innovations, the faculty developer drew on her background in theater and the librarians used some of the active learning strategies they employ in the classroom to engage faculty and inspire them with some techniques they could bring back to their own classes. As an introduction to *Scholarship as Conversation* on the first day, the participants wrote their research expectations for students on sticky notes and placed them on a whiteboard, and subsequently engaged in a discussion of whether and how students were meeting the noted expectations. Once participants felt more comfortable chatting with their colleagues, this led to a discussion of the scholarly conversation and how faculty can introduce students to it at an appropriate level.

For *Research as Inquiry*, an exercise from the first iteration of the seminar asked faculty to consider how a recent news story overlapped with their own particular disciplines to help them explore how students might approach a topic they might not have complete familiarity with and develop a research question. In the 2018 seminar, the prompt was a story about nuclear contamination

in the wake of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, and in the 2019 seminar, the participants worked with an article related to reconstruction plans in the wake of the Notre Dame fire.

To introduce *Authority is Constructed and Contextual*, the ten faculty and three conveners sorted themselves into groups based on areas where they have expertise—but not the areas of expertise that they are professionally recognized for. For example, one faculty member had a significant background in making gourmet pizzas, while another had extensive experience in floral arrangement and wedding planning. This introduced a discussion of how we gain expertise, evaluate it, and utilize the expertise others (academics and non-academics) have to offer.

Information Creation as a Process started the afternoon of the second full day. Having concerns about the participants' stamina after a day and a half of learning and exploring, the conveners led the faculty in an exercise where each participant drew their research process on a large whiteboard, followed by a gallery walk where each explained their discipline's process. This was based on an exercise shared by Ann Medaille and Molly Beisler (2016), which asked students to illustrate their research process as part of an effort to uncover pain points in students' processes, but served in this instance to show the varieties of research experience among peers in different disciplines.

On the third day, the focus on *Searching as Strategic Exploration* gave participants the opportunity to articulate what skills they think students need to have in order to be effective searchers and to consider how they themselves search for information. Using an intentionally vague prompt—"find an article on research methods in your discipline to share with the group"—participants then went to find a piece of information and engaged in a discussion of both the obstacles and experiences they had while they performed this task. They also discussed what they, as seasoned researchers, brought to the table with them, and how it changed or informed their approach. This allowed us to tie their experiences and their students' experiences together with Kolb's Phases of Experiential Learning Theory as described in John Bean's 2011 book *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (2nd ed.).

The sixth frame, *Information Has Value*, was incorporated into an activity in which participants considered how not understanding other threshold concepts may have led to instances of plagiarism. Participants recognized that students having a more concrete understanding of their role in the scholarly conversation would be beneficial, as would additional support in courses for Searching as Strategic Exploration. The group concluded by discussing what skills students would need to have—and what exercises would help develop said skills—in order for students to show that they understand that information does have value.

For the final half day, the participants were assigned a slide in a shared slide deck, and on the slide, they presented their plan for a new or modified assignment, including the scaffolding, learning activities, and assessment of the assignment. This became a virtual poster session for the conclusion of the course. As the seminar wrapped up, there was a palpable sense of enthusiasm from the participants.

RESULTS

The engagement and dedication to the seminar demonstrated by the participants impressed the conveners. Faculty shared their new insights and perspectives about the threshold concepts which gave conveners a glimpse of how ubiquitous, yet hidden, information literacy is across the curriculum. Active learning and group discussions unveiled new awareness of the differences between what faculty know deeply about information research and how they share or don't share that knowledge with their students.

A biology professor planning a new course that would introduce students to the culture of science research and laboratory work integrated several exercises into her class, including one that used Searching as Strategic Exploration as a support for students as they begin to structure a systematic review. Another biology professor introduced an infographic exercise that scaffolded searching and evaluation skills into the students' final products.

An Africana Studies and History instructor immediately began re-envisioning his introductory Africana Studies course, and added exercises that helped students envision their role in the scholarly conversation while simultaneously finding their place in the continuum of African American thought and ideologies.

To support students in the Human Development and Family Studies program who would be graduating and working in the field soon, one professor designed assignments that would require students to find the types of credible non-academic sources they would be required to use with clients in the future.

A criminal justice professor teaching a capstone course designed a group activity based on mapping the scholarly conversation that gives students an opportunity to create a visual representation of scholarly sources for a criminal justice policy

position paper. This activity will help students articulate the questions that most interest them, which will lead to more focused inquiry.

FUTURE PLANS

As of this writing, we are planning the next iteration of the seminar, and are not making significant changes. During the individual consultations with participating faculty, we asked for input regarding the design, timing, and format of the seminar. Participants unanimously stated that the format encouraged a sense that they were on a retreat where they could focus solely on the information literacy components of their courses, and that the daily sessions allowed them to connect with and develop a rapport with other faculty. Because participants felt the sessions were engaging and successful as they were delivered in 2019, only small adjustments to the 2020 schedule will be needed. Plans include extending lunch slightly and including an additional break in each session. Additionally, while we reserved a half hour at the end of each day for participants to consult with us in the 2019 iteration, the time was not used. We will still include it in the next iteration, however, in the event that it's needed.

MODIFICATIONS FOR OTHER ENVIRONMENTS

This seminar can be adapted for other institutions and other environments, depending on support and needs. If your library has limited staff, using a weekly or bi-weekly model can distribute the time commitment needed over a longer period, and it's possible to schedule sessions with faculty so that no meetings would occur during peak instruction times. If your library has a limited budget, offering to purchase copies of the Bravender book may be an incentive, and for no money, it's possible to provide continuous access to seminar materials through Google Drive, Office365, Dropbox accounts, LibGuides, or your learning management system. If you anticipate it will be difficult to provide sustained support to faculty after the sessions, consider developing an IL toolkit using a LibGuide or other repository, sharing examples of active learning activities you and/or your team have used, developed, or recommend. Finally, in many libraries, funding is a chronic issue. An institutional, regional, or national grant may help you purchase food, books, and funding for stipends for participants. As we move forward, this is a path we plan to pursue.

REFERENCES

Bean, J.C. (2011). *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. p. 64.

Bravender, P., McClure, H., & Schaub, G. (2015). *Teaching information literacy threshold concepts: Lesson plans for librarians.* Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, a division of the American Library Association.

Medaille, A. & Beisler, M. (2016). *Using Images to Understand Students' Approaches to the Research Process. 2016 Proceedings - Library Assessment Conference.* Retrieved from https://www.libraryassessment.org/past-conferences/2016-library-assessment-conference/2016-proceedings/

Characteristics of classroom space or other learning space (Typical or ideal)

Timing in schedule (beginning/end of semester, important prior content, relevant future assignments)

PROCEDURAL STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

How will you prepare before the class session?

How will students prepare before the class session?

What are the key things you will need to communicate and distribute to students during the class session? When and how will you do this?

Describe what the typical student or group will do to complete the activity.

How will you respond to student work or wrap up at the completion of the activity?

CONCERNS, CHALLENGES, & QUESTIONS