

Eastern Michigan University

**DigitalCommons@EMU**

---

LOEX Conference Proceedings 2015

LOEX Conference Proceedings

---

2022

## **Does It Really Take 50 Minutes? Insights from Faculty Focus Groups on Delivering Library Instruction in a General Education Program**

Jacqueline Sipes

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.emich.edu/loexconf2015>

---

# DOES IT REALLY TAKE 50 MINUTES? INSIGHTS FROM FACULTY FOCUS GROUPS ON DELIVERING LIBRARY INSTRUCTION IN A GENERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

JACQUELINE SIPES

## BACKGROUND

To meet the requirements of Temple University's General Education program, undergraduates must complete eleven courses in nine different areas. Over the past decade, Temple Libraries' subject librarians have provided robust academic support to the General Education program. Analytical Reading and Writing, a foundational General Education course that students are encouraged to enroll in during their first year, requires library research. Each semester librarians deliver two 50-minute course-integrated workshops to each section of Analytical Reading and Writing. Students must also complete seven Gen Ed "Breadth" courses in Arts, Human Behavior, Race & Diversity, Science and Technology, U.S. Society, and World Society. While there is no required library workshop for the breadth courses, librarians still provide some level of academic support. Support can take the form of in-person user education, assisting with assignment and curriculum design, providing a course research guide, or research consultations. The level of support and involvement is up to each individual subject librarian and course instructor; however, there are programs such as our Information Literacy Cross Teams that have paired librarians and faculty together over the years to formally redesign or implement an information literacy component in the breadth courses.

As the Education librarian, I support a high number of breadth courses. There are seven Gen Ed breadth courses taught within the College of Education, each of which has five or more sections each semester. I also provide instruction in our Analytical Reading and Writing program, and for other courses in Education. In 2013-14 I delivered in-person instruction for 27 breadth courses, bringing my total instruction load to 71 sessions. At the beginning of each semester, I reach out individual course instructors and offer an array of supports to the breadth courses including a 5 minute librarian introduction, a 20 minute overview of resources, a 50-75 minute in-depth workshop, a course-specific research guide, and one-on-one or group consultations. Most instructors request the 50+ minute in-depth workshop.

I tailor instruction for the breadth courses to a semester-long research project on a trend or issue related to education or adolescent development. In addition to completing a proposal and literature review, the projects require students to conduct original research using interviews or other methods. In some cases the content I teach overlaps with what students learn in the required library workshops in Analytical Reading and Writing. Database searching and source evaluation are the two primary areas of overlap. This overlap occurs because the instructor requests it or because of the wide range of students' skills and abilities. Because most of the General Education curriculum is non-sequential, many students enrolled in breadth courses either have not completed Analytical Reading and Writing or need reinforcement of the skills gained in that course. Some faculty are also not aware of the required library workshops in Analytical Reading and Writing.

Collaboration with faculty tends to happen prior to or during instruction. In some cases, I ask faculty to poll their students to see what percentage have completed Analytical Reading and Writing; however, in most cases the percentage is not high enough to warrant excluding instruction on database searching and source evaluation. Though it is evident that students have varying levels of experience with library research, I wanted to get a better understanding of why instructors most often requested the 50- minute session and how I might offer alternatives. Fifty to seventy-five minutes of in-person instruction for 25 sections is time-consuming, yet I still have no interaction with dozens of sections of the breadth courses I support. My idea was to move towards in-person

instruction sessions that were brief, yet effective, and supplemented by tutorials or activities that could happen outside of the library workshop.

In order to make decisions about decreasing the length of sessions and offering supplemental supports, I wanted to know which concepts faculty perceived as crucial to student success, which concepts needed to be covered in person, and which they felt could be covered outside of class using online tutorials. I planned two focus groups to gather feedback directly from faculty. Faculty feedback on shorter in-person “mini-lessons” and alternative formats of library instruction, such as tutorials, could also inform efforts to scale library support across the General Education curriculum and reach more sections.

## **FOCUS GROUPS**

Recruitment for the first focus group was done over email at the end of the Fall 2014 semester, when students’ recently submitted final projects were fresh in instructors’ minds. Four participants who teach General Education breadth courses were successfully recruited for a session that took place in December 2014. I am currently recruiting for a second session at the end of the Spring 2015 semester.

Participants in the first session included adjunct faculty and graduate student instructors who had previously received in-person library instruction from me in their courses. I served as the session moderator. I met with participants in a small library conference room and refreshments were served. The session was slotted for 60-90 minutes on a weekday after classes ended. I recorded the session with the consent of the participants. The Assessment Librarian was present as a note-taker. During the session, I read from a prepared script to ensure that all questions were asked and that the session did not go over the allotted time.

I prepared 11 questions and a script to guide the discussion during the focus group. An early draft of discussion questions was sent to the Head of Reference and Instructional Services, the Instruction Team Leader Librarian, and the Assessment Librarian for feedback. The list of the questions, included here in Appendix A, was sent to the participants prior to the focus group session.

## **FINDINGS**

The session recording was transcribed and analyzed according to the topical categories suggested in the discussion questions. The categories were instructors’ impressions of past instruction sessions, quality of student work, and changes in the format of delivery of instruction. As I analyzed the transcripts, I also noted themes that emerged across categories. The two emergent themes, balancing skill and content in General Education and recognizing scholarship as a conversation are discussed here as well. Responses were analyzed for agreement, disagreement, and nuance between similar responses.

### **Impressions of Past Instruction Sessions**

The focus group session began with an overview of the purpose and what I hoped to learn. In the first part, participants were asked to comment on what had worked well and what had been missing from previous workshops. Helping students narrow topics, identify credible sources, and find scholarly sources were all discussed as being helpful to students. One participant remarked that using Gale Virtual Reference Library, a reference resource, helped students with brainstorming and topic development. Another participant noted the importance of activities and topics that demonstrate for students that they may not know as much as they thought about research, providing anecdotal evidence from a senior who reported our library workshop as the first one in which she learned how to narrow database results to scholarly articles only. Interactivity and holding workshops in the library’s instruction lab were also regarded positively. When asked what was missing from the library workshop, responses varied, but all participants agreed that students needed more help understanding the reasons for citation.

Unprompted, participants also discussed alternative formats of instruction. One participant said she would like to bring me in for a five-minute introduction and two agreed that they would like to have students complete a “pre-test to test their library literacy skills.” Participants also acknowledged their own role in delivering help to prepare students for library instruction. One participant commented, “and if there is something you would like from us... if there’s something you’d like us to prepare our students with. I never really thought of that before, but if there’s something like a mini-assignment or video that would be great.” Another participant commented that she “love(d) this idea of having them do a self-check exercise around their skills or having an activity outside of class where they use that website [research guide] to answer some questions.”

### **Quality of Student Work**

When asked whether the library workshops had an impact on the quality of student work, participants did not have a direct answer. One participant remarked that “having met you, being able to say [to the student], ‘I can’t help you with this but there’s somebody designated that knows the library’” was helpful when she was assisting students who were struggling. Participants also

discussed their experiences working with English language learners and the broad range of writing abilities in their classes generally. One participant reported that she felt particularly ill-equipped as an instructor to help English language learners.

The remainder of discussion centered on student difficulties with narrowing research topics, source integration, and citation. When asked which areas students struggle with most, participants agreed that students experienced difficulty with formulating a research question, narrowing a topic, and in-text citation. When discussing citation, three participants expressed the challenges of getting students to integrate sources with their own ideas. One participant reported that her students “enter the research project with their answer...so, they’re...finding sources to support a pre-existing thing.” She felt it would be helpful for the librarian to discuss how to use and integrate sources, and that building cohesiveness as a team, librarian and instructor, might help solidify the concept for students. Another participant stated, “I find that my students make a lot of assumptions and they don’t look for information to support those assumptions.” She remarked that “helping them find information to support their thinking” is essential. Another participant lamented that in addition to receiving student work with no citations, she also receives work that relies too heavily upon citations.

There was consensus that it would be useful for the librarian to offer mini-assignments or lessons to support student learning in formulating research questions, narrowing a topic, and in-text citation. Each participant also commented on the importance of having the librarian in the classroom in-person, at least briefly, to set the stage for research work.

### **Format and Delivery of Instruction**

Questions in this category prompted participants to think both about the format and length of instruction. I provided examples of alternative formats to the 50-75 minute one-shot and asked which information literacy concepts they felt should be covered in face-to-face instruction and which could be covered in an online format such as a tutorial. I intended to show two examples of online tutorials—a video and a step-by-step “Guide on the Side” tutorial; however, due to time constraints I was unable to.

By this point, participants had already responded positively to the idea of mini-assignments and tutorials to help build students’ research skills. Participants expanded on these comments, acknowledging the challenge of getting students to watch a video outside of class, and brainstormed ways to ensure that students engaged with a tutorial. One participant said that she would be willing to show a tutorial during class and use Poll Everywhere to gauge comprehension. Another echoed that she would use Google Surveys to make tutorial viewing interactive. Another participant remarked that a feature that confirms completion would allow her to brand it as homework and ensure that students complete it. However, another noted that her students would be unlikely to complete a homework assignment that was worth only a small portion of their final grade. This participant liked the idea of shorter, in-person mini-lessons, and requested that I deliver two sessions 15-20 minutes in length on topic development and citations.

Responses varied when I asked which skills were best suited to face-to-face instruction with the librarian and which might be offloaded to a tutorial. Two participants agreed that writing research questions was a critical skill to cover in class. Another participant identified evaluating sources for credibility as a topic that should be covered in class, while another commented that source evaluation and database demonstration could be covered through tutorials. There was also some disagreement over whether citation could be covered in a tutorial alone with one participant saying that it would need to be reinforced in person.

I also presented the participants with a list of options such as offering shorter mini-sessions. Three participants in total expressed that they were amenable to the idea of a shorter, 25-minute overview by the librarian, followed by research or group work on an assignment in a computer lab.

## **EMERGENT THEMES**

### **Balancing Skill and Content in General Education Courses**

Participants expressed frustration with balancing teaching “skill and content” in General Education courses, and there was some disagreement about the extent of the instructor’s role in developing research and writing skills in General Education. Participants discussed “skills” as relating to research, writing, and reading comprehension, and content as the themes and topics covered in the course. Skill development is challenging for instructors, especially when the range of skills varies between students in a single class. Early on in the session, one participant observed, “the tension that I feel as an instructor...when you’re teaching a gen ed., it’s balancing skill and content.” Two participants wondered to what extent it is their role to bring students up to speed on what they perceived as basic skills such as citation. There was an expectation among three of the participants that students arrive in the General Education breadth courses having developed research skills in previous courses. One of them mentioned that she invites students who are struggling with skills, such as source integration, to one-on-one meetings for help. The fourth participant disagreed with the expectation that students already possess these skills, and commented that “Gen Ed is the place where you’re supposed to develop these skills.” She also expressed a belief that it is her role to help students’ develop these skills:

When I started teaching [not at Temple] and my students didn't have the writing skills that they thought... I was like 'well it's not my job' and I realized 'no, it is my job' they need this in every single course. Even in [non-General Education] there is a component of skills-based learning.

### **Recognizing Scholarship as a Conversation**

Another topic that came up across the session was students' capacity to recognize scholarship as a conversation. One participant discussed the difficulty of persuading students to "think of themselves as being scholars...and as contributing something real." She commented that getting students to understand that engaging with the voices of others is a standard practice in scholarship, and not just an arbitrary assignment requirement: "this is what is expected of you now...as researchers. This is...universal whether your instructor asks you to or not when you're in your professional world."

Inability to recognize scholarship as a practice with certain conventions, such as citation, also has implications for source citation and integration. One participant noted that her students, "just don't really get that it's plagiarism if you do not cite where you began thinking about this and where the conversation started." Another participant suggested that just after students complete their online training on ethics in human subjects research might be a good time for the librarian and instructor to start the conversation about developing a researcher identity. Though all participants teach courses with a human subjects research component, only the one participant required students to complete the online training.

### **DISCUSSION & FUTURE NEXT STEPS**

Participants viewed mini-assignments, pre-tests, and tutorials that gauge student skill level or cover a specific learning goal in a very positive light, suggesting that these tools can be used as a viable supplement to some aspects of the current in-person library workshop. Participants in this focus group also expressed willingness to deliver assignments or tutorials outside of the in-person library workshop, suggesting they view skill building as a collaborative effort. Though there were some differing views on what should be covered in-person, it was clear that these participants welcomed a combination of instructional modes. Learning more about what online tutorials should look like and how to deliver them, possibly along with other supports, will be explored in the follow-up focus groups. Delivery of these supports could also be explored with the faculty coordinators of each individual course.

A limitation of focus groups is that data gathered cannot always be generalized to the larger population. While all of the participants in this focus group responded with positivity to using learning objects to reinforce learning or cover basic skills, mini-assignments or pre-tests to gauge students' information literacy skills, and shorter in-person sessions, these approaches are inherently easier to implement in courses where the librarian has an existing relationship with the instructor. Strategies for overcoming this barrier to entry could be discussed with course coordinators. Tutorials and mini-assignments also provide a potentially valuable solution for scaling user education across sections of General Education courses. However, I need to engage in the legwork of additional outreach to instructors or course coordinators to extend these approaches beyond the sections I already work with.

Due to time constraints in the first focus group, I did not ask the participants to view online tutorials. Mutually discovering alternatives to the in-person session, rather than just discussing them in the abstract, is a key component of what I would like to accomplish in these focus groups. In the second focus group, I plan to move discussion and exploration of alternative formats to the middle of the session. In the second focus group I will also ask questions about how the library can help with source integration and helping students to recognize scholarship as an ongoing conversation that they are actively contributing to.

Using and integrating sources effectively was clearly an area where students experience difficulty. However, little of the conversation focused on how the librarian might support the way students use sources. It was unclear in this focus group whether the instructors saw the librarian as having a role in helping with source integration. While one participant suggested that the librarian help students identify the parts of a scholarly article, librarians are poised to help students apply analytical reading skills to all types of sources. Reading and thinking about how to use the source may help clarify how to integrate the source. One approach might be to focus less on evaluation and source types and more on how sources are used. Reframing how we teach sources, with a renewed emphasis on helping students read sources for different kinds of authority and consider how the authority affects the way the source is used in an argument, might be one way to provide support for better source integration.

In the spring of 2015, I provided two mini-lessons for the participant who requested them. Each session, one on topic development and writing research questions and one on finding and citing sources, ran approximately 20 minutes. Other ideas generated in the session such as creating video tutorials, pre-tests, or mini-assignments will be explored for implementation in future semesters. Given the time-intensive nature of creating and maintaining tutorials, I plan to explore quick solutions such as producing animated gifs or brief videos. More in-depth tutorials would likely need to be created in conjunction with other librarians who are teaching these same skills and would require a wider departmental effort. Quick videos produced with software like Jing or animated gifs are something I can create and update with ease.

## **A FEW FOCUS GROUP BEST PRACTICES**

- When recruiting, recruit more participants than needed. Some of them may not be able to come.
- Have at least 6-10 participants per focus group session.
- Hold focus groups in comfortable, easy to find spaces.
- As the moderator, ask probing questions, summarize complex answers to clarify the comments for yourself and other participants.
- Questions should be ordered based on the importance to the research agenda; however, you should also start out with some low-stakes exploratory questions to get participants talking.
- As you are designing your questions, think about how you will use the data you gather.

LOEX PRE-PRINT

## REFERENCES

Stewart, D. W., Shamdasani, P. N., & Rook, D. W. (2007). Focus groups: Theory and practice (2nd; 2. uppl. ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Guidelines for Conducting a Focus Group. (2005). Retrieved from:  
[https://assessment.trinity.duke.edu/documents/How\\_to\\_Conduct\\_a\\_Focus\\_Group.pdf](https://assessment.trinity.duke.edu/documents/How_to_Conduct_a_Focus_Group.pdf)

LOEX PRE-PRINT

## APPENDIX A

1. Thinking back to either this semester, or previous ones, what worked best about our library instruction session(s)?
2. Is there anything you thought was perhaps missing from our session? Is there anything you can think of that might have improved the session — either additional content or other methods of instruction?
3. What are the ways library workshops had an impact on the quality of your students' research assignments?
4. What areas of the research process did you notice your students struggling with? (Examples might include: Finding sources, Evaluating sources, Citing, Integrating sources with their own thoughts and ideas)
5. Are there topics I cover in our sessions that you find need to be reinforced later, or that you perhaps find yourself answering questions about later in the semester?
6. What areas of the research process have students handled well?
7. What are the key research skills that you feel are important for me to cover when I visit your class?
8. I'm going to show you an example or two of research tutorials and I'd like to hear your reactions. Don't worry too much about the specific content of the tutorials -- these are not Temple tutorials -- perhaps think more about the format and how it could work with your students. (We'll briefly view the tutorials together).
9. What might be some specific concepts or skills that you think could be covered *outside* of our class time in tutorials like these?
10. In addition to moving some of the topics outside of class time, I am also interested in hearing your ideas about other formats for in-person sessions that may be more effective. I'm going to put a few of my ideas up on the screen -- I'd like to hear your feedback on any of these or on other ideas you have.
  - Short introductory librarian visit, 5-20 minutes with overview of the research guide and setting up individual consultations but with no demonstration or activities
  - 2-3 mini-sessions (15-25 minutes) a semester - cover fewer concepts per session (e.g. one mini-session for pre-search and topic development, one for database searching and finding sources, one for source evaluation and citing, etc.)
  - Librarian sends online learning object, such as a video or a research guide, prior to meeting and students get hands on practice with research before the visit
11. Do you have additional thoughts on other ways instruction could be delivered more effectively?