Creating Objectives Collaboratively: Actionable Goals across the Library System

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Introduction

"What am I going to teach?" Instruction librarians often ask themselves this question when developing lessons for library workshops. Formulating strong objectives and assessing the success of teaching to those objectives can be a very satisfying and successful approach to library instruction.

As two new colleagues and I began our jobs as Learning Librarians at University of Michigan – Ann Arbor, we decided to look for ideas on how to teach. A good place to start seemed to be constructing actionable goals (goals and objectives are interchangeable terms in this paper). A collaborative process was developed whereby librarians were interviewed in groups and individually concerning creating objectives for a specific concept. This model has the potential to be scaled up and used by other libraries. This paper describes this model in practice and offers suggestions on how it can be implemented successfully.

Background

On a typical Tuesday afternoon, a room of instruction librarians face a blank whiteboard. One librarian asks, "What do you *want* to teach students?" The librarians start a cramped list that fills the whiteboard. They go beyond articulating instruction in the form of tools ("I teach the library catalog") to writing down ideas about real concepts ("I want students to be better information seekers") that students need to survive in an information-rich world.

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Some of the new librarians at University of Michigan's Shapiro Undergraduate Library decided to take a closer look at the creation and assessment of library instruction sessions. We first looked at overall instruction objectives. The expectation was that clear objectives would inform effective instruction.

We started by reading the literature. These readings were not only gleaned from the library field, but were also collected from K-12 education research (some of these items, especially the material involving objective-creation, can be found on the Creating Objectives Collaboratively wiki http://creatingobjectivescollaboratively.pbworks.com/; also, Key Resources are listed at the end of this paper). The new librarians and a veteran colleague read these articles, web sites and book chapters and then discussed the significance of the readings to everyday instruction. These articles were also sent to a larger group of librarians throughout the library system who have instruction as one of their responsibilities.

Two different meetings were then held. First, a large group of librarians from across the library system met to try to create overall instruction objectives. Each librarian created their own goals and then the group combined them into the following statement:

Objective: Students will be better information seekers

- Students will have a plan when they do library research

- Students will be introduced to a scholarly community

- Students will ask for help if they need it

- Students will ask focused questions: They will be better questioners AND better information seekers

- Students will recognize that library research is a process

- Students will know the differences between the library catalog, indexing databases and search engines

- Students will be able to use critical thinking skills to evaluate their sources

- Students will demonstrate transferable library research skills.

These goals are very broad and could be difficult to measure. For example, who would determine whether a student needs help for the objective "Students will ask for help if they need it?" Do students always know when they need help?

Second, a small group of undergraduate librarians met later to practice writing more objectives. This group looked at a workshop that would be commonly taught in the fall semester and began constructing objectives. One topic within this workshop, the critical evaluation of sources or "Scholarly vs. Popular," is a topic that is frequently taught.

Writing the objectives was overwhelming. The group again struggled with making the objectives measurable. One objective was that students will be able to select the best source for their papers. Since the best source can be very context-driven, the group wondered how the truly best source could be measured. Other objectives included the following:

- Students will be able to explain/recognize/understand the importance of scholarly literature

- Students will be able to distinguish between scholarly and popular sources in order to select appropriate sources

I decided to talk to my administrator about the project. She was excited to explore the creation of topic-specific objectives with other librarians. Could librarians throughout campus create objectives together? She asked me to coordinate a project whereby librarians throughout campus collaboratively created objectives for a common instruction topic, Scholarly vs. Popular, and she announced the project in a reference meeting. It was determined that including the perspective of other, more experienced librarians would help create more powerful objectives. This perspective would be gained by conducting interviews with them.

Creating Scholarly Vs. Popular Objectives Collaboratively

The following process can serve as a model for those institutions looking for ways to create objectives collaboratively. The Keys to Success section is followed by a description of this model in practice.

Keys to Success

1. Administrative support: With the head of reference from two libraries supporting this project (my supervisor), there was some outward legitimacy regarding the project. I could also call on this person's considerable experience in framing the project. She had several logistical suggestions (included below) that facilitated this process.

2. Sharing the literature: Share the literature widely within your institution. It is helpful to share the literature especially with librarians that will be asked to contribute to the creation of objectives. This gives new librarians who haven't worked with objectives before some background and refresher information to librarians who are familiar with the topic.

3. Questions: Develop questions ahead of time that significantly probe the librarians' experiences with objectives. The questions in the model described in this paper can be easily adapted to fit many institutions. Ask for help in developing the questions. Getting input from librarians even at this stage promotes the idea that this is a collaborative effort and may foster more buy-in for the project. Time spent in creating thoughtful questions will save time later as the interviewer will have to commit some time to speaking with many different people.

4. Time – Interview Length: If questions are developed thoughtfully before the interviews, interviews may be for a short amount of time. The interviews for this project were for 30 minutes. Librarians are busy people. They may be more willing to participate in this project if they don't have to commit lengthy amounts of time to it. The interviewer may also find that there is a considerable time commitment for the project. The interviewer will also have to devote less time with short interviews and may be able to interview more librarians.

5. Time – Interview Grouping: Interview librarians together that have common instruction tasks. For instance, if you have instruction coordinators, meet with them in a group. Meet with several general library instructors at once. Meeting with large groups of library instructors can generate positive energy and provide an opportunity for librarians to exchange ideas. Again, this will save time for the interviewer as well. Of course, if scheduling is difficult, separate interviews may have to be made occasionally.

6. Leadership: This project was managed by someone who has an extensive education background, a former high school and middle school teacher. It is important to have someone lead this collaboration who is open to collaboration, can create measurable objectives, and who isn't afraid to push the group to be specific about goals.

Preparing for the Interviews

Maximizing the interview time for this project seemed like a priority. Before asking many different librarians what

they thought the objectives of a Scholarly vs. Popular lesson should be, meaningful questions were developed. I asked a long-time library instructor for assistance in the creation of thoughtful questions. The following questions were developed and then used in every interview.

1.   When was the last time you taught this concept?

2.   What does teaching this concept mean to you?

3.   Do you create objectives for classes?

4.   What are/would you like to be the objectives for this concept?

5.   How do you teach this concept?

6.   How do you know you were successful teaching this topic? How would you assess formally?

INTERVIEWS

Instruction librarians from across campus were asked the above questions. Librarians that were interviewed included traditional instruction librarians, technology instruction librarians, and subject specialists from the humanities, social sciences and sciences as well as administrators. Librarians were interviewed individually and in groups. One group interview included seven librarians. A student assistant took notes during that interview. Overall, sixteen librarians were interviewed totaling five hours over seven working days. An administrative assistant compiled the notes from the interviews into one document. Librarians were contacted via email for follow up questions and input regarding results.

INTERVIEW RESULTS

Nine of the sixteen librarians (approximately 57%) had taught the concept of critically evaluating sources or "Scholarly vs. Popular" in the last month. Five of the librarians do teach this concept but hadn't recently. Two librarians don't teach the concept.

Four of the sixteen librarians regularly create overall objectives and write them down for their instruction sessions. Four librarians said they occasionally write down objectives. Three librarians mentioned that they think of objectives but don't write them down or articulate them. Four of the librarians stated that they rely on the full time instructors in course-related instruction sessions to set the objectives. One librarian said that she doesn't write down objectives and doesn't think in those terms.

When asked what the objectives of a Scholarly vs. Popular lesson should be, the librarians had many similar ideas. The objectives can be summarized in the following statements:

Objective: Students will be able to critically evaluate sources

•   Students will be able to describe scholarly and non-scholarly sources.

•   Students will be able to identify scholarly and non-scholarly sources if they are given examples of scholarly/nonscholarly sources that include at least a few of the typical characteristics of these publication types.

•   Students will be able to fulfill their professor's expectations (determined in conjunction with the librarian prior to instruction session) regarding scholarly sources

•   Students will be able to apply their knowledge concerning scholarly and non-scholarly sources in new situations.

The librarians also discussed how they could measure the success of teaching this topic. In general, their ideas for in-class assessment can be summarized in this statement:

Students are given one article with scholarly elements and one with non-scholarly elements. Students are able to identify and describe the scholarly and non-scholarly elements of the two sources. Students are then able to locate a scholarly journal (or article) relevant to their field of study in a database without using an automatic, scholarly/non-scholarly/peer-review filter.

Both the summarized objectives and assessment are statements that were presented through email to the librarians after the interviews for their approval.

When asked how they teach students to critically evaluate their sources, eight of the fourteen librarians who teach this concept incorporated examples of scholarly and/or popular resources into their instruction. Four of the librarians (including some of those that use examples) show students a chart describing the difference between scholarly and popular articles. The library's Lesson Study group has created a lesson concerning critically evaluating sources (see lesson on the Lesson Study Lesson Plan page http://www.lib.umich.edu/instructor-college/lesson-plans) and two of the librarians mentioned using that lesson. Three of the librarians (those that teach a seven week, digital resources class) formally assess this concept.

Other suggestions from librarians regarding assessment included checking in afterwards with the class instructor when doing course-integrated instruction; using a pre- and post-test; presenting formal quizzes; asking class instructors for student papers when teaching course-integrated classes; having students write a paragraph about the concept; using clickers to quickly assess by showing an example and having the students identify whether a snippet is scholarly or non-scholarly. Two librarians indicated that they felt that they would never know

"for sure" if they had taught the concept successfully.

INTERVIEW RESULTS IN PRACTICE

Some librarians were unaware of the Critical Evaluation of Sources Lesson Study lesson plan http://www.lib.umich.edu/instructor-college/lesson-plans. Since this lesson had been rigorously tested on actual students (see http://www.lib.umich.edu/instructor-college/lesson-study to learn more about the Lesson Study process), it was used to teach this concept.

See the "Instruction Form Appendix" for an example of how the Lesson Study resources can be adapted. Instructors provided examples in instruction sessions and used the adapted Lesson Study worksheet to assess instruction. Students were able to demonstrate understanding of the Scholarly vs. Popular portion of their lesson.

REFLECTIONS

It can seem daunting to attempt a collaborative process with large groups. Chunking the interviews is not only a time saver, but also provides a smaller, more manageable forum for discussion about the topic. Librarians freely discussed the topic in the group interviews.

The email conversation regarding the summarized objectives and assessment provided a smaller scale group opportunity as well. The librarians at the University of Michigan were eager to discuss this topic even though instruction may be only one part of their very complex, demanding responsibilities. Providing opportunities for them to share their instruction ideas that had small time commitments and used technology to assist the process facilitated the discussion.

The group interviews were not only helpful for time reasons, but were also helpful because the librarians within the groups taught in the same contexts and were able to build on each other's ideas and comments. Librarians in group interviews seemed to learn from each other regarding how to communicate goals. For instance, in one group interview a librarian asked whether librarians told the students what the goals were for the class. This became an interesting discussion in how communicating the goals to the students may help those students focus on why they are learning about specific topics.

Other institutions may want to use email discussions exclusively instead of face to face interviews to create the objectives. The questions could be emailed to instructors. Responses could be emailed to a project manager who then summarizes answers and presents them to the group. While this approach may help with the time commitment, it bypasses the opportunity for discussions regarding instruction approaches. Librarians with extensive time commitments may feel like the time saved through email discussion outweighs the discussion opportunity. Email conversations may also be helpful for librarians who are widely distributed throughout many campuses

making face to face interviews difficult and time-consuming.

It was rewarding to communicate information about objectives with the librarians interviewed. The insight from veteran librarians regarding the content of objectives was helpful as well. I will use the goals created for critically evaluating sources to inform my own teaching on this topic. It was reassuring to hear other librarians discuss objectives. As a new librarian and former teacher, it affirmed the direction of my own instruction.

KEY RESOURCES

American Library Association. (2006). *ACRL | Objectives for information literacy instruction: A model statement for academic librarians*. Retrieved 10/21, 2009, from http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/objectivesinformation.cfm

American Library Association. (2010). ACRL | *Writing measurable objectives*. Retrieved 02/15, 2010, from http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/acrl/about/sections/is/webarchive/smartobjectives/writingmeasurable.cfm

Bloom, B. S. (1974; [1974, c1956]). *Taxonomy of educational objectives; the classification of educational goals*. New York: D. McKay Co., Inc.

Gronlund, N. E., & Brookhart, S. M. (2009). *Gronlund's writing instructional objectives*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson/Merrill Prentice Hall.

Yeah, but is it *scholarly*?
And should I care?

Yes, you should care! If you're going to write a paper on a topic, and you're seeking out other people's opinions and research, **don't you want to find the most accurate research out there?** Why bother reading something if you can't be sure it's accurate, truthful and reliable?

Ask yourself these questions about the sources you decide to use in your paper.

Who wrote it?
Do you have any reason to believe that this person knows a lot about the topic? How do you know? What kind of credentials do they have? Is it a journalist reporting on something they barely know about, or is it an academic scholar who has been studying the topic for years? Don't know who wrote it? That may tell you something!

Who reads it?
Academic writing can be hard to read; it requires you to have a deep interest in the topic and be able to follow sound reasoning. Popular writing is meant to be enjoyed and readable by anyone regardless of prior experience with the topic. Can you find the publication you're reading from on the bookstore magazine rack or a .com website? Or is your stuff in obscure journals that only an experienced set of people can appreciate?

Why was it written?
Was it written to make the big bucks and sell copies of magazines? Does it advance knowledge?

Other questions to ask if you're still not sure:
- Is it outdated?
- Does the author tell you where they got their information? (Do they cite their sources?)
- Is it longer than a page or two?
- Is it structured into sections (abstract, bibliography, introduction, conclusion)?
- Do the pictures/graphs support the text, or are they just there for show?

Dealing with your professors…

There's more than one level of "scholarly". Sometimes you need to get your professors or GSIs to clarify what they want.

Ask if they want you to use only **peer-reviewed** materials, which go through a very rigorous process in order to get published, or if using **scholarly**, but not peer-reviewed, materials are okay.

Your Assignment Using the articles provided, answer the following questions for each article.

ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS

1a. Who wrote the scholarly article (scholars/researchers with related graduate degrees, journalists, no background info available, etc)?

_____
_____

1b. Who wrote the non-scholarly article (scholars/researchers with related graduate degrees, journalists, no background info available, etc)?

_____
_____

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2a. Who is expected to read the scholarly article (general population, scholars, people in a certain trade, etc)?

_____
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2b. Who is expected to read the non-scholarly article (general population, scholars, people in a certain trade, etc)?

_____
_____

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3a. Why was the scholarly article written (do the authors have an agenda)?

_____
_____

3b. Why was the non-scholarly article written (do the authors have an agenda)?

_____
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