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Success, Challenges, and Some Solutions for Teaching Information Literacy

By Susan Whitmer

FOR STUDENTS TO BE ENGAGED in learning about information literacy, an academic instruction librarian must have a good sense of humor, a thick skin, and a curiosity about a wide-range of subjects. It also helps the librarian to be invested in the triple threat of academia: student success, student retention, and student graduation. Weaver (2013) theorizes that students drop out because they feel like they do not have the academic skills they need to succeed through their programs. I begin my classes by talking about how information literacy skills will not only help them succeed in college, but will translate to success in their careers. The information literate can navigate problems and projects by assessing needs and locating solutions.

As a Reference & Instruction Librarian at Texas Woman's University (TWU) in Denton, Texas, I am the primary information literacy instructor for the first-year composition (FYC) program. Information literacy skills for FYC students include: learning how to find quality information and data, learning how to evaluate information and data, and learning how to ethically use information and data (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016). Teaching information literacy classes to first-year composition (FYC) students is challenging but, after five years, I have learned how to make it entertaining for the students and fun for me.

I am a bicycle advocate, artist, writer, and culture vulture; all interests that I integrate into my library instruction presentations. For example, when I teach sources for the argument paper, I use photos of myself riding a bike to connect how useful government data is to argue for bicycle infrastructure. I use the U.S. Census

Bureau, [census.gov](https://www.census.gov), to demonstrate site navigation skills to the statistics table, "Percentage of Workers Who Commuted by Bicycle in Medium-Sized Cities, Population 100,000 - 199,999." This table shows where we are in Denton, Texas, and should be, with the number of bike commuters compared to other cities our size, Denton = 731 bike commuters v. Boulder = 5,507 bike commuters (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). I then use the Bureau of Labor Statistics', [bls.gov](https://www.bls.gov), to demonstrate how to navigate to career information data with the example of my avocation, "Bicycle Repairers."

My FYC information literacy classes are about an hour long and follow this format: 1. Introduction to the TWU Libraries' home page (~5 minutes) 2. Demonstration of how to search the catalog for scholarly articles (~10 minutes) 3. Worksheet activity to locate and cite one source using the catalog (~15 minutes) 4. Introduction to the FYC course page, evaluate sources, database searching (~10 minutes) 5. Worksheet activity to locate and cite a source using a database (~10 minutes) 6. Reflection activity: Library Instruction Survey (~5 minutes)

LESSONS LEARNED

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Texas BL Award

YEAR ONE: 2014–2015

Success: Two projects started during my first year as an instruction librarian, the Core Assessment Academy and FYC Learning Outcomes, led to me being invested in my new position. The FYC director initiated a Core Assessment Academy where artifacts from the core classes are evaluated. As an Academy volunteer, I graded anonymized writing assignments which informed my FYC instruction by demonstrating the need to place a greater emphasis on evaluating resources.

The TWU Libraries' Director of Data & Analytics helped me design a FYC Learning Outcomes project based on data collected from citation worksheets. I continue to update and use the learning outcomes project as it helps me see where students' strengths and weaknesses are in their ability to locate and cite quality information.

Challenge: Talkative students: It is a rookie teacher's mistake to try to teach over talkative students. I would walk over to the talkative students and try to talk over their conversation. This made them talk louder.

Solution: I no longer have this problem. I make small talk before class starts which shows them that I am interested in more than lecturing, I want a dialog, and scholarship is a dialog.

YEAR TWO: 2015–2016

Success: One of the TWU Academic Success Lecture Series promoted the idea of peer-instruction. Harvard's Dr. Eric Mazur shared that students learn better from each other because the instructor tends to be overly familiar with the subject and probably takes important items for granted (Mazur, 1996). I started using peer instruction in my classes when I ask students to locate sources for their papers. Peer instruction is when students help each other locate sources and explain information literacy concepts to their peers who may not understand the instructor's vocabulary. I encourage students to talk to each other. It is a fun way to learn and makes for a vibrant atmosphere.

Challenge: The number of requests for FYC classes increased this year and I was offered an instruction assistant. After I spent all summer training the assistant, they quit the week before classes started. I needed an assistant to help me manage all my instruction classes and assessment projects.

Solution: I reached out to the Circulation Department and set up training sessions for circulation staff to assist me. It turned out to be the start of a wonderful relationship between the Circulation Department and the Reference Department. Some of the student workers were SLIS students and enjoyed practicing the theory they were learning in graduate school.

YEAR THREE: 2016–2017

Success: A library instruction coordinator was hired and their first responsibility was to create a set of online tutorials on plagiarism, citation styles, evaluating information, writing research questions, and searching our catalog. All first-year students were required to complete the tutorials and present a certificate of completion to their core class instructors. I noticed a definite improvement in the FYC student's ability to find and cite information.

Challenge: I received a request to teach a library instruction class on Interdisciplinarity to a remedial FYC class. When I

asked for clarification, I was resent the original request: “Create a library instruction class on “Interdisciplinarity. I want to see how you interpret this request.” I over thought, over prepared, and over researched interdisciplinarity. When I arrived to teach, I found out that this was a remedial class that needed basic information literacy instruction. I presented an overstructured, 52-slide presentation with Venn diagrams and too many big words. Halfway through the class, I could feel that the presentation wasn’t working.

Solution: I stopped my presentation and asked the class for specific research topics then demonstrated how to perform basic research using the catalog and Credo Reference.

YEAR FOUR: 2017–2018

Success: Some FYC classes were being held in new classrooms that had tables for groups of four students instead of traditional row seating which inspired more participation. One class stands out, a group of students responded enthusiastically when I asked for volunteer research topics to demonstrate: “Female Black Panthers!” “Mass Incarceration!” “Food Deserts!” These were welcome research topics and together we discovered that when searching the catalog, use the term “Black Panther Party” otherwise your search results will consist of leopards and jaguars.

Challenge: I was working with our scholarly communications librarian to pilot open educational textbooks for remedial FYC classes. However, it was that year (2017) that the Texas Legislature passed HB 2223, regarding the mainstreaming of remedial classes. Students who would normally take a non-credit remedial writing class were now taking corequisite classes. The corequisite classes provide additional instructional support but used the required, non-open access, textbook. The open educational textbook idea for FYC was put on hold. Success: Two new FYC directors were hired, both enthusiastic supporters of library instruction. I discussed my class structure with them and gave a brief demonstration of my FYC information literacy class. They suggested that I add more information about media bias so I now have two media bias charts on my FYC course pages. One media bias chart is from Ad Fontes Media, and the other is from Allsides.com. These charts helps students determine the credibility of news sources and where news sources are on the bias scale: Left, Right, and Center.

Challenge: As an environmentally-minded librarian, I’m concerned about using paper worksheets. I collaborated with a SLIS student to design a Google Form that replicates the worksheet. While I was unsatisfied with the final result, I plan to continue working on this project. With the paper worksheets, I get close to 100% participation because the students have to write their names on the worksheets and turn them in to me. I review the worksheets, make suggestions for alternate databases and search terms, and then return the worksheets to the instructors to give back to the students.

CONCLUSION

Five years ago, I started teaching information literacy skills with a rigid idea of how to teach first-year composition students. As I become more comfortable teaching, I see an increase in the number of students who contact me for research assistance by phone, online, and face-to-face. Information literacy is key to student success and life success, and knowing where to locate and how to ethically use quality information helps students successfully complete assignments and will help them solve problems in their working lives.

I plan to continue looking for new ideas and incorporating them into my first-year composition information literacy classes. I look forward to writing an update in 2024 tentatively titled, "Ten Years of First-Years: A Decade of Information Literacy Success."

Susan Whitmer is a reference and instruction librarian at Texas Woman's University. Susan uses her bicycle advocacy to teach information literacy concepts about government sources.

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