

MUCHOS MENTORES EN IOWA: THE PEDAGOGY OF STUDENT TO STUDENT MENTORING IN INFORMATION LITERACY

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At Grinnell College we believe that students can be the best teachers and that lasting learning also happens outside the classroom. The Grinnell College Libraries' peer mentoring program, through which students teach and promote information literacy to other students, is rooted in these beliefs. This program was cited by the Association of College and Research Libraries in awarding the Grinnell College Libraries the 2011 Excellence in Academic Libraries Award.

INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

Grinnell College is a selective, private liberal arts college with 1600 students and a curriculum that emphasizes inquiry-based learning. The Grinnell College Libraries have designed an information literacy program to support this curriculum. We customized the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education for our local situation and developed an information literacy curriculum around the customized standards. The resulting curriculum and materials were branded *Doing Research* and posted online (<http://www.grinnell.edu/library/doingresearch>) for use in course-integrated instruction, the informal instruction that is done at the reference desk, and individual research consultations.

Grinnell College has long had a culture of peer mentoring. The Math Lab, Science Learning Center and Academic Advising department all use peer mentors as tutors, both for ongoing tutoring relationships and for staffing drop-in labs. These three offices were founding members of the

Academic Resource Centers (ARC) group, which was founded in 2009 to bring together staff from all of the academic support departments on campus. The Libraries are also part of ARC, and were able to draw on the experiences of these centers as we launched our peer mentoring program.

PEER MENTORING IN THE LIBRARIES

The existence of other successful peer mentoring models on campus was one factor in the decision to introduce peer mentoring to the Libraries. Other goals were to acknowledge and support student employees' existing practice of providing informal research help to their peers, to encourage consistency of service among the student employees, to expand the availability of late-night and weekend research assistance, and to give librarians more time to do course-integrated instruction and advanced research consultations. We also suspected that students might be more comfortable asking for help from a peer than from a professional librarian.

The Libraries' peer mentoring program is split into two parts: the Basic Information Service program, which trains all students who work at any public service desk to provide basic information literacy assistance and referrals for more in-depth help, and the Reference Assistant program, through which a small number of Reference Assistants are trained to provide more advanced research help.

BASIC INFORMATION SERVICE

We equipped the 40 student staff working at our four public service desks to offer "Basic Information Service." We start the training with the verified assumption that the student employees have already learned about doing research through information literacy sessions in their courses, so this instruction

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is to provide a review, to fill in knowledge gaps, and to ensure consistency among student library workers.

For the training, we meet in a computer lab so that the session is as interactive as possible. We typically have eight to fifteen new public desk student employees each academic year. Usually two instructors provide the training, which enables one instructor to lead while the other roams the room, ensuring the students are following along.

We start with an overview of our website and catalog searching techniques. We spend the bulk of our time focusing on the Libraries' research tools, such as subject guides and the Journal Finder (Serials Solutions 360 Core). (The full list of sixteen training topics is available in Appendix 3.) We conclude the session with a review using a "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" game – complete with dramatic music. There are fifteen questions in the game, so we are able to include a question covering almost every point of our training. Candy is given out for correct answers. This is a good way to ensure that the students understood the training, and to remind us if we left out a key point.

The major focus of this training is to equip and encourage these students to offer basic information service to patrons. Mentoring fellow classmates with basic research questions adds a new dimension our student staff positions, and we want them to feel comfortable directing students to resources as they begin research. We also expect these student workers to know when and how to refer a patron to a librarian or other person.

And while our primary focus is to equip these students to teach others, we are pleased that some have told us that they also found it helpful in their own research. "I realized I have not fully utilized the vast resources I have at reach," one student commented after the training.

We follow up to our Basic Information Training in several ways. Every few weeks we give the students a couple of sample reference questions. (Do we have access to a specific issue of *Economic Journal*? What databases do we have related to the field of religious studies?) We encourage them to think of at least one way to arrive at an answer, and to let us know if they get stumped. We also drop by the desks for face-to-face follow-up and remain alert as we witness encounters at the desks. A recent interaction is typical: a student approached the desk, asking the student worker about how he could get started on an anthropology paper he had due soon. The desk employee asked if the patron knew about our subject guides. When told "no," she rotated her computer monitor so the patron could see it, and animatedly pointed out the resources available on our website. The patron lit up, exclaiming, "Thanks! That's just what I needed!" This is exactly what we hoped to accomplish with this service.

REFERENCE ASSISTANT PROGRAM

From the early stages of planning our Reference Assistant (RA) program, the overriding goal has been to create

"desirable and meaningful" positions for our new student staff members as well as a helpful, reliable service for the Grinnell's students, faculty and staff. To recruit applicants, we share the brief job description in Appendix 1 with selected faculty colleagues across campus and then invite recommended students to apply. The RA positions have become sought after jobs as interested students apply specifically for these positions after seeing an RA at work or being helped by one. We also review applications in our general application pool for student staff positions and ask librarians and current RAs for recommendations.

We send applicants for RA jobs a set of interview questions ahead of time; we want students to prepare for the interview by reflecting a bit and then talking with us. Our interview questions (see Appendix 2) are tied to the job description and cover standard topics such as academic research and customer service experience. During interviews, we also discuss applicants' awareness of students' tendencies and needs with research, ways to make reference more appealing to our patrons, and what they would most like to learn in order to succeed as an RA.

When hiring RAs, we strive for balance across the academic divisions (humanities, social sciences, and sciences). However, to date, all but one of the RAs have been social sciences majors. The remaining RA has a double major in psychology (science) and art history (humanities). Thus, one of our goals for the RA program for the next year is to recruit another RA from the science division. Foreign language skills prove helpful with literary, historical and music research, for instance, and our current RAs have strong skills in Spanish, French, Russian, Ukrainian, Hindi, and Nepali.

RAs undergo ten hours of training with librarians early in the semester they begin working. Having several librarians help train our RAs provides a variety of points of view and allows for librarians and RAs to become acquainted with one another and for mentoring to begin. RA training also includes opportunities for shadowing both librarians and other RAs at work at the reference desk.

RAs work an afternoon shift weekly plus one or more evening shifts. The afternoon shifts facilitate further contact with librarians and library staff, while the evening shifts extend our reference desk hours until midnight. Librarians and RAs share a half-hour overlap at the reference desk during evening shifts which encourages conversation regarding reference questions received and another opportunity for mentoring.

Librarians and RAs have weekly, hour-long meetings with an alternating format: one week we review progress on projects, discuss any challenging reference questions from the previous week, and have training on topics such as statistics and data, primary sources, and humanities and science reference resources and representative questions. The following week, the RAs spend the meeting time collaborating and working on projects.

Within our profession, reference work is an accepted form of instruction. Accordingly, we are pleased that our RAs

can contribute to Grinnell's information literacy work. From the start of their training, the RAs are encouraged to help students articulate and develop research strategies and to use *Doing Research* as a resource and teaching tool. While we provide ongoing training to the RAs on resources and search techniques, we also strive to honor the ways in which our RAs approach researching the topics their classmates bring to the reference desk. For instance, a student patron recently asked a librarian at the reference desk for help finding law cases related to non-mandated programs created under No Child Left Behind. The librarian led the patron to the legal section of LexisNexis and found several cases. One of RAs had arrived early for his shift, overheard his classmate's question, listened to the librarian's recommendation, and toward the end of the consultation offered Google Scholar's "legal opinions and journals" search as an option. This is an example of a librarian and an RA collaboratively teaching a student, but also teaching one another varied options for research.

Another way RAs enrich our information literacy work is through outreach and promotion of library resources and services. RAs work with librarians to develop and design a variety of ways to bring collections, databases and library services to the attention of our campus community. Several designs have been used for both advertisements in the *Scarlet & Black* (our campus newspaper) and in posters hung in the library and around campus. The RAs also help distribute these posters around campus and work with the advertising manager of the *Scarlet & Black* to publish ads. Librarians and RAs both post research tips, information about new resources and announcements for upcoming events to the Libraries' Facebook news feed. Additionally, the RAs have helped us create multimedia versions of some of the content from our *Doing Research* pages. During the spring 2011 semester, RAs created a three-minute video on basic searching in our catalog, which we've uploaded to the college's YouTube Channel. RAs selected the topic, used Adobe Captivate to create the video, and discussed drafts with librarians during RA meetings. Presently, the RAs are working on an advanced catalog search video, and have suggested that our third video focus on evaluation of sources. Grinnell's librarians can use these videos in the fall with classes as a way of preparing for information literacy sessions.

In the future, we'll be asking the RAs to write a statement of their mentoring philosophy as a way for them to reflect on their work and for us to understand and improve their training and experiences at our reference desk.

OUTCOMES

We have been pleased with the quantity, variety and depth of the reference questions our RAs have received and answered. Since we began the service in October 2009, the RAs have helped over 300 patrons. Although RAs tend to work at less busy times, and hence to answer fewer questions per hour than the librarians, they seem to be asked questions at a roughly comparable rate when adjusting for the number of patrons in the building at the time. For example, RAs only answer about half as many questions between 11:00pm and midnight as librarians

answer between 8:00 and 9:00, but our patron counts show that the number of patrons in the library drops by a similar amount between those hours.

Patrons do not seem hesitant to ask RAs complex reference questions. The following three actual questions are representative:

"Where can I find data on hybrid car sales?"

"Does the library have a picture of a chimpanzee's insides?"

"I need articles concerning the role of sports in the assimilation and identity formation of immigrants."

We are also happy with the results of the RAs' efforts to promote information literacy in student-oriented media such as Facebook and YouTube. Given the demographics of the Libraries' fans on Facebook, we estimate that approximately ten percent of Grinnell students are fans of the Libraries. We usually see a handful of click-throughs from Facebook to the Libraries' Web site every month, and in one case we saw increased usage of a specific resource (Refworks) after promoting it on Facebook (although we don't have any proof that the Facebook promotion caused the increase). In addition, the RAs' catalog searching screencast received 172 views in its first two months on YouTube.

FUTURE PLANS

The Libraries' peer mentoring program fits into a campus-wide peer mentoring initiative coordinated by ARC. Since the Libraries started their peer mentoring program, the Writing Lab began embedding peer mentors in writing-intensive classes and the newly-founded Data Analysis and Social Inquiry Lab started using peer mentors to support inquiry-based learning in the social sciences. The expansion of peer-mentoring programs has raised awareness about the common aspects of mentoring pedagogy across disciplines and has inspired the ARC members to increase coordination. ARC will run a workshop in the summer of 2011 to help faculty think about how to integrate peer mentors into their courses, and there are plans for a common peer mentor training in the fall of 2011. The Libraries will be active participants in these efforts; as we learned from the early adopters of peer mentoring programs on our campus, we hope that other academic resource centers on campus can draw on our experiences as they explore launching their own peer mentoring programs.

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APPENDIX 1: REFERENCE ASSISTANT JOB DESCRIPTION

For the 2011-2012 academic year, Grinnell College Libraries (GCL) will hire and train two student Reference Assistants to work ten hours each week. Reference Assistant (RA) duties include afternoon and evening shifts at Burling Library's reference desk helping patrons with directional, basic and more in-depth information questions plus working with librarians to develop and promote GCL's reference service. RAs complete training on topics such as the use of reference sources, GCL catalog and web pages to support research, databases and indexes, web searching, and reference desk and library procedures. Candidates must be second-year Grinnell students by the time they begin work as a Reference Assistant; have successful customer service and academic research experience; and facility with Microsoft Office Suite and interest in online social networking tools. Work experience in a library is welcomed but not required. As a Category III student position, Reference Assistants are paid \$8.85 an hour.

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR REFERENCE ASSISTANT APPLICANTS

- 1) What interests you in this position?
- 2) Describe your customer service experience: what was enjoyable and challenging?
- 3) Describe how you like to do research (we're not looking for a librarian answer here).
- 4) Describe research processes that students tend to use. Can librarians and reference assistants draw on any of these approaches as we help students at the reference desk?
- 5) After a training period, reference assistants will work some of the time alone at Burling's reference desk. Describe a situation in which you've worked alone and with little direct supervision.
- 6) Explain how you'd help a student who:
 - a. Didn't have a clear research topic.
 - b. Wants more information and research options after you have shown them all the resources and search techniques you know.
- 7) What are some good ways of making reference service more appealing, visible and useful for Grinnell's students? For instance, do you think Facebook or texting would be good ways for students to access reference services?
- 8) You'll complete two weeks of training before working at Burling's reference desk. What would you most like to learn to help you succeed as a reference assistant?

APPENDIX 3: BASIC INFORMATION SERVICE TRAINING CHECKLIST

Training goals: all students working at the Libraries' public service desks will A) be able to answer directional and basic information questions and B) know when and how to refer a student for more in-depth help.

A) Basic website and catalog searching

1. _____ My Account features: *checked out item, renewing items, ILL status.*
2. _____ Catalog searching: *“keyword” vs. “subject” on sleep AND dreams,*
3. _____ Request Materials: *when checked out, not available yet, etc.*
4. _____ Connecting from Off Campus, Off-campus access links

B) Research pages [goal: point to the webpage and basic use.]

5. _____ Doing Research: *a progression to guide your academic work*
6. _____ Subject Guides: *pick guide useful for your academic major*
7. _____ Database A-Z List: *briefly review and search a database.*
8. _____ “.PDF full-text” and “Search for full text:” *follow links in search results.*
9. _____ ILL: *if GCL doesn't have the article, chapter, or book.*
10. _____ Journal Finder: *do we have access to Southern Review?*

C) Referrals

11. _____ Why important? *We want to help students learn, so if you can't help try to find someone else who may be able to.*
12. _____ When to refer? How to refer?
You may refer a patron for additional help when...
 - You don't know the answer to their question
 - You're uncertain if you've fully answered their question
 - A student's question exceeds your level of training or comfort
13. _____ Find a Librarian link: *librarians available via ref desk, on call, IM, texting, email, phone, by appt.*
14. _____ Library Lab form: *research consultation with librarian*
15. _____ Consulting Librarians page: *each librarian helps several academic departments.*
16. _____ Library hours and calendars: *find out when libraries open, services available.*