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# LET'S HAVE A PARTY: INFORMATION LITERACY INSTRUCTION AS AN EMPOWERMENT STRATEGY

SHAHLA BAHAVAR, ANGELA YUMIKO BOYD, VALERIA MOLteni AND SOPHIE LESINSKA

## INTRODUCTION

International and ethnic minority students are two groups of learners whose academic success is of special concern to DIAL-South, the professional organization that at the 2007 LOEX Conference sponsored the discussion session "Let's Have a Party: Information Literacy Instruction as an Empowerment Strategy." The abbreviation DIAL-South stands for the Southern California branch of the Diversity in Academic Libraries interest group of California Academic and Research Libraries (CARL). DIAL supporters are committed to diversity in academia and to equitable access to education. For many DIAL members who once belonged to the cohorts of minority and/or international students, this philosophy is intertwined with a sympathetic attachment rooted in identification.

The foundational assumption of this discussion session was that the international and minority students experience more alienation on campus than average students. International students are far away from home, cut off from their support networks, and surrounded by a culture that they know from movies rather than from everyday practice. Minority students are also susceptible to alienation. They usually are first-generation college attendees and therefore strangers to academic culture.

While part and parcel of academia, libraries are free of the most acute pressures of academic life: grading and other forms

of evaluation. This is why academic libraries are well-situated to become spaces where students can get acquainted with academic culture in a stress-free environment. Effective library services such as outreach, reference, and information literacy instruction (ILI) play a major role in enhancing the library's function as a place of academic acculturation.

Since DIAL members are always eager to discuss and promote diversity in academia, the idea of a DIAL-sponsored discussion session emerged at our group's meeting. In keeping with the LOEX 2007 program committee and the conference participants' wishes to hear about unconventional teaching practices, we found our inspiration in an innovative venture undertaken by two librarians at the University of Southern California (USC). Joy Kim, Curator of the USC Korean Heritage Library, and her colleague, Korean Studies Librarian Sun-Yoon Lee, challenged the boundaries between work and play by launching bi-annual information literacy parties. At LOEX 2007, we showed a brief film "Lunch and Learn at the Korean Heritage Library" that captured interviews with both librarians and a few shots from an instructional event at their library.

Notably, the USC Korean Heritage Library counts among its constituents and patrons both international students from Korea and Korean Americans, who are an important ethnic group in Los Angeles. Because of this confluence, the specific case of ILI at the USC Korean Heritage Library bridged two more general presentations about campus-wide strategies to reach international students at USC and ethnic minority students at California State University Dominguez Hills (CSUDH). By juxtaposing small-scale and institution-wide solutions, the discussion session aimed to inspire reflection and cross-pollination of ideas.

The discussion organizers are affiliated with institutions that are leaders in diversity enrollment. With regard to international student population, the University of Southern

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California in Los Angeles (USC) ranks number one in the nation (17%), right ahead of University of Illinois – Urbana Champaign (12.5%) and New York University (12%). At California State University Dominguez Hills (CSUDH) diversity is one of the most salient characteristics of the student population (which is 40% Latino, 30% African American, 19% White, 10% Asian/Pacific Islander and 1% American Indian). The library systems on both campuses have implemented campus-wide strategies to reach international and ethnic minority students.

The session opened with Shahla Bahavar's presentation about USC Libraries successes in reaching out to international students. Next, the session organizers showed the film "Party and Learn at USC Korean Heritage Library." Finally, Valeria Molteni talked about an array of strategies implemented at the CSUDH Library to reach out to minority students. After 20 minutes of introductory remarks, session organizers turned for comments to the audience (approximately thirty attendees).

## **PART ONE**

Information Literacy Outreach to International Students: University of Southern California's Experience (Shahla Bahavar)

USC is a private research university in Los Angeles. The student population of total 33,000 is almost evenly divided between undergraduate and graduate students. Almost 17% of the total student population (over 6,000) consists of international students from more than 116 countries. In the past, Middle Eastern countries had a strong representation on campus. Currently, most international students come from India, Taiwan, China and South Korea. The majority of international students are enrolled in graduate programs (80%) in the areas of Computer Science, Electrical Engineering and Business Administration.

At USC a variety of information literacy programs prepare international students to succeed academically. USC Libraries work on this endeavor in partnerships with such departments such as the American Language Institute, Language Academy (a stand-alone English as a Second Language program) and the Office of International Students Services.

### **USC American Language Institute (ALI)**

USC was one of the first universities to recognize that some international students require instruction in English in order to succeed. To support such instruction, the American Language Institute was established in 1959. The international students are required to take the International Students English Examination test before commencing their studies. Depending on the placement test result, students may be required to take between three to twelve hours of ALI English classes per week. Simultaneously, all ALI students are enrolled in their regular academic subject area courses.

### **USC Libraries Information Literacy Instruction (ILI)**

USC Libraries provides international students with

ILI in different formats and contexts. Through contact with the International Students Services Office, USC Libraries provide library orientation to new students at the beginning of each semester. These initial orientations enable students to learn what resources and services are available to them at the campus libraries.

The second outreach strategy is a partnership with American Language Institute (and also with the ESL Language Academy). Librarians teach course-integrated, hands-on information literacy sessions to ALI students who learn the library research process in networked classrooms. Such sessions are tailored to class assignments and give students opportunity to interact with librarians. Group instruction often leads to interactions at the reference desk, one-on-one research consultation appointments and virtual chat or email reference transactions.

USC American Language Institute recognizes the importance of library instruction to international students' academic success. Due to limited resources, librarians are unable to teach multiple sessions to several sections of ALI courses. Rather than increase the number of in-person sessions, USC Libraries supports the integration of information literacy into ALI classes by creating relevant online resources. The first such tool is a website designed for international students. See [http://www.usc.edu/libraries/about/instruction/course\\_support/ALIIntroductiontoResearchatUSC.htm](http://www.usc.edu/libraries/about/instruction/course_support/ALIIntroductiontoResearchatUSC.htm).

Furthermore, to complement in-class instruction, USC Libraries have customized the online tutorial called Research 101 (originally created at the University of Washington and available under the Creative Commons License). See (<http://www.usc.edu/libraries/research101/>) The tutorial is intended for the general student population at USC. It will be fully implemented in the fall of 2007. Because of high demand for library instruction within the ALI, the tutorial was piloted in the spring 2007 to the limited audience of international students.

The USC version of Research 101 consists of six independent modules, each with its own set of objectives and exercises. It is not meant to replace in-person instruction but to complement it. In addition, the tutorial provides an alternative for students who wish to learn at their own pace. In the spring of 2007, ALI students were required to take the tutorial prior to attending the library instruction session. As a result, hands-on classes conducted by librarians were more effective. Librarians only needed to review the basics and had time to address more advanced topics such as critical thinking.

## **PART TWO**

Lunch and Learn at USC Korean Heritage Library: A film produced by Sophie Lesinska in collaboration with Joy Kim and Sun-Yoon Lee

Korean students at USC campus are mostly enrolled in graduate programs such as Social Work, Political Science, Public Policy and Planning, Gerontology, Cinematic Arts, Critical Studies, History, Linguistics and Literature. A growing

population of Korean undergraduates includes primarily Business and Economics majors.

USC international students from Korea find home away from home at the Korean Heritage Library (KHL). Like home, the KHL is a place where students study, read for pleasure, watch movies and interact with people who share their culture. Last, but not least, like at home, at the KHL Korean students can communicate in Korean about their experiences in the English-speaking world of academia. Articulating the unfamiliar in one's own language accelerates the process of acculturation to academic life in the United States.

Established in 1986, the KHL library initially focused on building its collections, which today consists of books (46,000), serials (16,000), videos and DVDs (1,500), microfilms, maps (including rare maps), photographs, and a rich collection of other archival materials. Its particular strengths are in the Korean War, Korean journalism, cinema and mass media and Korean-American immigration history. The international reputation of this collection is reflected by the library's impressive interlibrary loan request statistics. The KHL users include USC Korean Studies Institute, Korean Studies scholars all over the world, and the Korean American community.

In the interest of promoting the KHL collection, a few years ago Joy Kim, the KHL Curator, and her colleague Sun-Yoon Lee came up with the idea of lunch and learn events. They designed a session that covers a general overview of USC Libraries online and print collections and a more specific overview of Korean-language resources available to USC students. These sessions are organized every semester and are conducted in Korean over lunch. The library provides food, including Korean and American delicacies, and creates an environment that is conducive to social networking. The success of this program consists not only in the knowledge transfer that occurs during the instructional session but also in the creation of an academic support community that includes librarians and peers.

### **PART THREE**

Information Literacy for Diverse Populations: California State University Dominguez Hills (Valeria Molteni)

CSUDH is located in Carson, California in the South Bay Area of the Los Angeles County. The student population of approximately 12,000 students includes nearly 9,000 undergraduates and over 3,000 graduate students. CSUDH is part of the California State University system, which, with its 23 campuses, 417,000 students and 46,000 faculty, is the largest, most diverse and one of the most affordable institutions of higher education in the nation.

Since its beginnings in the early 1960s, CSUDH has been educating an ethnically diverse student population. Today it includes 40% Latinos, 30% African Americans, 19% Whites, 10% Asian/Pacific Islanders and 1% American Indians. Many students work full time and many are the first in their families to attend college. Incoming CSUDH students often lack confidence

in using academic libraries because they come from families where the world of higher education is regarded as inaccessible and intimidating. In addition, because they do not perceive the library as an integral part of the university campus, the students do not include it as part of their studies.

The CSUDH library has developed a variety of strategies to successfully deliver library services in a welcoming manner. These strategies include: 1) bilingual reference and instruction services delivered by the Multicultural and Outreach Librarian, 2) the library's involvement in the freshman course University 101, 3) the library's involvement in the CSUDH orientation program for prospective students and their parents.

### **Bilingual reference and instruction services**

The CSUDH created the position of the Multicultural and Outreach Librarian to better serve its ethnically diverse student body. Because the Multicultural Librarian holds academic degrees both from Argentina and the United States, she is able to offer high quality reference services both in English and Spanish. This is of great importance to the Latino students who often associate Spanish as the language of private interactions and English as the language of learning. By challenging this dichotomy, reference services in Spanish help Latino students embrace academic culture as more accessible. In addition, on the more practical level, bilingual reference services ensure that interviews correctly identify specific information needs.

Patrick Hall's article "Developing research skills in African-American students" (2003) emphasizes a correlation between general comfort level and academic achievement. "Many factors," argues Hall, "affect how well African American undergraduates develop their research competencies. Not the least of which is the set of mental operating perceptions in which these students give, receive and store information" (p. 183). Among the perceptions that Hall is referring to is the environment where the learning process occurs. The strategy of using the language familiar to the students from their home space produces an environment that enhances the students' receptivity to new knowledge. CSUDH professors recognize the importance of bilingualism on campus and often encourage the simultaneous use of Spanish and English in ILI.

### **Ethnic minorities and first year experience**

The CSUDH reference librarians are involved in the teaching of University 101, a 3 credit introductory course for first-year students. University 101 is central to placing the students within the university community, and its different assignments encourage them to participate in all aspects of campus life. The CSUDH reference librarians contribute to the teaching of University 101 through bibliographic instruction and general reference services.

### **Orientations**

The Multicultural and Outreach Librarian participates in orientations for the new students during the summer and at the

beginning of each semester. In this context too, employing both English and Spanish is a useful strategy to reach not only the students but also the parents.

Overall, CSUDH encourages minority students to claim the campus library as their own space by implementing three principal strategies: 1) bilingual reference and instruction services, 2) the library involvement in the freshman course University 101 and 3) the library involvement in the CSUDH orientation program for prospective students and their parents. All three strategies implemented simultaneously allow students to regard the academic library as a familiar and nurturing space on campus.

## DISCUSSION

The major topics that emerged during the discussion were: 1) strategies for alleviating stress in international and minority students, 2) the value of bilingualism in ILI, 3) partnerships with academic support units.

Invoking Patricia Wolfe's argument in *Brain Matters: Translating Research into Classroom Practice*, one of the discussion participants emphasized that extreme stress impeded the students' ability to learn. Due to their status as strangers to American academic culture, both minority and international students experience more stress than average students. Effective ILI should result not only in improved research abilities but also in an increased level of comfort. Ideally, ILI should prepare students to claim the library as their own territory, as a space perceived as familiar and safe.

Bilingual and/or bicultural librarians are uniquely qualified to mediate the process of acculturation necessary for stress reduction and academic success. However, cultural sensitivity is comparably desirable. Academic librarians are not positioned on top of the academic hierarchy and thus they share with international and minority students the status of being simultaneously insiders and outsiders on campus. For instance, librarians rarely teach for credit courses and rarely grade. This ambiguous position within academia makes librarians non-threatening figures and equips them with a cultural sensitivity necessary in productive interactions with most vulnerable students.

Similarly, the language barrier is most easily overcome when librarians can communicate with students in their native languages. This, however, is rarely possible. Speaking slowly, avoiding jargon, providing handouts and self-paced tutorials are just a few strategies that can alleviate the stress of dealing with English as a foreign language or with the sophisticated register of academic discourse.

Last but not least, the discussion confirmed the importance of partnerships with academic orientation programs.

International and first-generation college students, we agreed, deserved special, or/and additional orientation sessions. Apart from orientation programs, other important partners include offices for international student and scholars and centers that help first-generation college students.

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