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PUTTING THE CART BEFORE THE HORSE: CREATING ONLINE INFORMATION LITERACY MODULES FOR A RELUCTANT FACULTY

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INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges faced by instruction librarians is how to reach as many students as possible in the most effective way possible. There are many different ways to approach this challenge, from embedded librarianship to scaffolding information literacy skills and concepts through general education and disciplinary curricula to doing as many one-shot instruction sessions as possible to employing a train-the-trainers strategy with faculty, staff, and graduate students. Some libraries are also turning to online instruction tools to supplement or replace in-person information literacy instruction sessions; a brief search of the literature will return hundreds of articles about using online tools in library instruction. These online tools can include traditional LibGuides; tutorials such as Guide on the Side; videos; and content created within a learning management system (LMS). While not an ideal solution in every case, online tools are one way to reach more students with fewer resources.

This was the dilemma facing librarians at the University of Maryland (UMD) as they considered how to move forward with library instruction for the Professional Writing Program (PWP). The PWP is comprised of courses that satisfy the general education upper-level writing requirement; students can choose between classes on science writing, technical writing, writing for the arts, and business writing, among others. As this is one of the few requirements at UMD that cannot be tested out of or satisfied with transfer credit, the PWP is a large program that runs about 250 sections with over 5,000 students enrolled each year. The large (and growing) nature of the PWP combined with increasing demands on liaison librarians' time—such as an increased institutional focus on outreach and instruction in the disciplines—meant that librarians were not able to reach most of the PWP sections with in-person library instruction, though there was a clear need for information literacy instruction in these courses.

Therefore, a committee of librarians decided in 2014 to pivot away from in-person instruction and create online modules within Canvas, the campus LMS, that were designed specifically to meet the needs of PWP students. For a detailed description of the initial creation of the modules, see Griner et al.'s 2015 paper. Essentially, there are three modules, viewable at <http://go.umd.edu/pwp2>, two of which focus on general information literacy skills and concepts, such as choosing a topic, using keywords and Boolean logic, and citing sources properly; and one module that contains lists of specific resources targeted at each type of PWP class (business, science, etc.). The modules were intended to replace in-person instruction, although librarians would still do sessions if PWP instructors specifically requested them.

As part of a graduate school fellowship in spring 2016, I worked with another graduate student to update and assess the modules. As we went through the process, I kept returning to one question: what do faculty actually think of online library instruction like these modules? Do they think online instruction is effective, or is it something that librarians love but is useless to faculty? Multiple studies show that when online instruction tools are created following sound pedagogical principles, they can be as effective as in-person library instruction (Anderson & May, 2010; Beile & Boote, 2005; Dewald, 1999; Greer, Hess, & Kraemer, 2016; Johnston, 2010; Silk, Perrault, Ladenson, & Nazione, 2015; Silver & Nickel, 2007; Zhang, Watson, & Banfield, 2007). However, faculty have to buy in to using these tools first; unless instructors use them in tandem with an assignment or otherwise specifically highlight them, it is unlikely that students will stumble across these tools on their own. Therefore, I chose to focus my assessment on faculty perceptions of online information literacy instruction tools, using the PWP modules as an example. I found that while the PWP faculty do not dislike the modules per se, many are skeptical about using them as a replacement for in-person library instruction. This paper describes the process of updating and assessing the modules, then discusses takeaways from and possible responses to the results of the assessment.

PRE-ASSESSMENT AND MODULE UPDATES

My partner and I began by conducting informal conversations with faculty and administrators in the PWP program. We found that faculty whose classes might find the modules useful were often unsure about how to incorporate the modules into their courses, and that some faculty would probably never be interested in the modules, simply because their assignments did not require

the kind of research for which the modules are designed. To that end, we implemented several major updates to make the modules easier for faculty to use. We:

- Added short quizzes to accompany each module that could be assigned and graded through the LMS
- Edited and streamlined content and updated links
- Added navigation buttons for better usability
- Made it possible for faculty to import the modules into their own course space within the LMS
- Created a separate instructor resource website, <http://ter.ps/pwplibrary>, that included an overview of the modules with specific learning objectives for each, technical instructions for using the modules within the LMS, worksheets and activities to use in class along with the modules, and contact information for the PWP liaison librarians and other subject librarians

The updates went live in May 2016, and were introduced by a librarian at the annual PWP faculty orientation in August.

POST-ASSESSMENT AND RESULTS

Assessment of the modules took two forms: analysis of usage data from the LMS, and a survey that was sent to all PWP faculty. Usage data for fall 2016 showed a 30% increase in total use and average daily use of the modules over fall 2015 (spring 2015 was excluded from this analysis due to a large number of broken links that rendered much of the content useless). A “use” in this case refers to a unique page click within the modules; unfortunately, we were not able to be more granular in our analysis to find, for example, which pages or modules were used the most. In addition to an increase in overall use, patterns of use differed between the two semesters; use in fall 2016 occurred in several large spikes between periods of relative disuse, while use in fall 2015 was more consistent across the semester.

After receiving IRB approval, the faculty survey was distributed in October 2016. It asked questions about use of the PWP modules in particular and about online library instruction in general. 22 out of 75 faculty completed the survey for a 29% response rate. Over half of respondents reported that they incorporated library instruction into their classes in some way; some simply told their students to read through the modules, while others had an in-person session with a librarian. Most of those faculty felt that library instruction helped their students conduct better research and find resources they would not find independently; of those who did not use library instruction in their classes, some voiced frustration with the content of the modules, others were unsure of how to do so, and some were burnt out on library instruction in general.

Respondents had generally positive views of the PWP modules specifically, noting that the quality of sources in students’ projects improved when they incorporated the modules. However, 65% of respondents felt that online library instruction was less effective than in-person library instruction, while just 30% felt that online instruction was equally effective and 5% saw online instruction as more effective. Over half of the respondents expressed a desire for an in-person session in which a librarian would explain any online tools to their students.

TAKEAWAYS AND NEXT STEPS

While the results from our assessments show that PWP faculty do not hate the modules, they do not give a rousing endorsement to the PWP modules specifically or to online information literacy instruction in general, and they do not provide a clear reason for faculty skepticism of online instruction. It is clear that though these faculty tolerate the modules, they do not see them as a viable replacement for in-person instruction. Survey responses also indicate that participants are still unsure of how to use the modules, despite the development of the instructor resource website and changes made within the modules. This skepticism and uncertainty has implications for the efficacy of the modules. If faculty are not sure how to effectively incorporate the modules into their courses, they are more likely to simply tell students to read through the modules or to not use the modules at all. Either option decreases the effectiveness of the online instruction tool; without reinforcement from the faculty member—ideally in the form of guided and/or graded practice—the information literacy skills and concepts are less likely to “stick” with students, and the modules obviously cannot be effective if they are never assigned in the first place.

At this point, the librarians who work with the PWP faculty have some choices to make. The problem of increased demand for instruction and outreach is not going to disappear, yet the faculty seem reluctant to embrace the initial solution. Now, we must consider if online information literacy instruction is still the answer to the problem.

If the answer is yes, then we need to evaluate the tools used to deliver that online instruction. As they stand now, the modules are very text-heavy and could certainly be improved to be more interactive; universal design for learning principles could be implemented to convey content and assess student learning through multiple modes of engagement and expression, such as videos, podcasts, and graphics. There may also be another platform for the modules that is more effective than the LMS. They could move onto a library-affiliated web platform, such as LibGuides or the library website itself, or the content in the modules could be migrated into an online learning simulation or choose-your-own-adventure style online experience with opportunities for guided practice. An online learning simulation would require a significant amount of work to create, but it has the potential to be more engaging than the current modules and would require less work on the part of the PWP instructors because the simulation could ideally be assigned with minimal follow-up.

Regardless of the mode that online information literacy instruction takes, it will require significant library support for PWP faculty to be effective, especially if it is still intended to replace in-person instruction. Librarians cannot assume that faculty automatically welcome or even accept online library instruction as a valid alternative to in-person sessions with a librarian. This means that we need to “sell” the modules, highlighting their utility, positive impacts on student work, and sound pedagogical basis. It also means that librarians need to be prepared to provide support to instructors who may be unsure of how to use the modules, whether that support is technical (how to import the modules into their course space in the LMS) or pedagogical (how to design an assignment around the modules). Even with additional online tools, such as the instructor resource website developed for PWP faculty, librarians cannot assume that faculty will know how to effectively use the modules in their classes after an hour-long demonstration at the beginning of the semester. Support for faculty must be ongoing, easily accessible, and well-advertised. This support will require additional time spent on PWP faculty during the semester, but it should still be less of a time commitment than teaching multiple one-shot instruction sessions.

However, online information literacy instruction may not be the solution to the problem of increasing demand and stagnant resources. The modules may require too much support and maintenance with too little faculty buy-in to be a truly effective use of time and resources. If that is the case, then we must go back to the drawing board and consider other ways to meet the need for instruction in the PWP classes. One option is to dedicate more resources to in-person information literacy instruction in those classes, since that seems to be what at least some of the faculty value. Perhaps this means adding another librarian to the PWP liaison team or hiring a graduate assistant or hourly graduate student instructors to share the instruction burden. Perhaps it means teaching more than one PWP section simultaneously in a large lecture hall, or targeting instruction only to the PWP themes or sections that require it most. There may also be another option that allows for a better balance between online and in-person instruction.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of the direction the relationship between the PWP and the library takes in the future, it is clear that the cart was put before the horse in the development of the online PWP library modules. We assumed that the modules would be effective and accepted without really consulting the PWP faculty, who we depended on to actually implement and use the modules. Then we only provided limited support for instructors in implementing the modules, leaving instructors confused about how to use the modules and how much help they could expect or request from the library. In addition to potentially straining the relationship between the PWP and the library, this confusion meant that the modules were probably not implemented in a way that maximized their impact on student learning.

Perhaps these troubles could have been avoided had we gone back to the fundamentals of liaison librarianship at the beginning of the process: understanding the needs and expectations of faculty and students. What are faculty learning objectives for their students? Where are faculty and students having difficulty meeting those learning objectives? What skills and knowledge do students need to succeed in their courses and in their lives beyond school? What can the library realistically do to help students meet the faculty’s learning objectives and gain those necessary skills? And most importantly, especially when we try something and it does not go as well as we would like, at what point do we admit that an attempt to answer these questions did not work and try something new?

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