



2004

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Recommended Citation

Brad Matthies. "The road to faculty-librarian collaboration." *Academic Exchange Quarterly* 8.4 (2004): 135-141.

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The road to faculty-librarian collaboration

Abstract

It is critical that citizens of a democratic society have a solid grounding in information literacy skills. The author believes that an effective way to achieve this goal is for faculty and librarians to collaborate on ways to teach these skills to students. As proof of the efficacy of faculty-librarian collaboration the author presents an example that is based on his collaborative experiences with faculty.

Introduction

Given the rate that information can now be created and shared, librarians and teaching faculty in higher education are facing great pressure to incorporate information literacy into their instruction goals. Moreover, higher education is now being called upon to assess if students truly have learned how to learn. Indeed, this trend is evident by the mere fact that several accrediting bodies now recognize information literacy as an important learning outcome for students (Gratch-Lindauer 2002; Rader 2004). In fact, as Rockman rightly observes, "Information literacy is no longer just a library issue. It is the critical campuswide issue for the 21st century, of keen importance to all educational stakeholders, including faculty, librarians, and administrators" (2003, 612).

With promoting the value of information literacy to an interdisciplinary audience as my goal, this paper will briefly describe some of the problems that academic librarians face when promoting the concept, and discuss why information literacy is important to educators. Next, it will offer suggestions on how to promote information literacy, and provided advice on how to establish good faculty-librarian relationships. Finally, it will describe a successful collaborative effort between two librarians, faculty, and students at Butler University, which serve as positive proof for the efficacy of collaboration with librarians.

What is Information Literacy?

The library literature abounds with numerous scholarly definitions of what information literacy means. For example, Grassian and Kaplowitz identify six popular definitions for the term that range from a marriage of technology skills with the ability to think critically, to a definition that describes information literacy as a construct which is unique to each individual learner (2001, 5-6). In light of this conflagration of definitions, many scholars are quick to question the term's legitimacy and wonder if the term has lost its meaning (McCrank 1992). Moreover, as many have observed, this conflagration of definitions has the potential to hinder librarians who are attempting to promote the concept to an interdisciplinary audience.

A solution to this definitional problem is evident in the Association for College and Research Libraries' Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. According to these standards, an information literate person is able to identify, locate, evaluate, and use information effectively. To these we can add the notion of "lifelong learning" as evidenced by a person who has acquired a "framework for learning how to learn" (ACRL 2000). In fact, these standards capture the commonalities which are evident in the many definitions of information literacy, thus allowing us to divorce ourselves from the scholarly debate and concentrate on teaching and promoting the concept (Grassian and Kaplowitz 2001, 8).

The Value of Information Literacy

Estimates put the number of Web pages at approximately 800 million and growing (Boyle 1999). In addition, with over 150,000 new books having been published in 2002, traditional print sources have not gone away. Also, thanks to the Internet and the personal computer, over 10,000 small publishers went into business in 2002 (Reid 2003). Thus, by all indicators, the wealth of information that is available to the student of today was only dreamed of ten years ago. More telling though is the fact that the student of today is part of what is known as the "next generation" (Abram and Luther 2004). This next generation [1] consists of students who were raised on technology and who expect one-stop shopping for their research. In addition, this next generation likely has no idea what traditional research consists of and may even view the library as having no role whatsoever in their college life (Nelson and Stepchysyn 2003).

As librarians and other educators know, the problem with most of this electronic information is that it receives little or no quality control. Moreover, many students are never taught how to evaluate this electronic information, nor are they taught that traditional sources (e.g., print books, journals, and magazines) still have a very important role to play in their education. So, in light of the fact that the paradigm has shifted and is growing expediently, it is imperative for students of the next generation to develop a framework that will allow them to become self-sufficient citizens who can locate, critically evaluate, and effectively use information--no matter what the format. The solution to this problem, of course, lies in the campuswide promotion of information literacy by all educational stakeholders.

The Road to Collaboration

As I observed in the beginning of this paper, information literacy is an issue that "all educational stakeholders" should care about (Rockman 2003, p. 612), thus, it naturally follows that two of the main information literacy collaborators in academia are likely to be faculty and librarians. Indeed, a cursory search of the library literature will reveal numerous papers that present the anecdotal and empirical evidence that tout the benefits of faculty-librarian collaboration (Ducas and Michaud-Oystryk 2003; Rockman 2003). As positive as these articles may be, it is important for potential collaborators to realize that the road to collaboration is not without its challenges or critics. First and foremost, for many faculty and librarians, it has not been made clear who is responsible for promoting information literacy on their campuses. In addition, when it is realized that information literacy is a campus issue, many upper level administrators fail to make it a priority thus, it never becomes part of the campus culture (Breivik 1998, 77-109).

Even if roles are clearly defined and the mission of information literacy is supported by college administrators, there may be other problems with collaboration. Foremost among these problems is the invisible divide that often exists between librarians and faculty. Or, as Iannuzzi observes, "In a truly collaborative environment, participants must agree to a great deal of negotiation, a submission of egos, and a merging of agendas" (1998, 100). Unfortunately, as is the case with any organization, this state of true collaboration is often very hard to achieve.

Most troubling though for librarians, is Doskatsch's summary of the research that investigates the perceptions of academics towards librarians. According to her review, many faculty question the librarian's education credentials, scholarly output, and teaching skills. Moreover, many faculty are simply unaware of what librarians do in their jobs and see little difference between librarians and support staff (2003, 116). Similar critiques even go as far as suggesting that the library profession is not yet ready for comprehensive collaborative efforts (McCarthy 2002). Obviously, the road to collaboration is not without its challenges or critics. Whatever the case, it is my opinion that many of the aforementioned challenges can be addressed by librarians who make an effort to effectively communicate library services and librarian roles to their fellow educators, and follow through by effectively delivering these services. Thus, it is through the Butler University Libraries' example of proactive collaboration that I hope to show the reader that the benefits of collaboration far outweigh the risks.

Building a Collaborative Model

Liaison programs are often cited as being paramount to creating environments that encourage collaborative efforts (Black, Crest, and Volland 2003). As proof of this observation I offer the example that is set by the Butler University Libraries. Butler's original liaison program was established in 1990 and could be best described as reactive. In other words, the bulk of the liaison activities consisted of responding to faculty requests for book orders, and the librarians' input in the selection process was, at best, marginal. Simply put: the librarians' expertise and training in resource selection and information literacy instruction were not being fully utilized. In 1994, then incoming Dean of Libraries, Lewis Miller saw this problem as a waste of librarian talent and quickly developed a plan to remedy this situation. Through such strategies as developing new policies that redefined the liaison role, conducting workshops that helped to develop subject expertise, creating an instruction team, and making the liaison role part of the librarians' annual evaluation, Dean Miller slowly changed the program from a reactionary model, to one that proactively maximizes the librarians' talents.

Butler librarians now coordinate collection development, select and purchase electronic resources, and coordinate instruction within their individual disciplines--all of which is done with a great deal of freedom and authority. Of course, much of this freedom and authority did not exist prior to 1990, and is largely due to the program's mandate of establishing good relationships with faculty. So, as these relationships slowly grew, the faculty started to see the librarians as experts in their own right. This, however, is not to say that faculty involvement was eliminated. In fact, faculty input in all library matters is one of the program's key outcomes and the program could not succeed without it.

Successful Collaboration: One Example

Hired in 1998, Jonathan Helmke was appointed as library liaison to Butler University's College of Business Administration (CBA). Through his careful questioning and listening, he identified resources and services most useful to the business faculty in their teaching and research. Then, taking Dean Miller's mandate of building good faculty relations to heart, Helmke aggressively promoted library services to the CBA faculty. Some of the services that Helmke promoted included print and electronic resources, bibliographic instruction, and faculty or student-tailored research assistance. Simply put: Helmke doggedly promoted what he could offer to the CBA; then he followed through by effectively delivering these services. This simple strategy made allies of many business faculty who now see the value of incorporating library services into their classroom instruction (Moore 2003).

Moreover, the effectiveness of this strategy in creating allies is easily supported by examining the number of instruction sessions that the library delivered prior to Helmke's arrival. For example, in 1997 the library delivered approximately four sessions to the CBA via the efforts of one librarian, however, in 2003 two librarians delivered 73 sessions to the CBA. Thus, it is quite apparent that a 95% increase in instruction is a good indicator that this strategy is an effective way to build relationships.

Finally, and most importantly, this proactive strategy has allowed Helmke to establish a continuing dialog between the business faculty and the librarians who now serve them. Thus, the librarians have been successful in continuously re-aligning library resources and services with the needs of a rapidly changing curriculum and the growth of faculty and student research.

The Proof is in the Product

It is my assertion that faculty-librarian relationships which are built on the successful delivery of services, often establish lines of communication that may lead to mutually beneficial endeavors. For example, during the summer of 2002, Helmke and I were made aware of an upcoming CBA course which was slated to replace a course on job skills. Titled MG199 Freshman Experience, this newly created course was intended to introduce business students to general business principles, and among other objectives, emphasize critical thinking from a business perspective.

By maintaining open lines of communication with the CBA faculty, we were able to receive early notice of this upcoming course. This allowed us to proactively promote what the library could offer the course instructors prior to the course ever having been taught. Moreover, having maintained positive relationships with the CBA for approximately five years, the course instructors were receptive to meeting with us about library session design.

So with ample time to prepare, we set up a series of meetings with the course instructors and identified their learning objectives. During these meetings we discovered that the students would be expected to complete a semester-long group project that required them to compare and contrast two similar businesses. In order to complete their project the students needed to be able to: 1) know how to select business sources that would answer their research question, 2) be familiar with a wide array of general business sources, 3) know how to identify and select the

appropriate databases on the Butler Libraries Web page, 4) be able to function in groups, and 4) be able to critically evaluate the content of their sources. Added to these was the challenge of having only one class period available to cover these objectives.

After examining these objectives we quickly realized that we could not meet all of these in a traditional one-shot library lecture. So, after presenting this problem to the faculty, they graciously agreed to allow us one more class period and they also agreed to a mandatory evening session for their students. Moreover, they were willing to let us deviate from the traditional library lecture, and incorporate constructivist learning techniques into our sessions.

In our first session, students are taught the various types of business information, how to match this information to their research question, and what library databases may lead them to it. In the second session, students are taught how to use the library databases, and are also afforded the opportunity to start their research while two librarians are available to help them. In the final session, students are taught how to critically evaluate the content of their sources via a source evaluation workshop. In this workshop, students are divided into groups, are given a fictitious topic and one business source, and are then required to use the CRITIC Acronym [2] to evaluate the content of their source for credibility. Thus, it was only through collaboration with faculty that we were able to design three library sessions that covered all of the instructors' course objectives--including group participation and an emphasis on thinking critically about information. Moreover, it was through this collaboration that we were able to seamlessly integrate information literacy outcomes into all of our sessions.

Subsequent Use and Refinements

As faculty and librarians both know, nothing ever goes completely as planned and there were a few glitches. Generally the problems involved the students' understanding of the business source types, students who could not remember database techniques and confusion about how to correctly use the acronym to evaluate sources. Of course, many of these problems would have not been made apparent to us if we had used a traditional library lecture. In fact, by incorporating group activities and active learning techniques into all of the library sessions, we received immediate feedback from the students which was invaluable in helping us to correct these problems in later sessions. Moreover, was it not for the open and collaborative environment which the CBA instills in its instructors and students, these sessions would have likely been less successful or not have occurred at all.

Finally, as I noted earlier in this paper, success in service delivery often leads to more success and has the potential to create additional allies. So, it should be of no surprise that news of these sessions spread to the other faculty who were slated to teach future sections of MG199. These growing relationships eventually lead to all of the MG199 instructors incorporating our evaluation workshop into their course plan, and some faculty even afforded us additional classroom time for our other sessions.

Conclusion

More is at stake here than collaboration between librarians and faculty. Keeping with the

librarian's principles of intellectual freedom and the freedom to read, members of a democratic society need to be able "to recognize propaganda and misinformation, and to make their own decisions about what they read and believe" (ALA 2004). If this is truly a desired outcome of higher education then members of the academy should be encouraged to seek out librarians, who, by the very nature of their jobs, are information experts. Moreover, librarians should not sit idly by and bemoan the lack of critical thinking skills in the next generation. Rather, librarians have an ethical responsibility to promote information literacy to the next generation, and do so by utilizing all the means which are available to them. This, of course, includes the promotion of information literacy concepts to the faculty on campus. As seen by the success of our example, there are allies on campus--it is just a matter of taking the time to find them.

Authors' Note

The author would like to thank Lewis Miller, Dean of Butler University Libraries, and Jonathan Helmke, Access Services Librarian, for their invaluable feedback concerning this paper. Finally, the author would also like to thank the faculty and students of Butler University's College of Business Administration. Without their contributions, this collaborative effort would not have been possible.

Endnotes

[1] a.k.a. NextGens, Millennials, Generation Y, etc.

[2] For a detailed explanation of the CRITIC Acronym and the CRITIC Exercise please see: Brad Matthies and Jonathan Helmke. Forthcoming. "Using the CRITIC Acronym to Teach Information Evaluation, in *Library Instruction: Restating the Need, Refocusing the Response*. Selected Papers Presented at the Thirty-second National LOEX Library Instruction Conference held in Ypsilanti, Michigan 6 to May 8 2004, ed. D. B. Thomas, R. Baier, E. Own, and T. Valko, Ann Arbor, MI: Pierian Press. See also <http://blue.butler.edu/~bmatthie/loex04.html>.

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