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The Librarian and the Collaborative Design of Effective Library Assignments: Recommendations for Faculty on Question Design for Student Success in Research Assignments

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Abstract

The success of library research assignments depends to some extent on the quality of the research question posed to students. Librarians can help teaching faculty craft more effective research assignments through intentional partnerships where librarians discuss with faculty how to pose well-structured research questions, what library resources are available to support the research and what a faculty member expects a student to learn from the exercise.

Keywords: Research assignments; Research collaboration; Research questions; Student success

Introduction

Librarians are trained to access, collect and organize information. It is our duty to help patrons, students and faculty locate information, but this responsibility is also the source of both our satisfaction and our frustration. At the college level, the frustration is often based on faculty assumptions that students already possess the skills necessary to comprehend and navigate their written research assignments. Faculty may become equally frustrated when students are unable to properly complete assignments – they select poor sources and fail to create a proper thesis or answer the research question to their instructor’s satisfaction. These failings cry out for a call from librarians to professors to collaborate on designing better research assignments that support student success without compromising either our colleagues’ academic freedom or their expectations.

The Nature and Issues of Library Research Assignments

Research assignments are based on questions usually formulated by classroom faculty in order to explore an issue relevant to the class. Generally, they allow students the freedom to explore a topic related to the course, expand on the discussions presented in class, or help students become familiar with the literature and stylistic approaches of a particular discipline.

Faculty often expect students to find suitable resources and maintain the integrity of their research by identifying resources of high relevance and quality, as well as avoid plagiarism. They also expect students to organize their findings effectively and to provide a well-designed argument, usually around the contours of a thesis statement. However, it has been my experience that students approach the research assignment with anxiety, not so much because of the research process itself, but due to their lack of understanding what the question or assignment is asking them to do.

Findings published in the *Project Information Literacy Progress Report: “Truth Be Told: How College Students Evaluate and Use Information in the Digital Age”*¹ suggest that although students still encounter some difficulties in identifying and evaluating relevant resources for their research questions, their primary difficulties are found in getting started with “research assignments and determining the nature and scope of what is required of them.”² My own personal observations of students conducting research confirm this. Basically, students often lack an understanding of what it is that the question is asking. This is an issue evidenced by many of the questions that librarians receive at the reference desk or during virtual reference interactions and information literacy/library workshops. As a result, assisting classroom faculty understand how the design of better research assignments corre-



lates directly to the research process may be just as important as teaching the information literacy skills to students. The library research assignment requires that students are familiar with several information literacy skills and strategies. At the core of an effective research assignment is a well-designed question. Even when the research topic is open-ended, students have concerns about how to get started and how to define a topic suitable for the classroom objectives. Partnering with faculty and promoting collaboration on designing effective library assignments are activities imperative for academic librarians. Teaching information literacy skills will be more effective once students are taught how to scaffold the elements of a research assignment, a project or a question.

Based on the reference interactions and the dynamics of discourse related to research assignments I have encountered at my institution, the primary intervention is not usually centered on showing students how to use databases or acquiring search skills, but on mediating the assignment. This is an observation shared by Mara L. Houdsyshell who explains that “librarians frequently encounter students who are unclear about the assignment [and/or] ask the librarian to interpret the requirements of their instructor’s assignment,”³ as well as making many other more traditional requests such as locating or citing resources. Accordingly, deconstructing the assignment for students in such a way that they can understand what is required of them becomes part of reference service. This, however, can result in unnecessary exposure of the librarian who may be compelled to mediate the elements of an assigned project without completely understanding if their explanation or intervention is in line with what the instructor intended to measure when assigning the research paper. One can easily just offer students instruction on how to find and access resources, but if they do not understand the question or the assignment the student will continue to encounter difficulties in selecting appropriate sources.

Students also encounter fundamental difficulties that stem from an actual lack of understanding of the vocabulary which comprises the assignment. The use of words such as *evaluate*, *ideal*, *conception*, *analyze* or *notion* appears to cause

higher levels of confusion since many students are not familiar with the gradation and distinctions that are inherent in these terms.

When designing research assignments for students, one usual precept is that the question must aim at stimulating higher level critical thinking that forces the student to offer evidence of learning via a lucid and digested thought process rather than via an undigested or canned response. As Ann Marlow Riedling writes, “students can be encouraged to use critical thinking skills simply by being asked the right higher-level thinking questions.”⁴ These are the preferred type of questions for library research assignments as well. However, higher level thinking questions are the most demanding since they require that students comprehend several elements embedded in the question. Questions such as “how has American foreign policy evolved since 1942?” or “compare and contrast ideals of kingship?” may be aimed at bringing into play higher-level thinking and may require the students to practice finding, evaluating and synthesizing information, but these types of questions require students to know how to scaffold the question into comprehensible segments.

A Call for Collaboration

Some questions require explanations. Some questions also require students to have an ability to generate a series of queries or a thesis. In dealing with a variety of research questions, academic librarians should concentrate on working outside their usual domain that often is focused on helping students with retrieval and critical selection of resources and be prepared to assist faculty with designing the research assignment. This can be achieved by seeking collaborative opportunities in which librarians can help classroom faculty develop effective questions that provide clear written directions and guidance for students in understanding the various components of the project and with clear structures that serve to scaffold the question or project. Additionally, librarians can offer assistance in identifying resources specific to the assignment before faculty give the questions to the students. Librarians also should ask to see assessment rubrics or assessment methodology in order to better help students address the as-

signment. In addition, my experience indicates that students should be provided with background information relevant to their assignments as sometimes they may lack the necessary prior knowledge needed to effectively tackle the research questions.

Suggestions for Faculty in Designing Research Assignments

The successful completion of a library research assignment requires that students are familiar with several information literacy skills and strategies. An effectively designed question is at the core of an effective research assignment. My advice to faculty would be:

- Concentrate on developing clear questions. Craft your questions carefully. Questions should be connected to the learning goals of the course.
- Aim to provide clear written directions on the assignment. Explain and illustrate how you would tackle the question.
- Provide guidance for students in understanding the various components of the project.
- Consult the library and look for resources specific to the assignment. Outline and share your search strategies. Plan and schedule a Library Orientation.
- Clarify assignment structures: Illustrate how to scaffold the question or project. Explain critical vocabulary.
- Provide grading rubrics and when possible aim to grade all assignments.
- Provide access to background information.

At the Bronx Community College, our collaborations have been focused on offering faculty assistance in the design of research assignments as requested. We offer our services via consultation and we are openly available to help support colleagues through conferences initiated by faculty or by personal invitation from the librarian based on prior interactions with them. We have attempted to avoid prescribing how our colleagues' research assignments should be crafted. While respecting the duties and the "turf" of teaching faculty, more work should be done in creating collaborations between librarians and

faculty across disciplinary boundaries throughout the college that culminate in research assignments that help our students succeed and demonstrate their achievement of classroom goals. We look forward to these collaborations.

Endnotes

¹ Alison Head and Michael B. Eisenberg, *Truth Be Told: How College Students Evaluate and Use Information in the Digital Age* (The Information School, University of Washington: Project Information Literacy Progress Report, [2010]), http://projectinfolit.org/pdfs/PIL_Fall2010_Survey_FullReport1.pdf

² Ibid., 1.

³ Mara L. Houdyshell, "Navigating the Library," *College Teaching* 51, no. 2 (Spring2003, 2003), 76, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=10424393&site=ehost-live>.

⁴ Ann Marlow Riedling, "The Question Is the Solution," *Book Report* 20, no. 1 (May, 2001), 28-29, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=4390866&site=ehost-live>.