

Deceptively Simple Assignments That Make a Big Impact

Sharon Domier, University of Massachusetts Amherst

When I was in junior high school, I had a class that covered a wide range of topics - from giving and receiving compliments graciously to writing clear and comprehensible instructions. The various activities were intended to give us a set of fundamental skills that would help us to function well in society. Although I have long forgotten many of these activities, the assignment on writing instructions resurfaced in my memory when I began to do library instruction. Our junior high assignment was to select a commonplace activity, break it down into a series of movements, and write a set of instructions for the other students to follow literally. Students tried to explain actions like tying shoe laces or sitting down in a chair. It seemed so easy and pointless until we saw the results of our sloppy work. Take the action of sitting in a chair for example:

1. Walk towards the chair and stop when you are standing in front of it.
2. Turn 180 degrees so that you are standing with your back to the seat of the chair.

So far, so good. But how far away from the seat? How far apart do your feet need to be? Then what? Often we had forgotten to write down intermediate steps, such as bending your knees (how much), or leaning forward. The students followed these instructions step by step with hilarious results.

Today, as a librarian and as a co-instructor of a graduate course on Japanese Bibliography and Research Methods for the past eight years, I continue to tackle the challenges of students who follow instructions in my assignments verbatim and then stop when they get stuck. In some cases, assignments were poorly designed and need to be reworked. In other cases, it is clear that some students are simply lazy. Students who misunderstood the assignments or didn't complete them are always encouraged to redo them so that they are ultimately successful at each step of the research process. But over time and through experience I have also learned the value of setting students up to make mistakes as long as we give ourselves the time and opportunity to learn from them.

The most important class I currently teach is a three credit semester-long course that is mandatory for students enrolled in the first year of the graduate program in Japa-

nese Language and Literature; it is also recommended for senior undergraduates writing an honors thesis. In order to become successful researchers, the students must be able to use both North American and Japanese library systems to locate, acquire, analyze and utilize Japanese language materials for their theses. Over the course of the semester they will learn how to use Japanese language dictionaries and encyclopedias, specialized reference tools and subject guides, along with library catalogs and databases. Finally, they will prepare a detailed research plan that includes two specialists on their topics, which libraries they would visit in Japan, what the rules are for access by visitors, and what they would use that is not easily available in North America. It is a tall order for anyone, but particularly so for students who haven't gone through rigorous discipline training as undergraduates.

At my university, students have a wide range of backgrounds and skill levels. Some are Japanese, have never used a North American library, and haven't acquired library/research vocabulary yet. Others are American students who majored in Japanese language and, frequently, they haven't done any extensive research projects. A different group of Americans majored in subjects besides Japanese but picked up language skills while working in Japan; these students often do not have any background in Japanese culture. Complicating the mix are usually one or two bright students for whom neither Japanese nor English is their mothertongue.

Early on in crafting this course my co-instructor and I realized selecting a textbook and creating course assignments that would work effectively with such a wide-range of students would be a challenge. We realized that most of our American students needed to consult a history text to verify dates, names, and events. Our Japanese students needed to consult history texts as well to learn the English language terms for dates, people, and events. It would have been easy to assign a textbook and have the students buy them in the bookstore. But it seemed crazy to do that when the library has lots of Japanese history textbooks and the point of the course is to help students develop good library/research skills. Why not ask them to decide on one themselves and bring it to class? When we first gave out this assignment, we didn't even think it should count in the grades - how hard could it be?

When the students came to class, their reactions ranged from nonchalant to angry to demoralized and caused some of them to second-guess their ability as graduate students. One student circumvented the entire process by bringing a travel book from home that included a section on Japanese history. Another tried to use the library catalog but used keyword searching and stopped when she was overwhelmed by too many hits. A third student couldn't figure out how to turn on the lights in the stacks and so was unable to bring a book. On the plus side, there were others who used the library catalog, looked up subject headings, then checked book review indexes and came fully able to justify their choice of textbook.

It took some nudging to get the students to share stories of successes as well as failures. It also took some encouragement and directed questions to get some of them to remember exactly how they did something. I asked them specifically to let me know what kinds of information the library should provide to incoming students to help them to feel more confident in using a large research library. As one student pointed out, it doesn't matter how good your searching skills are if you can't figure out how to locate the light switch or move the compact shelving and you don't know that it is okay to ask for help.

During the post-assignment analysis with the students we realized that the assignment we thought might take five or ten minutes to complete actually asks the students to do at least the following:

- Find the library homepage
- Locate the library catalog on the library homepage
- Use the library catalog
- Understand the difference between keyword, title, and subject searches
- Limit results to weed out irrelevant materials
- Read a catalog record
- Learn how to read call numbers
- Understand that many libraries divide materials by language or format and that copying down the call number isn't enough; you also need to copy down the location
- Experience the joy of browsing and how you may find more appropriate materials nearby the one you located in the catalog

- Realize that it can actually be hard to find materials on the shelf: compact shelving, re-shelving areas, bad signage, funny light switches

All of this before they even get to the “purpose of the assignment”: to choose a history book and defend its appropriateness as a textbook!

As it turns out, this “simple assignment” serves as an effective pre-test to their information seeking skills. So my co-instructor and I have tweaked the assignment somewhat so that it is clear to the students that the goal of the assignment is not just to find a textbook, but also to show us their comfort level using library resources. We remind them that they all come from different countries and have different skills sets, and that the assignment serves as a placement test for the library course. We list the skills required to successfully complete the assignment, but not all the steps – we still let the students discover (or not discover, as the case may be) these steps themselves. As we require the students to document each step they take and each decision they make, it is clear how many steps they think are involved in the process and what they may be missing. Based on the written results of the exercise and their verbal feedback, we have a much clearer idea of the topics and skills we need to address in class to cover the particular needs of the students.

With the sometime unsuccessful (if not downright disastrous) results of this assignment firmly lodged in their minds, students pay much more attention to guidance on power searching, handouts about classification schemes, and begin to ask questions that will save them precious time that would otherwise be wasted by browsing or scrolling through long lists. When they do their next assignment, which is a variation of the first, and serves as a post-test, they see that they spend much less time and feel much more successful about results of their efforts. The time they save “searching” and “researching” they can use for reading and analyzing the materials they find.

Ultimately, beyond helping my students, thinking of the chair exercise continues to help me as well. During my class sessions, I used to take major shortcuts in my instructions so that I could accomplish a lot in a limited amount of time. I found out later that the students couldn't replicate the sessions at home because I had forgotten, for example, to cover how to access the library homepage because the computers in the library default to that page

(Deceptively Simple...Continued from page 9)

and the student computers do not. So with the chair exercise in mind, I now create illustrated handouts for students that include step-by-step instructions, beginning with the address for the library homepage, and ask one of my students to test it for me before I teach the class. Each time a student follows the instructions and still misses the “chair” I have another opportunity to improve my skills as an instructor.

(Slaying the Dragon...Continued from page 5)

Others found some benefit in taking the course:

- *The most important and specific skill I have learned through this course has been searching online specifically in database – never did I know the possibilities at hand....Before I would simply type I my search topic and hope to get decent results. Now I realize how I can improve those results using Boolean operators, truncation and nesting.*
- *To sum up, I learned much more from this class than I thought I would, and I believe it to be an extremely helpful and beneficial tool that should be offered to all college students everywhere. It was also a lot of fun!*
- *I feel that GE103 has been an extremely beneficial class. My research strategy has improved immensely and it is much easier to research difficult subjects....Now instead of wasting a lot of time searching through the endless files of Google, I go first to databases that provide more reliable sources immediately.*
- *I'm not going to lie, I went into this class with the outlook that I'm going to research however I want to, and no one can tell me a correct way to do it. However, now that I have learned about all of these new sources of information, I have used them in many different classes....I can honestly say that I will actually recommend it to next year's freshman [sic] although I know that most of them will enter with the same closed mind that I had.*

The librarians found this data exciting and helpful in identifying what's working and what needs improvement. However, it is just a measure of short term learning. The next step will be to retest seniors and see how much of what they learned in their first year has stayed with them through their college careers.

Thus, the librarians have settled into their responsibilities as instructors and the loyal subjects have resigned themselves to their fate of becoming more information literate, even if they don't want to. So everybody lived more or less happily ever after in the beautiful leafy Kingdom of Aquinas.