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Teaching with zombies

Bringing information literacy back from the dead

It is a well-documented problem within higher education of how to convey information literacy skills to students in a way that is not only effective but relevant to their lives.[1] When librarians stand in front of the classroom and present the world of databases, books, and scholarly articles, half the class is already drifting off. The challenge is to get the students interested in learning more about the resources available to them so that they can apply them to their current academic work and beyond.

Harrison College, an Indiana-based for-profit college, began requiring a two-credit, 12-week course in information literacy in the fall of 2010. The course is taken early in a student's college career, as it sets a foundation for research skills essential for success in upper level courses. The class exposes Harrison College students to library resources and databases, evaluation techniques, and citing sources.[2] While a curriculum team prescribes much of the coursework, instructors add supplementary materials and chose how the information is presented to students.

The authors, both librarians, taught this course at the Harrison College Lafayette, Indiana campus in its premier quarter, and in the quarters following, from 2010 to 2012; one the day class, the other the evening section. We had different class make ups because of the time the class met: the day section had mostly younger, traditional students recently graduated from high school, while the night section had a higher percentage of nontraditional, adult students, many of which were working full-time. Despite the demographic differences, one commonality was a disinter-est (and dislike) for the subject of research. It became our goal as instructors to make learning information literacy both useful and fun.

After two quarters of instructing the information literacy course, we identified two key problems: one, student apathy toward research; two, topic selection. Poor topic choice stemmed directly from students' lack of interest in the information literacy course and objectives. When selecting a topic in the first week of the course, participants chose subjects they thought would be easy—topics, such as "gout" or "domestic violence" that were too broad, and often of no personal interest to the student. The end result? Passionless final bibliographies and students who hated research. Student course evaluations were further proof that students were not enjoying class or understanding the course objectives. As we planned for another quarter of students, we decided to experiment with connecting information literacy concepts to a popular culture event in a conscious effort to make the class more engaging and exciting for students.

Piloting zombies

One of the concepts we teach in information literacy is how important access to information is, but what if we no longer had access to information in the way we were accustomed? What if we were forced to think differently about what information means and types of

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resources that are critical for survival? What if the zombies came?

Zombies have made a recent resurgence in American pop culture; sparked in part by remakes of the *Dawn of the Dead* movie franchise and the TV show *The Walking Dead*. Librarians have quickly become part of the phenomena. Zombies were featured in the McPherson College library orientation graphic novel *Library of the Living Dead*,[3] and the University of Florida library created a zombie apocalypse survival LibGuide as part of a campus-wide zombie outbreak game.[4] Inspired by the success of these other zombie-loving librarians, and playing off our own love of the undead, we decided to rework the class into a "Z-Day" framework.

The new information literacy course premise was that a zombie apocalypse had occurred, leaving the world in utter chaos and destruction. As instructors, we prepared for these changes to the class structure by gathering supplementary materials and tweaking assignments and lessons slightly to work in the zombie theme. We added zombie images and clip art to assignment materials, and made videos using the Web tools Xtranormal and GoAnimate. Google sites and Wikispaces were developed to organize and present our materials.[5]

When class began, our students became survivors of the zombie invasion, forced to take shelter where and when they could while trying to defend themselves from constant attack. As Z-Day survivors, the President of the United States called upon our students to put together documentation in their areas of expertise that would enable the human race to survive. The documents, of course, were their final annotated bibliographies.

From the first class session, there was an excitement to the class that was never there before. Students were engaged in selecting their topics and willing to start looking for information immediately. Early in the quarter, as a class, we narrowed the overarching class topic of Z-Day down to narrower topics that aligned with the specific degree programs of our students (primarily business

and health sciences). Students chose one serious research topic related to the zombie apocalypse to study the remainder of the quarter. Topics were much improved over the previous quarters, and included choices such as "disaster planning and preparation," "economic recovery after a disaster," and "mob mentality and crowd control."

Subsequent class sessions centered on information literacy concepts like Internet searching, database discoveries, and resource evaluation, but were also plagued with zombies. We watched video clips, fake newsreels, and read short articles on the probability that a zombie apocalypse could really happen. We played "Organ Trail," a mock-up of the old DOS game, Oregon Trail. We took zombie survival tests all the while learning about research.

At the end of the quarter, the final annotated bibliographies confirmed to us as instructors that the zombie theme had improved student research tremendously. In previous quarters, final bibliographies contained sources that touched the surface of student's chosen topic; now, the projects demonstrated a thorough understanding of a topic, and annotations showed us students were actually reading and comprehending the materials discovered. Student creativity shone through as topics were tied in with the zombie theme. Many created supplementary materials like short animated videos to go along with their projects. And, most importantly, student bibliographies demonstrated a better understanding of course objectives.

Challenges and lessons learned

We ran into two major challenges with this class theme. Some students did not like the zombie premise, and we accommodated that by allowing students who had an issue with zombies to choose another approved topic. The second challenge was a handful of students did not understand that the zombie aspect of the class was the creative flair - not the actual research topic. This, of course, led to very challenging conversations on why one cannot find scholarly articles when searching

"How to zombie-proof your home." Working one-on-one with students who struggled, and reiterating concepts like keywords, synonyms, and scholarly versus popular articles, helped these students understand how the zombie themed topics could be applied to research on real-life situations.

Despite these drawbacks, overall we found the quality of work greatly improved over previous quarters in which there was no class theme and students researched any topic of their choosing. Along with this, students were more enthusiastic about coming to class. Both authors solicited anonymous feedback throughout the quarter. When asked specific questions about the use of the zombie topic, the answers reported were positive. One student wrote, "My instructor used everyday topics to relate to the material we were covering in class. She used zombies as a way to make the class interesting. I actually looked forward to coming to class and doing the work! I mean, how many colleges offer courses on zombies!"

Another student commented, "The structure of this course is very refreshing. The information is relayed in such a fun manner that I don't even realize I am learning. Which is awesome." For the most part, students really enjoyed all the in-class activities and liked having zombies in class with them. Despite the generational differences in the student population, the consensus in both sections of the course was that the zombie theme made research fun and not what students thought information literacy class would be: boring.

With the help a zombie apocalypse, our students were able to learn some valuable searching skills while researching topics that were serious and meaningful. Our students, through hands-on in-class activities and required research assignments were able to fulfill the information literacy requirements set forth by Harrison College. As instructors and librarians this made us proud. We hope, like the fictitious legends of the undead, that our students go on walking toward the real flesh, that of lifelong learning.

Notes

1. For example, see Barbara P. Heuer, "Using Popular Media to Build Literacy," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education,* no. 115 (2007): 55-62; Amy Springer and Kathryn Yelinek, "Teaching with The Situation: Jersey Shore as a Popular Culture example in Information Literacy Classes," *C&RL News* 72 (2011): 78-118.

2. Harrison College 2012–13 Catalog, http://bit.ly/YWXgFD.

3. Matt Upson and C. Michael Hall, "Library of the Living Dead," http://blogs.mcpherson.edu/library/zombie-guide-to-the-library/.

4. Margeaux Johsnon, Amy Buhler, and Chris Hillman, "The Library is Undead: Information Seeking during the Zombie Apocalypse," *Journal of Library Innovation* 1(2010):29-43. The corresponding zombie survival LibGuide is available at http://guides.uflib.ufl.edu/zombie

5. View zombie themed materials used in the course at https://sites.google.com/site/lafayetteinf/ and http://inf1100.wikispaces.com. ✍

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participated in the events shared his enthusiasm with unrestrained fervor.

The success of this venture was due largely to the presence of an author and cultural figure of the stature of George R. R. Martin. It is also a testament to the collaborations possible when an institution brings together author-donors, local artists and businesses, and the community. This exhibition created a narrative of the power of words, demonstrating how Martin's often-cited influences as a young and avid reader led to his own creation of works that are now shaping literature and popular culture. We believe that our efforts to present that process of influence and impact extends to the library as well, and to the readers who entered to see the exhibition.

Note

1. http://deeperthanswords.library.tamu.edu/events.html ✍