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Making a Weak Link Stronger:
Incorporating Information Literacy into a Semester-long Freshman Seminar

By Tammy Sugarman and Anne Page Mosby

Introduction

The freshman seminar, GSU 1010, is our campus' response to the national trend to facilitate students' transition from high school to college. Although typically it is one of five classes in a Freshman Learning Community (FLC), it is also valuable as a generic, standalone course. Statistics show that students who take a freshmen seminar typically have improved grades, greater academic and personal success and higher retention rates. In addition to learning college "survival skills" such as time management, note-taking, and library research, GSU 1010 focuses on promoting the use of campus services and facilities, encouraging participation in activities on campus and in the community, providing information about how to obtain and keep financial aid and scholarships (especially Georgia's own Hope Scholarship), and discussing social issues of concern to students and their environment, such as diversity. Fall semester 2000 was the second year that Georgia State University offered new students the option of registering for a freshman seminar, and the first year that librarians participated as instructors.[1] Our motivations for teaching this course were twofold: to move beyond the traditional "one-shot" library instruction class by teaching the same set of students for the entire semester, and to incorporate information literacy objectives into the three credit semester long course. This paper is a case study of some of our experiences and observations with a class that met once a week for two and one-half hours over the course of fifteen weeks.

Freshman Seminars at Georgia State University

Georgia State University (GSU) is a large, urban research institution in downtown Atlanta, offering about 50 undergraduate and graduate degree programs in 217 fields of study through its six college-level units: Arts and Sciences, Business, Education, Health and Human Sciences, Law, and Policy Studies. Classes are taught from 7:30 A.M. through 10 P.M., and students may study full or part time. According to the university catalog GSU is the second largest of Georgia's 80 accredited institutions of higher learning, enrolling 24,000 students each fall—10% of all students in higher education in the state. Every county in Georgia is represented by GSU students, as is nearly every state in the United States and about 130 other nations. Approximately 35% of all students are minorities.

In Fall 2000 there were 4053 new students at GSU, with 2315 of them being freshmen. While about one-fourth of all freshmen took advantage of a Freshmen Learning Community, 150 of them enrolled in one of the six sections of GSU 1010 offered as independent, standalone classes taught by librarians and counseling professionals. During Fall 2000, four librarians volunteered to teach GSU 1010. The authors of this article decided to team-teach one section and were supported by library administration as well as our colleagues who stepped forward to help with some of our regular job responsibilities such as coverage of a few reference desk hours each week. All sections of GSU 1010 used a programmed text that was tailored to our specific campus, Achieving Personal and Academic Success, by Petrie, Landry and Edwards.[2] There were several standardized modules in the freshman seminar program, several of which allowed us to bring in guest speakers, such as those for financial aid, the HOPE scholarship, and advisement. Additionally, other modules could be taught without an expert speaker, using the

material in the textbook.[3] The inclusion of information literacy was our own unique slant on the freshman seminar.

Information Literacy Goals/Assessment

With the increasing emphasis on information literacy in Georgia and the nation, we felt it was imperative to enrich our freshman seminar with components of critical thinking and information skills competencies that are fundamentals of success in higher education. Using the ACRL "Objectives for Information Literacy Instruction,"[4] we focused on five goals that we wanted students to be able to demonstrate by the end of the course. These were stated in our syllabus:

1. Define and articulate the need for information
2. Access needed information effectively and efficiently
3. Evaluate information critically
4. Use information effectively to accomplish a goal or fulfill a specific purpose
5. Use information ethically and legally, and understand social issues surrounding the use of information

In order to objectively measure students' information literacy skills, we designed and administered a pre-test in August and a post-test in December. In the third class session, students took a multiple-choice pre-test based on an instrument designed by Anne Moore at New Mexico State University, and adapted to our local circumstances.[5] The pre-test included questions of judgment, definitions, and Boolean logic. Nine questions were the same on the pre and post-tests, and fifteen questions addressed demographic topics.

Information Literacy Assignments

In addition to the pre- and post-test instruments, we designed several assignments throughout the semester to help students reach the five information literacy goals. Two

assignments required students to regularly read the *New York Times*. One assignment required students to find, evaluate, and summarize an article about diversity issues within the 2000 U.S. presidential election. The other assignment required students to select three articles related to various topics covered over the course of the semester, such as time management, alcohol abuse, fitness, and nutrition. The purpose of these assignments was to get students to become accustomed to reading on a regular basis about events and issues in the world around them. We wanted them to practice searching, selecting, and locating an article appropriate for the assignment, instead of choosing the first one or two that appeared in the list of search results.

Students attended a library instruction session for one class period at the beginning of the semester. Topics covered included evaluating Web sites, distinguishing between scholarly and popular publications, and searching the online catalog and GALILEO databases. Following the session, students were required to complete a "library skills assignment" that included searching for books in the online catalog and articles in GALILEO databases and then locating these items. In addition, students had to find a scholarly and popular publication and compare the two based on the criteria discussed in the session. It was our intention that the skills and knowledge the students gained from this session and exercise would help them complete four group projects during the semester.

Working individually and then in assigned groups, students were given the task to find, evaluate and summarize four different kinds of information sources (Web sites, articles, books and a GSU or community resource) on four topics discussed in class: technology and the information revolution; diversity; sexual health or substance abuse; and nutrition/fitness. We used the resources chosen by the groups to compile a Web site with information potentially useful to fellow GSU freshmen entitled "Freshmen to Freshmen."[6] Using a rotation schedule,

each individual and group had the opportunity to find, evaluate and summarize each of the different types of information resources. We made the decision to include a GSU or community resource as one of the "types" of information to get students thinking "outside the box", that is, that people and organizations within their own community are sources of information, and that not every information need will be fulfilled through the Internet. Additionally, students had to write a reflective paragraph describing what they learned about conducting research while working on the assignment. We hoped this would get students to think about the entire research process, instead of focusing separately on each step along the way.

Finally, to meet the objective that students know how to use information ethically and legally, and understand social issues surrounding the use of information, we assigned readings from contemporary magazines. "Your Idea is Brilliant: Glad I Thought of it"[7] and "Beyond Digital"[8] were two of the articles students read and wrote reflective essays about. They also completed a homework assignment about plagiarism and academic honesty and dishonesty. Students were assigned to read five small vignettes, each of which addressed an issue about plagiarism and academic honesty, and answer questions such as "What would you have done in this situation?"

Demographics

Information gleaned from the pre-test shows the following brief profile of the students. A majority of students had graduated from Georgia high schools. All but one had a (self-reported) high school GPA of at least 3.0 or higher. Most students said they had a librarian and instruction on library use and the Internet in high school, but few students rated themselves as regular library users or even as enjoying reading for pleasure. All but two said they expected to

graduate from college. While no student rated themselves as "terrified" of computers, several were very uncomfortable—even "terrified"—of using the library.

Objective Outcomes vs. Classroom Observations

Since our sample was very small we have approached our observations as a simple case study.[9] The objective questions from the pre-test and post-test indicate the following:

- *Students rate themselves as knowing how to use information*. However, observation of their actual information seeking behavior indicates a "disconnect" between knowing and doing. For example, students "know" that basing an assignment on the first sources that come up in a periodical database search is not the best way to do research, but, again and again, in class assignments many students did settle for the first few search results from databases or internet search engines. This was also evident in student worksheets for library-related assignments, and as well, in the more in-depth project to create a Web site useful to other freshmen.
- *The majority of students said the Internet contains a mix of information of varying quality.* Again, this seems to be an example of knowledge not matching behavior. When students used the Internet to complete assignments they were not critical of their choices.
- *Most students stated that anything you find on the Internet is not yours for the taking.* Yet the conversations in class about plagiarism and academic honesty indicated that, in fact, students believe and will do the opposite. "Cut and paste" is just a simple click away.
- *Students can identify key definitions, such as bibliography, annotation, online catalog or journal article.* They showed clear improvement from the pre-test to the post-test when concrete examples were used, such as an example of a citation. Thus, high school librarians and media specialists, as well as librarians in higher education, may want to keep this in mind when creating exercises related to information literacy.

Observations or, Lessons Learned

As Sarah Blakeslee observed in her freshman orientation course, "freshmen, being human like the rest of us, will try to operate on the principle of least effort whenever possible."[10] To our dismay, we miscalculated our students' motivations for taking the course. The real reason many of them enrolled in the freshmen seminar was to earn an "easy A," a statement that was propagated at the time they registered for classes. Therefore, although they did tend to complete homework on time, much of the semester students moaned and groaned about doing any work. The library skills assignment presented a particular problem to almost every student, even after two attempts, and we will need to re-tool this exercise to an approach that appeals to students, such as scenario-based questions, or an online tutorial with immediate feedback.

During class periods, we had a difficult time engaging students in conversation, and most of the students resented staying in class for the entire class period. We attribute part of these difficulties to the fact that our section met on Friday afternoons, which, to understate the situation, is less than an optimal time for students to engage in learning. In an effort to combat this, we broke up the class sessions into "chunks" of activities, usually involving a guest speaker for part of the period. We emphatically recommended that the freshmen seminar not be offered during this day/time in the future, and are happy to report this is the case for Fall 2001.

On the class evaluations, many students indicated that there were too many assignments over the course of the semester, especially related to information literacy. However, we feel the assignments would have been neither an undue burden nor exceptionally difficult to complete, if our course had focused solely on information literacy, and had not incorporated all the additional required topics/modules related to the transition from high school to college (many of which took

up an entire class period). In the future, we plan to focus on only one or two information literacy related assignments during the course of the semester.

Because our freshmen seminar was a "generic" section, in other words, not part of a learning community, the students had less in common with each other, and all were enrolled in different classes. This made it difficult for us to take a subject-specific focus for the information literacy assignments, such as education or health sciences. We are not convinced, therefore, that the generic GSU 1010 is the appropriate place to incorporate information literacy into the curriculum. On an encouraging note, however, on their class evaluations the majority of students said that the course goal to help students become information literate "was met exceedingly well."

Time management proved to be one of the most difficult topics for students to learn, and as it turned out, for us as instructors to practice efficiently. Before the semester began, we estimated that we would spend approximately 7.5 hours per week (including the two and one half hours of class time) on course-related activities. In reality, we used at least 10 hours per week on preparation for class, grading assignments, and using WebCT. In addition, we regularly attended faculty meetings for instructors of GSU 1010, approximately three hours each month. Owing to the support of our library administration and reference staff colleagues, we were relieved of approximately five hours of general reference desk duties per week, and kept approximately five hours of general reference desk duties. In addition, we maintained our liaison responsibilities with our assigned academic departments, including designing and teaching related library instruction sessions and performing collection development. It was not unusual for us to grade assignments over the weekend, or work on other library related job responsibilities after hours, on our own time. Because this was the first time either of us had taught a freshman seminar,

there was a steep learning curve in several areas, including using WebCT. While we believe that overall our experience was a valuable and worthwhile one, we advise other librarians who are considering teaching a semester long course to realize that unless other "regular" job responsibilities are relieved for the duration of the semester, it will be difficult to avoid putting in additional hours beyond the forty hour workweek.

Conclusions

Teaching a freshman seminar is very beneficial to librarians in opening another avenue for interaction with faculty throughout the campus. Closely working together in a program to support freshmen, faculty and librarians come to appreciate each other's skills and expertise. Most especially, librarians have a chance to share skills emanating from interdisciplinary thinking and wide experience in information searching.

This teaching experience yields some suggestions for the future of a more educated Georgia. First, awareness of the complex elements faced by high school graduates in making the transition to college can clarify for library professionals--both in the high schools and at the college level—that there are steps, exercises, and assignments that can lead the student to fuller information literacy. The more experience students have with concrete examples, the more information literate they will become. As Georgia high schools adopt and implement the American Association of School Librarians' "Information Power: The Nine Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning"[11] students will come to college prepared with a solid foundation upon which further information literacy learning can take place.

Many open questions remain as the authors seek the "best" method for teaching information literacy. Like the "writing across the curriculum" program in which writing exercises are incorporated into the assignments of a wide array of classes, should every class

include components that lead students to critically evaluate information, access it and use it more effectively and efficiently? Ideally, every class in high school and college would provide increasing practice and expertise in becoming information literate. At the same time, is a separate semester-long class for information literacy more valuable than the multi-class approach--and perhaps most valuable when paired with a methodology class of the student's major? These questions remain open with our tentative conclusion being that we need some of each.

Finally, recognizing that we are all in the midst of a global transition in the computer revolution, there can never be too much exploration, probing and use of both traditional and new technologies. Never before in human history have we had so much individual and societal freedom to become literate. However, whether student or information professional, transitions can be overwhelming. How many times have you had the occasion to hear that a person can find everything they need on the Internet? Moreover, it is not unusual to hear from a student at the reference desk that, although they are in the senior year, a particular assignment is bringing them to the library for the first time? Also, they might volunteer that they have done just fine in their college career without using library resources. Will people live full and successful lives without lifelong learning of information literacy? Of course, but there could be more. Thus, librarians are challenged as much as ever before in helping people to become aware of the need for good information skills in the wider virtual library.

Notes

[1] Freshmen Learning Communities consist of a cluster of classes centered on a common theme, for example health sciences or business technology, and students enroll in all of the classes in the community for one semester. FLCs were offered at Georgia State University initially in 1999 (9 FLC's), then in 2000 (16 FLCs) and 2001 (26 FLCs). Approximately 500 freshmen (slightly less than 25% of incoming freshmen) were enrolled in 20 different learning communities, including "Education in the New Millennium," "Language and International Business," and "Communication, Media and Society." The enrollment in Fall 2000 FLCs represented a 61% increase over Fall 1999. In Fall 2001, 26 FLCs are being offered and enrollment in these cohorts is expected to be approximately 650 freshmen. Within the 26 FLCs, over 50 faculty will be teaching one or more courses.

[2] Petrie, Trent A., Lisa Pinkenburg Landry, and Kimberly Bobinski Edwards. Achieving Personal and Academic Success. RonJon Publishing, 1998.

[3] Modules with guest speakers from campus experts included: library orientation, stress management, team building, group dynamics, diversity training, advisement, nutrition, student services and resources. Modules tied to the programmed text but without guest speakers included: the urban environment, downtown Atlanta, the history of Georgia State University, personal responsibility, writing for college, internet proficiency, learning styles inventory, community service, and study and survival skills.

[4] Association of College and Research Libraries, Instruction Section. "Objectives for Information Literacy Instruction." College & Research Libraries News 62.4 (2001): 416-428.

[5] Moore, Anne. NMSU Information Literacy Instrument. 2 July 2001 <http://personal.lig.bellsouth.net/lig/a/n/annemoor/nmsuili.html>.

[6] Sugarman, Tammy S., and Anne Page Mosby. Freshmen to Freshmen. 31 July 2001 <http://www.library.gsu.edu/liaisons/classes/Fall1010/freshmen.htm>.

[7] Schrage, Michael. "Your Idea is Brilliant; Glad I Thought of it." Fortune 16 Oct. 2000: 412.

[8] Pearson, Ian. "Beyond digital…" Generation-e. Special supplement of New Statesman 10 July 2000: xx-xxi.

[9] For the pre-test, n=18 and the post-test, n=13.

[10] Blakeslee, Sarah. "Librarian in a Strange Land: Teaching a Freshman Orientation Course." Reference Services Review 26.2 (1998): 73-78.

[11] American Association of School Librarians. Information Power: The Nine Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning. 13 July 2001 <http://www.ala.org/aasl/ip_nine.html>.