Information Competence in the Freshman Seminar

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Abstract
This article describes a collaborative model designed to facilitate integration of information competence into the curriculum of the Freshman Seminar at Sonoma State University. The model focuses on collaboration among librarians, faculty, peer mentors and students.

Introduction
The May/June 2001 issue of Change magazine reported the following statistics regarding college graduates’ self-reported information competence:

Roughly two out of three college graduates (63 percent) feel confident in their ability to organize information and communicate its meaning to others. Nearly as many (61 percent) feel confident in their ability to perform quantitative tasks and analyses. But less than half (48 percent) feel confident in their ability to find information – essentially, in the skills needed to research a topic. (Gumport 29)

These statistics should resound dramatically in the halls of academia, where information competence is increasingly perceived to be one of the fundamental learning outcomes of a college education (Markum 98). Librarians are currently working to find ways of facilitating students’ acquisition of the necessary skills; professors, on the other hand, are only slowly coming to an understanding of this daunting task. This article will report on a unique partnership which involved the development of a program for the incorporation of information competence as one of the fundamental learning objectives of the Freshman Seminar at Sonoma State University (SSU).

The California State University’s Chancellor’s Office is strongly committed to the incorporation of information competence (as defined by the Association of College and Research Libraries information literacy standards) as a core component of a CSU education. In addition to workshops and conferences developed by the CSU Information Competence Task Force, the Chancellor’s commitment to information competence included grant money made available to librarians and instructional faculty. Over the past several years, many of these grants have been awarded to libraries. However, as the search for information and the ability to evaluate information have become more complex, it has become glaringly apparent that information competence is no longer just the purview of the library, but rather must be tackled across the curriculum, with the library as a strong participant. Consequently, in the 2000-2001 academic year, grant money was directed to instructional departments committed to including information competence as an educational outcome of their programs. One such grant was awarded to the Freshman Seminar course at SSU.

SSU’s Freshman Seminar, team-taught by a faculty member and a peer mentor, is open to all incoming first-time freshmen {1}. Peer mentors are carefully selected from the population of sophomore, junior and senior students to serve as full teaching partners in the course. Approximately seventy percent of all freshmen choose to enroll in the Seminar as part of their first-year experience. The culture of the university is such that, in almost all areas, students are given options of courses within the curriculum. Such a position encourages students to participate actively in their own educational choices. In
keeping with this culture, the Freshman Seminar is strongly encouraged, but not required, except in the case of EOP students. Due to the high percentage of freshmen in the course, the Freshman Seminar seemed the ideal place to lay the groundwork for information competence in a significant number of students. We developed a “pilot” program for a new instructional approach to information competence in a selected subset of Freshman Seminar sections.

While SSU’s librarians are already committed to the belief that students do not become information competent simply by writing one research paper or having one fifty-minute library session, the initiation of information competence projects by faculty came to be recognized as necessary to students’ acquisition of information competence. Increasingly, librarians are witnessing faculty’s frustration with students who are unable to conduct even the most rudimentary of research projects with any kind of academic rigor. For students, the Web has become the ultimate source of information: such information is easily attainable, apparently trustworthy and accessible from home. Faculty understand that students often fail to go beyond the Web when conducting research, neglecting the myriad of alternative sources which, traditionally, represented the core of any research project, such as primary sources, books, and journal articles. Faculty have a fairly clear idea of the options for research and some general conception of information competence; all too often, however faculty expect that university students have learned fundamental research skills “somewhere along the way” and therefore have never really asked themselves how to foster information competence skills in their students. Consequently, many faculty lack a structured approach with which to introduce such topics in class. Collaboration with librarians seemed to be the obvious way for faculty to learn a new pedagogy, and to teach information competence in their classes. Our project in the Freshman Seminar at SSU offered faculty a means of understanding information competence in a more structured, codified way, with specific applications to a class they were already engaged in teaching.

The Project
Per the requirements of the grant, we used the ACRL standardized definition of information competence (also known as information literacy). Briefly, information competence may be defined as the ability to recognize when information is needed and to locate, evaluate, effectively use, and cite the needed information [2].

Goals And Objectives
The specific goals of our information competence project were to:

- increase information competence among a select group of faculty and peer advisors;
- increase collaboration between the library and those faculty, resulting in course-specific student project descriptions which further information competence among freshmen;
- increase librarian contact with new freshman in the form of targeted interventions on that project;
- give students a forum in which to display their newly acquired skills in a meaningful context;
- revise the Freshman Seminar curriculum’s student outcomes to include information competence.

In terms of learning outcomes for faculty, we hoped that, upon completion of the project, instructional faculty and peer mentors would be able to:

- incorporate information competence skills into the Freshman Seminar;
- develop project assignments which will allow students to use information competence skills in a concrete, assessable way;
- assist students in identifying resources, implementing research strategies, compiling information in both oral and written form, and writing bibliographies;
- develop collaborative working relationships with librarians.
We also devised a set of learning outcomes for the students describing the expectation that students would be able to:

- define a project topic in conjunction with their course instructors;
- identify types of resources necessary for completion of their research projects;
- implement research strategies, including information retrieval and resource evaluation;
- consult effectively with librarians to insure the quality of their research;
- compile their research for presentation in both oral and written form;
- and, finally, write a bibliography.

**Training**

In order to insure that all instructors had the knowledge and skills necessary to meet all of these learning outcomes, we devised a training session, held at the end of the spring 2001 semester. First we did an interactive exercise in which we divided participants into two groups – peers and faculty – and had each group answer the question “What Does It Mean to Be Information Competent?” The peers focused particularly on the need for each individual to know what works for her and how she best manages a research project. The faculty on the other hand, were concerned with evaluation of sources and the critical thinking skills involved in research. The exercise provided a great opportunity for discussion amongst the faculty, especially surrounding the use of web resources and ways to get students to use other types of resources. Both faculty and peers stressed the cyclical nature of research and information competence and the fact that students often forget that all research is a process. Next, the entire group assigned their ideas to one of the ACRL standards. This was an excellent way for all involved to become familiar with the standards and their specific intricacies. As we did this, it became quite clear to all of us which of the standards are library specific (retrieving information) and which of the standards might more appropriately be discussed in the classroom (defining topics, evaluation, etc).

During the second half of the training session, we focused specifically on how to incorporate information competence into the curriculum of each individual Freshman Seminar section. We began by asking the group to imagine that they would be asking students to complete a pre-determined assignment in their Freshman Seminars. They were to decide which tasks or class activities they needed to incorporate into the syllabus to insure that they were addressing the ACRL standards. In so doing the group developed pedagogical strategies to teach each of the five major standards in class. (A complete description of the training can be found at: http://libweb.sonoma.edu/brodsky/infocomp/default.html.) For the final portion of our training, we worked together as a group to brainstorm ideas for small research projects specific to each of the Freshman Seminar themes.

**Consultations & Collaborations**

After the training, the Freshman Seminar instructors were asked to consult over the summer with their assigned librarian. The librarian met with each group at least once, and also conducted e-mail discussions. These consultations gave everyone the opportunity to talk about assignments for the project, and for assignments in general, including how to define the goals and purpose of a given assignment, how to word the assignment to avoid ambiguity, etc. It also gave the librarian a chance to talk about the library and its services, including a tutorial on resources for faculty and specific areas in which librarians often see students floundering. In the case of the overzealous faculty member, the librarian was able to put the project into a freshman context and help the faculty member to understand what kinds of projects were appropriate in scope for the targeted level. Once the project was well-defined, the librarian consulted on project

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timing (when to introduce each standard, when students should attend library workshops, etc.) and suggested the most useful resources specific to each project. Finally, it was decided who would be responsible for each aspect of the presentation. For example, instructors might initiate brainstorming discussions for research topics, while librarians would take responsibility for presenting searching techniques.

Post-project assessment (see below) indicated that, from the faculty perspective, this kind of intensive collaboration was invaluable. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the one-on-one time was the direct librarian input into assignment development. Much as faculty might consult the writing center when attempting to formulate good writing prompts, freshman seminar instructors were able to work carefully with a librarian to develop sound research project descriptions. What was particularly crucial to all involved was the librarian’s ability to see the potential pitfalls in any project description, particularly in terms of breadth and scope, providing a unique kind of control that would prevent students from feeling overwhelmed as the project came to fruition.

*Classroom And Library Activities*

Once the semester was underway, the classroom activities used to foster information competence varied widely from section to section. All of the sections presented their project description sometime early in the semester to allow students to begin to think about the project well in advance. Most of the sections organized their students into groups. Some teams did not present the standards formally at all, while others presented them all in one package, and still others, perhaps the most effective, presented them one by one, discussing each individually at different times throughout the semester so that students could think about the implications of each standard for their own projects. The evaluation of sources was a crucial component of every project. For many students, the simple notion that one cannot trust every source, or that some sources are more valid or valuable than others, was a revelation. Not surprisingly, this component of information competence was the least familiar to students and the most significant to faculty. Finally, in order to introduce students to the necessity of citing all of one’s sources, all sections required some kind of formal bibliography as part of the project.

Students had at least two different types of interaction with the library. Somewhat early in the semester, students were required to attend two of the library’s regularly scheduled drop-in workshops focused on searching techniques. In addition, each class had a maximum of two sessions with a librarian. These supplementary sessions were singularly important because the students came in contact with several of the SSU librarians; such interactions helped to break down some of the barriers students regularly experience when using the library. Moreover, because the librarians knew what students had learned in the drop-in workshops and also had a sense of what was being taught in the classroom, they could focus on other aspects of information competence or re-present concepts that were causing particular difficulty. One especially fascinating aspect of these classroom sessions lay in the discussion of appropriate sources for a given project topic. For example, one student who wanted to investigate Afghani students’ reactions to September 11 revealed in October 2001 that he had been looking in the book catalog for relevant material and was frustrated because he was finding nothing. A perfect teaching moment ensued. During the library sessions, students also learned the differences between scholarly journals and popular periodicals and between web and print resources, and they were encouraged to remain flexible when researching. Again, these sessions were particularly fruitful because they were aimed at developing information competence skills in the context of a well-defined, manageable research project.
Assessment
Assessment of the program was built into all aspects of the project. Assessment tools included:

**Pre- And Post-Tests**
Pre- and post- test were administered to all students, faculty and peer mentors participating in the project. The questions were designed to correlate directly with the five ACRL standards. An in-depth analysis of the results may be found on our website: http://libweb.sonomah.edu/brodsy/infocomp/.

**Mid-Semester Meeting**
At the midpoint in the semester, we convened a general meeting of Freshman Seminar instructors in order to determine where the different teams were in their implementation of the information competence project. Instructors were also asked to identify any additional help needed from the library or the project coordinator. The general sense at this point in the semester was that many students were, not surprisingly, procrastinating, and their lack of engagement was also seen as a major stumbling block. It was widely acknowledged that, if nothing else, learning the eventual consequences of procrastination would be a valuable lesson for many students.

**Class Presentations**
The presentations of student research took a variety of forms. Some sections requested short, 5-minute oral reports on the students’ findings. Another section required students to stage a debate around their issue. Yet another built a website compiling student research. All of the classes incorporated some written assignment in conjunction with the oral presentations, as well as a bibliography.

**Exit Interviews With Freshman Seminar Students**
The librarian met with some of the classes to talk about their projects. Discussions were candid with a variety of responses ranging from those who saw the benefit of the project to those who questioned the need for the project. Students indicated a great appreciation for extra librarian contact time and stressed the importance of the transference of their newly acquired knowledge to other classes. Students also indicated a greater comfort level in using the library and approaching library staff. Criticisms included a need for the restructuring of the library drop-in workshops and more class time devoted to discussing the projects. Overall, most students felt that the project was worthwhile and should remain a fundamental component of the class.

**Exit Interviews With Instructional Teams**
End-of-semester interviews were conducted with each of the instructional teams involved in the project. This included approximately an hour of one-on-one discussion with the team, the project coordinator and the library representative. Team members were asked a variety of questions, such as:

- Have you increased your own information competence? If so, how?
- Have you seen increased information competence in your students?
- In collaborating with the library, did you change the types of assignments you created?
- Do you feel that you have successfully incorporated information competence into your Freshman Seminar?
- Would you continue doing so in the future?
- Do you foresee incorporating information competence in other classes you teach at SSU?
- Do you believe the Freshman Seminar’s curriculum’s student outcomes should be revised to include information competence?
What difficulties did you have working on this project?

Significantly, most of the faculty participants indicated the knowledge they had gained from the program would alter how they write assignments, not only for the Freshman Seminar, but in their other classes as well. In some cases, faculty reported that, upon hearing about the Information Competence program in the Freshman Seminar, their department colleagues had expressed an interest in participating and learning more about the library's commitment to information competence in all SSU graduates.

Outcomes
Overall, students met the goals of the project, demonstrating an enhanced understanding of information competence by the end of the semester. They exhibited a better understanding of information and its uses. They clearly indicated greater comfort in asking for help in the library. However, while all the students were introduced to a variety of types of resources and indicated an awareness of a variety of sources, a majority still demonstrated heavy reliance on the web. Evaluation skills also improved, but will need to be constantly revisited. In general, faculty and peer mentors experienced a range of self-described learning. Some believed the training was primarily a refresher course for them, a thorough review of their own previously gained knowledge of information competence, whereas others appreciated mastering the subtleties of the subject. Most importantly, all appreciated the more systematic approach to the standards, and the kind of structure this approach offered to their own teaching. In the end, it was clear that it is not only the students who benefit from this kind of collaborative approach to the teaching of information competence skills. Librarians also benefit, in that they gain a better understanding of freshman students and their needs, as well as a clearer view of faculty's concerns and requests. Faculty similarly benefit from their close collaboration with librarians in the development of assignments, both for the Freshman Seminar and for other classes as well. Overall, the program was successful and will continue to be implemented in future years at Sonoma State University.

Notes
1. Additional information about the national First-Year Experience movement may be found on the website of the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience at http://www.sc.edu/fyel/.
2. The ACRL standards, as well as associated performance indicators and learning outcomes, may be found on the ACRL's website at: http://www.ala.org/acrl/ilstanddldlo.html.

Works Cited