

Assessment of Information Literacy at the GE/freshman level: Progress Report 2011-2012, by Felicia Palsson

Background/Contextual Information:

Currently, information literacy is one of five required GE learning objectives in SSU's freshman year composition (FYC) classes. In Spring of 2011, the Library participated in a holistic assessment of freshman research papers led by the Composition Coordinator, Cathy Kroll. The holistic review showed that freshman composition students were focusing primarily on writing the paper, not engaging with research sources. We quickly realized that assessing information literacy with traditional research papers yields poor results. It wasn't clear that students were fully reading the outside sources, not to mention properly integrating the ideas of other authors, or evaluating websites for credibility. Too often students cited inappropriate sources or didn't cite them at all. Plagiarism or perhaps inadvertent copying from sources was widespread. The phenomenon of "looking for the right quote" is a widely known consequence of research paper assignments, and SSU students are no different. As a result of this initial assessment, Felicia Palsson, the Library Instruction Coordinator, decided to work closely with the Composition instructors to pilot a new approach to information literacy curriculum for these classes.

Pilot Program 2011-2012: Curriculum and Common Assignment

Beginning in Fall 2011, we designed a new curriculum for freshman information literacy. It includes both a new way of teaching as well as a new method for assessment of student learning. In the new curriculum, information literacy is taught (and assessed) using a scaffolding process of deep engagement with sources. Students are introduced to the core concepts of information evaluation by meeting with a librarian. (Experienced writing instructors also introduce these concepts, in which case the librarian-led class serves to reinforce them.) During the hands-on instruction session in the Library, students engage in a critical thinking exercise addressing conceptual elements of a source (e.g. asked not just to "identify the author" but to identify his or her *authority*). We are asking them not only to "find" information but also specifically to evaluate information they find. They must compare Google search results to peer-reviewed journal articles, using structured criteria we provide. This framework challenges them to understand the purpose, the audience, and the credibility/authority of source material. **The Library instruction is now consistently geared toward information literacy, taking a departure from traditional bibliographic instruction sessions, where librarians mostly taught about tools such as databases and catalogs.** "Finding" is no longer our priority outcome for freshmen.¹ Instead, we want to provide students with a critical

¹ Note that we believe the use of advanced bibliographic tools is still appropriate for upper-division and discipline-specific courses.

Assessment of Information Literacy at the GE/freshman level: Progress Report 2011-2012

approach to research and an understanding of the correct use of outside source material.

Students are required² to write an elaborate annotated bibliography followed by a literature review rather than a research paper. This is key: Cathy Kroll and Felicia Palsson decided to use this common assignment for freshman composition in order to collect artifacts for assessment that would require **deeper engagement** with source material. In October 2011, the Library introduced an information literacy rubric, and Cathy Kroll provided an in-service workshop to all FYC instructors to discuss the common assignment of the annotated bibliography and literature review.

The assignment asks students to take ownership of their research selections on a deeper level than they have previously been asked to do. Instead of just “pulling a quote” they are required to demonstrate *in annotations* that they can evaluate the source (according to criteria we provided earlier such as authority, purpose, relevance, etc.). This is a departure from the traditional annotated bibliography, which focuses on summary. Also, in the literature review, students must be able to compare and contrast sources, utilizing techniques of *synthesis and analysis* to show where authors agree with or diverge from other authors.

Assessment Process: Challenges and Lessons Learned

In Spring 2012, Felicia Palsson and Carrie McDade (instruction librarians who had been teaching the Library sessions) undertook the collection and review of the annotated bibliographies³. We wanted to collect evidence that students were learning information literacy skills programmatically, across multiple sections of the same course. The Library instruction (by two librarians working as a team) was consistent. Students in all sections of FYC received Library instruction in critical thinking and evaluating sources. However, due to wide discrepancies in the way the FYC instructors’ prompts were written, the annotated bibliography assignment was not truly “common” – i.e., they were not sufficiently similar to measure them all with our rubric.

Here are some specific numbers: We collected and read 106 annotated bibliographies from 8 sections of ENG 100B. This represents about 22% of the students we taught in freshman composition Library instruction sessions during spring semester (from 36 sections of ENG 101 and ENG 100B altogether). Of these 8 sections, only 3 groups had annotated bibliographies we could accurately score with our rubric. It is worth noting that, when we started off the semester, 17 sections out

² (Students are required to complete this assignment in participating sections; a few instructors have opted not to participate in the common assignment/common program.)

³ Note that Cathy Kroll was on sabbatical in Spring 2012, so for our pilot year we did not score literature reviews.

Assessment of Information Literacy at the GE/freshman level: Progress Report 2011-2012

of a possible 36 (that is 47%) were signed up and willing to participate in the assessment pilot. What this means is that several sections failed to submit annotated bibliographies at the end of the semester, either for logistical reasons or because they diverged from the project at some point along the way. It also reveals weaknesses in our collaborative process.

This is a key point: Nearly all FYC instructors are graduate student TAs or adjunct faculty. We learned that coordinating a programmatic assessment with such a diverse body of instructors was very challenging, especially when many of them hold more than one job, and/or are not available on campus very often, and this particular class may not be their primary focus. We understand the challenges that graduate students and adjunct instructors face, in terms of the demands on their time and the resources available to them. Given these mutual challenges, we were unable to collect accurate data about student learning in Spring 2012. Although the first year of the pilot did not result in usable data, it did reveal several factors to consider for the collaboration going forward.

Going Forward: Changes to the assessment for 2012-2013:

The pilot revealed the need for a “bottom up” approach to the common assignment. In particular, we discovered that graduate TAs who are brand new to teaching need closer guidance. The biggest lesson we learned was that **all instructors must share in the design of the prompt** and all must agree on the information literacy skills we want students to demonstrate. Going forward, all FYC instructors must write their prompts with these outcomes in mind. That is the only way to ensure a truly *common* assignment and collect artifacts that can be compared against the same rubric. In order to achieve this goal, for the 2012-13 academic year, we are planning a much more interactive workshop with “all hands on deck” in a truly collaborative process. Instead of simply introducing the assignment, we want to build this assignment together with writing instructors.

We are also considering the possibility of a more strategic alignment of information literacy within the GE pattern. It will need to be widely discussed among faculty groups, but it’s possible that freshman composition is not the ideal course to attempt to achieve the information literacy objectives. Another possibility is to create “strands” of information literacy learning, which can be “woven” across the GE pattern in multiple courses. Felicia Palsson, as the Library Instruction Coordinator, is investigating these options with the cooperation of the GE committee at SSU.

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