Ellen Bahr and Chandler Harriss

One-to-one instruction

Two perspectives

In this article, we share a description and analysis of a project undertaken as part of an introductory-level mass communication class at Alfred University (AU). The project involved a semester-long collaboration between a librarian and a faculty member. The project was founded by a desire to give students an integrative experience, meaning an experience that connects the classroom with external campus resources (i.e., the library). We will present the experience from two perspectives, that of the librarian and that of the faculty.

The collaboration was organized around a project that required the students to choose a topic of interest to research more fully to develop a project proposal. In choosing a topic, the only requirement was that it be linked to course content, which meant that media must be present in some way. The composition of the class provided an interesting mix of students majoring in three of AU's four schools and at varying class levels. Because of this mix, a wide range of abilities was present, and topics varied considerably from student to student. This variation is important because it called for a flexible approach to library instruction.

In addition to the research component, the project was also designed to encourage the development of technological literacy skills. It accomplished this task through the use of search engines and library databases, online bibliographic tools, and Google Cloud computing technologies. The latter tools were also employed by the faculty and librarian as a way to streamline communication, which is often one of the greatest challenges when it comes to collaborative teaching.

Benefits of one-to-one instruction (A librarian's perspective—Bahr)

Last year, when a faculty member in the communication studies department invited me to collaborate with him in the classroom, I proposed that we try something new. In addition to providing classroom instruction, I agreed to meet with the students individually. This meeting would give the students an opportunity to get personalized help with their assignment (building an annotated bibliography on a media-related topic) and participation in the meeting would comprise 10 percent of their final grade. I found many benefits to the approach, both for the student and for the librarian.

The first thing I noticed is that one-to-one meetings create a natural environment for reference work, which has otherwise dropped off significantly in our library. Our reference desk was eliminated some years ago, due to a decline in the number of questions from patrons. While the librarians' offices are very visible and we welcome questions from students, I continue to believe that most students are unaware of the kinds of assistance that a librarian can offer.

In the one-to-one meetings, I was able to determine fairly quickly the kinds of things the student needed help with and then tailor the assistance to the student's needs, whether it was a matter of breaking the assignment down

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into manageable steps, figuring out how to get started, choosing or clarifying a topic, identifying keywords, knowing where and how to search, or choosing and citing sources.

In addition to providing individually tailored help, one-to-one meetings also gave me an opportunity to model good research skills and behavior, and to build student confidence. Because the librarian isn't grading the student (the students needed only to do a modest amount of preparation and meet with me to earn that portion of their grade), there is less embarrassment or fear in asking questions than there might be with their professor.

The meetings usually started with a brief conversation about the student's chosen topic. Frequently, the topic was too general and the conversation then turned to how they might narrow it. While I don't have a background in mass communication, I am familiar enough with the field to be able to offer ideas or, more commonly, to ask questions that elicit their own thoughts about why the topic is worth investigating.

With a working topic, we would then search the library's resources using our discovery service, Summon, experimenting with a variety of keyword combinations until the student began to feel satisfied with the results. Sometimes during that process the student would identify a paper that looked particularly interesting, and we could build from there. In modeling search behavior and talking about search strategies, I tried to also communicate the idea that research is frequently an iterative process.

During the one-to-one meetings, we encountered a variety of problems that students face when using libraries. For example, the student may have identified a particularly interesting article that is not part of our local collection. If the student didn't already have an interlibrary loan account, I encouraged the creation of one and then submitted the request on the spot.

In a number of cases, students identified books that would be great additions to our collections and that weren't available in our library. Our library is relying more and more on patron-driven collecting, and I took the opportunity to rush order these books. In some cases, students were unfamiliar with the Library of Congress call number system and how to find things in the library building, so I provided a quick explanation and pointed them in the right direction. I tried to help the students move past these stumbling blocks so that they could focus on the content of their bibliographies.

The students varied in the amount of help they wanted or needed, and I adjusted my approach accordingly, meeting the student at her or his level. I tried to strike the right balance between modeling research skills and doing the work for the student. Meetings rarely lasted more than 15 minutes, and some students came to see me more than once. Anecdotal evidence told me that the students were getting something out of the experience and an end-of-semester survey confirmed my suspicion. The majority agreed with the statement that, "The one-to-one meeting with the librarian contributed to my success in this class."

While I anticipated that individual meetings would make it easier to tailor instruction to the specific needs of the student, I didn't anticipate how the experience would also inform and enhance my own work as a librarian. As I worked with the students on their research topics, I found that I was learning a great deal from them about how the library can better serve their needs.

For example, in working with the students to find resources on their topics, I sometimes found important gaps in our collection that I could then fill. Working so closely with students gave me an opportunity to see things from their perspective and to appreciate where our research tools might need improvement. I also found that I gained a much better understanding of the average student's research skills and knowledge about the library. I can imagine that this kind of experience would be very useful for librarians who have little direct student contact, since it can help to inform all kinds of work in the library, including things that generally happen behind the scenes. Finally, these kinds of collaborations serve to deepen connections between the library and teaching faculty.

Partly as a result of this experience, our library is now working towards developing a

personal librarian program, with the goal of creating more opportunities for students to work with librarians one-to-one.

Reflecting on collaborative instruction (A professor's perspective—Harriss)

I have collaborated with librarians many times over the years, but this project was different in some notable ways. In the past, my collaborative experiences typically involved asking a librarian to come into the classroom to deliver a traditional lecture on how to use the library's tool set (i.e., search engines and databases), and then encouraging the students to seek the librarian's assistance when they were ready to undertake whatever project I may have assigned.

As Bahr mentions above, the librarian did more than simply tell the students what the library could do to help them achieve their goals. In our scenario, the librarian became a required resource that the students used to show them how to achieve their goals, and she did so at the level of the individual. Of course the biggest challenges to this requirement involved the time that the librarian was required to devote to the students and the communication between the librarian and the professor. It seems wise to limit the number of projects like this because of the time imposition, but it also seems like a valuable experience.

With that in mind, targeting where these projects take place within the curriculum is an important consideration—I recommend early in the students' careers and in courses most students are required to take. For me, the key is to connect this experience to a specific project, because simply introducing the library's offerings without that connection is likely to be unproductive, since the students will quickly forget what they've been told (see Bloom's taxonomy). Moreover, by allowing the students the flexibility to determine what they will research seemed to enhance the project's success, since they had the ability to make sure whatever they produced was something that interested or benefitted them in some way; sometimes the process is more important than the content.

In respect to the process, we introduced students to a number of tools. First, because the assignment required the students to produce an annotated bibliography, we talked about citations, what they are, and what role they play in academic work. Next, we introduced the students to a variety of tools that they could use to locate sources related to their topics, including the library's subject guides, Google Scholar, WorldCat, and Summon. In addition to discovery tools, we also showed the students how to use EasyBib to produce their bibliographies in the appropriate style, and how to attach an annotation to that citation. The students then exported their bibliographies and created a Google Doc, which they shared with me for evaluation.

I evaluated the bibliographies based on whether the research was likely to produce a focused essay, whether the sources would be useful and reliable, and whether the citations and annotations were well-written and stylistically correct. In essence, we were able to touch on many of the tenets associated with the development of information literacy skills. I provided the students with my feedback by compiling it into a spreadsheet using a Google Form and then sharing that feedback as a note in our learning management system's gradebook. I also left comments on the Google Doc whenever it seemed appropriate, or if I wanted to highlight a specific component of the submission.

While I've covered my interaction with the students in some detail, there was another line of communication that needed maintenance during the project—the line between the professor and the librarian. We solved this problem through the use of the Google tools, as well. Email could work, but that process is prone to managerial difficulties due to the number of individual messages exchanged. In contrast, employing a Google Form allows the librarian to use a structured format to input data, and the professor can collect and wade through that data in a single spreadsheet. The drawback to this process is that it is best to capture all data at one time, unless that librarian is also given access to the spreadsheet so updates can be made there.

In the end, I only asked the librarian to provide some basic information—the date of the meeting and notes on the meeting—so the process was simple and open-ended. The

librarian could use these notes to let me know if I needed to reach out to the student to help her or him further.

Overall, I'd have to say that the process was quite successful, and the proposals I received were superior to the previous times I've assigned this project. In short, the students received the benefit of multiple perspectives and personalized assistance. This type of one-to-one instruction can be difficult to accomplish, but, when students have multiple sources to turn to for support, the chances they will capitalize on the opportunity seems to increase and the requirement to do so does not hurt.
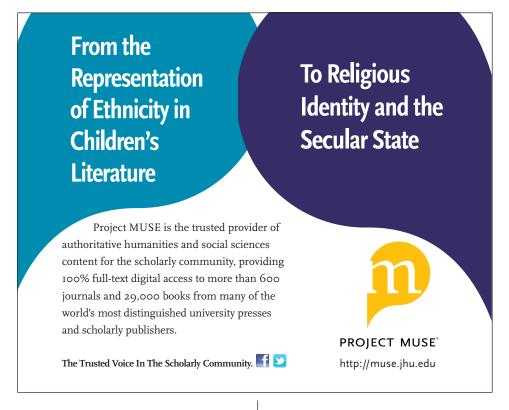
More importantly, the students who undertook this project walked away from it with an experience that could be applied to almost any class they may take and a familiarity with tools that extends beyond the halls of AU.

Conclusion

As the use of reference services declines in some libraries, one-to-one instruction can provide a natural environment for research consultations between the student and the librarian.

Having support from the student's professor in encouraging (or requiring) a student to meet with a librarian is probably much more likely to result in such consultations. Based on our experience, a one-to-one approach to library instruction is an effective complement to more formal, classroom-based instruction, especially in cases where the students' skills, knowledge, and abilities may vary. An interesting area for follow-up would be to compare different approaches—whether group instruction alone, one-to-one instruction alone, or a combination of the two is most effective.

Interestingly, in an end-of-semester survey, our students rated the one-to-one meetings as a greater contributor to their success than the group instruction. Of course not all librarians have enough time to devote to this type of instruction, and it would be very difficult to replicate across a large number of classes due to the time required. Nevertheless, we found it to be a useful approach and one that could be adapted to meet a variety of instructional situations and needs. ♫