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Colleen T. Boff

Bowling Green State University, cboff@bgsu.edu

Carol A. Singer

Bowling Green State University, singerc@bgsu.edu

Robin Sinn

Johns Hopkins University

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Engaging Honors Students with Active Learning

With the shift in education from a teacher-focused classroom to a student-focused classroom, developing ways to incorporate active learning experiences into the curriculum is crucial. This may be a challenge for instruction librarians to negotiate for several reasons. The “60 minute” or “one shot” session is hardly enough time to tell the students everything they need to know about the library, let alone have students also do an activity. Since librarians are often guest lecturers, it may also be a challenge to convince a professor to engage students in an active learning activity since librarians do not “own” the curriculum.

At Bowling Green State University in Ohio, three librarians collaborated with the director of the Honors program to develop an active learning experience for a critical thinking course taken by first year students. A 50 minute library session was developed that could be used for all sections of the course.

Instead of having a formal meeting with the Honors Director where we sat down and framed our conversation in the context of Information Literacy standards, we decided to take him to lunch during which we were able to talk with him about his impressions of library research habits of honors students in a more informal way. Our conversation kept coming back to the lack of quality sources in their papers as a result of students using only the web. We agreed that these first year students may simply be unfamiliar with the location of the library research databases. The Director of the Honors program also indicated that the types of sources students were using were not research-based or scholarly. As a result of our conversation, he became increasingly interested in what librarians could do to help honors students improve their information seeking skills.

The next step was to draft a proposal for a 50-minute session addressing the difference between primary and secondary sources as well as the location and use of the library research databases. The librarians made several assumptions about these traditionally- aged students that are articulated best by researchers Oblinger and Oblinger:

- 1) They don't feel the need of instruction manuals to learn technology
- 2) They like to learn from experience rather than listening to lectures
- 3) They like activities that include social interaction
- 4) They like to work in teams
- 5) They're achievement oriented
- 6) They like to use inductive reasoning instead of being told the answers *

The proposal was approved by the Director and was sent out to the 14 faculty members who were teaching the course. Of the 14 sections, students in seven of the sections participated in the library session.

What we did with the students

First we established what we hoped the students would learn. Our learning outcomes included:

- work cooperatively with peers in order to learn information search strategies from each other
- learn how to locate primary source material in order to verify information reported in secondary sources
- become familiar with library systems in order to gather information and evidence to support critical analysis and inquiry

There were approximately 21 students in each section of the course. At first, two librarians team taught the session because of the interactive nature and new approach for us. We began the 50 minute session with a ten minute explanation of the differences between primary and secondary sources, using paper copies of journal, newspaper, and magazine issues as examples. We divided the class into groups of four to five students and assigned roles of reader, recorder, time keeper, and speaker to each group member. We gave each group a short article from a newspaper or magazine summarizing the results of a research study published elsewhere. The group was told to locate the full text or the citation of the original article referred to in the summary article. We were intentionally vague and offered little direction to the students about which research tools to use. Groups had approximately 15 minutes to search and then each group reported back to the class. Representatives of each group were expected to tell the class if they located the original study, how they located it, and anything interesting they came across during the process.

When the groups reported their findings back to the class, we reinforced the good search strategies and offered suggestions to groups that had difficulties. Rarely did the students start out with the library resources. Instead, most students gravitated towards Google. Some students were able to identify the full text of the original research article by using the free web. More often than not, students got as far as locating a citation and then were asked to pay for the full text. Either way, the students were engaged in the search enough to care about our explanation of how they could find the full text through the library resources.

Preparing for the session:

Students have access to more than 150 research databases through our library system. We wanted to make sure that the research articles referred to from the newspaper articles we identified were all available from *Academic Search Premier*, our interdisciplinary database with which we want all students to be familiar.

We then identified newspaper articles that summarized studies. At the very least, we made sure that the name of the research journal was stated in the article. Ideally, it's a good idea to start this process three to six months prior to doing the

activity since it often takes a few months before the original research article is indexed in the library databases. Since we didn't have that much time to prepare, the secondary-source articles we handed out to the students were from Lexis-Nexis. The titles we've used in the past include:

- "Post-stress pig-outs appeal to women, not men..."
- "Bias in the Jury Box?"
- "Coffee reduces diabetes risk, study says."
- "Children's waistlines are growing"
- "Grandma is good for you..."
- "Fizzy drinks are a recipe for fatter children..."
- "No pain, no gain? No way..."

We have since begun clipping articles out of our local newspaper for future use and have been diligent about finding articles that may pique the interest of an 18 year old.

Assessment

Though we made inroads with this program by incorporating a library session into at least half of the sections offered that semester, we were not as successful in developing an assessment instrument. This would have been an ideal situation since we had a control group of honors students who did not have a library session to compare to those who had.

Anecdotally speaking, students seemed genuinely engaged in the activity. One young woman came into class feeling indignant about having to take a critical thinking course at all since she had already taken such courses in high school. The librarians teaching this section made sure to ask her after the session if she felt like the session had been a waste of time. Perhaps she was being nice, but she indicated that it was the best class in the course to that point. Overall, each time we taught the session, we as teachers felt extremely satisfied with the way the students responded. All seven faculty members, many of whom participated as if they were students in the class, responded well to the session. Though we have not done so yet, we feel confident that this instructional approach could be used with non-honors courses as well.

- * Oblinger, Diana and James Oblinger. "Is It Age or IT: First Steps Toward Understanding the Net Generation," In: Diana G. Oblinger and James L. Oblinger, eds. *Educating the Net Generation*. Boulder, CO: EDUCAUSE, 2005. <http://www.educause.edu/educatingthenetgen/>

By

Colleen Boff, First Year Experience Librarian, Bowling Green State University
Carol Singer, Reference & Instruction Librarian, Bowling Green State University

Robin Sinn, Head of the Science Library, Bowling Green State University