

Using the Start/Stop Essay in Bibliographic Instruction

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During the spring semester of 2006, I began to question the effectiveness of my instructional sessions and wondered if it were possible to get quick and dirty feedback from the students in the sessions. I knew it might be difficult: we only get one chance with most of the students, as our current instructional set-up only handles one-shot bibliographic sessions. How could I gather feedback in an effective and meaningful way from the sessions, and still have time for all the material I had to cover?

I did what any good librarian would do – I started doing research on activities and feedback in instructional sessions. The literature revealed several great evaluation tools for information literacy programs, but they were either too involved for one person to conduct, or they required the librarian to have contact with the students more than once. Other tools employed complicated surveys which would have eaten into the time allotted for sessions. Still other tools utilized online modules which were easy to use, but not so easy to install and implement. The more I read, the more I realized that most of the literature simply tested the students on their skills before and after formal instruction without necessarily considering how the students viewed their own abilities and how the sessions affected their perception of their abilities. This bothered me; yes, I wanted to know what the students were learning, but I also wanted to know how they perceived what they were learning, and I needed something that was easy to use.

I kept reading but was very frustrated, until I came across an article in *Reference Services Review* by M. Flaspohler from 2003 about an information literacy program at a small college. The author implemented evaluation into the program itself by using what's called a start/stop essay. The start/stop essay is a brief essay which requires the writer to express two habits they intend to begin using and two habits they intend to discontinue once they've had formal library instruction. This was the answer I was looking for: an easy way of gathering data that also allowed the students to consider and express their own research habits! I was glad this method focused on student habits, which by their nature, tend to be more long-term and centered directly on a student's actions (i.e., what the student will do) not just an important fact the student learned during the session. This assignment could be completed in a few short minutes, which meant

it wouldn't take up much time; it was a method that could be easily employed by one person. The only materials one needed would be paper and something to write with (or a computer with word processing). The data it could generate would be meaningful, without being overwhelming in terms of amount to be processed. I was, needless to say, very excited to find this article! Unfortunately, it was too late in the semester to start using the essay – most of the instruction I do takes place at the beginning and in the middle of the semester. However, I was determined to use the essay in any summer sessions I conducted to see if it would be as useful for me as Flaspohler had found it to be.

And was it ever useful! Though I only conducted five sessions over the summer, which produced 58 essays, mainly from English 101 and 102 classes, the information communicated in those brief essays was very telling. I subsequently produced a study based on the essays which was published in Fall 2006 in *Louisiana Libraries*. I shared the results of the essays, which were based on a categorical data approach. I read each essay and generated keywords or phrases based on the students' responses; then I read each essay again and kept a tally of how many times keywords and phrases appeared. The most frequently occurring "start" was "using the library's resources" followed by "making keyword lists for searches." The most frequently occurring "stop" was "procrastinating" followed by "waiting until the last minute." This provided me with a great deal of insight into how the students perceived their own behaviors, as well as what stuck out to them in the session: what they perceived to be helpful or important, or confusing and not useful. This information gave me a better blueprint for developing my sessions for the fall and spring.

I'll admit that there were some responses I found to be confusing or unhelpful. One student indicated that he was going to stop "being close-minded" when doing research. Another student indicated that she would stop "making [her] research an essay form." Other students failed to follow the directions given for the essay; some wrote one start and one stop. Some wrote two starts and no stop, or two stops and no starts. One student wrote that he had never had to do research before and therefore had nothing to stop, but intended to start off on the right foot using what he'd learned in the session. Some of the con-

fusion resulted from being unable read the students' handwriting; of course, this wasn't a problem when the students were able to type out their responses. I wish I could have had the students type their responses out every time, but that wasn't always feasible. But I'll be sure to emphasize better penmanship in the future!

Overall, however, I was so encouraged by the intelligible responses I got from the essays that I decided to continue using the essay in fall 2006 and spring 2007. I am in the process of evaluating the essays (there are many, many more this time!) from those sessions. I intend to publish the results to see if modifications I made to the sessions made a difference, based on a comparison of the essays from the summer with those of the fall and spring. I would also like to see how a larger sample size might affect the kinds of keywords and phrases I receive – again, in comparison to the first study. Moreover, I used the essay in classes other than English 101 and 102 and am interested to see how including other disciplines might affect the kinds of keywords and phrases produced, compared to the first study.

I highly recommend using the start/stop essay, if you're trying to get some quick feedback on your instructional sessions, as well as trying to make an information session meaningful to the students. The start/stop essay allows you to not only evaluate the effectiveness and content of your sessions – it also gives the students a chance to reflect on their habits and how they may modify those habits based on instruction. As far as I'm concerned, everybody wins!

References

Flaspohler, M. R. (2003). Information literacy program assessment: one small college takes the big plunge. *Reference Services Review*, 31(2), 129-140.

Lowe, M. (2006, Fall). The Start/Stop essay in instruction and information literacy at University of Louisiana at Monroe. *Louisiana Libraries*, 69 (2): 7-11

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Everyone, librarians included, can benefit from being reminded the world is unpredictable and knowledge and understanding of it is limited. Thus, make sure any planning you or your institution is doing allows for a rapid change, if necessary, because you don't know what's coming next. Additionally, try not to focus on systems and practices that have historically worked – just because they have worked in the past doesn't mean they will work in the future.

Black Swan is a bit more intellectual heavy-lifting than many books and it is a rollicking, if a bit disjointed and wordy, overview of a wide-range of topics and situations. However, if you want to challenge yourself and think about the way you or your institution views the future, *Black Swan* is worth a look.