

DOUBLE, TRIPLE, QUADRUPLE THE RECIPE: SERVE LIBRARY INSTRUCTION TO A CROWD (AND ASSESS IT, TOO!) WITH LIBGUIDES AND POLLEVERYWHERE

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

At the University of Wyoming (UW), as at numerous universities across the country, many courses have sections with well over one hundred students. The Wyoming state constitution requires instruction on government and, consequently, the American and Wyoming Government (POLS 1000) classes are some of the highest enrollment courses on UW's campus. Reaching a crowd can be difficult in courses this size. We had several objectives in this library activity: adding an active learning component to a large lecture course, transmission of specific content, and teaching research skills related to political information.

Large class sizes and the constraints imposed by auditoriums serving as classrooms need not prohibit the use of active learning techniques. In an article published in *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, Smith and Cardaciotto (2011) found that students in large lecture-based classes assigned active learning activities reported greater retention of and engagement with course material compared to students assigned content review activities, which suggests that it is truly worthwhile to find ways of integrating active learning in a lecture class.

A librarian visiting a large class may not be able to rely on the usual one-shot instruction methods. In a review of the literature and a survey of instruction librarians, Vander Meer,

Ring and Perez-Stable (2007) found that some ways librarians have dealt with classes of over 50 students include: creating a web guide or online tutorial for the class, breaking the class into smaller groups, establishing drop-in sessions for students to meet with a librarian, and using audience response devices. In recent years, many librarians have tried using "clickers" or other audience response systems in order to engage students in information literacy instruction sessions, mostly to positive effect (Adams & Howard 2009; Bronshteyn, 2010; Chan & Knight, 2010; Moniz, Eshleman, Jewell, Mooney, & Tran, 2010).

We wanted to promote engagement with the library space and with librarians, so we set up a combination of several of the strategies outlined in the literature: an online guide, a chance to drop in to the library for assistance, and discussion questions about the activity that students would answer via PollEverywhere (an audience response system that uses students' cellphones rather than clickers).

A RECIPE FOR ENGAGEMENT

One of the learning objectives of an introductory political science class is to assist students in their understanding of political news and information. Our library activity was based around finding information about political candidates and judging how to use that information. We also added a component that required students to visit the library and locate the section of books on political parties. The library assignment was divided in three parts (see Appendix): students identified sources that met their information needs, evaluated information sources for relevance and authority, and learned about additional information sources they may not have considered such as books in the library and online government information.

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On the first day of the assignment, we handed out worksheets and went over the questions. Then students were allowed to work independently or in groups to complete the activity. Students came to the next class meeting with their worksheets completed, which allowed us to spend most of class time discussing students' responses. Students submitted their answers through PollEverywhere (<http://www.poll Everywhere.com/>), which they had already been using throughout the course. As we discussed the responses to each question, the class actively participated. In large lecture classes students may be reluctant to speak, but this was not the case in our activity. Seeing other students' responses through PollEverywhere may have given individuals more confidence in their answers; we also asked students to discuss their answers in a group for a few minutes before submitting answers through PollEverywhere, which may have had an effect on willingness to speak. Students received participation points for completing the activity, and participation was verified through PollEverywhere registration.

The first question for students dealt with newspaper articles about presidential candidates. "Find a newspaper article about the 2012 presidential campaign with the library search tool. Read the article and decide: Would this article help you decide how to vote? Why or why not? Would you use this article in an academic research paper? Why or why not?" When students reported on the sources they used we were able to talk about different types of sources, including wire reports and newspaper editorials. Asking students whether they would use the article they found in an academic paper emphasized the use of different types of sources for different purposes. The discussion included talk on whether or not opinion pieces could be used in an academic paper.

Although most of the questions in the assignment dealt with online resources, we also wanted students to physically visit the library. For this part of the assignment students were instructed to locate the call numbers beginning with JF2112 in the university's Coe Library. This section is comprised of books on political parties. While the question we asked students was simply factual, the task enabled us to talk about browsing library stacks as a research tool.

The last set of questions covered the Federal Election Commission's website. Students researched political contributions made by Wyoming residents to both major parties and to individual candidates. At the time that we conducted this activity Wyomingites had donated more money to the Republican Party, but Barack Obama had received the most donations to any one candidate. First students answered the basic fact information, but we also asked them to analyze that information when we asked if this information was surprising.

The answers to this question resulted in discussing a topic we hadn't planned: civil discourse. PollEverywhere automatically displays answers as they come in, and students laughed at responses such as "[Obama's] an idiot," and "Most Wyoming people are stupid." Since students' responses are anonymous to each other, we were able to talk about why this type of talk is not helpful in a democracy without singling out a particular student's answer. PollEverywhere's ability to accept

free responses allowed the discussion to develop from the students' answers, not just our questions.

RESULTS IN THE CLASSROOM

Many of the questions we asked students to respond to were meant to stimulate reflection and discussion, and they were definitely effective in that sense. A few factual questions measured students' ability to find and interpret information, and at least 80% of students responded correctly. This is encouraging, as it demonstrates that students were able to complete the online exercise and understand the information that they found.

In addition to the discussion questions used in class, we also asked students some questions about the activity itself. When asked if they learned something new from the library activity, 63% responded affirmatively. We also asked students if they learned something they will use in other classes (56% affirmative) or in their non-academic lives (60% affirmative). These questions address two of our major concerns in information literacy: are students learning transferable skills and are they becoming lifelong learners. Based on these self-reports, many students are moving in that direction.

Figure 1: Student responses to a question about transferable skills

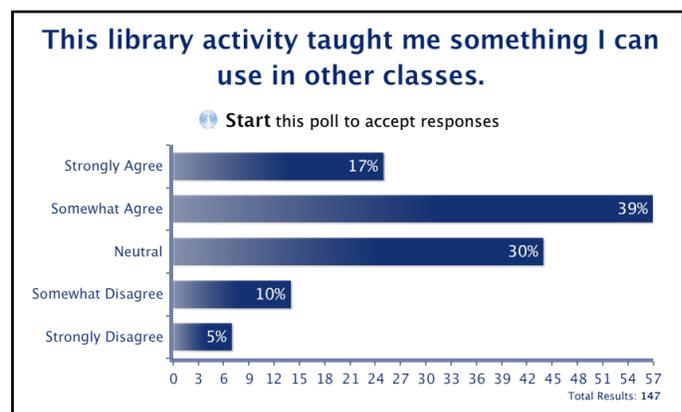
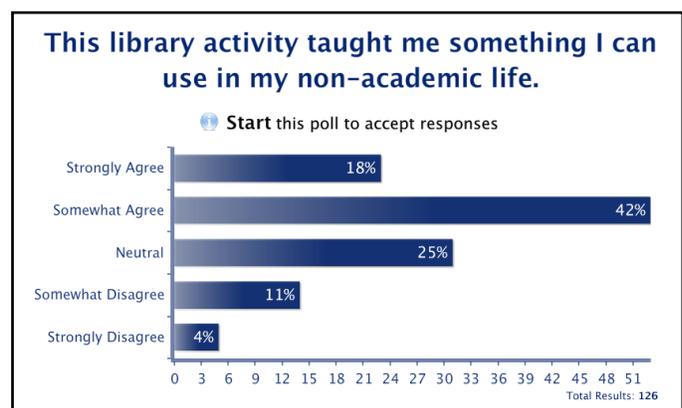


Figure 2: Student responses to a question about lifelong learning



We asked one open-ended evaluative question, attempting to learn if students found the activity helpful. We received 128 responses and coded them as positive, negative or neutral; we received 91 positive responses (71%), 24 negative (19%), and 13 neutral (10%). Some of the positive comments said, in a general way, that the activity was helpful, that students would like to do another activity of this type, or that they learned more about library resources. More specific comments were, “It helped me broaden my knowledge of the tools I can use to make a political decision” and “I learned a lot about some of the candidates.” These comments point to the larger good that information literacy instruction can do, helping to develop an informed citizenry.

Students gave us some suggestions for improving the activity next time we do it. Some had a hard time finding full text of the articles they wanted and would have liked a demonstration. Other students suggested that the activity and following discussion would have been more useful if more focused on a specific topic. We could certainly choose a particular issue and have students compare candidates’ views on that issue or have students compare two different political analyses. It’s a thoughtful suggestion that we will consider next time. The negative comments clustered around two main themes: 1) they already knew the concepts that the library activity was meant to teach or 2) they would prefer to take notes and prepare for exams instead of learning concepts. The first issue, that students were already familiar with these skills, is one that comes up in evaluations of other library instruction sessions as well. At University of Wyoming, much of our library instruction is offered in 1000-level classes, so even first-year students in this class had probably met with a librarian before. We work to make library instruction experiences distinct, useful, and engaging, but students may find some elements repetitive. As to the second issue, that students would prefer to take notes and prepare for exams, some literature (as well as classroom experience) suggests that students are at times resistant to active learning strategies that require engagement. It’s easier to sit back, listen to a lecture, and make notes from the PowerPoint slides than to search for and evaluate information independently.

At the end of the semester, students in this class completed the course evaluations that are standard throughout the college. Although students were not specifically asked about class activities or about the library, at least two respondents mentioned the library: “The library activity was the best I’ve had so far (and I’ve had a lot of library assignments)” and “I believe it was helpful to get familiar with the library.” We were pleased to see that at the end of a 16-week semester, students remembered and valued the library activity that they completed in the eighth week of the class.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, we found this activity to be a positive addition to a large lecture course. The openness of the PollEverywhere system allowed for a discussion which was more likely to have been found in a small class instead of one with approximately

200 students. With a few improvements this could be a valuable addition to many courses. For example, a suggestion that students had was to make a clearer connection between the goals of the assignment and the overall course. It’s vital that students see the relevance of the activity. Also, in a subsequent activity, we would mix up groups of students. While discussion was well-received and vibrant, we felt that it could have been fuller if students were sitting by strangers rather than their friends because they would have been less likely to get off topic.

When providing feedback on the library activity, one student said, “I enjoyed the discussion most of all. Having open dialogue is far more productive than constant note taking.” In a fiercely partisan environment *and* an election year, we feel that fostering informed dialogue on political issues is one of the most important things we can do in the classroom. Working together to create this activity helped us meet learning goals regarding information and civic literacy, vitally important literacies for democracy.

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APPENDIX

POLS 1000 Library Assignment (see <http://libguides.uwyo.edu/pols1000>)

Introduction to Assignment

Where do you get your political information? How good is it? How do you decide who or what to vote for? This guide will give you a series of exercises that require you to find and evaluate information. You'll need to write down your responses to the 10 questions in this guide and take those responses to class on Thursday, October 13th in order to participate in the lecture on that day.

If you have questions, ask a librarian by using the contact information in the box on the left or come to the library open lab session on Wednesday, October 12th from 3-4pm in Coe 218.

Find a newspaper article

Go to the [library homepage](#) and do a search in the "Research Starting Point" search box for "campaign 2012" or for a specific candidate who is running for office in 2012 (e.g., Michelle Bachmann). Then click on "Newspaper Article" on the left under Content Type to limit your list of results.

Skim through your list of results and click on the article that seems most interesting.

1. Record the **author's name**
2. Record the **name of the newspaper** that the article came from (e.g., *The Houston Chronicle*, *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, etc.).

Evaluate news articles

3. Read the article you found in the first exercise. Would this article help you decide how to vote? Why or why not?
4. Would you use this article in an academic research paper? Why or why not?
5. There are many criteria to consider when choosing useful sources. Some criteria are: accuracy, authority, bias, audience level, and currency. Record, in a word or phrase, why you would use or reject the article you found.

Find a book

Go to Level 3 in the Coe Library stacks and find this call number range: **JF 2112**. Skim the shelves and choose the book in this area that looks most interesting.

6. Record the call number.
7. Take a photo of the book cover or write down the title.
8. What is the subject or theme of all the books in this area?

Government information

The duties of the [Federal Election Commission](#) or FEC, which is an independent regulatory agency, are to disclose campaign finance information, to enforce the provisions of the law such as the limits and prohibitions on contributions, and to oversee the public funding of Presidential elections.

9. Go to the [FEC website](#) and read the page "About the FEC." What did you learn?
10. Look at the Campaign Finance map for the presidential election, and look at Wyoming contributions to presidential campaigns. Are there any surprises for you on this map? To which party have most Wyomingites donated? To which candidate?