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The "embedded" librarian in a freshman speech class

Information literacy instruction in action

As librarians, we often get to see the beginning of the information literacy cycle. We see and help students all the time with resource discovery, information collection, and early decision-making about the information they've gathered. Rarely, it seems, are we afforded the chance to see the middle steps of the process where they begin to use and synthesize this information. Nor do we often get the chance to see the papers, projects, and presentations that are the final result of the research. And more's the pity, because we spend so much time talking about and trying to teach information literacy, it's often disheartening that we only get to see the beginning stages of the work. We can learn a great deal about how to more effectively assist students in the information literacy process if we have some experience working with them from the beginning to the end of a project.

Why become embedded?

I was offered the opportunity to be involved in a semester-long experiment with Jennifer Wood, associate professor of communication arts and sciences at Penn State-New Kensington. Wood approached the head librarian at the campus about methods of improving the quality of her students' research. Knowing of my interest in information literacy, she directed Wood to me. Realize that Wood and her classes are not strangers to the library. At both the lower and upper divisions, she brings her classes to the library to get instruction on library basics for freshmen, as well as for assistance in solving the knotty research problems of the senior project. So when she talked about looking for different methods of improving her students' research, I knew we might have an opportunity to try something out of the ordinary.

Wood's primary concern was with the research being done by her freshman Effective Speech classes. As a whole, the students were using far too many poor quality Web sites, using Wikipedia as an authoritative source, or worst of all, not using or attributing sources at all. We both agreed that even the best speaker in the world can't speak effectively without sound research.

In our conversations, we discussed what was going right and what was going wrong with the standard library instruction sessions (an introduction to research session and an evaluating Web sites session). Her answer was that the sessions were generally fine, but somewhere between the instruction sessions and the presentation of the speech, the research process of the students was breaking down. This, to me, sounded like a failure of the instruction classes to really teach some of the second-level information literacy skills. Many of the students were learning the tools, but either weren't using them or were using them poorly because they weren't applying other information literacy skills, such as evaluation, to their research. Additionally, they may not have been using library resources because a Web search was simply more convenient. Clearly, I wasn't imparting

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the value of the article databases in the library versus the "free Web." Or, if I was teaching it, convenience was still trumping quality. So the question still remained: how do we improve the research of these freshmen?

I proposed to Wood that I take a very active part in her class and become an embedded librarian rather than just a guest lecturer. In fact, I asked her if I could attend every one of her class sessions. After discussing the project and the large time commitment with my boss and with Wood, we all agreed that it was a worthwhile experiment.

Embedded librarianship in action

Largely, the format of Wood's class is discussion-based. Students give three speeches during the semester and several "mini-speeches." Lecture sessions are rare. This class format proved ideal for the embedded librarian concept. I was able to be a full participant in the discussions, and my goal was to keep the class thinking about all aspects of information literacy.

In addition to the classroom sessions, I provided the two standard library instruction sessions for this course. The first was an introduction to the library databases and included a hands-on, in-class assignment. The second session focused on evaluating Web sites. It included about 15 minutes of lecture followed by 35 minutes of case studies, where the students applied the described criteria to the displayed Web sites. Because I worked with these students since the beginning of the semester, I feel my credibility was enhanced in these in-library sessions. Further, the students seemed much more engaged in these sessions because of my previous classroom interactions with them; some of them even drew parallels to concepts, such as currency of information, which I had already mentioned in class.

My main role in the discussions was to keep the students thinking about their sources of information. I prodded them to question whether better information might be available, and I aided in the discovery of better resources for their topics. For example, I helped a student find better sources opposing gun control after he started with the clearly biased secondamendmentfacts.com Web site. My presence in the class resulted in many more reference questions, both in-person and via e-mail. With this increase in student contact time outside of class, students were able to create better searches and understand the iterative nature of constructing searches.

Further, judging from their bibliographies, they tended to use multiple formats of information, i.e., they didn't just stick to what they could find full-text online or on the "free" Web. For example, one student argued in favor of a salary cap for Major League Baseball. His initial approach was to use newspaper and magazine articles. After discussing the limitations of those sources in reviewing his speech, with my guidance he went on to use several academic books and scholarly articles on sports economics, as well as using the text of baseball's collective bargaining agreement.

Perhaps the most important thing I did in the class was to promote critical thinking. One student's speech focused on the potential negative effects of anti-depressant drugs prescribed for adolescents. It was clear that her original approach was to cherry-pick her sources in order to present a polemical argument. Rather than look at medical journals and government reports, she chose to use Web sites and popular articles that were basically screeds written by parents and sensationalist journalists. By using probing questions, I was able to get her to consider some of the statistics that her sources bandied about (particularly the fact that these articles never mentioned the number of teens that might have been helped by anti-depressants). Given this additional reflection on her sources, she was able to build a much stronger and nuanced argument in her speech than she would have had she not questioned her sources any further.

Often, the students didn't take full advantage of my services until after the first presentation of their speeches. After they received criticism from the class, Wood, and myself,

then they were much more apt to come and talk to me about their projects. They were much more open to trying new approaches to research once they were reviewed by the class. I think this can be characterized as constructive criticism leading to a teachable moment.

Results and looking to the future

Wood and I evaluated the project as a success with room for improvements. She was very happy with my positive impact on the class discussions and my aid in teaching the class. Perhaps most importantly, she felt that compared to previous sections of her Effective Speech classes, my interventions made for much stronger speeches. The students were apt to use more sources, as well as more reliable and credible sources. As Wood said repeatedly throughout the semester, "It doesn't matter how good your delivery is if your research and information are poor."

In our discussions after the semester, Wood and I came to several conclusions about how we might handle things differently in future iterations of this project. First, she would include me in the individual closed-door sessions with the students in which she advised them on the grading of their speeches and solutions to problems in the speeches. This would put me in a position of increased authority, where I could help shape the speech more effectively and hear her conversation with the student first-hand, rather than a derivative account.

Second, I would be involved more in grading. She suggested that I take over grading the bibliographies and that perhaps the students should turn in annotated bibliographies, before they give their speeches. Third, I would keep detailed records of reference transactions with the students from the class. These records would not include anything that would breach confidentiality, but they would be a valuable metric to compare the increase in reference from the students in the class versus our baseline reference transaction data. Finally, we would include more measures of student satisfaction with the project. In the open response section of the course evaluation, several students noted that I was an important part of the class for them. Anecdotally, many students told me personally that my presence in the class and willingness to help made the class better for them. However, it would be much more valuable to have unbiased qualitative and quantitative information on student satisfaction with the project.

Conclusions and considerations

Many factors must be considered before one undertakes an embedded librarian project. First, the time commitment is substantial. Make sure that your supervisor realizes that, at a bare minimum, you're going to need at least four hours a week outside of the library. If you're in a situation where your staff is stretched thin, this might not be the project for you. Second, approach a faculty member with whom you've cultivated a strong relationship. For the project to work, the librarian and the faculty member must put a high level of trust in one another. Third, a discussion-based and/or project-based class would seem to be the ideal format for the embedded librarian. In these types of classes you have multiple opportunities to interact with the students and demonstrate your knowledge and abilities. Then most of the students will realize that you are indeed a valuable resource, and further, that you're a "real" person, not just somebody sitting behind a desk in the library. As with nearly everything in life, I believe that good librarianship is about cultivating relationships. Finally, make sure you're going to have fun doing it. If you're not extroverted or comfortable jumping in on classroom discussions, this may not be a good project for you. However, if your personality allows you get right in the middle of things (which is where the trust of the professor comes in handy), instructing in this manner can be an absolute blast and allow you to make better connections with the students on an individual level. Undoubtedly the students will benefit greatly from your presence in the classroom.