From the Ivory Tower to Real Life: Using Iterative Design to Connect Students to Research

Introduction

At the University of the District of Columbia, the U.S.'s only urban, public, land-grant university and an HBCU, we are studying writing composition faculty approaches to designing research assignments and experiences teaching research. Our project identifies opportunities for librarians to better support the development of student information literacy and research skills. Analysis is ongoing; we are presenting initial findings here.

Methodology

- In-depth interviews with seven writing composition faculty members
- Qualitative analysis of interviews using applied thematic analysis

Overarching Themes

There's Too Much to Do

- Faculty are expected to cover extensive writing curricula *and* introductory research--i.e., more than is reasonable to cover.
- They must teach the entire research process since students enter their courses with a range of previous research knowledge.

> "It's like composition is the worst for teaching, because you have to deal with grammar, sentence structure, research, critical thinking. If you teach other subjects, you can focus on social studies, right? Oh, let's talk about social studies."

Research + Writing + Critical Reading

Faculty clearly expressed that research, writing, and critical thinking/writing are deeply interconnected and must be developed and practiced in concert.

Empowering Students with Skills & Community Connection

- Connection: Faculty encouraged students to select research topics with personal or community connections; they felt this led to greater engagement and more meaningful and empowering research experiences
- Lifelong Learning: In addition to academic skills, faculty considered how they could support real-life transferable research skills to foster lifelong learning.

Developing an Interactive Approach

Approach to research

Faculty encouraged students to select research topics with personal or community connections so assignments will be meaningful and empower students with skills and community connection

Achieving Course Goals

To achieve student learning outcomes (SLOs) or desired skill learning, faculty:

- Highly scaffolded their course design and had each assignment build off a previous assignment (e.g., students find an article, students create an annotated bibliography, students write research paper)
- Connected academic skills and learning to personal life experiences

Top skills

Faculty most wanted students to learn about:

- The range of information sources available to them
- The role of different types of information sources in research
- Evaluating sources for credibility and suitability for research
- Expressing their own critical analysis and writing voice

> "I think, to some degree, these later writing courses are...built on unstable land. So I need to figure out where to shore up the land, once we've started. And you can't necessarily plan that ahead of time."

Iterative Design and Pedagogy

Faculty described how their pedagogy, course content, and assignment design evolved each semester--and sometimes during a semester--in response to their own development as instructors and in response to specific student needs in each course section they teach.

How We Move Forward

As librarians, we aim to better support students and faculty in all areas of research and information literacy, and the goal of this project is to improve our services. Our initial findings reinforce the imperative to provide more meaningful support for student research learning, going well beyond "teaching the databases." In the future, we will seek to:

- Amplify the library's role in supporting critical reading of material and how and why to evaluate information.
- Provide instruction on transferable research skills for lifelong learning, such as identifying information needs and the role of different types/formats of information.
- Create videos, tutorials, and activities on foundational skills like developing a research question, synthesizing sources, research resilience, and deepening research methods.

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