Technology, Teaching and Faculty: Collaborations that Work

Valla McLean and Carolee Pollock

Background

Teaching librarians and faculty share the job of teaching students to identify, locate, assess, and evaluate information. Information literacy is not only a necessary skill for success at college but also has practical application to students' lives outside of college. One way of ensuring that students learn information literacy skills is by dedicating class time to teaching these skills as well as the various library resources students need to complete their assignments. At MacEwan this instruction has often taken the form of a single class, taught in the library. Many librarians at MacEwan teach a number of these "one-shot" sessions over the course of a semester. Students are often apathetic or even resistant to this type of library instruction. A student may have experienced "one-shot" sessions for multiple courses, often with duplicate content. Students today, many of whom are computer literate, are often over-confident about the effectiveness of their research skills. This over-confidence leads them to believe further instruction is not necessary, yet for many their technological skills outweigh their critical thinking skills. The once a semester research and library skills session also requires the librarian to cover too much information in a short class, sometimes as little as fifty minutes. Retention for the students becomes problematic at best. Yet faculty members are reluctant to take time away from content delivery classes for more than one library session. Librarians also feel rushed and struggle to develop effective lesson plans and achieve measurable outcomes. So, we developed a different instructional strategy at MacEwan in order to create a more effective and satisfactory learning experience for our students.

McLean (History and Philosophy Reference Librarian) and
Pollock (History Instructor)
Grant MacEwan College [Edmonton, Alberta]

This strategy is a multifaceted approach to information literacy instruction that involves collaboration between college departments, the use of technology and the exploration of non-traditional teaching spaces. Together a librarian and a humanities instructor developed an instructional plan which included just-in-time library instruction offered in the students' classroom, backed up by the creation of a library research tool: a portable and customizable learning module in the course management system, Blackboard. Four topic-specific 10 to 20 minute lectures are delivered by the librarian in the students' classroom over the course of a semester. The topic-specific lectures are timed to provide the library skills needed to complete a particular aspect of their assignments. The library research module, embedded in the instructor's Blackboard course, provides students with quick and direct access to course-related library information and resources. In the classroom, the librarian teaches out of the module. While using this tool the librarian and instructor use interactive tutorials and active learning methods to engage the students. Students can then access the library resources module online, supplementing the in-class library instruction.

In addition, we hold one class in the library computer lab where students learn how to use the specific periodical database most relevant to the students' studies. Students come prepared with topics and keywords for obtaining journal articles for their bibliography assignment which is due the following week.

Just-in Time Instruction

We believe students are more likely to be receptive to library instruction or services when they have immediate and concrete information needs. Malcolm Knowles (1984) argued learners are more receptive to learning a new task or skill when they have a real-life need or practical reason to know something (p.56). So we decided to spread the traditional single library

class over the course of a semester in the form of a series of topic-specific 10 to 20 minute lectures. One expected benefit of just-in time instruction is greater retention. Students learn the skill and apply it to complete an assignment within a week or so. In addition, repeated visits to the classroom by the librarian help to build a rapport between librarian and student.

Students expect to find the information they need quickly and effortlessly. With a library research module, students are only a click away from accessing library resources relevant to their specific course whenever and wherever they want to. The tool meets the needs of a variety of learners at a variety of levels of learners. It is self-paced so the beginner student can review as necessary while the advanced student can jump ahead. Today's students tend to be comfortable with content management systems such as Blackboard. The library resources tool embraces the pedagogical values of online learning by students and faculty while allowing librarians to capitalize on students' enthusiasm for technology (Costello, Lenholt, & Stryker, 2004, p.452).

LIBRARY RESOURCES MODULE

A general course objective for History courses taught at MacEwan is to develop and strengthen students' research and analytical skills and to have them put those skills to use in preparing a research paper. The library resources tool includes information on creating search strategies, finding books and journal articles, critically evaluating sources, accessing resources through interlibrary loan, avoiding plagiarism, citing sources in Chicago Style, and contacting help. When the librarian teaches from the module, and students can refer to the module, critical research skills are reinforced and practiced during the semester and integrated throughout the course.

Both the benefits and drawbacks of online learning or the hybrid method of instruction for learners are well articulated by a number of authors (Getty, Burd, Burns, & Piele 2000; Shank, & Dewald 2003). Students with access to a library resources module in Blackboard do not need to memorize the processes and tips demonstrated in a library session because they can refer to the references and tips within the module. Additionally, they do not need to keep track of paper handouts. Learning, therefore, becomes something done on the students' time. Students also have one more point of contact during their studies, a subject librarian. Drawbacks include technical difficulties that are inherent with using technology. Today's classrooms are a mix of young students coming to us directly from high school and mature students; some students are not comfortable navigating through this electronic landscape.

In developing the architecture of the module, we used some of the best practices for designing user-centered web applications. The needs, goals and objectives of the students were addressed through an analysis of the course outline and assignments and through discussions between the librarian and instructor. The items in the module were ordered in a logical sequence according to student tasks (see Appendix). The naming structure of the links and files in the module was also aligned to task and goals. We linked directly to web pages, primarily those of the MacEwan library, instead of creating static HTML pages within the module that might quickly become out of date or require constant maintenance.

ASSESSMENT

We used both quantitative and qualitative methods of evaluation in the assessment of this method of instruction. At the end of the first semester of this project a survey was conducted to address the timing and possible requirements for additional information in the module. User statistics gathered from Blackboard on the library resources tool reveal each of the components within the module are being used multiple times to varying degrees. Student evaluations reveal that students believe having access to the module through Blackboard "should be there for every subject and really helped." In addition, the timing of the classroom visits by the librarian pleases students who feel there is "nothing worse than having someone teach a subject after you've done your work." Having many visits also allowed some students to "digest and understand each step without being overwhelmed." "[M]ost of all it put a familiar face on [the librarian], and allowed [the student] to feel more comfortable to ask questions."

A pre-test was administered at the beginning of the most recent semester to assess the library competencies of the students. The results of the test were used to adapt the lesson plans of the short lectures and provided content for the session in the library lab. A post-test was used to determine which objectives were not met through the semester. These results will inform future lesson plans for this course.

CONCLUSION

Teaching librarians and faculty at academic institutions share many common goals. Exploring new methods of instruction, using technology and recognizing each other's expertise is one possible way to contribute to the success of our students. The collaborative effort and model of instruction discussed in this paper serves as a building block to further collaborations between college departments. A library resources module in Blackboard, for example, has great implications for distance education faculty, librarians and students. Further exploration of this hybrid learning environment by librarians may also incorporate other functionalities in Blackboard such as quizzes, chat and discussion boards.

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