

WHAT'S UP DOC? TRANSFORMING INFORMATION LITERACY INSTRUCTION WITH DOCUMENTARY FILMS

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OVERVIEW

After coming up with the idea to pilot a three-credit information literacy course in Drake University's inaugural J-term, I knew I wanted to simultaneously develop the course to also work in the traditional semester. As I prepared to teach this new course—What's Up Doc? An Information Literacy Exploration of Documentary Films—I began utilizing clips of documentary films in one-shot instruction sessions for first year students too. This paper will discuss how I have transformed information literacy instruction in three settings: an accelerated three-credit course, a full semester three-credit course, and in one shot sessions.

BACKGROUND

I came to Drake University in June 2011. After teaching a one-credit, seven-week information literacy course at my previous job at the University at Albany eleven times, I was excited to have the opportunity to teach a two-credit, full-semester information literacy course at Drake. I soon discovered, however, that despite having more time to engage students, I still faced a classroom of too many disinterested students. As I was brainstorming new ways to make a for-credit information literacy course engaging, Drake was also dealing with a shortage of courses that satisfy the Information Literacy Area of Inquiry (AOI.) Too few courses satisfied the requirement, so those that did filled up with mostly seniors. The library's two-credit course, LIBR 046, was designed for first and second year students. I wanted to create an information literacy course that would be appealing enough that students would take it earlier in their academic careers.

Also, Drake was preparing for its inaugural J-term, a three-week term in January 2013 when students could opt to take a single three-credit course. There was significant support from the Provost's Office to help faculty develop J-term

courses, and I was intrigued by the idea. As I thought about how I could teach information literacy in a three-week term and make it more engaging, I had an epiphany: use documentary films.

THE ACCELERATED COURSE

I began preparing for 2013's J-term in the fall of 2011. Initially, I planned to spend much of the summer of 2012 watching documentaries and creating individual research assignments based on those films. All too soon, reality set in. I faced two huge challenges: money and time. When I approached the collection development librarian to inquire how much money I could have to purchase documentaries for my course, I received the unexpected news that there was no available money to purchase DVDs. While I wished I had thought to ask about resource support earlier, I already had students registered and needed to find a way to proceed. The second major obstacle was time. Once summer arrived, I was faced with numerous projects, meetings and responsibilities that prevented me from simply focusing on developing my documentary films course.

I realized the importance of two key tenets: build from success and be flexible. Although the level of student engagement in my previous information literacy courses was not as high as I would have liked, the courses were still successful. Instead of scrapping all of the assignments I had spent several semesters fine-tuning, I decided that I could use most of them and add new content based on documentary films. Without a budget, I had to be flexible with my film selections. I was lucky that my library has a relatively strong DVD collection, including documentaries. I wasn't able to pick my ideal list of films, but I had a nice collection to draw from. I also realized how much work I was putting into this course, and I didn't want it to be just for three weeks. I committed to simultaneously designing the three-week course

for J-term 2013 and the full semester course for spring 2013. I knew I would not have any time in between to make major changes if parts of the course flopped in J-term. However, designing both courses at the same time made planning for J-term easier. I didn't have a frame of reference for constructing a three-credit class that met four hours a day and five days a week. J-term was designed to have the same amount of content as a full-semester course, and I had practice developing a full-semester class. By starting from that calendar, it made it much easier to convince myself I was not trying to do too much in three weeks.

I added four components to my existing two-credit information literacy course to create a three-credit documentary film course: the films, response papers, a comparative annotated bibliography, and a creative final project. Although I planned to discuss each film in class, I also wanted to include a written response to texts. Some students prefer to write, while others prefer to discuss. Including both types of responses gave students two opportunities to share their thoughts and reactions to the films. I did, however, give students some choice about which films to write about. There were thirteen possible response papers, and students only needed to complete ten. They were, however, free to complete all thirteen for extra credit if they wanted to do so. In previous versions of my information literacy courses, students picked a topic and created an annotated bibliography of diverse sources. For this course, I changed the focus of the assignment. Students instead picked a documentary film and used its topic as the subject of their annotated bibliography. They then wrote a five-page paper comparing the information they discovered in their research with the information presented in the film. Lastly, I created a final project in which students identified a topic they thought would make a good documentary film. They developed an action plan to identify all of the pieces of information they would need to make their film and to address what elements from films we watched together they wanted to include in their proposed documentary film.

J-Term: The Results

I felt more satisfied and had more fun teaching during J-term than I ever had before. While there are certainly challenges to cramming an entire semester into three weeks, the level of student engagement was the highest I have ever seen. Because J-term is optional, students self-selected the course, and it showed. These students were curious and would often begin research while we were still watching the films. At times, we would stop the film and discuss where it might be going. It wasn't all perfect however. The pace was brutal. I left J-term, which ended on a Friday, exhausted. Spring semester began Monday, and I had to grade final projects, provide feedback on their final presentations, and the final batch of response papers. The calendar makes it simply not sustainable to do this every year.

THE FULL SEMESTER COURSE

Even coming off the fast pace, the good J-term experience made it so I was on a high entering the spring 2013 semester. However, there was somewhat of a dip in student engagement in the spring 2013 course. The biggest surprise to me was that about half of the students had already fulfilled the information literacy AOI requirement and were taking the course because they really liked documentaries. I made a couple of minor changes to the spring syllabus. Instead of having students give presentations on both the comparison project and the creative final project, they only presented on the final project.

The biggest challenge to the spring course was the pacing. Going from meeting for four hours at a time to meeting three times a week was jarring. Because I made the choice to keep many of the elements of prior information literacy classes, this course at times felt like two different courses. There were days when we didn't talk about films and there were days we didn't talk about information literacy.

GOING FORWARD

The biggest takeaway from teaching the course in J-term and in spring is that despite shared content, these are essentially two courses with different assessment needs. Fourteen classes in fourteen days is not the same as 26 classes and thirteen film labs over 14 weeks. In fact, less is more. Students were able to make more connections during J-term. They weren't taking other courses and were able to immerse themselves in the material. In the spring, it took more time to remind students of details from earlier weeks. There were also challenges to the feedback loop. In J-term, I had nine students and could turn around assignments quickly. In the spring, I had nineteen students and it was challenging to get everything graded as quickly.

Although I don't believe J-term's calendar is sustainable in the long term, I do plan to teach the course again in J-term 2014, as well as spring of 2014. I plan to redesign the course in a few ways. First, I plan to turn the J-term course into a series of case studies in research, based on the topics of films we watch. I will also feature a lot of group work. In the spring, I also plan to switch to a case studies approach. It was originally my intention to base our research around the films, but I didn't have enough time to start from scratch.

ONE-SHOT SESSIONS

I coordinate information literacy instruction for all first year students at Drake. Each first year student takes a three-credit first year seminar (FYS) in the fall semester. There are typically 45 sections of 19 students each. Faculty from all across the university teach the seminars, and they can have any topic. The goal of the seminars is to emphasize critical reading, critical thinking, information literacy and writing. Most courses have at least one assignment that

involves research, and it's easy to develop active learning sessions to introduce students to the databases and resources that will be most helpful. In the past two years, however, the library faculty have struggled with how to engage students in information literacy sessions when their course has no research assignment. Once again, I started turning to documentary films.

Here is an outline of a sample 75-minute first year seminar information literacy session using documentary film:

- Show clip from a documentary (one favorite of mine is *Hot Coffee*: the students are usually familiar with the case of the woman who sued McDonald's after spilling coffee on herself, and there are many ways to research the case and its surrounding issues.)
- Challenge students to each come up with one idea to research based on the clip. (I leave it wide open, if there's any connection to the clip, I'm all in.)
- Make each student share a research idea. If theirs has already been shared, they have to think of a new one. Placing 19 research topic ideas based on a 3-5 minute clip is powerful.
- Break students into four groups (determined based on how the library classroom is structured) and have each group pick one of the research topics to explore. Based on the topic the group selects, I assign each group a different database.
- Challenge students to individually find one source they think is great.
- Once each student has a strong resource, they share in the group and pick one to demonstrate how to find it and why it's the best in front of the class. As the student is demonstrating, I ask a lot of questions. This exercise replaces the traditional database demonstration, but I find it conveys the same points in a way students find more engaging.
- I close each session explaining to students what librarians are here for and how to contact us. I also share my personal contact information and encourage them to contact me directly when they have a research assignment for another course.

CONCLUSION

I have found great success engaging students through documentary film clips. The same technique could be used with news clips or other videos. Beginning with a video captures the students' attention because it is unexpected. While they're researching information to impress their peers (or at least not be embarrassed in front of them), it feels like a scavenger hunt. And ultimately, I think students learn more by doing first and asking questions second.

