

Team Teaching a Credit Class

by

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Introduction

The library instruction program at Indiana University-South Bend (IUSB) is much like programs at most other universities. The freshman study skills class and the freshman writing class have required library components in which the librarians introduce the basics of academic library research. Upper level and graduate classes have instruction only upon the request of the individual instructors. While we occasionally have the luxury of seeing a class two times in a semester, the majority of instruction is "one-shot." We also offer occasional workshops open to any student, and our reference-by-appointment allows more in-depth instruction for an individual. While assessment of our instruction program shows that students do benefit from our efforts, students often ask how they could learn more.

For quite some time we had considered offering a credit course, but we had not been able to free up one individual's time to develop and teach it, and none of the librarians wanted to take on all of the additional work alone. After much discussion, we eventually decided to team teach the course using all of the instruction librarians (who are also most of our reference librarians). In the spring of 1996, we began teaching a one credit-hour course called "Library Resources and Skills" offered through the School of Library and Information Science (SLIS). This article describes the process we used in planning, teaching, and revising the course since its inception.

Planning the Course

For several years, we have been holding monthly instruction meetings, and we used that forum for all discussions regarding this course. We chose one person to be the lead teacher, but all of us as a team helped develop the course objectives and syllabus and designed the final project. While Rosanne Cordell, Head of Library Instruction, led the discussions and kept us on track throughout the planning, the process was definitely collaborative.

The course is designed to be a general introduction to academic libraries for undergraduate students. It focuses on having students learn

about the resources in the IUSB library, on the Internet, and to develop a logical search strategy. The specific topics that we teach in the course include controlled vocabularies, the online catalog, locating and using print and electronic periodical indexes, MLA and APA style manuals, specialized reference sources, Internet resources, government publications, statistical sources, and how to evaluate sources. It should be obvious that in a one credit-hour course, we just introduce these topics — we do not attempt to cover them in-depth. It's not too different in this respect from the Western Civilization survey classes.

While we spend most of the class time introducing these subjects, we have designed the assignments to allow for hands-on learning. We also provide some lab sessions with guided exercises which are done during class time. The first semester, we had two lab sessions; we now have three. The final project is an annotated bibliography on a subject of the students' choice - we encourage them to choose a topic that they are researching for another class. They are required to have at least fifteen sources in the bibliography including one reference source, four books, five journal articles, two web sites, two government publications, and one other source. The annotations are to be a brief justification for inclusion of the source (e.g., source cited in encyclopedia article; most up-to-date, etc.).

Feng Shan, our lead teacher, has been responsible for teaching about half of the sessions, and the other five instruction librarians divide the remaining sessions. It was fairly easy to divide these, since we work closely together and were aware of each others' interests and expertise.

While we had developed the course together, it was up to each individual to develop their own lesson plans and assignments. Each person is also responsible for grading their own assignments. The lead teacher is responsible for all of the paperwork, the grading of the final project, and being the main contact person for the students.

The First Time

We first offered this course in the spring 1996 semester as an accelerated eight week class. We thought that the students would do better if we met twice a week instead of once, and we also thought that by covering all of the material during the first half of the semester, the students would be prepared to work on any research projects that they might have in other classes.

During that first semester, Shan attended every session to take attendance, answer questions, and to ensure continuity. Since he had been part of the planning and attended the sessions, he also took the responsibility of discussing questions students had regarding corrected assignments. He also developed a Webpage that included the syllabus, the outlines for each lecture, and the assignments. Students found this very useful.

Although it is a 100 level class, we have had students from freshman through senior status. We even had one graduate student that first semester. Each of the six instructors had slightly different experiences with the class that semester. Some thought that the students were attentive and enthusiastic; others found them hostile as soon as class started. This probably was a reflection on the most recent assignment that they had been given. We heard a lot of complaints from students that we were expecting too much work for a one credit-hour course. We heard this throughout the course, and this sentiment came out very strongly in the course evaluations. This perplexed us. We realized that we did make an assignment at almost every class session, but they were given at least a week to complete them, and none of us believed that our assignments should take more than forty-five minutes to an hour, at most. We decided that even though we told the students on the first day that this was an accelerated class and they would have a complete semester's work in half the time, we do not think that they believed us. There are also some students who think that there should not be any homework for a one credit-hour class.

Generally, though, the overall course evaluations were positive. Most students found the class to be quite helpful, and some recommended that it be made a required course. Although a few commented that they felt that there were some inconsistencies in our expectations of the students, more commented that it was valuable to have the team expertise.

Revisions

In fall 1996, we offered the class for the second time. We made a few minor changes in the syllabus and the assignments. We also asked the students to indicate how long they spent on each assignment; we wanted to check our perception against reality. We discovered that most students did not spend more time than we expected, and the few that did, either did not follow instructions or they were just not the best students on campus.

Another change was the way the course was handled. We decided that our lead teacher did not need to attend every session. He still taught half

the sessions and remained in contact with the students via e-mail and office hours, but he felt that he knew what we each of us was doing, we had been through the routine once and we probably didn't need to rely on his presence.

This seemed to work fine for the students, although we were concerned about continuity. The course seemed somewhat disjointed to us. With the exception of the lead teacher, who was able to see the students fairly often, we would go in, teach our session, and leave. It was nothing more than a specialized one-shot bibliographic instruction session for us. This is something that disturbed all of us, but apparently, it did not bother the students. The evaluations were even more positive than the previous semester. We again found that several students mentioned the advantage of having a team of instructors.

While this was somewhat reassuring, we were not satisfied. We thought that we could still serve them better by making some further refinements. The third time we taught the class (spring 1997), we set aside the first ten minutes of each session to discuss the assignment that was being returned that day. This discussion took place with the librarian who had made the presentation and had graded the assignments, which means that we would give the lecture and give the assignment and a week later we were in the classroom again to return the papers and field any questions. This gave us more contact with the students and we found out first-hand what kinds of questions they had about our assignments. The evaluations for this semester were again positive and had even fewer negative comments than in the previous semesters.

The Future

Of course, we are never satisfied, and we have already decided to make some changes for next year. The first one is purely logistical. We had offered the course through SLIS, but since that program is closing on our campus, we had to find a new home. The course will be offered through the College of Arts and Sciences. Actually, this may be a positive change for our enrollment. Not too many undergraduates looked at the SLIS listings in the schedule of classes, and our enrollments have been small (ten to fifteen). Perhaps they will increase with the Arts and Sciences listing. We will also offer the course only in the spring semester, instead of fall and spring. We also are going to try spreading it out over the entire semester to see how that will work. While there are still some good reasons to think that meeting two times a week is better, we think that possibly students need more than a few

days to digest what they learn. We also hope that the students will feel less stressed by having only one assignment per week.

We are seriously considering having only two people teach the course instead of six. We could accomplish this by reducing the regular instruction load of these two librarians. We think that it will probably be easier for students to get used to the teaching styles, and it will give the two librarians a chance to get to know the students a little better. It will be an interesting experiment. There may be some drawbacks to this. We believe that it has been positive for the students to become familiar with so many of our reference librarians. Students have commented that since they had been introduced to six librarians throughout the course, they would almost always see a familiar face whenever they were in the reference room. If we decide to have only two instructors, the students will not get to know the rest of reference librarians as well.

Even if we decide to use only two teachers, we all want to have continued input into any changes. We feel that the team approach in developing the course is good, and that six heads are better than one. The students also seemed to think that it was a benefit to have a team of instructors. They probably felt that if one of us were boring, at least we would not be back.

Team planning and team teaching have been good experiences. While certainly one person could develop the course by him/herself, I'm not sure that any of us would have volunteered to do that — it does take a lot of time. But working as a team, we were able to accomplish it with just a few meetings and no one felt a huge increase in the workload. Being able to bounce ideas off each other is another very important benefit to teamwork. It is definitely something that we would encourage others to consider trying.