From Barrier to Bridge: Partnering with Teaching Faculty to Facilitate a Multi-term Information Literacy Research Project

Elizabeth Pickard
Portland State University, epickard@pdx.edu

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Keywords

information literacy instruction, research skills instruction, asynchronous, online

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From the Field

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Elizabeth Pickard (epickard@pdx.edu)
Science & Social Sciences Librarian and Assistant Professor, Portland State University Library

Abstract

Academic librarians partner with teaching faculty in many ways, but it is uncommon for them to develop a partnership to experiment with course curriculum. It is especially rare to sustain this kind of partnership over multiple terms. This paper reports on such a collaboration and how it has allowed both librarian and instructor to compare the efficacy of different means of information literacy instruction in asynchronous, online-only courses. The paper also presents strategies for establishing a partnership and navigating the partners' different needs in order to reach a common goal.

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Introduction

Like researchers in many disciplines, librarians often struggle with gaining access to and recruiting research subjects. Academic librarians are often at the mercy of other people in accessing the subjects and situations that most reflect librarians' work. For example, library instruction sessions, reference encounters, research consultations, and the design of digital learning objects can affect the quality of student coursework, but librarians rarely see student work. To gain access to student coursework, librarians can recruit students directly by flyer, but increasing recruitment numbers by contacting students via email or in class usually requires the help of teaching faculty.

Librarians are dependent on teaching faculty in terms of how much and what types of information literacy instruction (ILI) students receive in their courses. To build information literacy assignments into a syllabus or experiment with different approaches requires the help and per-

mission of teaching faculty. To mandate that students complete a library-focused exercise usually requires assignment by teaching faculty. To teach a library instruction session at all usually requires a request from teaching faculty.

One problematic aspect of this dependency is that it limits the research that librarians can pursue on their own in terms of topic, design and quality. Designing a research project is a substantial undertaking. It takes time and effort to figure out the methodology most likely to derive definitive results, to apply for institutional review board (IRB) approval, and to apply for funding. If the librarian does not have access to comparable groups on whom to test different approaches to instruction, they may choose not to carry out the research project even though the topic is significant to academic librarianship. If they do pursue the project, they might not be granted access. In order for the study to happen they might need to employ a less effective, yet achievable design, or make do with less than optimal recruitment numbers.

This situation can sometimes make it difficult for librarians to pursue rigorous, significant research projects. A survey of librarians' perceived ability to conduct a research project found that "confidence in performing the discrete steps in a research project may be useful as a predictor for whether or not an academic librarian conducts research."[1] While the survey did not specifically address confidence in being able to access appropriate subjects as one of the discrete steps, the majority of librarian's rated their ability to "design a project to test your question"[2] as a 3 on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 being "very confident"[3]). As a librarian, I questioned whether or not it was worth pursuing the research project this article discusses because I had little confidence I would gain access to the subjects in the number and in the context needed.

The Project and the Obstacle

The research project this article discusses began with an informal collaboration. Teaching faculty from different disciplines mentioned in passing to me, their liaison, that the bibliographies their students submitted in online-only classes seemed to contain less authoritative sources than those submitted by students in their face-to-face classes. Thus, the project aimed to explore how information literacy skills were being taught in online-only courses and to compare the effectiveness of this instruction with information literacy instruction in face-to-face courses.

In terms of methodology, I wanted to use grounded theory[4] to compare the final research project bibliographies from an online-only course with the bibliographies from the face-to-face version of the same course. I also wanted to explore the efficacy of different approaches to ILI in online-only courses by trying different modes of ILI in different sections of the same course and then comparing the different sections' final project bibliographies. Ideally, the

methodology would involve comparing bibliographies from multiple sections and formats of the same course, all taught by the same instructor, who would also allow me to alter the curriculum each term to scaffold in different versions of research skills assignments. In other words, to carry out this research project with the most rigor and academic integrity, I needed to get long-term access to a single instructor's classes and have some agency in how these classes were taught.

My ideal methodology did not reflect the usual librarian-teaching faculty relationship. If I taught a quarter-long class every term, carrying out this methodology would have been less of a challenge, but I do not. Only some academic librarians teach full-term courses. How then can a librarian carry out such a long-term, intensively course-reliant research project?

Finding a Teaching Faculty Partner

The methodology I hoped to employ required finding a faculty member who taught the same course repeatedly and in different formats. I also needed intensive access, so it seemed prudent to ask someone with whom I had worked regularly and who clearly valued the library. I was fortunate that an anthropology faculty member, Sarah Sterling, met these criteria.

In academia, teaching faculty see their courses as primarily under their purview. A review of the literature on library-faculty relations observed, "[F]aculty culture is generally more isolated and proprietary…In the case of teaching, faculty see their classes as their own domain, untouchable even by other faculty."[5] Given that I wanted to share the instructor's purview for multiple terms, I wanted to make my offer as appealing as possible.

I approached Dr. Sterling ready with details about Portland State University (PSU) that underlined the need for ILI, and I offered the possibility that my involvement would save her time

in the end. Sterling teaches a few different 300-level online and face-to-face archaeology courses. Since PSU currently has no admissions requirements with respect to writing or research experience, I pointed out that many students in 300-level courses have done little to no research. I proposed that my involvement would help get both experienced and less-experienced students on the same page in regards to research, and allow her to focus on teaching them archaeology. I proposed that scaffolding research skills assignments into the curriculum across the term could result in 1) fewer questions to her about where and how to find sources and about which sources were appropriate, 2) fewer of these questions mid-term and at the end of term when instructors are particularly busy, and 3) students using more authoritative sources in their final project bibliographies. Students would most likely use more authoritative sources because at final project time they would already know how and where to look for such sources and would not have to simultaneously figure out how to do research while actually doing it. I suggested that while there would be an initial investment of time involved in redesigning the curriculum, in future terms she could end up with more time overall. Fortunately, she agreed.

Initially, I had conceived of myself as the sole principal investigator (P.I.) on the project because of its focus on information literacy. However, the project required Dr. Sterling to participate in an intensive way, so it seemed appropriate to ask if she were interested in working with me as co-P.I. I was actually very interested in collaborating with faculty from other departments. I worried, though, that a department outside of the library might not initially see the project's significance. I saw the project as applicable across disciplines but suspected other departments might not value the effects of ILI until the results were available—results I felt would clearly demonstrate the need for more intensive ILI in online-only courses. Just in case, I asked

Dr. Sterling if she might be interested in being a co-P.I., and it turned out she was. It turned out that this kind of collaboration and research was actually in keeping with PSU's promotion and tenure guidelines for her discipline and would support her promotion.

Collaborating on Project Design

Scaffolding ILI into the curriculum required balancing a librarian's ILI goals with an instructor's discipline-specific aims, as well as with the technological parameters the course format necessitated. First, we decided to refer to ILI as "research skills instruction" so that people in both fields would more readily understand the relevance of the study. Dr. Sterling and I selected courses I thought would fit my aims and for which she was willing modify parts of some assignments. Anthropology 366: Archaeology of Mesoamerica and Anthropology 368: Oceania Prehistory were the same course level and had almost identical assignment structures. We decided to test different modes of ILI in the online-only version of these courses over five academic terms.

Dr. Sterling's online-only courses were all asynchronous, and the parameters of this format came to define the project's methodology. I had initially thought I might compare the effects of a synchronous online ILI session with those of a similarly taught face-to-face session. However, the asynchronous format necessitated that I instruct online via different means. As detailed in Table 1, Dr. Sterling and I decided to try scaffolding different research skills into her existing assignments and combine this with different levels of required contact with the librarian (me). The study is still in progress, and in Fall Term 2017, we will look at bibliographies from additional sections of Anthropology 368 and 366. In Anthropology 368, instead of mandated contact with a librarian, the students will use only digital learning objects, in this case video library tu-

torials and a graded online quiz. In Anthropology 366, the librarian will teach an online synchronous ILI session even though the course itself is asynchronous.

The asynchronous format of Dr. Sterling's courses also changed the specific focus of the research. Not surprisingly, the intense scaffolding we tried has proved to be most effective so far, but it is not sustainable. The librarian, who is responsible for six departments, spent ten to thirty hours per week working with just this one course. The focus of the research project thus became exploring what was most effective among sustainable online-only ILI options for asynchronous courses. In other words, if the avatar of a librarian is a thousand little pieces, how should we assemble them?

Recruiting: Success and Limitation

I had also hoped to compare bibliographies from online-only and face-to-face versions of Dr. Sterling's courses, but she was not teaching a face-to-face course during the already lengthy timeline we had set for the project. In order to keep to the five-term timeline, Dr. Sterling suggested working with a different anthropology instructor's course. This course was at the same level, had a similar assignment structure, and was being offered in both formats during the project's timeline. The instructor agreed, and we got IRB approval to include his course in the project.

Not a single student from the other instructor's course signed up to participate. At that point, Dr. Sterling had successfully recruited from four different course sections. Around the second week of a term, Dr. Sterling sent me a list of students registered for her courses. I then sent a recruitment email and consent form to the students. Dr. Sterling created a dropbox as part of the course shell in Desire-2-Learn (D2L), which is the online learning management system at PSU. To sign up to participate, students uploaded the consent form and their final projects

to the dropbox. Towards the end of a term, Dr. Sterling posted a reminder in D2L, again inviting students to participate in the project. These steps continue to constitute the whole of our recruitment.

With the exception of sending the recruitment email, the rest of the process is out of my, the librarian's, hands. When working with Dr. Sterling, recruitment had been successful. When working with the other instructor, it was not. Dr. Sterling emailed the process we followed to the other instructor so we could be consistent. As I had with Dr. Sterling, I got the email list of students and sent the recruitment email and consent form. It is impossible to know what might have gone wrong after that. Since I had to work at such a remove from the students, it was also impossible to troubleshoot beyond a polite, midterm email asking if the instructor had a sense of how many students might be interested. The instructor let me know that no one had signed up as of yet. My only option was to wait until the end of the term for what turned out to be bad news.

The lack of recruitment left us with a difficult choice about the project's scope. Dr. Sterling and I could drop the face-to-face ILI comparison aspect of the study, or we could extend the project timeline by two additional terms. Both of us were soon to be up for review and needed to be able to write about our work in line with University's promotion and tenure calendar. Even though the extended timeline would make coding and writing about the results difficult to do in a timely way, we ultimately wanted to make the study as thorough as possible. Thus, we decided to look at bibliographies from a face-to-face term of Anthropology 366 in 2018, which was the next time Dr. Sterling was teaching a face-to-face section of either course (see Table 1).

Our recruitment experience underlined how dependent the librarian is on teaching faculty to facilitate this type of research. It also underlined

that teaching faculty are similarly dependent on each other when their research requires access to another instructor's domain. In general, it underlined how necessary collaboration is in carrying out rigorous research and how effective it can be.

Mutual Benefits

This librarian-teaching faculty collaboration has already benefitted both of us as researchers, instructors, and faculty seeking promotion. It has also benefitted PSU students. The methodology and approaches to ILI that Dr. Sterling and I developed together seem to be working. Through our collaboration, we have gotten to see some specific effects of different ILI instruction efforts, and this has shown us which means of online-only ILI are either more or less effective. For example, with more intense ILI scaffolding (see Table 1), students' bibliographies became more substantial. This information allows us both, librarian and teaching faculty, to better design curricula, better structure ILI for particular course delivery formats, and better develop services and future research studies. All of these benefit students through better provision of instruction and of the skills they need to produce college-level research.

Even before we had any definitive findings, our collaboration resulted in changes to the pedagogy of the Department of Anthropology at PSU. At a Department meeting, Dr. Sterling explained my suggestion to give students the citation for, instead of the PDF or a link to, assigned readings. She explained our hope that this small moment of ILI scaffolding would force students to figure out how to access library materials and would inherently introduce them to the library as a recommended place to find appropriate sources. Doing this early in the term for shorter assignments would give students some research skills well before the end of the term, such that students would be able to approach their final research projects with these skills already in

hand. At the meeting, the chair of the Department called for instructors from that point forward to provide citations for required readings instead of giving students PDFs or links to them.

As I had initially offered as a possibility, intensive ILI scaffolding led to Dr. Sterling getting fewer questions about how and where to find sources and what kinds of sources were appropriate. She also got fewer questions, and noticed less student-panic, during crunch time at the end of the term. This suggests a benefit to students as well. It suggests that at the end of the term, students did not have to simultaneously figure out the research process and generate a paper on a new topic. Dr. Sterling told me that her not having to field research skills questions meant she had been able to focus on teaching archaeology and had had more time overall.

Our collaboration has further benefited us both in our different roles and as faculty seeking promotion. It has allowed me to more thoroughly do the kind of research my scholarly agenda involves and that I feel is informative and timely with respect to academic librarianship. It has helped Dr. Sterling as well. She said she felt this project was "super helpful for promotion," and that "the Department of Anthropology has been very impressed with my collaboration with the library." In fact her most recent promotion letter from a former Department Chair refers to our collaboration specifically. It states, "Dr. Sterling is to be commended on her critical attention to online pedagogy…With PSU Librarian Elizabeth Pickard, Dr. Sterling is undertaking a comparative project with two online courses Dr. Sterling offers. The results of this project will provide information on best practices for teaching library research skills, particularly in online format."

As this letter suggests, our collaboration has strengthened the PSU Library's relationship with the Department of Anthropology as a whole as well as my librarian-teaching faculty relationship with Dr. Sterling. In discussing this

article and our collaboration, Dr. Sterling said she appreciated having a "dedicated professional helping me with my class." She said I felt to her "like an instructional partner." Our collaboration has gone smoothly from the beginning, and even at the project's midpoint, we work more fully like partners and peers.

Conclusion

Ultimately, academic teaching faculty and librarians share a common mission: helping students produce college-level research. The study this article discusses exemplifies a collaborative effort to support this mission. Articulating what teaching faculty and librarians might each bring to the shared goal allowed me to work outside the usual librarian-teaching faculty relationship. I was able to find a teaching-faculty partner and do research that might have otherwise been beyond my reach.

As a librarian, I needed a teaching faculty-partner to be able to experiment with course curricula and to have access to the resulting coursework. To some extent, I had to use the courses and course formats available to me and trust that the instructor would effectively recruit students. This dependence significantly affected the methodology and shaped the research question. In this case, the collaboration ended up making the project more rigorous. The resulting exploration of asynchronous ILI possibilities may be more definitive and broad-reaching than my initial plan to compare one-shot, synchronous, online ILI with one-shot, face-to-face ILI. However, it is conceivable that the collaboration may have worked to opposite ends had my teaching-faculty partner been less diligent, less open to my participation, and less willing to collaborate over so many course terms. Nevertheless, this project demonstrates that when such collaboration goes well, it can benefit both librarian and teaching faculty well beyond the findings of the study.

Table 1: Experiments Scaffolding ILI into Coursework (items in bold are new for that term)

*

TAUGHT AS USUAL	366 & 368 (Spring 2016)	Reading assignment 1: Students given link to reading (landed in database not in full text)	Reading assignment 2: Students given link to reading (landed in database not in full text)	Final research project	No scheduled librarian contact
MINOR SCAFFOLDING	366 & 368 (Fall 2016)	Reading assignment 1: • students given **citation only** for reading • **find a more recent article**	Reading assignment 2: • students given **citation only** for reading • **find a more recent article**	**Preliminary bibliography** due before final project	**Librarian available via D2L during term**
INTENSE SCAFFOLDING*	366 (Winter 2017)	Reading assignment 1: • students given citation only for reading • find a more recent article • **required to ask librarian a question** (email/D2L)	Reading assignment 2: • students given citation only for reading • find a more recent article • **required to ask librarian a question** (email/D2L)	Preliminary bibliography due before final project	Librarian available by D2L or email during term
EXPERIMENTS IN SUSTAINABLE SCAFFOLDING	366 (Fall 2017)	Reading assignment 1: • students given citation only for reading • find a more recent article • **required group video conference with** librarian (via D2L)	Reading assignment 2: • students given citation only for reading • find a more recent article	Preliminary bibliography due before final project	**Librarian will monitor D2L thread for each assignment and participate when helpful**
	368 (Fall 2017)	Reading assignment 1: • students given citation only for reading • find more recent article • **Digital learning objects & graded quiz** • **no librarian contact**	Reading assignment 2: • students given citation only for reading • find more recent article • **no librarian contact**	Preliminary bibliography due before final project	**No scheduled librarian contact**
FACE-TO-FACE ILI	366 (Winter 2018)	Reading assignment 1 • students given citation only for reading • find more recent article • **F2F library instruction session**	Reading assignment 2 • students given citation only for reading • find more recent article	Preliminary bibliography due before final project	**Librarian available only in face-to-face instruction session.**

*not sustainable—librarian worked 10-30 hours per week on this one course

[1] Marie R. Kennedy and Kristine R. Brancolini. "Academic Librarian Research: A Survey of Attitudes, Involvement, and Perceived Capabilities." *College & Research Libraries* 73, no. 5 (2012): 437.

[2] Ibid., 443.

[3] Ibid., 447.

[4] A.L. Strauss and B.G. Glaser, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Aldine Transaction a division of Transaction Publishers, 2006).

[5] Lars Christiansen, et al. "A Report on Librarian-Faculty Relations from a Sociological Perspective." Journal of Academic Librarianship 30, no. 2 (March 2004): 118.