On the same page: collaborative research assignment design with graduate teaching assistants

By: Maggie Murphy

Abstract:

Purpose: This paper aims to explore how collaborative research assignment design consultations between instruction librarians and new graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) have the potential to improve the design of research assignments for first-year writing courses.

Design/methodology/approach: The author conducted a small number of questionnaires and structured interviews with first-time GTAs who serve as first-year composition instructors to explore their conceptions about teaching researched writing. Thematic analysis of the results of these qualitative instruments led to the design of a new framework for working with incoming cohorts of GTAs at her institution prior to the start of each fall semester.

Findings: New GTAs often emphasize strict source type parameters in research assignment design and expect their students to engage in expert research behaviors. Emphasizing the assignment design expertise of instruction librarians during new GTA orientation may lead to more assignment design consultations with first-time college writing instructors. Collaborative assignment design consultations between librarians and GTAs can improve the alignment of research assignment parameters with their shared goals for students' research and writing skills and habits of mind, including seeing research and writing as iterative and inquiry-based processes.

Research limitations/implications: While not every instruction librarian works with GTAs, working with instructors to collaboratively design research assignments that shift focus away from using specific search tools and locating particular types of sources opens possibilities for what librarians are able to achieve in one-shot instruction sessions, in terms of both lesson content and pedagogical strategies used.

Originality/value: The existing literature on first-year writing addressing faculty and librarian assignment design collaborations, and research assignments more generally, does not often explicitly examine the experiences of librarians who primarily work with GTAs. This paper adds to this literature by highlighting specific obstacles and unique opportunities in librarian–GTA teaching partnerships in first-year writing courses.

Article:

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On the same page:

Collaborative research assignment design with graduate teaching assistants

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Abstract

Purpose

– This paper aims to explore how collaborative research assignment design consultations between instruction librarians and new graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) have the potential to improve the design of research assignments for first-year writing courses.

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Findings

– New graduate teaching assistants often emphasize strict source type parameters in research assignment design and expect their students to engage in expert research behaviors. Emphasizing the assignment design expertise of instruction librarians during new graduate teaching assistant orientation may lead to more assignment design consultations with first-time college writing instructors. Collaborative assignment design consultations between librarians and GTAs can improve the alignment of research assignment parameters with their shared goals for

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experiences of librarians who primarily work with graduate teaching assistants. This paper adds

to this literature by highlighting specific obstacles and unique opportunities in librarian-GTA

teaching partnerships in first-year writing courses.

Introduction

First-year writing courses are a common feature of general education curricula at many

two-year and four-year colleges and universities. There is great variability in how first-year writing

courses are structured at different institutions: they may be structured as standalone introductory

composition courses, as a sequence of composition courses, or as thematic or disciplinary

first-year seminars with a writing-intensive focus (National Census of Writing, 2015). However,

according to the Council of Writing Program Administrators (2014), first-year writing courses

should aim to accomplish key shared outcomes, regardless of format. These shared outcomes

include helping new college students build rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking and reading

skills, the ability to engage in iterative composing processes, and awareness of conventions for language, style, discipline, and genre.

While these outcomes can be achieved in any number of ways, first-year writing courses often include assignments that require students to delve into research and writing from outside sources. In fact, first-year writing programs (and their instructors) "frequently bear the responsibility for teaching basic research writing to first-year students" (Artman et al., 2010, p. 96) in the general education curriculum. This is why library instruction for first-year writing courses is a feature of almost every academic library's instruction program. For example, 97% of academic libraries that responded to a national survey on libraries in the first-year experience indicated that they offer library instruction for first-year students; first-year seminars/writing courses were by far the most common disciplines for first-year library instruction among those respondents (Library Journal and Credo Reference, 2017).

Despite the frequency with which research writing is included in first-year writing courses, the efficacy of assigning research papers in these courses has been a topic discussed in the composition studies literature for decades (Brent, 2013). While in theory, research papers help students learn how to engage in the iterative processes of inquiry, critical analysis, synthesis, and scholarly discourse, in practice the experience is often very different. When Schwegler and Shamoon (1982) asked students why faculty assign research papers in an early study on this issue, students' answers indicated that they saw research papers as an exercise in learning about unfamiliar topics, using library resources, gathering information, and writing papers that are ultimately informative and factual, rather than argumentative or analytical. To students, research is "close-ended, informative, skills-oriented" (p. 820). Howard and Jamieson (2014) echo these findings more than thirty years later, writing, "students and instructors hold different ideals for the research paper, and pedagogy may not resonate with instructors' goals for the assignment" (p.

235). Thus, there is a clear disconnect between the intended aims and actual outcomes of research paper assignments in first-year writing: what faculty want students to learn in the process of writing a research paper is not being achieved by the way the assignment itself is designed or taught.

In a seminal work on the influence of faculty perceptions of academic research on undergraduate research assignment design, Leckie (1996) argues that this disconnect largely has to do with a number of interrelated assumptions faculty make about undergraduates' ability to engage in research like an expert scholar would. These assumptions end up being implicitly "embedded in the design and wording of the assignment" itself (p. 203) in the form of requirements for topics, sources, and page length, rather than explicitly communicated to students. Howard and Jamieson (2014) characterize these assignment requirements, from the view of students, as "seemingly arbitrary demands" to be obeyed, such as "'Your paper must include references to at least two books'; 'You may not cite websites'; 'You may not cite *Wikipedia*'; 'all of your sources must be scholarly'; and so forth" (p. 237). Research assignments ultimately expect students to find, evaluate, read, comprehend, and synthesize lengthy, complex sources without necessitating that they first understand how and why scholarship is produced and disseminated in the first place.

Library instruction in this context rarely helps in any meaningful way, because it is often delivered in the form of one-shot sessions in which librarians are directed by writing instructors to demonstrate how to find and cite sources. Reflecting on their experiences on working with instruction librarians as first-year composition instructors, Jacobs and Jacobs (2009) write: "...our course schedules and assignments revealed an assumption that a single 'dose' of library instruction would teach students all they needed to know about research" (p. 74). This reveals a common instructor perception about the role of librarians in first-year writing: if librarians show

students how to effectively search databases and format citations like experts do, the students will be able to engage in researched writing as experts.

Additionally, completed research papers rarely provide any evidence of student's research and writing behaviors or habits of mind. According to Howard and Jamieson (2014), students often satisfy written requirements for source integration by patchwriting from sources they do not actually evaluate, read deeply, comprehend, or synthesize (p. 234). Yet the idea persists that producing a paper that meets the assignment requirements means that students must have gained "the requisite knowledge and skills through the very process of preparing a piece of written coursework" (McGuinness, 2006). In other words, the actual design of research paper projects often encourages students to meet the letter, but not the spirit, of what was intended by the instructor when the paper was assigned.

The problematic nature of research paper assignments, and the tension poorly designed assignments create between instructors, students, and librarians, is not new territory in writing studies or library and information science literature. However, most of these discussions focus on the interplay between faculty-level instructors and librarians, and how they individually and collectively grapple with the best ways to teach students to be ethical, critical, and creative researchers. But, what about when first-year writing instructors are not faculty members, but graduate students? And, what about when those graduate students have never taught research writing before? What unique challenges do instruction librarians face working with GTAs who assign research papers in first-year writing courses? Are there also unique opportunities?

This case study considers how instruction librarians can collaborate with new graduate teaching assistants who are first-time instructors of introductory first-year writing courses in order to design assignments that meet their shared goals for students' researched writing. A qualitative exploration of new graduate teaching assistants' perceptions about teaching researched writing

revealed beliefs that setting strict requirements on source parameters correlates with first-year writing students developing the research practices and dispositions graduate teaching assistants use as emerging experts. This prompted the author to rethink the way new graduate teaching assistants are introduced to her institution's library instruction program in order to encourage GTAs who are first-time writing instructors to schedule pre-semester assignment design consultations with instruction librarians.

Background

At UNC Greensboro, a new cohort of graduate teaching assistants for the college writing program, housed under the Department of English, starts each fall. These GTAs consist of new and continuing students in both the English PhD and Creative Writing MFA programs. Each new GTA is scheduled to teach a section of the introductory first-year writing course in both fall and spring semesters of their first academic year. The GTAs serve as instructors of record and have wide latitude to plan their course syllabi, including writing assignments, as long as the standardized course learning outcomes are met. This is significant to this case study in that there is no program requirement that students complete a research paper assignment in the introductory writing course.

The college writing program is administered by an English department faculty member who leads a week-long program orientation for new GTAs each August, before the start of the fall semester. The orientation consists of a number of peer- and faculty-led sessions on course and assignment design, pedagogy, assessment and grading, accessibility, classroom management, and more. Additionally, the GTAs take a graduate course, Teaching College Writing, during their first fall semester teaching, which serves as an introduction to the discipline of writing studies as well as a venue for developing a reflective pedagogical practice.

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During the summer orientation session, new graduate teaching assistants also meet with the instruction librarian who works with the college writing program for a half-hour session about library instruction for the introductory first-year writing course. Traditionally, this session is focused on logistical considerations: how the GTAs can request an instruction session for their class, what information is needed from instructors to design an effective library instruction lesson plan, and what some sample lesson plans for different research assignments might look like. The orientation session prior to the fall 2017 semester, which was co-led by the information literacy coordinator and the author, an instruction librarian who had been recently hired as the first-year writing program liaison, also included a brief introduction to the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy* and other basic information literacy concepts that underpin library instruction as a practice.

The majority of library instruction for the introductory first-year writing course at UNC Greensboro has historically been in the one-shot format. For example, between Fall 2015 and Spring 2018, fewer than 13% of the 177 introductory first-year writing classes that received library instruction came for more than one instruction session in a semester. None had more than two sessions in a semester. While one-shot library instruction sessions have well-known pedagogical limitations for teaching complex information literacy dispositions and practices in all disciplines (Artman et al, 2010; Jacobs and Jacobs, 2009; Mery et al, 2012; Walker and Pearce, 2014), the one-shot is still a prevalent and unfortunate format for instruction librarian work with first-year writing classes in particular. As Artman et al. (2010) write from the perspective of writing studies scholars and composition instructors:

"...it is still common practice to either disregard the expertise our librarian colleagues may lend to IL instruction, or, conversely, to 'farm out' lessons in information literacy to one-shot library instruction sessions. These practices can, in turn, serve to reinforce the

perception that the research process is separate from (and more facile than) the writing process, that teaching students effective research practices can be reduced to a single, skills-based class session, and that, ultimately, literacy in information is only useful or valuable if tied to that well-worn (and ill-formed) genre, the academic research paper" (p. 96)

Thus, while instruction librarians know that one-shots have a limited impact on first-year students' short-term ability to complete research projects *and* long-term growth as writers and researchers, the degree to which a librarian is embedded in a first-year writing course is determined by some combination of programmatic requirements and the extent to which an instruction librarian and writing instructor are able to negotiate a collaborative relationship.

At UNC Greensboro, just as there is no programmatic requirement that the GTAs assign a research-based writing assignment in the introductory course in the first place, there is also no requirement that instructors of first-year writing courses incorporate library instruction into their schedules when they do assign research project. In fall 2017, just 64% of introductory course sections (or 45 sections) met with a librarian for an instruction session at all. A number of factors likely influence these numbers, including that first-year writing instructors may not be assigning research projects (and therefore see no use for library instruction), may feel confident in their own ability to teach students necessary information literacy concepts for researched writing, many not value the expertise or teaching skills of librarians, or may think they cannot or should not cede one or more class periods in the semester schedule to "research instruction."

Because the author came to UNC Greensboro from a community college setting, where the majority of first-year writing courses were taught by full-time faculty in the English department, working with graduate teaching assistants as the primary first-year writing instructors was a new experience. However, GTAs often teach first-year writing, especially at universities with large

enrollments that result in dozens of sections being offered concurrently in a semester. According

to the National Census of Writing (2015), about 32% of 410 four-year institutions (ranging from

small liberal arts colleges to large doctoral-granting institutions) reported that graduate teaching

assistants in English taught at least some percentage of the first-year composition courses

offered at their institution during the 2011-12 year. At about 16% of those institutions, graduate

teaching assistants in creative writing programs and other disciplines also served as instructors.

While graduate teaching assistants at UNC Greensboro are required by the institution's

accreditation agency to have "master's in the teaching discipline or 18 graduate semester hours

in the teaching discipline, direct supervision by a faculty member experienced in the teaching

discipline, regular in-service training, and planned and periodic evaluations" (SACSCOC, 2018: p.

1), there is no guarantee that they have taught before at any level before stepping in front of their

introductory first-year writing courses in their first fall semesters at GTAs. Additionally, while

accreditation agencies typically require that instructors of record have graduate degrees or have

accumulated a certain number of credits at the graduate level in the subject of instruction, many if

not most graduate students in English departments do not consider themselves to be scholars of

writing studies or rhetoric and composition. Rather, their focus of study is likely to be in a period

or style of literature or in literary theory—and in the academy, those concentrations are

considered distinct fields from college writing or composition (Downs and Wardle, 2007).

Finally, while graduate teaching assistants are typically closer, in terms of professional

preparation and time passed, to the experience of being an undergraduate student than a full

faculty member would be, GTAs might also suffer from the "expert researcher" phenomenon that

Leckie (1996) writes about. When faculty design research assignments and teach research

methods to undergraduate students, they do so from a position where it is difficult to remember

the skills and habits of mind novice undergraduate researchers (and especially first-year

students) bring to the table. This often results in research assignments that unfairly expect undergraduate students to engage in sophisticated, disciplinary-specific ways of thinking in order to delve into the processes of inquiry and analysis required to complete the assignment as written.

However, this phenomenon at least typically impacts novice researchers studying the same discipline their faculty members were trained in. In the case of GTAs teaching introductory first-year writing, the "expert researcher" issue is further exacerbated by having literary scholars teach composition courses. Leckie (1996) writes, "The nature of the discipline will also have an impact on the researcher's own research process, including how she or he seeks and uses information in the course of a research project" (p. 202). Research assignments appropriate for introductory general education first-year writing course are unlikely to require the same students to consider the same topics, engage in the same methods, or use the same tools as humanities research and writing, which is the disciplinary framing many GTAs-as-expert-researchers likely have (Downs and Wardle, 2007).

Over the course of the fall semester, the author anecdotally observed many first-year writing students at UNC Greensboro struggling with research assignments in library instruction sessions and one-on-one research consultations in courses taught by new graduate teaching assistants and wondered if it could be attributed to the unique confluence of factors resulting from having new graduate teaching assistants teach researched writing in the context of first-year writing. This led her to wonder: how did those GTAs feel about teaching "the research process" to students? Were they satisfied with their students' final products? Did they feel their students were developing the critical and creative ways of thinking and practical skills necessary for meaningfully engaging in iterative research and writing? While the new GTAs would certainly learn from their own experiences each semester and likely adjust how they design and teach

research assignments in the future, each new fall would continue to bring a new cohort of

first-time instructors. How could this entire experience be improved for new GTAs, first-year

writing students, and instruction librarians the next go around?

Questionnaires and interviews

To get a better sense of how first-time graduate teaching assistants think about teaching

researched writing within first-year composition courses, the author conducted a series of

questionnaires and structured interviews during the 2017-18 academic year (similar to the

approach used by Lantz, 2016, with graduate teaching assistants serving as instructors of

first-year biology). Two anonymous questionnaires were developed and distributed at the end of

the fall 2017 semester in order to compare the experiences of graduate teaching assistants at her

own institution with experiences of GTAs more broadly; one questionnaire was intended for just

first-semester GTAs at UNC Greensboro, and one was meant to be open to any first-time GTAs

teaching first-year composition via a national listserv for writing program administrators (WPA-L).

The questionnaires were designed in Qualtrics using branch logic to deliver open-ended,

clarifying follow up questions depending on a respondent's answer to a yes or no question. The

questionnaires included questions about new GTAs' practical experience with designing and

assigning research assignments (e.g. "Did you spend more time than you had originally planned

teaching students about research?") as well as their own goals and dispositions for teaching

researched writing (e.g. "What should writing instructors, specifically, teach students about the

research process?").

It should also be noted that both versions of the questionnaire were designed to screen

out new graduate teaching assistants who had previously taught first-year writing in another

setting, in order to capture responses from just first-time composition instructors. All of the new

graduate teaching assistants (n=11) in the 2017-18 cohort of the college writing program at UNC

Greensboro were invited to participate in the institution-specific questionnaire via email. Of 7

respondents, 5 were eligible as first-time instructors of first-year writing to complete the full

questionnaire. The open questionnaire was sent to the WPA-L listserv in early December 2017,

with the intention that writing program administrators might advertise it to new graduate teaching

assistants at their institutions. Of 13 responses to the open questionnaire, 10 first-time instructors

of first-year writing were eligible to complete the full questionnaire. Across both versions, there

were 15 total respondents who completed the full questionnaire.

At the end of the spring 2018 semester, the author invited the entire 2017-18 cohort of

new GTAs to participate in follow-up interviews. While 4 GTAs initially were interested in being

interviewed, the author was only able to successfully complete interviews with 2 GTAs before the

start of summer break due to scheduling concerns inherent to the end of a semester. The

interview participants were asked a series of 18 standardized questions, grouped under 4

categories: "information literacy," "pedagogy and assignment design," "first-year students," and

"librarian integration in first-year writing." The author recorded the interviews and used an online

automated transcription platform to process the recordings and clean up the transcripts.

The full protocols for both questionnaires and the structured interviews were reviewed by

UNC Greensboro's Institutional Review Board; all received an IRB determination that they "[did]

not constitute human subjects research as defined under federal regulations [45 CFR 46.102 (d or

f)] and does not require IRB approval." Additionally, the questionnaires and list of interview

questions were not intended to be rigorous research instruments that would result in

generalizable findings, but rather a way to provide the author with a quick snapshot of graduate

teaching assistant dispositions.

Findings

The questionnaires and follow-up interviews indicate that graduate teaching assistants share many of the same perceptions about teaching researched writing that faculty-level instructors do. Each of the questionnaire respondents (n=15) assigned a research paper project in their fall 2017 introductory first-year writing course, regardless of whether it was required by their program. Additionally, the 2 interview participants, who were among those who completed the questionnaire anonymously, elaborated on their experiences with assigning research papers.

When asked about the role of teaching researched writing in introductory first-year writing courses, most instructors articulated learning goals that stressed evaluation, comprehension, and synthesis over the ability to locate sources. For example, in response to the question, "What should students know about research by the end of a first-year writing course?" one instructor answered:

> "Students should know how to evaluate sources for credibility, identify key concepts and arguments in academic writing, and be able to converse (both orally and in writing) about those ideas and their understanding and views regarding those ideas."

However, when they were asked about whether or not they set parameters for source use in their research paper assignments, the articulated assignment requirements for students emphasized the ability to identify a source's format and integrate particular specific types of publications. Consider these responses to the following questions.

> "What types of sources could not be used in the research paper, and why?"
>
> "Popular, because they don't present cogent and peer-reviewed arguments."
>
> "What types of sources were required in the research paper, and why?"
>
> "Books from the library were required because the library is a valuable resource for on campus research."

New graduate teaching assistants likely think that by limiting students to particular types of

sources, they are requiring students to engage in scholarly conversations and critical analysis as

part of the research and writing processes. However, by limiting first-year writing students to

specific source formats (not coincidentally the formats typically used by expert researchers in

literary studies and other humanities disciplines), instructors are actually unintentionally

circumventing opportunities for students to practice critical evaluation and select sources based

on rhetorical contexts and information. Furthermore, the exclusive use of peer-reviewed sources

and print books rarely makes sense for the types of researched writing students are being

assigned in introductory composition classes, when students often have wide latitude to choose

topics about current events and popular culture.

      Finally, when asked about their understanding of the idea of "information literacy"

instruction as it relates to first-year writing courses, several respondents' answers mirrored the

idea of that the role of librarians is to teach skills-based research instruction during a "library

day." For some respondents, information literacy itself is a discrete set of competencies involving

finding and citing sources, rather than a framework practices and ways of thinking about

information that demonstrate understanding of how information is created, disseminated,

evaluated, and valued in society. In response to the question "What is your definition of

information literacy in the context of teaching first-year students?", one interview participant's

definition even involved the goal of having students use specific tools instead of engaging in

open-ended inquiry.

> *"Learning and knowing how to use the particular databases that the library offers. The*
>
> MLA International Bibliography*, ProQuest*, and JSTOR: *those are the three main ones that*
>
> *I make my students use."*

Notably, the *MLA International Bibliography* is a subject database often used in literary studies

and familiar to graduate students in English departments. However, it would rarely be an

appropriate choice for a first-year writing student to use due to its level of difficulty and specificity

compared to many multidisciplinary databases and tools like Google Scholar.

All of the questionnaire respondents indicated that they were satisfied, overall, with their

students' final research papers. However, despite their students' ability to produce satisfactory

products, several respondents perceived that their students were not fully engaging in inquiry or

evaluation during the research and writing processes. For example, when asked "What

information literacy skills or habits of mind do your students still struggle with?", one participant

answered:

> *"I still see a lot of evidence of them just going to Google and using whatever pops up.*
>
> *Like kind of that plug and chug where, instead of going into it with a research question,*
>
> *even though we worked at getting them into a research question, they still wait until*
>
> *they've kind of written the paper to find sources. Or they only search for articles that*
>
> *reinforce their own ideas."*

These behaviors all mirror outcomes of mechanics-focused researched writing assignments that

emphasize products instead of processes. As Critten and Seeber (2015) argue, assessing student

research by evaluating the quantity and type of sources students use "tells you what a student

obtained, but not how it was acquired, or if the student even wanted the product to begin with"

(slide 12). Merely being able to produce a final paper that meets source requirements says very

little about a student's dispositions towards research and writing, never mind whether they are

able to engage in "reflective discovery of information," understand "how information is produced

and valued," and use information to "create new knowledge" and "participate ethically in

communities of learning"—all elements of information literacy as defined in the *ACRL Framework.*

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When asked "why did you assign a research paper this semester," the range of responses from new graduate teaching assistants indicated a variety of beliefs about the role of research papers in first-year writing. For example, one questionnaire respondent answered:

"Because many of the students are unfamiliar with the actual process that not only goes into writing but researching as well, and I feel that it is important that my students get a chance to practice and engage with those skills that they will undoubtedly be using (at the very least) the rest of their undergraduate careers."

However, another answered:

I felt like I had to. I think incorporating research is an important skill, but after this semester I am never doing a formal "research paper" again. Students don't need it as much as they need other skills that already require research incorporation.

These responses both reflect a belief that teaching researched writing in first-year writing is valuable, but neither response actually gives a reason why the complex set of abilities required to engage in iterative research and writing processes must be taught through the assigning the genre of "the research paper."

Perhaps this is related to why 13 of the 15 respondents answered that they would change their approach to teaching researched writing in the subsequent semester, based on what they learned from their experience of assigning a research paper in their first semester. These changes ranged from "moving away from the traditional research paper format in favor of genres that students are more familiar with and more likely to need to work with in their professional futures" to "incorporating librarians and digital project consultants into the course in order to assign multimodal projects" to "re-emphasizing credibility" through informal activities leading up to a scaffolded research paper assignment. Significantly, these new graduate teaching assistants only arrived at these ideas for alternative ways to teach researched writing after experiencing

designing, assigning, and assessing a traditional research paper during their first semester

teaching introductory first-year writing.

A New Approach

From analyzing the experiences and perceptions of new graduate teaching assistants

serving as first-time instructors of introductory first-year writing, it was clear to the author that she

shared many learning goals for students with new GTAs at UNC Greensboro—yet, these new

GTAs had initially fallen into the same trap that so many well-meaning faculty members had

before them. They were designing research paper assignments that inadvertently constructed

research as linear and skills-based while implicitly expecting first-year writing students to engage

in researched writing using the methods and tools they use as emerging experts. As a result,

their students were able to produce final products that nominally met the written requirements of

the assignments without meeting the GTAs' goals for what students should learn about research:

namely, how to engage in meaningful inquiry and reflection, synthesize complex ideas, and

create new knowledge.

Yet, while the new GTAs from whom she gathered responses articulated the desire to

engage in different approaches to teaching researched writing in the future, the author had

limited agency as an instruction librarian within the structure of the college writing program at

UNC Greensboro to pre-emptively improve the experiences of either new cohorts of graduate

teaching assistants or their students in subsequent fall semesters. The 30-minute session the

instruction librarians are allotted during the GTA orientation each August was hardly long enough

to meaningfully impact new GTAs' perceptions about library instruction and the role of

information literacy in first-year writing, particularly when the factors that result in poorly designed

assignments (namely, the influence of the "expert researcher" mindset on research paper

assignment design and the expectation that a single one-shot session with a librarian will turn students into expert researchers) are so pervasive even among experienced faculty. This raised the question: without being able to change the structure of the orientation process for new GTAs, and given that it was unlikely that new instructors would deviate from the one-shot precedent for first-year writing courses, what was the most impactful change that could be made?

Assignment design collaborations

In contemplating how to improve teaching researched writing in first-year composition courses, scholars in writing studies and LIS have offered many possible solutions, such as greater scaffolding of research assignments, deeper integration of librarians as teachers and course designers in the first-year writing curriculum, the establishment of faculty-librarian communities of practice around information literacy pedagogy, and supplemental online information literacy instruction (Barratt et al, 2009; Gardner and White-Farnham, 2013; Howard and Jamieson, 2014; Kissel et al, 2016; Leckie, 1996; McGuinness, 2006; Refaei et al., 2015). Yet, given the specifics of the situation at UNC Greensboro, the author decided that the most meaningful way to improve student learning outcomes for researched writing was to use the 30-minute session during GTA orientation allotted to discuss library instruction to propose that new GTAs collaborate with instruction librarians on the actual design of research-based assignments. This solution, while rarely discussed as a standalone fix to the problems inherent with "the research paper" in first-year writing, is supported by both writing studies and LIS literature.

For example, writing from the perspective of a composition studies scholar, Brent (2014) encourages writing instructors to collaborate with librarians on assignment design by pointing out that librarians are well-attuned to the struggles and barriers students face when they are given research paper assignments and are thus in a position to help improve them: "Since the

librarians frequently are the ones to clean up our messes when we create ill-conceived research

assignments, we would do well to listen more closely to what they are saying" (p. 43). McClure

(2009) takes this idea further, pointing out that both librarians and writing instructors have unique

perspectives on the writing and research processes as both teachers and practitioners. Thus, by

collaborating on research assignment design, librarian-instructor partners can "learn more about

their shared writing and researching goals, thus likely to improve both library and writing

instruction in the process" and "work together to design assignments in order to build in research

and analysis concepts at the points of need in them" (p. 71). Whitver (2017), reiterates this

sentiment in writing about librarian partnerships (including research assignment design

collaboration) with graduate teaching assistants during a teaching practicum, writing "if both

librarians and first-time teachers approach this collaboration with a willingness to learn from each

other and a commitment to working toward their shared goal, they can transform the information

literacy classroom into a dynamic learning environment that fosters the skills necessary for

engaged, researched writing" (pp. 175-176). In other words, research assignment collaborations

can be beneficial to both librarians and writing instructors, resulting in the exchange of expertise

and design of assignments that reflect their mutual goals for student learning.

However, as Wishkoski et al. (2019) point out, collaborative assignment design is not the

norm in library instruction. Rather, "...consultation with a librarian happens only after course

assignments are written and syllabi set" (p. 96), or worse, after the assignment has been

distributed (and, at that point, cannot really be changed without risking greater confusion to

students). This is because library instruction is often seen as an optional support service for

first-year writing instructors, who can involve librarians as little as they want to in the design of

their courses and assignments. To this end, Artman et al. (2010) argues that writing instructors

can only really benefit from the expertise of librarians in information literacy pedagogy and theory

by involving them much earlier:

> "…this collaboration must not be reserved until students are in the process of conducting
>
> or beginning their research, but must be part of instructional planning envisioned by the
>
> instructor or writing program administrator. If this sort of cooperation appears to improve
>
> student writing (in terms of the final products produced through such partnerships), then
>
> our efforts as compositionists and WPAs must focus on the collaborative processes that
>
> facilitate productive interaction between library and writing instructors." (p. 100)

Thus, while assignment design consultations between instruction librarians and GTAs are unlikely

to ever be required by the college writing program administration at UNC Greensboro, the author

also concluded that at least pointing out that collaborative research assignment design has

proponents among writing studies scholars might help legitimize the practice to new GTAs and

encourage further collaborations.

Finally, while one-shot library instruction sessions will always have limitations, assignment

design collaborations can open up more discussions about the inefficacy of skills-based

demonstration during library instruction. If instruction librarians are able to help first-year writing

instructors think through the negative impacts that strict source parameters have on the student

learning process in the context of researched writing and help them align the design of the

assignment with their goals for what students should learn about writing and research, other

forms of research projects that emphasize process over mechanics might emerge. When

students are not faced with arbitrary requirements for source use, writing instructors might be

encouraged to envision library instruction sessions that engage students in active learning

around aspects of research involving inquiry, analysis, and reflection.

Discussion and future directions

During the summer 2018 term, the author began to redesign the outline for the librarian-led session during the orientation for new GTAs. Instead of solely focusing on the logistics of scheduling library instruction, the session contextualized library instruction as part of a larger collaboration between writing instructors and librarians that begins with working together on assignment design. The session would also highlight some of the common pitfalls to traditional research paper assignments, including the relationship between source requirements and student dispositions towards research, in introductory first-year writing courses and introduce backward design (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005) as a helpful process for aligning goals for student learning with assignments and lesson plans.

<Insert murphy-fig1.tif>

Figure 1. Examples of slides from the revised library instruction introduction for new GTAs

Unfortunately, when the orientation schedule for the fall 2018 cohort of graduate teaching assistants was issued, the author discovered that she would be across the country participating in a multi-day professional development working during the entire 3-day orientation. This meant that she would be unable to fully implement plans for working with the new cohort in the 2018-19 year, because the new GTAs would not have an opportunity to meet their actual liaison librarian with whom they would collaborate on assignment design before the start of the fall semester. Instead, the information literacy coordinator at UNC Greensboro led a hybrid session that contained elements of both the old introduction to library instruction and the revised plan emphasizing assignment design collaborations in the author's absence.

While the author was unable to lead the session during the orientation for the new cohort of graduate teaching assistants in summer 2018, the hybrid session described above was not altogether unsuccessful in encouraging new GTAs to meet with the first-year writing instruction

librarian about research assignment design. Of the 9 new GTAs beginning as introductory

first-year writing instructors in fall 2018, 5 scheduled meetings with the author in August and early

September to begin the process of designing research assignments together. Additionally, while

the author did not explicitly hope that developing collaborative relationships with new GTAs

would impact the library instruction model at UNC Greensboro, more first-year writing instructors

scheduled two or more library instruction sessions in the fall 2018 semester than they had in the

previous six semesters; 20% of the 35 first-year writing classes that received library instruction

came to the library more than two or more sessions, as compared to an average of about 13%

between fall 2015 and spring 2017.

One of the things the author emphasized during research assignment design sessions

with new graduate TAs was the practice of aligning source parameters to the instructor's actual

learning goals for their students, which typically included students being able to evaluate the

authority and trustworthiness of a source of information as well as choose useful and relevant

sources in the context of their actual research topics. As an outcome of these discussions, the

instructors moved away from requiring peer-reviewed journal articles or print books for

research-based writing assignments in their first-year writing courses. Instead, the wording of

their assignments stressed that students should seek a range of authoritative voices on their

topics, regardless of source type. For example, the source requirements section of one

persuasive video assignment, titled "What kinds of sources should I use?" was phrased,

> "Credible sources do not need to consist of solely academic, peer-reviewed journal
>
> articles. Credible sources do need to be written by someone with expertise in your
>
> subject. This may be an academic professional/scholar, a journalist with extensive
>
> experience covering and analyzing your topic area, or some other expert in the field."

In another example, a different instructor used the following language to describe source

requirements for an argumentative research paper following a collaborative assignment design

consultation with the author:

> "Your source needs to be someone (or some organization) with the authority to speak on
>
> the issue at hand. That means different things for different topics. If your topic is the
>
> Cuban Missile Crisis, a government source might be useful, if your topic is Chance the
>
> Rapper, you're better off with a music critic. The library will help you to better define your
>
> searches and sources, but keep these things in mind: is the source biased? Authoritative?
>
> Current? If it is biased—can you present its ideas while still situating it/contextualizing it for
>
> your reader?"

As a result of these shifts in assignment parameter language, the author was also able to create

library instruction lesson plans for the sections taught by the aforementioned graduate TAs that

focused on more conceptual aspects of information literacy, rather than demonstrations of how to

use scholarly article databases or the library book catalog. For example, to get students thinking

about how and why information sources are created and shared in the first place before students

are asked to seek them out through research, the author designed an activity for one library

instruction session in which students were asked to work in groups to match different source

formats (such as podcasts, Tweets, broadcast television news updates, YouTube videos, online

magazine blog posts, and journal articles) to different statements about their creators and

creation/dissemination processes (such as "can be published by anyone of any level of authority

or expertise on a topic," "can be instantly updated or edited after it was originally published to

correct an error or add new information," and "shares the results of original research, analysis, or

theory by an academic subject specialist"). In another instruction session, students were asked to

examine the first five results from a Google search for "backyard composting safety" and work in

groups to develop a list of criteria they use to evaluate different types of web sources, leading to

a class discussion about what questions a researcher should ask about authority, currency, bias,

and documentation in order to determine whether a source is trustworthy and relevant for their

information needs.

Finally, the author met with the information literacy coordinator and the college writing

program administrator in late fall 2018 to discuss possible future changes to the curriculum of the

introductory first-year writing course as part of a general education revision at UNC Greensboro.

One change the author advocated for was revising course outcomes, and instructor guidelines,

so that an alternative approach to teaching researched writing becomes part of the program

requirements for the introductory course. This approach has students practice reading,

comprehension, and synthesis when writing from complex sources before engaging in an actual

research project with a final product of an annotated bibliography (see Figure 2).

<Insert murphy-fig2.tif here>

Figure 2. Slide describing alternative research project approach

The author also secured an invitation from the writing program administrator to serve as a guest

instructor for a class session of the graduate practicum course, which all new GTAs take, in the

upcoming fall 2019 semester. The session will be focused on shared concepts and language in

the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy* and a similar framework used in the discipline of

writing studies, the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* in order to help graduate

teaching assistants explore the overlaps between writing and information literacy instruction.

Conclusion

Working with GTAs on information literacy instruction can present librarians with

opportunities to develop effective collaborative teaching partnerships. Working with brand new

instructors at the outset of their instructional journeys may bypass some of the traditional

frustrations both librarians and instructors feel around assigning and assessing student research

projects. Of course, not every instruction librarian works with graduate teaching assistants.

However, many librarians will have the chance to work with new instructors who may be teaching

at the college level for the first time, which can result in similar opportunities to develop teaching

partnerships with new instructors right out of the gate.

One advantage of working with new graduate teaching assistants over new instructors in

general is that GTAs are often required to participate in pre-semester orientation programs

and/or teaching practica aimed at preparing these students for their instructional duties. Multi-day

orientations and semester- or year-long practica are often impactful venues for librarians to

emphasize how collaborative assignment design relationships can result in assignments that

emphasize shared librarian-instructor goals for student learning about research and writing as

inquiry-based iterative processes. For example, as Whitver (2017) writes, new graduate teaching

assistants as first-time college writing instructors "were more likely than other writing instructors

to involve librarians in assignment design, to strategically position library instruction sessions

within the greater context of their writing assignments and to take a greater role in engaging with

their students during library instruction sessions" (p. 173) as a result of participating in a

collaborative model with librarians during their formative teacher training.

New faculty-level instructors may not be required by their institutions or departments to

participate in formal pedagogical training similar to what is required of graduate teaching

assistants before they begin teaching. However, librarians may be able to create opportunities to

reach new instructors in order to emphasize collaborative research assignment design before the

instructors assign research projects to students by working with teaching and learning centers or

instructional design units on campus. Because these departments are often tasked with providing

professional development on teaching and course/assignment design to faculty, they may be able to more easily promote information sessions with librarians to new instructors.

Additionally, regardless of whether librarians are working with new graduate teaching assistants or new faculty-level instructors, there are a few common strategies they may want to try in order to encourage instructor support for collaborative assignment design. First, librarians can emphasize any shared language about information literacy dispositions and practices between the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* and the instructor's own disciplinary frameworks. They can also discuss literature from both LIS and disciplinary perspectives about successful librarian-instructor partnerships around research assignment design and information literacy instruction related to an instructor's field. Lastly, instruction librarians can ask graduate teaching assistants or other instructors with whom they have successfully worked before to become involved in their outreach and collaboration with new instructors, in order to provide potential opportunities for peer teaching and learning or encourage a community of practice around information literacy at their institutions.

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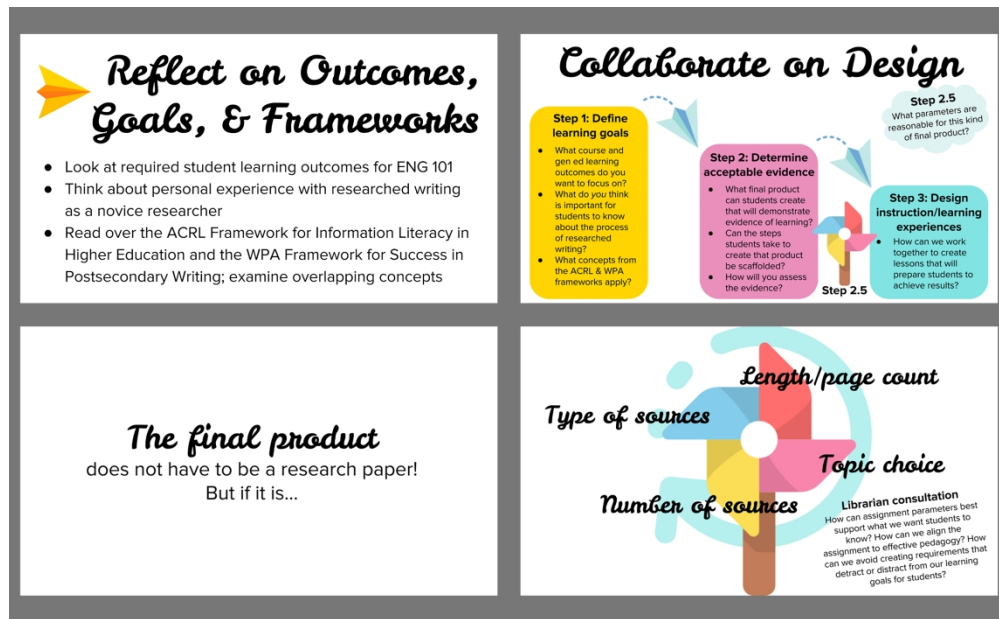(2019): 95–126. https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2019.0006.

Figure 1. Examples of slides from the revised library instruction introduction for new GTAs

279x171mm (300 x 300 DPI)

Example of Alternate Assignment Approach

The first step is to write from sources, without *finding* the sources.

- The librarian and course instructor collaborate on developing 4-6 sample topics for the class.
    - Each sample topic comes with a set of 6 sources in different formats.
- Librarian and course instructor teach students the BEAM method of source use. Students discuss creation process for different formats.
- Students write a paper on a sample topic, focusing on comprehension, synthesis, and integration, not locating sources.

The actual final product is an annotated bibliography.

- After writing and receiving feedback on the first paper project, students receive instruction on locating and evaluating sources.
- Students develop their own research question, then find 4-6 sources that help them examine the question and understand the conversation.
- Students write an annotated bibliography in which they evaluate each source's authority and creation process, and articulate what role the source would play in a final paper.

Figure 2. Slide describing alternative research project approach

338x190mm (300 x 300 DPI)