

Learning Together: A Cross-Disciplinary Partnership

Robin E. Brown and Zhanna Yablokova

In August of 2009 in my position as librarian at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, I was requested to meet with Professor Zhanna Yablokova, a member of the English Department who was interested in collaborating with a librarian on designing a new approach to introducing library resources and to teaching research skills to her College Composition II students. At our first meeting, I asked Professor Yablokova to explain her concerns. The issues that Professor Yablokova raised about traditional library instruction were remarkably similar to the critiques that I was already familiar with from my experience as a librarian and from the library literature. We talked at length about ways to overcome the limitations of the traditional instruction model that usually takes place within short one-time visits to the library. Within this model, the librarian usually sees students once, often without the opportunity to follow up on students' progress in learning about library resources or about the library itself. The librarian is also unable to further assist them with assigned research projects. In fact, the goal of traditional library instruction is simply to provide students with a general overview of the available library sources, which typically leads to the library sessions being disconnected from the objectives set by the instructors.

Literature Review

The dysfunction in the traditional instruction model often causes librarians and classroom teaching faculty

to work together. This partnership often results in designing a different, more functional model. Buettner Manus, for example, chose an embedded-librarian model and attended the class every time it would meet.¹ Smiti Gandhi, on the other hand, designed a project that centered on a five-session library instruction curriculum.² Michael Hearn, alternatively, chose to meet students eight times during the semester, for about twenty minutes each time.³

Heidi and Dale Jacobs tackle one of the core issues with traditional library instruction. Library instruction, according to them, can and should be much more than teaching the mechanics of access to library resources. The process of teaching research is as difficult to teach as writing. Both are processes.⁴ A logical conclusion reached by probably all librarians and writing instructors (including both Professor Yablokova and me) who are collaborating on the improvement of informational literacy instruction agrees with the idea that research needs to be taught in as much depth as writing. Dick *Raspa* and Dane *Ward* point out that the changes in the structure of information make collaboration more essential than ever.⁵ The very nature of information literacy makes it "ripe for collaboration."⁶

To find discussions of information literacy in the English Composition literature is difficult but not impossible. We were able to locate works that discuss teaching research (Grobman) or critical thinking

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(Harrington) skills. Grobman's essay, in particular, is a plea for requiring information literacy and research training at all levels of English Composition instruction.⁷ Harrington et. al. provide an official statement of desirable outcomes from first year instruction.⁸ Information Literacy appears under the heading of "critical thinking, reading and writing ... a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources."⁹ Harrington also recommends that all students "practice appropriate means of documenting their work."¹⁰

The Premises of Our Work Together

Our collaboration began with scheduling Professor Yablokova's College Composition II class that she was teaching in the fall of 2009 for more intensive library instruction. My background includes working in an instruction program where librarian instructors routinely see writing classes at least twice and often three times during the semester. We decided I would meet with students three times. Professor Yablokova and I agreed that we would need to meet several times during the semester to discuss the instructor's goals concerning informational literacy, the availability of the sources related to the instructor's assignments, and the content of my presentations. In the process, we began to share literature and learn from each other's professional practices. The curriculum that was presented in the library instruction sessions for Professor Yablokova's classes grew out of these extended conversations.

Another important aspect of our collaboration was training Professor Yablokova in the field of information literacy. As a College Composition instructor, she has long been interested in assisting her students in the acquisition of research skills that are necessary for their academic success, regardless of their majors or areas of study. She, however, was unfamiliar with the concept of informational literacy and appreciated my help in systematizing her understanding of both print and electronic library materials, as well as sharing with her my knowledge of how to develop informational literacy for students. Instructor/librarian dialogue is an important factor in developing this type of collaboration. Many instructors are already deeply concerned about teaching students how to use library resources but often lack the necessary background in the teaching informational literacy for which librarians have been trained. Extended conversations and a willingness to listen to each other are the essential

tools for finding common ground on instructor-librarian collaboration.¹¹

Designing the Research Study

The idea of doing a research study emerged out of a conversation in the middle of the Fall 2009 semester. Based on my previous experience and my reading of literature on the subject, it was clear to me that students who receive more frequent library instruction during the semester are better prepared for completing their end-of-the-semester term papers as well as completing research assignments in other classes, so I suggested that we try this model and study the results of this experiment. The following semester Professor Yablokova was teaching a section of English Composition II. Students would come to the library for instruction three times. They would be also encouraged to see me individually to get additional help with finding and evaluating sources. In order to assess the effectiveness of our model, the research papers at the end of the term would be evaluated based on the rubric that focused on information literacy skills.

Curriculum Reform

Our collaboration has resulted in Professor Yablokova revisiting and reassessing the curriculum for her College Composition II classes. Moving away from the traditional curriculum that was based on a single research assignment at the end of the semester, Professor Yablokova designed a series of research assignments that would allow us to introduce some basic research skills to students throughout the course of the semester. The assignments allowed students to gradually master the research skills that they would be required to demonstrate in their end-of-the-term research papers.

The new curriculum was the result of our mutual realization that we need to:

- Teach students information literacy skills
- Focus on specific skills that all students need
- Use a step-by-step approach (first open web sources, then electronic databases, then printed sources)
- Most of the teaching of information literacy skills should take place in the classroom
- Attach each component of information literacy teaching to an assignment
- All assignments should fit into the preliminary established objectives (backwards design).

We had also realized that objectives should be focused on assisting students' acquisition of information literacy skills that would help them succeed in any class, not just in an English class and to satisfy the requirements of any instructor, not just this particular instructor.

Implications of Library Instruction

After we decided to hold library instruction sessions, the next key question was "What resources should we cover and in what order?" The traditional method of library instruction is not collaborative – the librarian instructor usually decides which skills will be covered and in what order. Although the faculty member may be asked what library sources should be included in the presentation, the decision is usually made based on a cookie-cutter basic skills approach. Our approach became everything the traditional approach was not. Prior to every library visit, we would meet for a detailed discussion of what sources should be covered in the session and why, how, and in what order they should be taught. The presentations were closely tied to the classroom curriculum and Professor Yablokova's research-skills requirements. The classroom curriculum and teacher requirements determined what research skills would be included. We began with identifying the types of sources to be introduced to the students. The three library visits were devoted to the three following types of sources: (1) open-access online sources, (2) electronic library databases and (3) printed sources. Later in the semester, students were asked to use the same three types of sources in their research papers. In the class that followed each instruction session, Professor Yablokova would review the material presented in the library presentation. Consequently, academic research and research skills became an ongoing, semester-long discussion in her College Composition II class.

Thus, the topics of the three library sessions were open-access online sources, electronic library databases and printed sources, particularly books. Professor Yablokova was adamant that we would begin with teaching students to use the free web as an information source. Her argument was that since the first source students refer to is the Internet, instead of prohibiting them to use open-access online sources, we should rather structure the assignments in such a way that would encourage students to evaluate open-access online sources and learn to identify these that are use-

ful in an academic setting. We both agreed that this approach provided us with a rare opportunity to help students realize the disadvantages using open-access online sources in comparison to using electronic library databases and the necessity to assess credibility of the open-access online sources. When at the end of the semester Professor Yablokova asked her students which of the three types of sources they had had most difficulty finding, many students responded that it was academically solid open-access online sources. They pointed out that they had to review hundreds of free-web sources before they could find one that was both relevant and credible. When Professor Yablokova and I later reviewed the outcomes of our project, we both agreed that the one of the most important outcomes was that we could demonstrate to students that for academic research electronic library databases are a far better source than open-access online sources. By examining different types of information sources and strategies side by side, we could demonstrate the advantages and disadvantages of each. Professor Yablokova's philosophy very much parallels the structure offered by Troy Swanson, who argues that we need to teach students to search, regardless of the platform.¹² He also argues that our standard typology is based on a print-based model that does not acknowledge that the same information may be available on several different platforms.¹³ In our project we acknowledged this. We also acknowledged that students' first choice of information sources is the Internet and that it is crucial that we teach them to use it mindfully as well as to demonstrate the advantages of more structured and academically reliable sources.

The second session was devoted to electronic library sources. We introduced periodical databases, such as Project MUSE, JSTOR, New York Times Historical, and Academic Search Complete. We also presented to students e-book databases, such as E-brary, net-Library, and Springer's E-books collection. For years now library periodical databases have been the main source of academic essays for scholars. Therefore, learning how to use them is crucial for our students' academic success. Also, more and more books are available in an electronic format. At Borough of Manhattan Community College Library, for example, there are now more electronic books than there are printed books.

At the same time, we wished to acknowledge that there are many valuable books that still exist solely

in print. In our final session, we instructed students in how to locate and use print materials both in the college and the university libraries. We also demonstrated how to request books from another library. Later several of the students requested books from other libraries for their research papers and commented to Professor Yablokova that this was one of the most useful research strategies they had learned. We also familiarized students with the library cataloging systems and call numbers used by most libraries so they will be able to easily find their way through any library.

The other major change we made in the library instruction curriculum was the introduction of inter-disciplinary research. We stressed that in College Composition II, students are usually assigned literary research, i.e., they are asked to research the work of literary critics discussing the literary text being analyzed in class. Professor Yablokova suggested that there would be more value in assigning students cross-disciplinary research topics that would cause students to make connections with other academic disciplines. The topics we designed for the end-of-the-semester research paper asked students to incorporate into their analysis of literary other sources written by historians, art historians, sociologists, psychologists, and biographers. Our goal was to prevent students from simply recycling what literary critics had written and instead to require them to use their knowledge of other disciplines to develop interesting, meaningful and, most importantly, independent literary arguments. Another important goal was to demonstrate to the students that most academic subjects are interconnected and that they can always apply knowledge that they gain in one class to analyze issues raised in another. The inter-disciplinary approach also allowed us to introduce to students library sources that they could use in other classes

In addition to three library instructional sessions students were offered extra credit if they made an appointment with me to receive additional help in either finding or evaluating sources. Many students did take the opportunity to earn extra credit and improve their essays. A significant number of these students demonstrated that a lot of additional work needs to be done in addition to classroom instruction. Thus, for many students who came to see me, I had to review some of the instructions I had given in the classroom.

Project Outcomes

Our collaboration has had a significant impact on both Professor Yablokova's and my practices. My standardized outline for all College Composition II classes now includes cross-disciplinary research as well as a renewed emphasis on information ethics. Professor Yablokova tells me that her fundamental practice has also changed. Teaching information literacy skills has become an important part of her curriculum in every class that she teaches, regardless of whether students receive formal library instruction. To all of her classes she now assigns projects that involve inter-disciplinary research. She has also, on an ongoing basis, been coming to me looking for literature on teaching information literacy.

As we began to reflect on the outcomes of our work, we realized that the resources available to librarians are simply inadequate to the task of providing information literacy training at the level that is needed.¹⁴ The teaching faculty members should be encouraged to teach informational literacy to their students. Therefore, information literacy training should be offered to all interested faculty.¹⁵ We are currently considering implementing a college-wide program that will offer faculty training in information literacy, the probable next stage of our collaboration.

Notes

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