Integrating Information Literacy Using the LPSS Political Science Research Competency Guidelines

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Defined as a set of skills requiring individuals to “recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information,” information literacy involves the application of learning goals and objectives in the development of curriculum for students at all levels. In higher education, library and information professionals have been working along with teaching faculty for over a decade now, to incorporate and translate the concepts of information literacy into concrete instructional practices. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has been at the forefront of this movement, both developing and disseminating guidelines and training opportunities for faculty and librarians who wish to incorporate these standards into their practices. While much of the original research focused on undergraduate education and large scale program implementation, most recently there has been a push to explore the application of information literacy concepts within a variety of academic learning communities.

Formed in 1975, the Law and Political Science Section (LPSS) of the Association of College and Research Libraries serves as an education and information exchange forum for academic librarians who provide research and instructional support for law or political science programs. Over the course of the past few years the section has been engaged in the process of developing information literacy guidelines for political science and law that would identify the necessary skill sets and competencies for student achievement in these fields. The results of their efforts were released in January of 2005 as the draft version of the “Political Science Research Competency Guidelines.” These guidelines, which are based in part on the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education represent a growing wave of attempts to adapt the more general set of competency guidelines to the discipline specific needs of academic programs and departments. Since their initial release, LPSS has continued to modify and collect feedback on the use and application of the guidelines and in February of 2006 released an updated version of the document.

In the fall of 2005 the Political Science Research Competency Guidelines were used at George Mason University as part of an effort to create a course integrated library instruction initiative for the School of Public Policy (SPP). A liaison librarian and a professor in the school collaborated on the effort employing a modified version of the instructional planning model developed by Robert Reiser and Walter Dick to guide the process.

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of integrating library research competencies into an existing course. Using the experience as a case study, this paper discusses the instructional planning process and the role of the Political Science Research Competency Guidelines in designing a multi-part library instruction component for an introductory graduate-level Public Policy course.

Arlington Campus Library and the School of Public Policy

George Mason University’s Arlington Campus is an urban commuter campus that serves as home to a variety of social and policy sciences programs. In addition to the School of Public Policy, the campus houses the School of Law, the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, and the Nonprofit Management program of the Department of Public and International Affairs, among other academic units. The campus is primarily made up of graduate professional programs, and courses are largely taught during the afternoon and early evening hours. The afternoon and evening class schedule is designed to accommodate the needs of a large portion of the student body who work fulltime during the week, many of them in the Washington D.C. political arena.

The Arlington Campus Library serves as a primary resource for all of the non-law programs, students, and faculty on the campus. Library users have direct access to a wealth of electronic resources and a print collection of applied social science materials. The library primarily collects in the areas of political science, international commerce, management, education, social work, and conflict resolution, and serves as the university’s depository for European Union documents. The Arlington Campus Library has a longstanding collaborative relationship with many of the programs on the campus and regularly participates in a variety of public services activities including orientations and the provision of library instruction. Librarians at George Mason University perform their duties as “liaisons” dedicated to specific departments and programs. In this regard the liaison, and indeed the library, works in partnership with the faculty and students to develop the necessary services, programs and collections needed for departments to be successful.

The present School of Public Policy (SPP) at George Mason University was formally established in July 2000. Since that time it has been among the fastest growing units within the university and currently has faculty and classes on two of the university’s three campus locations. The school offers both masters and doctorate level programs covering an assortment of policy and governance issues from international commerce to transportation infrastructure management. Due to its strategic location near the nation’s capital, the school has also been able to draw on the knowledge and experience of experts in the region, who frequently serve as adjunct instructors, guest speakers, researchers, and mentors.

As the largest program on the Arlington Campus, the School of Public Policy enrolls an increasingly diverse body of students each semester. The multidisciplinary and contemporary nature of the program attracts students from a wide variety of backgrounds including both recent college graduates and returning professionals. In summer of 2005 key faculty members in the school approached the library with concerns that a number of their students were having difficulty identifying appropriate resources for their papers and that many did not seem aware of the vast body of resources available to them through the library collection. Furthermore, they expressed the feeling that some of the students were not conducting research at the level expected and that others seemingly did not know how to search, appropriately cite, and use the growing number of electronic resources being acquired by the library. Through these discussions, the school and the library began deliberating on the possibility of developing a series of library instruction sessions that could be readily integrated into an existing course. The idea evolved into what would become the “Policy Research Library Skills (PRLS)” modules, a series of hour-long instruction sessions that would incorporate the needs of students who were relatively new to the school, while providing a more in-depth level of skill development for more advanced students. The chosen course was Public Policy (PUBP) 700 “Theory and Practice in Public Policy” which serves as a gateway course for the School’s standard Masters in Public Policy (MPP) program. PUBP 700 is generally offered during both fall and spring semesters and often in multiple sections due to the large number of students who enroll. Additionally, the class is required for a number of the certificate programs offered through the school. Once we decided that the class was a good fit, among our first challenges was to come up with the structure and content for the library instruction modules.

Policy studies and Information Literacy

Policy studies encompass a wide range of programs that include political science, public policy, public administration and public affairs. Sometimes referred to
as “applied” or “practical” politics, traditionally the goal of these programs is to train students who are interested in being involved in the work of political organizations and initiatives. Particularly at the graduate and professional levels these programs are designed to prepare students for administrative jobs in politics and governance as policy makers, legislative assistants and government administrators. Although each division of study (e.g., political science, public policy) may employ its own distinctive approach, program content is generally interdisciplinary, drawing on a mix of applied social sciences and focused on the roles of government and civil society. Individual courses may cover a wide array of topics ranging from healthcare to telecommunications technology, but many include a focus on distinct skill building areas such as policy analysis and management.

It is particularly in these areas that the concepts of information literacy have clear relevance for policy and political science education. Students preparing for careers in the policy sciences must be able to conduct research on a variety of contemporary and constantly evolving topics. They must be able to find credible and authoritative sources of information, and they will need to be able to interpret, analyze, and translate research information from a wide variety of sources. Furthermore, they will need to be able to utilize these skills long after they have left the university environment with its numerous databases and resources, so it is important that they understand the concepts rather than simply the tools. As stated in a recent report on access to information from the National Academies, “Policymakers and analysts need to be able to access and interpret information about the nation ranging from trends in the overall economy down to the use by individuals of Medicare in order to evaluate existing programs and to develop new ones.” Through the process of integrating information literacy competency standards into the policy science curriculum we hope to match up the needs of the educational programs and students with the needs of the profession.

Instructional Planning and Design
Instructional planning and design methodology is a useful tool for identifying and implementing the educational design of a course. There are a number of different models and approaches for this process but most lead the instructor through a series of steps for systematically planning what teachers and students will be doing over the course of a given class. For purposes of this exercise a modified version of the instructional planning process developed by Robert Reiser and Walter Dick was consulted. Largely designed for use in elementary and secondary school classrooms, the basic concepts are applicable to a variety of course types and levels. Furthermore, the model was developed with teachers, not instructional designers in mind, hence the recommended steps in the model are clearly laid out and relatively easy to implement. This aspect is a benefit to librarians who are often, as in this case, not designing an entire course, but specific elements of one. As described in their text *Instructional Planning: A Guide for Teachers*, the Reiser/Dick Model consists of seven primary steps for planning effective instruction: 1) identify instructional goals, 2) identify objectives, 3) plan instructional activities, 4) choose instructional media, 5) develop assessment tools, 6) implement instruction, and 7) revise instruction (see figure 1). A number of instructional design models also include an initial needs assessment step, in which the needs of the audience or group for whom the instruction is being prepared, are analyzed.

As applied to our anticipated process, we would use our knowledge of student needs combined with the initial student needs identified by the professors as our basis for the goals of the Policy Research Library Skills component. We would then review the LPSS Political Science Research Competency Guidelines in order to identify further goals and objectives using the standards and performance indicators. Based on the results we would then plan the nature and number of course integrated instructional activities. In regards to instructional media/technology, the professors were already using the WebCT courseware as part of the PUBP 700 course. However, in the proceeding months, the George Mason
University Libraries had become involved in a university-wide initiative to provide instruction on the EndNote bibliographic management software, and the School of Public Policy was very interested in facilitating its use among their students. We would then need to develop methods for assessment and plan to review and revise the modules for the following year.

Goals and Objectives: The LPSS Political Science Research Competency Guidelines

Representatives from the library and School of Public Policy met throughout the summer to decide upon the instructional goals for the Policy Research Library Skills sessions. As an initial step toward collaboration we wanted to ensure that the course documentation reflected our approach to integrating information literacy by including key elements in the syllabus. In addition to listing the librarian's name and contact information among the instructors and teaching assistants, the syllabus also included a section on course objectives which stated that “the course aims to enhance your proficiency in identifying and using appropriate, authoritative source material.” Additionally a section labeled “Special Skills” included “How to cite sources properly; find, assess and use sources appropriately; and with the greatest effect;” and “use EndNote, a bibliographic software program” among the skills that students would practice developing.

We then turned to the Political Science Research Competency Guidelines as a resource for further developing our goals and objectives for instruction. The latest incarnation of the guidelines is approximately 11 pages in length, consisting of five standards, with a total of 22 performance indicators and 89 possible outcomes. Although we would certainly not be using all of these, the expectation was to identify key standards and indicators that could be effectively incorporated into our work. Immediately apparent was Standard One: Know and Plan, which included indicators such as “Defining and articulating information needs (indicator 1)” and “Identifying various types and formats of potential information sources (indicator 2),” as they directly mapped with course objectives included in the syllabus (see figure 2).

Standard Two: Access, included indicators and outcomes such as “Selects the most appropriate information retrieval systems for accessing needed information” and “Selects efficient and effective approaches for accessing the information needed from subscription databases, free online search engines, indexes, etc.” These also met the needs of the concerns initially expressed by the teaching faculty. Furthermore, Performance indicator 5, “Extracts, records, and manages the information and its sources” included outcomes that spoke directly to the goals of EndNote instruction. Through our review of the Political Research Competency Guidelines it was decided that the Policy Research Library Skills units would primarily focus on Standards One and Two. These standards most effectively addressed the concerns of the teaching faculty while also highlighting areas typically covered in traditional library instruction. Standard Three: Evaluate, however, was also deemed to be of considerable importance, and it was decided that the topic of evaluation, should be a reoccurring theme throughout each of the PRLS sessions.

Instructional Activities

Through the initial meetings it was decided that the librarian would interact with the students through three separate course-integrated Policy Research Library Skills sessions, distributed throughout the PUBP 700 course. In accordance with Standard 1, the first session focused on general concepts related to research and public policy including the research process, topic exploration and the development of a Research Log for diagramming search terms and concepts. Additionally included was information on library services and col-
lections, and a demonstration of the library catalogs and key political science databases. These began the process of introducing students to the concepts related to Standard Two.

The second session was yet another collaborative experiment between the course instructor and the Liaison Librarian. For this session the instructors created a case study topic centered on a fictional policy professional who had been asked to advise a small town mayor regarding the establishment of a free wireless network or “hotspot” in their city. The professor began the session by setting up the case study and discussing the theoretical and practical processes involved in approaching this issue. This lecture was then followed by the librarian who discussed and demonstrated available resources for researching this topic using library and freely available information resources. Additionally, this session was used to address issues directly related to evaluating information, with a particular focus on web-based resources. Part of the presentation was also dedicated to addressing some of the methods and pitfalls involved in researching very recent and contemporary topics.

PRLS 3, the third session, was used as an opportunity to discuss a variety of government and nongovernmental information resources beyond the traditional literature databases and library catalogs. This session featured demonstrations of “specialized” resources like the Census Bureau’s American FactFinder, the World Bank’s World Development Indicators and E-Library, and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s SourceOECD. The presentation also included information on using alert services and RSS feeds available through an increasing number of library subscription resources.

Instructional Media
One of the initial considerations for utilizing instructional media was to establish a library presence within the course WebCT site. The librarian was provided with access to the course site as a “designer” so that a folder could be created in order to include presentation slides and other handouts associated with the class. The librarian as designer was also able to create links from within WebCT to the general library homepage and to other resources such as the libraries’ research guides and the database portal.

As mentioned earlier, it had also been decided that students in the PUBP 700 course would be required to attend an EndNote instruction workshop taught by members of the library staff. This software allows students to create and manage a “library” of bibliographic citation information for resources they identify for their research. During the workshop students were taught to search a number of subscription databases and export/import records into their EndNote Library. Using the EndNote software, researchers are able to connect to and search a variety of different library catalogs and import citations directly into their EndNote Library. Additionally, EndNote allows users to add keyword descriptors to the items in their library which in turn allows them to search the contents of their library using a number of different field parameters. Lastly, the workshop covered EndNote’s interoperability with Microsoft Word for creating in-text citations, footnotes, and reference lists. For purposes of information literacy instruction, the workshop uses the software as a “jumping off” point, to teach students a combination of research related and information management concepts including database searching and the importance of subject headings/keyword descriptors. In this regard we were able to address aspects of each Performance Indicator under Standard Two, in addition to the aforementioned Indicator 5 (Extracts, records, and manages the information and its sources).

Assessment and Revision
The issue of assessment is one that is critical in the process of applying guidelines and standards to instruction. Assignments, tests, quizzes, and surveys are all among the common methods used to evaluate students learning and understanding of material. Although a variety of methods for assessing the impact of the Policy Research Library Skills (PRLS) sessions were discussed, ultimately, it was decided that two quizzes would be used to gauge student understanding of the material.

Quiz 1 was administered early in the semester after the first PRLS instruction session. The librarian and one of the teaching assistants worked to develop 10 multiple choice questions based on the content of the first presentation, and the instructor informed students that those who scored less than 90 percent would be required to attend a review session later in the semester. The quiz was posted in WebCT and students were given a 24-hour period in which to complete it. Roughly 75 percent of the students passed the quiz with a score of 90 percent and higher, those who did not attended one of two sessions entitled “Research Redux,” which reviewed the questions and answers by addressing the search strategies and concepts reflected in the quiz. These sessions also turned into opportunities for
students to discuss their progress in the course and pose additional questions to the librarian. The second quiz was given later in the semester after the third PRLS session. This time around, students in the class were each asked to submit one question for possible inclusion on the quiz. Students whose questions were selected were exempt from taking the quiz. The librarian then reviewed the submitted questions and selected a subset for inclusion. Approximately 80 percent of the students who took quiz 2 scored above 90 percent.

Over the course of the past year, both librarians and teaching faculty have continued to experiment with various methods of assessing the PRLS components. Library evaluation forms and mid-term course evaluations administered to students are just a few of the methods that have been employed. Likewise, feedback from the teaching faculty and assistants who grade the student’s final projects has also been used to evaluate the success of the initiative. This input, along with other logistical elements, have led to a number of adjustments both content wise and administrative. Changes made for the fall 2006 semester included removing the post-quiz review and the third PRLS session, due to concerns from both students and teaching assistants about limited course time and an increasing work-load.

Conclusions
The experience of developing and delivering the multi-part Policy Research Library Skills components offered a unique opportunity on a number of different levels. From the library perspective it provided a chance to engage faculty in conversation on the importance of information literacy standards in relation to their specific discipline. Furthermore, the use of an instructional planning framework provided a context for both faculty and librarians to explore key elements of course design with reference to research skill development and learning outcomes. The Political Science Research Competency Guidelines proved to be a valuable tool for efficiently identifying goals and objectives for students enrolled in graduate level political and policy science programs. In addition to providing a base level of standards on which both the library and the academic department could agree, use of the guidelines also encourages accountability and standardization among instruction librarians. Among the other benefits of the guidelines is that they openly acknowledge that the process of integrating information literacy, specifically in the classroom, is a collaborative effort between librarians and teaching faculty. The success of such initiatives, however, rests on the availability of members from both groups, who understand the importance of research skills for their students, and who are committed to exploring options to effectively engage them.

Notes

Bibliography


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