Librarians and High-Impact Educational Practices

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As academic librarians, we often are invited into the classroom to teach information literacy skills. Information literacy refers to the critical thinking skills students need to develop in order to be successful in finding, using, evaluating, and creating new information. While information literacy instruction may expose students to a wealth of information and resources, if it is taught within a single course session and not explicitly tied to an assignment or project, the takeaway instruction can have little impact or engagement with student learning. Complicating matters further from the librarian's perspective, this type of interaction with students provides little in terms in of extended learning experiences and often lacks assessment.

The librarian's role in student learning is increasing across the academy and we are working to foster deeper relationships across disciplines with faculty, students, advisors, as well other organizations on campus that are involved with student planning and retention. This type of relationship is essential for information literacy student learning outcomes, but it can also provide a basis for building engaging experiences and active learning which in turn, can contribute to higher student success outcomes across the academy. More specifically, high-impact educational practices (Kuh, 2008) create an environment for both formal and informal learning experiences that last longer and are more integrated than the traditional course work. To align information literacy efforts with high-impact educational practices, many of our library colleagues have extended their roles beyond the classroom including being embedded in courses and distance learning, involvement in first-year learning experiences or other introductory learning experiences, and increasing collaboration with faculty one-on-one to plan curriculum, articulating student learning outcomes, and participating in a wide variety of institutional assessment activities. With increased participation in high-impact educational practices at all types of institutions, librarians are working to leverage their expertise to provide information literacy instruction and resources that support collaborative assignments and projects, learning communities, undergraduate research, and capstone courses and projects.

One teaching methodology used in high-impact educational practices librarians have been investigating within their own teaching is project-based learning (PBL). While project-based learning has typically been geared towards K-12, this curricular model has begun to shift to higher education, evolving from the previously familiar problem-based learning (mostly in STEM), in which students are presented an open-ended problem to solve within the course period, and often with limited "solutions." Project-based learning focuses on the active roles of students, with a "voice and choice" atmosphere for collaboration, group roles and norms, and cross-disciplinary options for resources, research, and possibilities for real-world application.

Let's consider an example of direct librarian involvement with an education course shaped entirely around the concept of project-based learning. The coursework was centered on a pedagogical example for pre- and existing teachers through a project-based learning model and it evolved into a high-impact educational practice by engaging students in a collaborative research assignment at the undergraduate (and graduate) level. The "driving question" asked students to recognize that many of our K-12 librarians and libraries are disappearing from the schools - in recognition that an essential component of project-based learning revolves around a social justice or community connection. The assignment asked students to emulate the role of a task force assigned to research the benefits (or not) of a library and librarian established in the local school. Students were directed to locate resources and research that would aid in the discovery process for a final project, which could include a standard research paper with appropriate sources or a presentation to the class on their findings. Students were also given the opportunity to present their ideas beyond a typical assignment, e.g. seeking outlets for their research such as an article in the local newspaper/blog or constructing a presentation for a school board that is considering eliminating the librarian position at their local elementary or high school. As part of this project, students engaged in a complex information literacy skill-building exercise in terms of inquiry-based collaboration and real-life applicable skills.

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There are two documents published by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) that may interest teaching faculty in consideration of working with teaching librarians to incorporate information literacy into high-impact educational practices: the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education and the new ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. Both documents outline established guidelines for creating curriculum and instruction in order to structure higher-order thinking skills related to information literacy through application and assessment, which can be molded to fit both project-based learning and high-impact educational practices learning goals.

What can teaching faculty and other campus organizations expect in creating and strengthening a partnership with librarians through high-impact educational practices? First, libraries should have the space, both physical and virtual, for students and faculty to explore the collections and resources that support teaching, learning and research. Second, the services and collections should reflect the needs of all users, including faculty and administration to support the entire cycle of research including data management and publishing. Third, and perhaps most essential for student learning, librarians and teaching faculty should be collaborating to construct information literacy instruction and assessment around high-impact educational practices that align with the mission, plan, goals, and outcomes relevant to institutional accreditation. As Murray (2015) stated, "Academic libraries, with shifting focus on providing an atmosphere accommodating different academic needs, can provide an informal academic environment that may foster student engagement in HIPs."

As the chair and vice-chair of the Association of College and Research Libraries, Student Learning and Information Literacy Committee, we welcome the sharing of ideas and discourse on collaborating and promoting the value and impact that librarians and libraries can have on the campus and in the classroom.

Further Reading:

Association of College and Research Libraries, Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency.

Association of College and Research Libraries, Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.

George D. Kuh, "High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter." (2008), AAC&U, retrieved from http://us.tamu.edu/Forms/High-Impact-Educational-Practices.aspx

Adam Murray, "Academic Libraries and High-Impact Practices for Student Retention: Library Deans' Perspectives." (2015). portal: Libraries and the Academy, 15, no.3, 471-487.

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