

Student Peer-Teaching for Freshman Orientation to the Library

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Is there a way to get freshmen involved in a library orientation before they are aware of the level of research that will be required of them? How can we get them to engage and participate instead of just sitting there possibly tuning out? Many colleges require freshman orientation (Boff & Johnson, 2002, Walsh, 2008) and typically one of the objectives of these first-year programs is to acquaint students with the services and resources they will need on campus. Since the library offers learning resources that are essential to the higher education experience, most orientation classes include a visit to the library. Several college libraries have developed different ways of introducing these new students to available resources. Some of these innovations include scavenger hunts, computer-assisted instruction (Web and CD-ROM), DVDs, and various forms of active learning (Boyd-Byrnes & McDermott, 2006, Germain, Jacobson, & Kaczor 2000). At Pittsburg State University (PSU), we have developed a peer-teaching walk-around tour that gets students involved and adds a kinesthetic dimension. This first visit is critical as the freshman's first exposure to the library can set his attitude/response for his college career and we want to make sure it is a success.

Goals and Background

While we are still working on achieving the much bigger, more comprehensive task of integrating information literacy into the curriculum, the goal of this first visit to the library is much more modest: to introduce students to the physical PSU library, especially library services, materials, and people. The objectives for introducing students to the physical library are:

- Have students meet librarians
- Have students feel comfortable in the library
- Make students aware of services that are available
- Show types and locations of materials
- Have students actively participate in their learning.

At PSU, a 6000-student regional university in Pittsburg, Kansas, all full-time freshmen are required to take a two-credit Freshman Experience (FE) course. There are 35 to 40 FE classes every Fall, and every FE class is limited to 27 students. As part of FE, one fifty-minute class session is devoted to a visit to the library.

In order to give the students a good overview, they visit six departments: Reference, Circulation, Special Collections & Archives, Periodicals, Government Documents, and Interlibrary Loan. We have developed color-coded handouts with 5-6 basic questions about each department, such as "What is 'Faculty Reserve' and how do I get items from there?" (Circulation), "If I approach the desk and the librarian looks busy, what should I do?" (Reference) and "What is Interlibrary Loan?" (ILL). Every student is handed only one of the six department handouts when they arrive. After a five-minute welcome and introduction from a librarian, the students are divided into small groups of three to four by color of handout. Thus, each student with a yellow sheet goes to Special Collections; each student with a blue sheet goes to Government Documents, etc. Once the student group is at their assigned department, a librarian gives a 10-minute presentation of key facts and figures about the department. Since these six sessions run concurrently, six librarians are required for each class session. After attending a 10-minute presentation, the class gathers back together as a big group in the lobby. Then we start the 25 minute tour with only one librarian facilitating. At each department in the tour, the students who talked to a librarian in that department tell their peers what they learned, using the questions on the handout as a crib sheet. Many students worry about speaking in front of class, but, as we tell them, we haven't lost one yet. Some groups divide the questions up and some just appoint one student as the spokesperson. The librarian facilitator adds anything missed or corrects anything the students did not understand and emphasizes one or two points for that department. The entire visit is over in about 45 minutes. The Library used to tour the students around the library while a librarian talked the whole time and research indicates that students would retain more from peer-teaching (Senecal & Fratantuano, 1994, Dabour, 1997). Under the newer peer-learning tour, in general, the students do very well and actively participate.

Student Survey and Evaluation of the Program

Afterward we have a three-question, 'one-minute survey' (Choinski & Emanuel, 2006). This feedback is very valuable. The questions are:

1. What is the most important point you learned during your class tour?

2. What important question about the Library remains unanswered for you?
3. What did you learn about the Library that was the most surprising to you?

The answers can be enlightening, frustrating, and very funny. This questionnaire helps us to emphasize next time information that may be getting lost and the results are used in yearly evaluations of the program by the reference librarians.

Some of the most common and a few of the more interesting answers we have received to Question 1 is that the librarians are helpful, friendly, and not “related to the boogie man.” Also, the students recognize the library is “essentially open 24 hours” because of internet access.

For Question 2, we have found that the questions that remain unanswered are usually questions that cannot be answered in this sort of forum, such as: “Where are the (World War II, psychology, nursing) books?” Previously, the most common unanswered question for was “Where are the restrooms?” even though we walk right by two sets of them. Now we make a point to point them out.

And Question 3 lets us know most students are surprised at the Special Collections & Archives and the Government Documents areas; they have no idea that a library has such specialized collections. Also, the size of our library is large compared to what our students are used to, as many are from small towns; this visit gives them a sense of the (comparatively) vast resources their new library has, while also making sure they know they are welcome to use all of it.

A student worker compiles the answers for each class and emails the results to the class teacher. Many teachers respond with gratitude for the session and for the feedback. The student worker also keeps track of the types of responses on a spreadsheet for each year. So for example, a glance at the spreadsheet will inform that for Fall 2007, the “most important thing learned” was “where to find materials/location of materials” by 188 students; “how to check out books” was important for 77 students; and “library hours” for 68 students. By categorizing and cataloging these responses systematically, we can easily track how each semester’s set of sessions went and make any adjustments to our color-coded handouts.

In terms of general feedback, the library portion of Freshman Experience is consistently one of the highest rated segments of the class according to end of semester surveys. Additionally, faculty comments frequently echo this response from one FE teacher:

“... As I said, I liked your plan where the students conduct the tour themselves. I felt [it] was more effective than the tours we have had in the past ...”

Laying the Groundwork

When we first began this peer-teaching program, there were several discussions among the librarians. While no one was against the idea, there were many concerns about how it was going to work out. For example, there were concerns about six librarians interrupting their normal work flow two or three times a day for several weeks, and whether this tour could be accomplished in the allotted fifty minutes. The discussions were very detailed, down to the tour route and what was going to be said by whom. After the first few tours when everyone saw how smoothly the classes ran, enthusiasm soared.

A potential problem with this form of instruction is that a tour can be a little noisy for other patrons in the library. As we are doing these tours early in the semester, it is usually not a problem, and there are quiet areas where we do not stop. Also, most of the students in the library have had FE and understand that the tour will quickly move on.

A peer-teaching program with six simultaneous sessions involves a lot of work, as someone needs to schedule all the sessions and there are interruptions in the work day for several librarians. However, in addition to meeting all of our objectives (students meet librarians, feel more comfortable, are aware of library services and locations, and are an active part of the program), one of the benefits of this has been improved communication and a team atmosphere among the librarians. While we are always looking to improve, this program consistently engages students and meets our objectives for a freshman orientation.

References

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which we use instant messaging and shared e-mail could be accomplished using more traditional communication methods such as team meetings, telephone conversations, personal e-mail, and/or in person office visits. However, we have found that by using these tools we are able to communicate more expeditiously, and just as effectively, which has significantly increased our overall efficiency.

For example, our programmer often needs someone to test new site functionality. In the past, he would send an e-mail and then wait for a response. Now, he can quickly identify available team members, send a chat message including the link to the page to be tested, and get a response within a matter of minutes. He can then use that feedback to immediately continue working on his project. Similarly, we have significantly improved the turnaround time for implementing requests for routine web page changes through the use of our shared e-mail account.

Conclusion

Obviously, chat and e-mail are two simple to use and widely familiar technologies. As such, they are ideal collaborative tools since most team members will already be comfortable with their basic use. Of course, depending on the culture and makeup of your team there may be one or more members who are resistant to using such tools. They may be disdainful of tools like chat that they think of as "always on", because they fear that constant interruptions will impair their ability to get work done. In such situations, I hope that you can use some of the information provided in this article to discuss the management features that mitigate this issue (e.g., the "away" feature), and more importantly, the collaborative benefits for your team.

Although using these two technologies for collaborative work may seem like a simple idea, we have found that few of our colleagues are taking full advantage of these tools to enhance their collaborative work. With just a small investment in setup time, we have found that you can get quite a bit of "bang for your collaborative buck". In Part II of this article, we will move on to discuss a slightly more complex tools designed to provide a collaborative work-

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During the last part of the session, Mason gave the LOEX audience a taste of a three hour "improv workshop" he has conducted; all 80+ audience members participated. The first game was called "Yes and . . ." Mason began with various leading sentences such as "A 50-foot basketball rolled down the streets of Albuquerque crushing buildings in its path..." Each person following said "Yes and (fill in the blank)" which produced themes ranging from Godzilla to zombie librarians. The second game involved two audience members reciting a poem at the front of the room. The first person said the poem in a language they did not know (e.g., Russian) and the second person "translated" it, often with

hilarious results. These exercises encourage teamwork and build confidence in performance skills.

Mason made good on his promise that we would "discover a new sense of fun, learn how to make our students laugh a little, and add some silliness to a profession that can take itself a bit too seriously."

For more information about the conference, and the PowerPoints and handouts for many of the sessions, including from all the sessions listed in this article, visit the website at <http://www.loexconference.org/2009/program.html>