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Research Partners, Teaching Partners: A Collaboration between FYC Faculty and Librarians to Study Students' Research and Writing Habits

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In Spring 2012, instruction librarians collaborated with first year composition (FYC) faculty to study students' research habits as they related to writing. We collected process narratives from students in the introductory FYC course at the beginning and end of the fall semester, and a group of librarians and FYC faculty coded them together. Although we did not achieve one of our initial research goals, we still gained valuable insight into how our students perceive sources and the research process. We applied what we learned to create new instructional materials and developed a valuable relationship with FYC faculty.

KEYWORDS information literacy, collaboration, first year composition, research process, writing process

Librarians have a long history of working with English faculty and first year composition (FYC) courses. We took this relationship one step further and conducted research with faculty on students' research and writing processes. In the 2012–2013 academic year, instruction librarians collaborated with FYC faculty at the university to study students' research processes as they related to writing. In particular, faculty were interested in how students were “writing information literacy” (Norgaard, 2003). In order to study how students thought about research as it relates to writing, we collected process narratives from students in the introductory FYC course at the beginning and

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end of the fall semester. Although one of our initial research goals failed, we gained valuable insight into how our students perceive sources and the research process. We used what we learned to revise our instruction sessions for FYC for Fall 2013, as well as the online course guide for these classes. Perhaps the greatest benefit of this project, however, was the relationship that the librarians built with the FYC faculty because of working together as research and teaching partners.

The study was conducted at a private comprehensive university located in central North Carolina. The university offers a broad range of undergraduate degrees, including those in the traditional liberal arts, business, furniture and interior design, exercise science, and education. For the academic year 2012–2013, the university enrolled 3,926 undergraduate students, 1,257 of whom were first-year students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of “writing information literacy” (Norgaard, 2003) provided the impetus for this project. In his article, Norgaard (a Writing and Rhetoric professor) argued that information literacy is not a “neutral, technological skill,” nor should it simply be “applied” to writing (p. 125). Rather, he promoted the concept that information literacy is “shaped” by writing, a relationship he termed “writing information literacy” (p. 125). Information literacy, then, is not a step that happens during the writing process; it is integrated throughout. Writing is informed by information literacy and vice-versa. Norgaard likened information literacy to the process-oriented models of writing: “In this sense, information literacy is less a formal skill linked to textual features than an intellectual process driven by engaged inquiry. It is less an outcome or product than it is a recursive process, something to be drafted and revised - by students and ourselves” (p. 128). Norgaard advocated that information literacy and writing are “natural partners” (p. 129), and practitioners of both would benefit from developing a deeper understanding of how one informs the other.

Artman, Frisicaro-Pawlowski, and Monge (2010) addressed a common lament among academic librarians—“one-shot instructions provide just enough basic skill training for the students to find the 3–5 sources required to write their composition paper” (p. 94). The authors, two English faculty members and one librarian, believed, like Norgaard, that cooperation is the key to improving student writing and research. Furthermore, they maintained that continuing to separate the two could have negative consequences: “By teaching research as a single and discrete unit disconnected from rhetorical concerns, we powerfully influence the ways students come to understand and engage information” (p. 96). They also advocated that universities integrate information literacy and librarians throughout the

composition curriculum, not just before a research paper. Artman and colleagues suggested using a series of self-paced, web-based units that are given to students before each assignment. They cautioned that if these units carry no credit/grade, students will not be motivated to complete them. The authors also suggested providing instruction through a hybrid model that combines classroom instruction and online information literacy units.

Jacobs and Jacobs (2009) also approached the article from the perspectives of a librarian and a rhetoric and composition faculty member. Like Norgaard (2003) and Artman and colleagues (2010), they recognized the shortcomings of the traditional one-shot, and the composition faculty member acknowledged that “he was asking the library to inoculate his students against bad research habits, much as others on campus were asking him to inoculate their students against bad writing habits” (p. 75). The authors encouraged approaching research as a process and suggested that information literacy cannot be separated from critical thinking. They also advocated for collaboration, and believed that it is essential that librarians and composition faculty have conversations with one another to discover the intersections between their two fields. Because of their collaboration, Jacobs and Jacobs developed a student-centered approach and assignment for composition instruction that concentrated on developing critical thinking skills, rather than technical skills, and engaging with sources. However, instead of pushing for a large-scale curriculum change, they encouraged grassroots efforts, starting with a single course or professor.

BACKGROUND

In 2010, the English department redesigned its composition curriculum and brought formerly disparate courses together under a new set of learning outcomes and shared assignments. Like in most composition programs, the director and instructors already requested library instruction frequently; however, I began working more closely with them at this time. In particular, I was interested in assessing the impact of library instruction on students. I had anecdotal evidence from faculty that they felt student research improved after instruction, but that they also felt that students were not getting everything they needed for research from the single library visit they made during the semester. The faculty recognized that this was not a failure on the part of the library instructor but on the limited amount of time available. In my conversations with composition faculty, we began to talk about ways to expand the one-shot and place more of an emphasis on the role of research in writing. Familiar with other schools that had created similar modules, I suggested that we create a series of online modules that students could complete on their own outside of class, either before and/or after attending an instruction session. In theory, this would free up more time in class for discussion

and hands-on activities. Completion of the modules would also satisfy part of the “fourth hour” requirements that emerged when the university moved from three to four-credit classes in 2010. The composition program was in the process of trying to create a “digital fourth-hour,” where they conducted most of these activities online, so the online modules fit well into that plan.

At the same time, an FYC faculty member approached me about designing and writing a book chapter related to Norgaard’s (2003) work on “writing information literacy.” The FYC faculty members were interested in using the modules as part of a larger study into the research habits of freshman composition students (Scheidt, Carpenter, Fitzgerald, Middleton, and Shields, 2015). They also wanted librarian participation in the study in order to ascertain the differences in our approaches to and perceptions of students’ research and writing. As a group, we obtained institutional review board approval to conduct the study in Fall 2012.

MODULE CREATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

A team of three librarians created the modules in Summer 2012. We started with the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) Standards, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Standards, and the learning outcomes for ENG 1103 (which were largely based on WPA) in order to identify concepts and skills to address in the modules. From these, we developed a series of five modules that covered the following topics: Welcome to the Library, Not All Information is Created Equal, Developing Your Topic, Using the Library Catalog and Databases, and You Write It, You Cite It. Each module began with a statement of the learning outcomes, and the information was broken down into short segments. After each segment, the student took a short quiz on that concept/skill. For the material in the modules, we created some original content (such as a video that helped students navigate our library website), but we also utilized existing videos and tutorials that were available under Creative Commons or similar licenses.

To design our modules, we consulted examples from other institutions and existing research in this area (Kraemer, Lombardo, and Lepkowski, 2007; McClure, Cook, and Carlin, 2011; Samson and Granath, 2004; Sult and Mills, 2006). We chose to use the Learning Modules feature in Blackboard to create the modules. This method enabled us to embed the modules where the students were already doing their other coursework and to create one version that we could then disseminate to all of the experiment sections of ENG 1103 (with the help of our instructional technologist). One of the primary benefits of this method was that the quizzes linked directly to the instructor’s gradebook, so it required no additional grading for them or for us. We set up the quizzes so that the grades from the modules were not automatically calculated in the student’s overall total. This allowed the faculty member to

set the standards for their own course—whether they would count the scores as extra credit, participation, and so on. We also forced sequential viewing of the modules' pages to prevent students from going straight to the quizzes.

With a few members of the English composition faculty, we presented the modules at a composition faculty meeting at the beginning of the Fall 2012 semester. Since we would use the modules as part of our study, we needed both control and experimental groups. The first 13 sections (about half of all sections of composition) to sign up had the modules placed in their Blackboard courses by our campus instructional technologist. We told the remaining sections that they would be able to use the modules the following semester. We requested that the faculty in the experimental group use all five modules in the order in which they were presented in Blackboard. We shared our original intent for creating the modules and stressed that the modules were not meant to replace but rather to supplement face-to-face instruction by librarians.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

In addition to the modules, we needed something that we could assess to determine if there was any change in students' perceptions of research and research skills over the course of the semester. The composition program already had a system in place for this purpose. At the beginning of each semester, professors gave students in ENG 1103 20 minutes in class to respond to the following prompt:

Imagine that you have been assigned a 1500-word essay for this course. The essay must develop an argument about a current social issue and must use at least three outside sources. Explain how you would go about completing this assignment. Be as specific and detailed as possible.

In their response, students explained the process that they would go through to complete the given task—a process narrative. The process narrative was ungraded, but professors assigned the same prompt during the last week of class. This provided us with a pre- and posttest that enabled us to compare how students' viewed and described research at the beginning and end of their first semester.

We gathered students' pre- and postnarratives at the beginning of the Spring 2013 semester. Using a computer program, an administrative assistant for the English department generated a random sample of 60 students from Fall 2012: 30 from the experimental group and 30 from the control group. The assistant then went through all the tests, removed any identifying data from the responses, and assigned random numbers as identifiers.

Pre- and postnarratives from the same students shared the same number so that we could track individual student changes, if any existed. The assistant maintained a master spreadsheet with students' names and numbers, which also indicated if they were part of the experiment or control group. The researchers did not know which students were in each group until coding was complete. The original set of 60 students generated 51 usable pre and postnarratives.

For our initial coding of student responses, we divided into two groups of three. Each group included two English composition faculty and one librarian. (One of the librarians who helped create the modules was unable to participate in this portion of the project.) We assigned each person in the group a set of 17 samples to analyze, and ensured that more than one person analyzed each sample. Each individual group member made note of common themes or patterns with the responses, and then the entire group met to create a list of potential codes. Both groups then came together and presented their lists, which we then combined to create a common set of shared codes. These Level 1 codes described research-related actions, such as organizing sources, gathering sources, finding a topic, and so on. Level 2 codes indicated points where students demonstrated higher-order thinking about their research and writing processes. Two core concepts of "writing information literacy" (Norgaard, 2003) are invention and inquiry. We therefore made our Level 2 codes Invent and Inquire and applied them where students articulated writing-research processes meant to discover and create new ideas (Invent) or to explore and synthesize ideas (Inquire).

Once the entire group decided on a common set of Level 1 and 2 codes, the researchers divided into three pairs. Librarians were paired with writing faculty in two of the three pairs. Each pair coded pre- and postnarratives for 17 students. All pairs used Google spreadsheets to collect coding data and then shared these sheets with one another. The coding process involved assigning a Level 1 code, copying and pasting all raw text data that generated the code onto the spreadsheet, and then adding a Level 2 code where appropriate. Each member of the pair created codes for the same set of 17 pre- and postnarratives, ensuring that at least two coders read each. In some cases, there were differing opinions on which code to assign to a particular piece of text. When this occurred, the pair presented the texts in question to the entire group and the group reached a consensus.

FINDINGS

We had hoped to learn what, if any, effect the modules had on students' research processes or conceptions of information literacy. However, this study did not produce statistically significant evidence of any such effects. Coding between the control and experiment groups did not indicate a statistically

significant difference between the research processes of the two groups. Although this finding was disappointing, we learned quite a bit from the study that will help us in future research projects.

First, we learned that for the module component of our study, we simply had too many variables at play. From the completion data extracted from Blackboard, researchers found that faculty did not incorporate the modules consistently in all 13 sections, nor did they grade consistently. Although we asked faculty to use the modules in the suggested order and in their entirety, professors did not always comply. We had hoped to garner more faculty participation by allowing them to grade the modules in their own way, but this ended up compromising our data collection. We required students to move through the modules sequentially, but there were indications that some students were simply clicking through to the quizzes. In addition, librarians provided instruction for 21 of the 25 total sections of ENG 1103, including both control and experiment sections. Although this is a testament to our level of participation in the department, it also made it difficult for us to determine whether students learned particular concepts from the modules or from face-to-face instruction. We also had some technical issues with Blackboard, our chosen platform, which may have frustrated students and affected their participation. Although we have anecdotal evidence from faculty that they felt the modules were beneficial, the study did not provide enough evidence to claim that the modules did or did not have a significant impact on students' research processes or perceptions of research.

Despite this initial failure, the overall research study was a success. Librarians and FYC faculty were not only able to analyze the data together and draw conclusions, but to investigate it from our individual perspectives. As librarians, we were able to glean useful information about librarians' impact on students' research habits and processes. In order to analyze the coded data from this perspective, we chose three Level 1 codes (Available, Quality, and Integrate) to analyze further what specific sources students mention (Available), how they evaluate those sources (Quality), and how they incorporate them into their writing (Integrate). We analyzed the raw text data that inspired the given code and counted the number of times students used specific words, phrases, or concepts in that text.

Under the Level 1 code, Available, several terms described how students found information, including how they searched and where they searched. First, a number of changes in terminology from the pre- to postnarratives provided evidence of an increase in awareness of the library and library resources in these first semester college students. For example, students mentioned "keyword" only once in prenarratives and seven times in postnarratives. They mentioned "database" three times in prenarratives and 17 times in postnarratives; "scholarly" four times in prenarratives and 12 times in postnarratives; and "Internet" 12 times in prenarratives, but only six times in postnarratives. Perhaps most surprisingly, students used "book" 25 times

in prenarratives but only 2 times in postnarratives. This may be because of the particular assignment scenario in the prompt, which focused on current events, but it may also indicate a shift in thinking about what source is most appropriate in a given context. Students mentioned “journals” twice in the prenarratives and seven times in postnarratives. Even if students were simply repeating many of the terms from library and class instruction, their usage reveals the beginnings of a shift in thinking about “research” as more than just doing a search online. Students mentioned our university library 4 times in prenarratives and 16 times in postnarratives.

Analysis of the Level 1 code, Quality, involved terms that described sources as well as sources that students seemed to equate with reliability. Students used a variety of terms when they described evaluating a source. Within the narratives, students used “credible” (3 pre-, 5 post-), “reliable” (6 pre-, 4 post-), “legitimate” (3 pre-, 1 post-), “trustworthy” (1 post-), and “reputable” (1 post-). According to this data, incoming freshmen are already thinking about the concept of quality; however, their terminology appears to change. Sources mentioned by students within Quality mimic those in Available. Again, students mentioned books mostly in prenarratives (6 pre-, 1 post-) and the library as a source of credible information (3 pre-, 4 post-). Throughout the postnarratives, the library emerged as the place students identified to start research and find reliable sources.

Within the Level 1 code, Integrate, there is evidence that citation as a concept is clearly something students are aware of coming into their first semester of college. Students mentioned “citation” and “in-text citation” 27 times (15 pre-, 12 post-). Many students spoke of citing their sources as a final step in writing their paper, creating the “bibliography” (3 pre-, 1 post-) or “works cited” (4 pre-, 10 post-) in “MLA” format (1 pre-, 3 post-). However, integrating sources for most students meant “quoting” (5 pre-, 11 post-). Only a couple of students used the terms “paraphrase” and “summarize.” Students rarely discussed how to integrate research into writing.

In addition to these quantifiable shifts in terminology, we also found some themes throughout the student narratives. First, many students described their writing process very rigidly in their narratives, but few students seemed to have a structured research process. Even the incorporation of research into writing broke down into a description of where and when they include their citations. Second, one of the codes that students used least frequently was “relevance” (Scheidt et al., 2015). Students rarely mentioned that a source should be relevant to their topic; rather, they focused on criteria such as “scholarly” and “credible” in their descriptions. In our discussions with faculty, they mentioned that they observed that students could find a scholarly article, but often the article was not relevant to their topic. Students chose it simply because it shared a keyword and met the criteria for the assignment. They would then choose the first quote that sounded like it fit and

insert it into their paper, which is consistent with findings from the Citation Project (Howard, Serviss, and Rodrigue, 2010).

Three of our Level 1 codes have already been identified (Available, Quality, and Integrate). Three others were of significant interest to both the librarians and FYC faculty: Brainstorm, Learn, and Evaluate. We saw these as the key activities or steps in the research and writing process, with Integrate as a fourth step. Each step has both a research and writing component that students did not always recognize. Students mentioned some of these activities more often than others did. For example, students talked about brainstorming (7 pre-, 5 post-) and choosing a topic (3 pre-, 5 post-) frequently (20), but less often about learning about a topic (5 pre-, 3 post-) or integrating it into their writing (2 pre-, 1 post-).

In this data, we see students grappling with how to fit new concepts, resources, and terms into their existing process to create something new that will help them cope with college-level assignments. They are beginning to develop more complex strategies, including what to do when a search is not successful. We could see evidence that students were making efforts to “write information literacy” but that both librarians and faculty could do more to articulate the relationship between research and writing.

APPLICATION

Although we would have liked to run this research project again in Fall 2013, this was not possible. Coding, analysis, and writing took the majority of the spring and summer, and once we had those, we did not have enough time to apply the information to develop new modules or significantly revise the original modules. In addition, we had not been able to solve some of the biggest issues that affected our first study’s design, namely the issues related to grading and consistency. We did have requests from faculty to use the modules, so we made them available and made small changes to improve functionality.

Instead of running the project again, we focused on making changes to our face-to-face library instruction for ENG 1103, as well as to our online guide for this course. Our previous guide emphasized finding sources (with tabs like Find Books, Find Articles) rather than discussing the overall process of research and writing. Through the coding process, we identified four key steps in the research and writing process, which became the pages of our redesigned ENG 1103 course guide: Brainstorm, Learn, Evaluate, and Integrate. Although we presented these steps in a linear fashion in the guide, we wanted to emphasize that research and writing are not linear processes. When we introduced the guide, we told students that they would be moving back and forth between those tabs as they worked on their

assignments. These terms also indicated a relationship between research and writing. When students “brainstorm,” they might read around to come up with a topic while also considering their purpose for writing. When looking for articles, students “learn” more about their chosen topic that they will apply to their writing. Students “evaluate” potential sources, not only to determine their credibility but also their relevance and appropriateness for the given assignment. “Integrate” conveys that incorporating information from sources goes beyond simply putting in a quote; students should consider how the information fits into the overall structure of a particular writing project.

In the “Evaluate” tab, we also introduced a new acronym for evaluation: PARTS (Position, Accuracy/Authority, Relevance, Time, Source type). We had previously used the ABCs (Accuracy, Authority, Bias, Currency). However, this acronym lacked the discussion of relevance. In addition, through our conversation with FYC faculty, we learned that many faculty members did not like to use the term “bias” when talking about sources. They felt that it automatically had negative connotations and that students typically thought in terms of political bias when they heard that word. Instead, we began using the term “position” to focus on where the author/publication stood in relation to the issue. “Source” also included the concepts of authority and relevance, as it asked students to consider what kind of source provided the information—journal article, website, blog, and so on—and how that contributed to the information’s reliability and appropriateness. The other elements (Accuracy/Authority and Time) remained consistent, addressing the presence or lack of citations, the author’s credentials, and when the information was published.

We also decided to place more emphasis on integration and relevance in our instruction. Previously, much of this discussion had been left to the faculty member, which further enhanced the separation between research and writing. In order for students to begin thinking about the interdependence of the research and writing processes, we began to talk more about this relationship in our library instruction. One of the ways we did that was to incorporate the BEAM model developed by Joseph Bizup (2010) under the Integrate tab. I was introduced to this model by an English faculty member and immediately began using it in my own instruction. BEAM places emphasis on what a writer *could* do with a particular source, rather than the characteristics of the source itself. This encourages students to consider how a particular source contributes to their writing, whether it provides Background knowledge, serves as an Example to analyze, contributes to the Argument (either for, against, or somewhere in between), or provides a Method for their analysis, argument, and so on. When students are asked to not just check a box and say whether a source is credible or scholarly, but to describe *how* they could use it, they have to think a bit more deeply.

One of the greatest benefits of this research project was the enhanced collaboration and relationship we gained with the FYC faculty—the “discovery of a common ground” as Jacobs and Jacobs (2009) put it. Our shared vocabulary enabled us to communicate with students in ENG 1103 in a more consistent way. Students received a similar message, in similar language, from both their professors and librarians, which secured students’ understanding. In addition, although most of the FYC faculty already had good opinions of librarians, throughout this project the faculty recognized us as co-educators and researchers. FYC faculty members continue to discuss their courses and assignments with us, and we have more productive conversations before instruction sessions because of this research. In Spring 2014, the director of the Writing Center approached the librarians and asked us to serve as instructors for a new one-credit writing studio taught in conjunction with ENG 1103. These small classes were designed to provide instruction that is more personal for students who do not feel as confident in their research and writing skills. Our demonstrated desire for collaboration with FYC and the English Department as a whole was a significant reason we were asked to be a part of this new course.

CONCLUSION

Although we were not able to determine the effectiveness of the modules, which was our initial goal, we feel that this project was a valuable learning experience. We learned a great deal about how our students view research and how this view changes during their first semester of college. The relationship between librarians and faculty also grew because of our collaboration, and the conversations that began through this project continue to influence our work with ENG 1103 students and instructors.

In terms of where we will be going next with this project, we are considering several possibilities. We may redesign the modules using a new platform and are exploring those options. For the content, we may choose to develop it in accordance with our new Quality Enhancement Plan, which our campus is currently discussing. We are also exploring the impact that the new Frames, proposed as part of the ACRL *Draft Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2014), may have and are considering how we could apply those concepts to instruction at the freshman level and throughout our curriculum. Regardless of which direction we choose, we will include the FYC faculty in our conversations. We both recognize that we share a common goal of making our students more responsible consumers and producers of information; we want them to “write information literacy.” In order to reach that goal, we must continue to communicate and collaborate to create a more consistent learning experience that extends beyond the one-shot instruction session.

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