

Raymond Pun and Heng (Helen) Ge

# The first year library research experience at New York University-Shanghai

## Cultural challenges and learning opportunities in China

Throughout the very first academic year (2013–2014), the librarians at New York University (NYU)-Shanghai played a critical role in collaborating with the Writing Department to teach all 300 first-year students about conducting library research for a seminar called “Global Perspectives on Society (GPS).”<sup>1</sup> From the librarians’ perspectives, it is not surprising to find that the 150 international students, including Americans, Europeans and South Asians, had less difficulty in conducting library research in comparison to the 150 Chinese students who were not familiar with “library research” and “academic integrity.”<sup>2</sup>

Teaching all 300 students and customizing two instructional services programs became an interesting challenge and a great learning opportunity to note the key differences between the two groups. After reaching out to all 300 students, the librarians hosted a writing faculty social to debrief and gather information from the faculty members’ perspective. Overall, the feedback was very useful, some of which will be shared in this article.

This article explores the librarians’ role as a collaborator with the Writing Department in this international context. To better understand the dynamics of internationalism and multiculturalism in the classroom from the librarian’s perspective, we will note the observations, strategies, opportunities, and challenges in teaching and engaging with

this diverse body, particularly Chinese students at NYU-Shanghai.

### Getting started: Lesson planning and strategy stages

Early in the spring semester, the director of the Writing Program reached out and requested that the librarians teach basic research skills: how to navigate the databases, how to search effectively, and how to select sources and assess their reliability. The writing instructors divided their own seminars by language proficiency and wanted us to teach the international students first and then the Chinese students. Each group of students had to read a specific text and write an essay to assess the significance and value of the texts while using library resources.

The international students read Jaclyn Gellar’s essay on “The Celebrity Bride as Cultural Icon,” while the Chinese students read Emile Durkheim’s *The Elementary Form of the Religious Life*. One group focused on gender roles in weddings while the other analyzed the role of religious beliefs and sacred values in society; two very different texts. To prepare for this, the librarians also read and analyzed the texts and brain-

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stormed two lesson plans to meet the needs of each group.

We used a LibGuide as a teaching tool to address the following: citation management, building a search strategy, and using the selected databases for their papers. Working closely with the writing faculty allowed us to customize our teaching strategies differently: using relevant databases and key terms to demonstrate a successful search strategy.

One of the major challenges we faced was managing all 300 students' reservations since it was a required library workshop.

We held six workshops for the group of international students. We used a Google survey to track students' first and second choices of time slots, however, many students kept changing their dates at the last minute or showed up at the wrong time, so we didn't have enough room to accommodate all in the computer lab. This happened a few times with the international students, so we created eight more workshops for the Chinese students and encouraged them to meet one-on-one if they couldn't fit the library workshop into their schedules. It became much more efficient after creating more classes and reworking our schedule. Based on the attendance rates, we find that students prefer evening library workshops than afternoons. We taught a total of 14 sessions, one hour per session.

### Key observations and selected notes from the surveys

For the most part, we focused on student

group work for international students in which each group had to come up with search topics. The international students were very active and had a lot to say about their search results. The international students were also willing to talk about their topics and what they wanted to search for in the databases. We replicated this teaching style for the group of Chinese students, but it did not go as well because many did not want to speak up, even in their groups. However, one trick we learned was to call students' names based on the attendance

form and ask for their responses. This worked out very well and in our writing faculty social, the faculty members agreed that this was something that had to be done to get Chinese students to participate in the classroom. We realized after

calling on one student, the other students became more alert and focused on the library workshop.

One interesting observation was that students, particularly Chinese students, might not be aware of the Western cultural context of their searches. We had one student who was interested in researching the legalization of marijuana from a popular cultural perspective, so we introduced several slang words for marijuana that are well-known in America, such as *weed* or *mj* or *mary jane*. The student was able to find more relevant results from these slang terms. This was a form of cultural linguistics at work. For classroom engagement and support, we noticed a few observations that could be very



Using the LibGuide as a teaching tool. View this article online for detailed image.

helpful for our future instructional services:

- Instructor's attendance. Although it was not mandatory, some instructors attended our workshops. Having them present changed the dynamics of the classroom. Students were more active participants and stayed focus during the workshops with their instructors. This is also an opportunity to build faculty relationships when a faculty is present. They learned more about our resources and services, and we learned about their research projects.

- One-on-one help. After each session, Chinese students came to us for additional help. Some wanted to know about databases for statistics and others asked if they could meet us again separately to discuss their projects. This was interesting because the students were too shy to ask questions during the session.

- Survey assessments. After completing all the sessions for each group, we designed and sent a Qualtrics survey asking for feedback. We received 26 responses out of 150 for international students. For Chinese students, we received 20 responses out of 150. It would be beneficial for us if we sent the survey after each session instead of after completing all the sessions at once.

- Advanced search techniques. In our surveys, international students were familiar with the Boolean operators but did not know about the advanced search techniques like truncation or wild cards. Chinese students also knew about the Boolean operators but did not know about the advanced search techniques. We received helpful comments where students asked for handouts and one-on-one help. But students also commented on the abundance of NYU resources and how overwhelming it could be.

- Textual analysis. During the sessions for the international students, we observed that a small percentage of students did not read the text assigned to them before they attended the workshop. However, the situation was much worse among the group of Chinese students, either due to the

difficulty of the text their teaching faculty members have chosen, the time period of the sessions we offered, or the perception about the importance of library workshops among Chinese students. There needs to be an effective approach to engage the students in their reading tasks for the future workshops.

For our first group of students, the international ones, we did not provide any handouts since we started each session by introducing our LibGuide and assumed that they would be able to find it. But based on the comments in our first survey, the international students wished they had handouts for their sessions. To expand on this suggestion, we made a handout to give to the Chinese students. It included an image of the GPS LibGuide and also quick research exercises:

- Building your search: What is your topic?

- What are key elements in your topic?

- For each of your key elements, what are synonyms for the word or phrase?

For future workshops, the library will build on its instructional services program based on the feedback and experiences we received from this year. More importantly, we also gained insights from the instructors, as well.

### **Debriefing the faculty: What we learned**

Towards the end of the semester, the librarians planned for a social event for the writing faculty members and writing tutors to debrief on the GPS workshops. This was a successful program that allowed the librarians to get the faculty members' and writing tutors' feedback on the students' papers and allowed us to further interact and build on the collaboration for future opportunities in collaborative instructional services. We exchanged teaching perspectives and shared our survey and observations with them. We gained many important lessons from this event, and here are some of the notes worth considering:

- Students still had difficulty evaluating sources: primary vs. secondary vs. peer reviewed vs. non-peer reviewed. How can students learn how to distinguish them?

- Students are still not used to understanding the concept of an article—how to maximize the research skills by looking at the abstract, keywords, and learn how to sift through relevant articles for research assignments.

- Plagiarism and citation. Many Chinese students still fail to understand the purpose of the citation and the works-cited page. Some international students also feel that the works-cited page is not important.<sup>3</sup>

- NYU has many digital resources, so it can be difficult to narrow down the relevant resources, even with the support of the LibGuide to curate specific databases and journals for research.

- How can the librarians plan the second year program differently? Is it possible to focus on disciplinary tracks—humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences or by majors—history, literature, chemistry, etc.?

These are important comments for us to continue to investigate and grow from our collaborative experiences teaching first-year Chinese and international students in a brand new university in China. For the most part, campuses with international students from countries like China may also need to tackle similar issues like ours: plagiarism, cultural differences, and concept of scholarly research.

## Conclusion

Overall, it was a great learning opportunity to collaborate and build on our experiences as “first year” librarians at NYU-Shanghai. Teaching the whole 300-student freshmen body was an opportunity for us to connect with students as they continue their academic careers. For the most part, the librarians need to continue sharpening our instructional services program to meet the needs of the students and faculty, particularly addressing the concern of plagiarism and the concept

of academic integrity. It is something that all academic librarians are familiar with.

The librarians also need to continue thinking of creative ways to engage with Chinese students who are not used to “American library research,” since many did not have the same right to access resources in China compared to their international peers. This was an eye-opening experience for our Chinese students who wanted to research more sensitive topics, such as Tibetan philosophy in Chinese society or contemporary history of social movements in China. We have a lot of opportunities to build on, and we plan to write a follow-up essay on our second year experience.

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## Notes

1. NYU-Shanghai is the first Sino-U.S. higher education joint venture university in the People’s Republic of China. Part of the “Global Network University” at NYU, NYU-Shanghai is an important portal campus for NYU students to study. Approximately 300 freshmen students are studying in Shanghai; 150 are international students while the other half are Chinese national students from various provinces of China. This hybrid student body makes the university a very diverse community.

2. See Yu-Hui Chen and Mary K. Van Ullen, “Helping International Students Succeed Academically through Research Process and Plagiarism Workshops,” *College and Research Libraries*, May 2011, v. 72: 209-235.

3. See Elizabeth Redden’s essay on “Chinese Students in the Classroom,” *Inside Higher Education*, April 9, 2014, accessed May 20, 2014, [www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/04/09/new-research-examines-how-chinese-students-respond-challenges-classroom#sthash.jYjO40LC.dpbs.](http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/04/09/new-research-examines-how-chinese-students-respond-challenges-classroom#sthash.jYjO40LC.dpbs.) ZZ