

What We Did Last Summer: Creating an Engaging Library Orientation for Summer Students

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With many students increasingly immersed in technology in their daily lives, have you ever wondered how well your students would do if you dropped them down, without any preparation, in the center of your website? Last summer we developed an orientation-type activity for 31 Summer Institute students which did exactly that! Drawing from shared content developed by the program's leaders, the librarians designed an innovative pedagogic approach that challenged the students to independently explore library resources and create an academic poster with minimal, but targeted, direction from the library instructors.

Opportunity Knocks

Each year, early in the summer months, the Office of University Studies (OUS) at Colgate University contacts the University Libraries to arrange a session for students participating in Colgate's Summer Institute. The Summer Institute is a five-week, pre-first-year program designed to ease the transition from high school to college. The standard OUS summer curriculum provides students with writing support and a selection of courses in the humanities, social sciences, and/or natural sciences. In previous years, the Libraries provided a standard tour and basic introduction to selected library resources. The authors, since taking on conducting these orientations a couple years ago, became concerned that the design of the sessions they inherited exposed students to resources and services without an immediate information need. Therefore, as we began to work with the program's administrators this past year, we were looking for ways to redesign our session—to make it more effective, but also more meaningful for the student participants.

The OUS program administrators explained that the Summer Institute students would now be participating in activities centered around the theme of abolitionism. The activities included a trip to the National Abolitionist Hall of Fame and Museum (NAHOF) in nearby Peterboro, NY. In addition, the program administrators were encouraging the Colgate faculty teaching the Summer Institute courses to make curricular connections to their abolitionism-focused extra-curricular activities. Recognizing early on that we should tap into this common theme, we decided to develop our instruction session around the shared topic of abolitionism.

Inspired by a digital exhibit created and displayed by the Libraries during a recent Colgate commencement weekend, the OUS program administrator requested that the Libraries prepare a slide show centered on the nine abolition-

ists inducted into NAHOF for display on the four plasma screens mounted in Case Library. We responded with the suggestion that we have the students create the slide show as part of the library orientation. This orientation would introduce students to some library resources that they would then use to create PowerPoint posters; these posters could later be shared with the community via the Libraries' plasma screens.

Designing the Session

In our initial discussions, it became clear that it was more important to us that the students left the session with a broad sense of what college-level research entails—more important than becoming familiar with a few specific resources. We wanted the session to get the students comfortable and have a meaningful experience with the work of research and to begin recognizing when they might need help and where to find it. Our specific learning goals for the students in this session were:

1. engage the students;
2. model the research process;
3. cause the students to reflect on their learning; and
4. introduce librarians and the library (both its physical and digital presence).

We knew that what we taught during this summer session would be reinforced and expanded upon in first-year seminars when the students returned for the fall semester. This gave us the leeway to be more creative in our approach to structuring the session. Based on our own experiences as teachers, we both suspected that allowing the students to discover source material in an exploratory manner on their own—with little involvement from us—would enhance their own organically developed facility with information resources. The abilities of so called “digital natives,” are highly debated (Selwyn, 2009), yet we found ourselves agreeing with the handful of educational theorists who posit that these students learn better through independent discovery, preferring to work in groups and that they are more visually oriented (Brown, 2000; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Prensky, 2001a; Prensky, 2001b). Therefore, we designed the session so that the majority of the time was devoted to students working in groups to explore the library website and resources with a minimum of direction from us.

One of the impediments to engaging with the Summer Institute students in the past was that we had a short period of time with the students during which to cover too many

things. In negotiating with the OUS program administrator, we were able to expand our time to a two-hour block. Even with extra time, we needed to carefully set our priorities to maximize our time with the students.

Of course, we recognized the potential pitfalls to this open-ended approach, such as students struggling to find pertinent resources or use the supplied technology. Therefore, we developed some guidelines for ourselves concerning how we would facilitate the students' practice—intending to be helpful without being intrusive. Wanting the students to become familiar with the library website and resources, we agreed to ask the students not to use general web searching. Nevertheless, we decided to hold this option in reserve for the last 10 minutes of the session in case our design proved too difficult. Also, concerned that the students might simply wait for our lead, we decided to hold our assistance in reserve for an initial period (the first 10 minutes) of exploration.

Session Timeline:

1. Students tour Cooley Science Library [15 min]
2. Students come to the Case Library and are introduced to the librarians (Maybee + Livermore) [5 min]
3. Maybee and Livermore provide a very brief introduction to the day's session [10 min]
4. Students work in groups on research and PowerPoint [40 min]
5. Students present their findings [30 min]
6. Students are led on a brief tour of the Case Library [20 min]

Working with the Students

With a very brief introduction to the day's task, we formed the students into nine small groups and gave each group the name of an abolitionist to investigate. Each group had 40 minutes to find some basic biographical information on their abolitionist (including an image) and create a PowerPoint slide presenting their discoveries. Again, our only restriction to the groups was that they needed to work from within the library website, i.e., no Googling. This way, we allowed their "digital native" abilities (e.g., PowerPoint skills, web searching) to be quickly utilized by putting them quickly to the task, but in a controlled environment with resources selected by librarians (the library website) – getting the best of both worlds.

Each group set to work. Generally at least one student in each group was familiar enough with PowerPoint to get started. In fact, some students seemed quite fluent in the use of PowerPoint. As we had imagined, we found that the students were able to find their way to appropriate library re-

sources—often the same ones we had identified as potentially being useful in our earlier planning for the session:

- American National Biography Online (cited 5 times)
- Oxford African American Studies Center (cited 2 times)
- Book (cited 1 time)
- Web sites (cited 2 times)

After 10 minutes of working in their groups, we began to check-in with the students. Their questions focused on search strategies and navigating database search screens, for example those with multiple search boxes. Very few questions focused on specific resources. Finding the required abolitionist images seemed to offer the students a little difficulty, although we would conjecture that this was due in part to the subject matter and associated time period. Towards the end of the working session we opened up searching to include the web as another option for students still struggling to find relevant images, and two of the groups took this option.

We next brought the students across the building to a large conference room where we had invited librarians and professors in the program to view each student group's poster and ask questions. To facilitate this, we had five of the groups present simultaneously for 15 minutes followed by the other four. Similar to a poster presentation at a conference, each group presenting sat at a table with their PowerPoint poster displayed on a laptop next to them, while the staff and other students not presenting went from table to table. There was very lively discussion and the students were engaged and interacting not only with their professors and librarians, but with each other as well. The students seemed proud of what they had accomplished in a short time and comfortable talking about it.

Following the poster session the students were separated into two groups and given a bare bones tour of the building, showing them the services desks, reference area and stacks. A few days after the session the final PowerPoint slides were posted to the four plasma screens mounted around the library where the community, including the students, could view the work.

What We Learned

In line with depictions of digital learners described in the literature (Brown, 2000; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Prensky, 2001a; Prensky, 2001b), the students did well at navigating the library website without prior direction, which allowed us to focus on just-in-time interventions, such as improving search strategies. They also needed little or no help negotiating PowerPoint, although some groups did have difficulty creating presentation quality slides. In a cou-

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ple cases the students were enamored by the design options and did not think through the final display quality. A couple of the resulting slides were hard to read through densely patterned backgrounds. Thus, next time we will include a brief overview of graphic design elements when moving into the slide production phase of the session.

Looking forward to hosting this event in the coming years, we see several possibilities for building on this summer's success. We would like to discard the rushed library tour that followed the student poster presentations. Instead we see potentially running this program right in the Reference area of the library (as opposed to being cut off in a difficult to get at classroom). We feel that working in the Reference area would allow the students to discover the physical space in the same organic manner as the digital space. The summer tends to be a quiet time at Case Library as there is no full summer term offered by the university. Also, the extra time could be devoted to addressing the design aspects of the slides.

Of course, we also hope to continue to make connections between our assignment and the OUS programming—making the orientation relevant to their work in the program. We recognize the need to work with the OUS administrators to choose a topic that allows for easy recall, but we feel there are many for which this is the case. We don't want to tax the student's capabilities—we want them to find information, feel successful and empowered to use our resources!

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discussion of these tools is beyond the scope of this short article, here is a brief description of these top two contenders and the features that they offer.

TweetDeck

<http://www.tweetdeck.com/>

TweetDeck is a free, standalone application designed to allow you to organize and manage your Twitter experience. It is available for the desktop (both PC and Mac), as well as for the iPhone and iPad. The TweetDeck interface allows you to arrange your incoming tweets into categorized columns which may include groups (e.g., friends, work, blogs, etc.), results of saved searches, mentions, and direct messages. From within TweetDeck you may compose and post tweets, share photos and videos, and auto create shortened URLs. You can also manage and update you Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn accounts via the TweetDeck interface.

It was our intention to create a fun, social and challenging event for the Summer Institute session. We felt that a challenging assignment in a comfortable atmosphere would stand out to the group and help reinforce the notion of the library as a place to seek assistance. Our goal was achieved this past summer and we see great potential for growth in the program in coming years.

References

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Hootsuite

<http://hootsuite.com/>

Hootsuite offers many of the same features and functionalities as TweetDeck. You can organize your tweet streams into tabs and columns, compose and post tweets, as well as manage multiple social networking tools via one interface. The primary difference is that Hootsuite is a web application, so you don't need to download and install anything to your computer. In addition, Hootsuite provides tweet scheduling functionality, robust statistics, and the ability to manage multiple Twitter accounts via a single interface.

These are only a few of the many third-party applications developed to extend Twitter's basic functionality. There are many others, and deciding which will work best for you is really an individual decision. Just search "best twitter tools" in your favorite search engine and you'll find lists of great options. My advice ... just dive in and explore!