

Using the Big6™ in a University Writing Course: A Collaborative Teaching Experience

Author: Abby Kasowitz-Scheer

Introduction

Academic libraries today play an important role in teaching students to use information resources effectively and responsibly. As is true in K-12 education, information literacy instruction is most effective when taught and learned in context with course and curriculum goals. Collaboration between libraries and academic departments is a key component to successful information literacy instruction.

This article discusses a collaborative project between the Syracuse University Library and the Writing Program, using a process based on the Big6 to teach information literacy skills in the context of an actual research assignment. The project illustrates that the Big6 can be successfully adapted to online instruction in a multiple-section course and stresses the importance of carefully aligning information literacy instruction with specific course goals and objectives.

Project Background

The Writing Program at Syracuse University offers a writing studio course (Writing 205) for sophomores enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences. This course is taught in many sections by teaching assistants and faculty to more than 500 students each year. Writing 205 examines research as critical inquiry and exposes students to the wide range of information available in a variety of formats and presented from multiple perspectives.

The Syracuse University Library has played a role in this course in past semesters, mostly by teaching on-demand, faculty-requested instruction sessions during regularly scheduled class periods. Librarians who have taught these sessions focused on using Library resources, such as the online catalog and databases, often with little knowledge of the students' long-term course projects or research needs. Furthermore, the Library only reached a portion of the students enrolled in the many sections of the course.

In the fall of 2001, the faculty of the Writing Program contacted the Library to discuss a possible solution for teaching research skills to a greater number of students without necessarily requiring all sections to attend formal library instruction sessions. A project team was formed including representatives of the Writing Program faculty, the subject librarian specializing in Writing, and the Library's Head of Instructional Programs. The team decided to develop a Web-based "guide" to instruct students in steps of the research process as well as to point them to resources related to their assignment: an annotated bibliography of resources relating to September 11, 2001 and the war on terrorism.

Project Description

This Web guide, designed by librarians and Writing faculty, was a key component in the second unit of several Spring 2002 Writing 205 courses. (Experienced Writing instructors had the option of creating their own research units if desired.) The content and activities of the Web guide were intended to be used throughout the unit as students worked towards their final project; this differs from the "one-shot" instruction sessions that the Library has traditionally provided, which are sometimes viewed as

separate from the “real” work of the course. The librarians on the team presented the Web guide to the Writing instructors at the beginning of the semester.

The Web guide, entitled “9/11 & the War on Terrorism: Questioning, Researching, & Re-questioning” was based on the Big6, although language was changed slightly to turn the steps into questions.

The steps of the Big6 provided the basis for the Web guide and the overall unit. The Web guide included introductory information about the site and the information problem-solving process, information and suggestions on each of the steps of the research process (see below), supplemental pages with additional tips and supporting information, downloadable worksheets to allow for hands-on practice opportunities, and a feedback form.

The research process was outlined and presented as follows:

1. **What is my task?** The task is defined using a description of the assignment supplied by Writing Program faculty. In order to help students understand the concept of an annotated bibliography, the project team asks students to imagine themselves as interns at the fictional Journal of Complicated Perspectives charged with conducting preliminary research on the topic. They would later present their findings to an editor (their course instructor) in the form of an annotated bibliography and oral presentation. Sample research questions, also provided by faculty, are linked from this page.
2. **What do I need to get started?**
The project team designed this page to assist students in brainstorming the types of information and resources needed to answer their research questions. The content describing types of information resources was adapted from TILT (Texas Information Literacy Tutorial) . This page provides a worksheet to help students record their thoughts during this brainstorming process.
3. **How do I find the information?**
Subtitled “Ready, Set, Search,” this page focuses on search tools (e.g., online catalog and databases) and search terms. A sample resource list is provided to guide students to databases, Web sites, print resources, and multimedia resources to assist students in finding information on September 11 and the war on terrorism. This section of the Web guide also includes worksheets on navigating the online catalog and databases and brainstorming search terms.
4. **What do I do with the information?**
This step encourages students to “interact” with the information found in step 3 by assessing their sources and recording key information. This page asks students to record two types of information required for the annotated bibliography assignment: rhetorical elements (i.e., publishing context, audience, point of view, claim, and evidence) and citation information. Worksheets are provided to help students evaluate print and electronic sources and record their notes.
5. **How do I complete my task?**
Step 5 focuses on incorporating the information found into the final project: the annotated bibliography and oral presentation. This page refers to information recorded in step 4 and provides additional suggestions and examples for composing bibliography entries and citations according to MLA style.
6. **How did it go?**
This page offers a very short statement on evaluating the project and research process. Students are encouraged to share their reflections with their classmates during their oral presentation.

Evaluation

The library team evaluated the Web guide using a variety of methods: a student evaluation form located in the summary section of the Web guide, an evaluation form for instructors, and informal feedback from instructors collected during a panel discussion at the Writing Program Spring Conference in March 2002.

Overall, the Web guide was considered successful as a way of bringing “the library to the students” (a term offered by one instructor), or providing convenient, easy access to library and Web-based information resources on the students’ research topics. It was also considered helpful in preparing students to conduct future research using an information problem-solving approach.

The feedback also indicated several challenges relating to the Web guide and the overall course unit. In general, the Web guide did not always match the individual instructor’s goals or teaching styles. Based on the feedback received, the project team may consider the following revisions for future projects:

- **Offer faculty guide with instructions for using Web guide.** It was clear that some instructors did not fully incorporate the Web guide as the project team had intended. For instance, some instructors assigned the worksheets after the students had completed most of their research, making the exercises appear tedious and irrelevant. Although instructors received a brief training session on the Web guide at the beginning of the semester, they may have also benefited from a handbook outlining the goals and intended uses of the Web guide in the context of the unit.
- **Make purpose of Web guide clear to students.** It appeared that some students had expectations of the Web guide that went beyond the original goals. The project team should communicate more clearly that the Web guide is intended to help students understand the research process as well as guide them in searching databases, the library catalog, and the World Wide Web. The team should clarify that the Web guide is not intended to provide specific information on the students’ research topics nor to teach “computer” or “Internet” skills, as some students expected. Students should also be encouraged to visit the library and speak to librarians when they require help not available on the Web guide.
- **Examine different ways to present content.** Many students indicated that the language used in the Web guide was too immature for the sophomore level. In addition, some felt that the research process was too confining as presented. The project team should consider different levels of skill and experience in the research process and use of library resources.
- **Consider less sensitive research topic.** Some instructors indicated that students had trouble focusing on the research process, because they were too emotionally involved in the topic only months after the September 11 attacks.

A more general recommendation is to have the team explore possibilities for incorporating an information problem-solving model like the Big6 across the Writing curriculum. Students could learn the general research process in the freshman Writing class (Writing 105) and build upon their knowledge in Writing 205 as they explore more advanced skills in writing and rhetorical analysis. While this research unit combined concepts from the Writing curriculum with general research skills, there is much more potential for establishing a comprehensive program of information literacy instruction within the required Writing courses.

Conclusion

This collaborative effort provided an exciting and important opportunity to teach students how information problem-solving can be applied to course assignments. The partnership between the Library and the Writing Program allowed for the sharing of information and expertise in the

instructional design stages that led to the development of a research unit strong in both writing and information skills instruction. The librarians on the project team appreciated the opportunity to play a significant role in the design of a two-week unit that impacted hundreds of students.

Learning from the experience and the feedback from students and instructors, the Library hopes to revise the Web guide for future projects with the Writing Program and to work with other academic departments as well. Using the Big6 and other information problem-solving models as a framework, the Library can work with faculty to help prepare students to be successful researchers in any discipline, and ultimately, in all learning opportunities within and beyond the classroom.