It's not just for term papers

Solving real-life problems in an information literacy course

by Sarah Kaip

After living in Montana for one year, I decided it was time to assimilate into the state's culture by buying a gas-guzzling, air-polluting 4x4-sport utility vehicle. Impulsively, I stopped at a dealer one day on my lunch hour to look at two used Ford Explorers.

I knew no car dealer would ever take advantage of an innocent-looking, little library lady like myself, so how could I doubt him when he said these Ford Explorers were a couple of the best on the market? However, when I returned to work, a quick glance at newspaper articles retrieved from "Lexis/Nexis" revealed that 1992–94 Ford Explorers were under investigation due to 135 reports of fires or thick smoke in the ventilation systems.[1] I realized how foolish I would have been to make such a big decision without doing an investigation of my own.

Designing a credit course

About the same time I was in the hunt for a SUV, I was also pursuing the design of a creative project for my two-credit Information Literacy course taught at the Montana State University College of Technology in Great Falls.

The previous year, I had students write a research paper but found that not only were students uninspired by yet another term paper, but they finished the class with a view of research as something needed simply to complete an assignment. This time I wanted students to see how information empowers us to make responsible and informed decisions in our personal lives, such as buying a new vehicle.

Therefore, the new final project required each student to "solve" a personal problem by the end of the semester using information he or she gathered throughout the course. Students were expected to enact their solution sometime during the semester using what they learned from their research and then report the outcome.

The students' problems varied dramatically. One student chose to research how to sell her house. She had never sold a house before and was very anxious to get the best price possible. Another student, a substitute teacher for a school district that integrates deaf children into regular classrooms, wanted to know how to teach deaf children effectively. Another student was asked to coach a teenage hockey team, but she knew nothing about the sport. One student's grandfather was recently diagnosed with prostate cancer, and he wanted to know how to help his family cope with the psychological effects of having a family member with cancer.

I was more concerned with the process than the result. If students failed to solve their

About the author

Sarah Kaip is reference librarian at Wilson College in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, e-mail: skaip@wilson.edu

problem, they could explain why they were unable to solve it. If that was the case, I wanted to know whether their information was inadequate, irrelevant, or even an obstacle for coming up with a solution. For example, the information I found about fires in the ventilation systems of Ford Explorers was an obstacle for buying the SUV model and year I wanted.

Furthermore, this wasn't simply a process of gathering information and then solving a problem. As they made decisions throughout the semester, students confronted new and unanticipated problems, which made it necessary to go back and do more research.

The student coaching a hockey team, for instance, realized that she struggled to assimilate into the hockey culture because she was unfamiliar with the players' language and jargon. This led her to read popular hockey magazines, which helped her communicate with her players on their level.

For many students, the search for solutions involved juggling their actions and knowledge with their need for additional information and vice versa.

Articulating a problem and choosing sources

The first task was to articulate the problem, tell why it was a problem for them, and figure out what they thought they needed to know to solve the problem. This is harder for students than might be expected. Students tend to zero in on one specific aspect of a problem and have a hard time looking at the big picture and its different components.

For example, when the semester began, Cara, the student selling her house, was mostly concerned with getting a fair price. As she progressed, she was able to articulate more specific things she needed to know. These included how to choose a realtor; what to expect from a realtor; what her responsibilities were as a seller; what to expect from a buyer; what paperwork she should become familiar with; how to prepare the house for viewing; how to negotiate a price; and how to close a deal.

Students were then asked to think of characteristics of information that would be appropriate for their situation. Cara thought information that was geared to a general audience, current, and written from the perspec-

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tive of buyers and sellers rather than real estate agents would be best. She knew most of her information would be opinionated, but some things would have to be factual, such as the worth of her house.

After students thought of general characteristics, I asked them to think more specifically about sources. Since Cara knew nothing about how to sell a house, she started with *Dummies* and *Idiots* books to give her an overview. She also looked for personal Web pages authored by sellers and buyers for tips and advice. Personal interviews from friends who had sold homes proved to be valuable resources, as well. I encouraged students to be creative and think of sources outside of the library.

Part of the assignment was graded on how well students were able to justify using the types of information they chose. Obviously the student coaching hockey did not need to have peer-reviewed journals. However, the student learning how to teach deaf children was expected to use professional education journals. Students learned that knowing when it is appropriate to use different types of sources is part of being information literate.

Solutions

Students then needed to make an outline and write a paper. The paper was a forum to tell me what happened. I wanted to know what types of information were found and how it was used, what decisions were made and why, what unexpected problems arose and how they were dealt with, what changes and adjustments were made, and what was the level of satisfaction with what took place.

I was particularly impressed by Cara's experience. The change in her level of knowledge and her attitude throughout the semester was significant. She began the semester frightened by her own ignorance. She experienced a great deal of anxiety because selling her house seemed overwhelming. There

was so much to do and she didn't know where to start.

Furthermore, realtors who did not want to provide her with written information about the process of selling a house frustrated Cara. In fact, one realtor told her that it was the realtor's job to inform her of what she needed to know. Cara felt like realtors wanted to keep her ignorant. She explained to me, "I am a person who wants to do some searching on my own so I know how to sell a house myself."

Once she started researching, she began to understand how the house-selling process worked. Organization and confidence replaced her feelings of anxiety, confusion, and frustration. It occurred to her that instead of being talked *at* by the realtor, she could communicate on an equal level, which earned her respect from the realtor. Given Cara's new knowledge, she became a partner rather than simply a client.

Changes for next time

There are two things I will change if I decide to do this again. I will have students keep a log or journal instead of writing a paper. I would like to see how information helped them solve a big problem by making several little decisions over a period of time. I got the sense that some students waited until the end of the semester to research and write. Hard to imagine.

I also would not allow students to choose a problem that is actually a topic for which they must write a paper for another class. This defeated the purpose, which was to show students that information is more than something needed to finish a term paper.

At the end of the project, students had to write a personal statement explaining what they learned about research and information. From these statements, it was clear most students realized libraries and research serve a higher purpose than simply getting them to the graduation podium.

Note

1. Associated Press, "Utility vehicle fires are probed," *The Boston Globe*, 23 February 1999, sec. A7. Accessed online: "LEXIS-NEXIS Academic Universe," 7 November 2000. ■

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