

Chapter 14

College Ready: Improving Student Research Skills Through Professional Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

High school librarians and teachers face the challenge of preparing students for the rigors of academic-level inquiry. To achieve this goal, one school examined its research practices and explored ways to more fully integrate information fluency skills, quality resources, and higher-order thinking into the curriculum. While collaborative partnerships existed, wider perspectives and a larger consensus were needed in order to improve practice. Collaboration between language arts department members and their librarian was seen as a solution to this problem and included an exploration of current best practices in information literacy and inquiry-based learning. Three main principles guided this work: a) a commitment to honoring the research process, b) improving students' nonfiction reading skills, and c) recognizing and enacting reflection as the driver of critical thinking. This chapter describes the collaborative process, the team protocols put into place, commitments, and instructional design tools, along with implications for ongoing improvement.

INSTRUCTIONAL PROBLEM

It is a scene repeated every semester: college freshmen hear their instructors utter the word “research” and experience a viscerally unsettling reaction to thoughts of endless hours overwhelmed by stacks of books, digital files, and length requirements. The independent approaches many learners will apply to research are equally predictable. For

instance, Wikipedia Willie has little understanding of how to find appropriate, credible sources for his paper, instead relying on and improperly using Wikipedia. He clearly has not been taught that the real strength of Wikipedia lies in mining its bibliographic wealth of credible sources and possible experts with whom real inquiry can begin. On the other hand, Debbie Database has learned where to access credible sources through her

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school/university library, but she has not mastered advanced search methods to appropriately narrow her search, resulting in an unmanageable amount of sources. Last Minute Lance will likely commit unintended plagiarism, simply because he will not have time to engage meaningfully with his topic, quickly quilting together pieces of whatever he finds on the first page or two of his Google results. Ingrid Inquiry, on the other hand, has appropriately vetted her topic, asked questions, and selected germane sources. However, she may not be able to skillfully apply higher-order thinking that would enable her to readily see connections and synthesize across information sources, perform analysis, and generate a viable thesis. While obviously caricatures, these imagined learners represent research paths commonly seen across the high school to college transition. Two reports, the 2010 Project Information Literacy Report (Head & Eisenberg, 2010) and the Pew Internet Project *How Teens Do Research in the Digital World* (Pew Research Center, 2012) provide evidence of underpreparedness and self-limiting practices employed by young adults when attempting to meet the challenges of inquiry at a higher academic level. In fact, Head and Eisenberg (2010) found students have a narrow set of lower-level approaches to their research while the 2012 Pew study suggested that some young adults actually manage the overwhelming amount of information resources by *limiting* their options rather than expanding and exploring multiple paths of inquiry.

The widespread challenge of preparing high school seniors for independent, college-level research is one we, as language arts and library practitioners have experienced firsthand. The need for a comprehensive instructional design more accurately aligned to college research, reading and writing was evident. Meeting this goal essentially demanded candid, in-depth collaboration and full embeddedness of the librarian.

Librarians who integrate information fluency instruction, services, and resources within the academic curriculum and are embedded in

instruction are uniquely positioned to develop a comprehensive view of the learning environment. Embeddedness reveals the big picture of how librarians' various roles, instructional programs and resources are meeting the needs of the learning community. Successful embeddedness also relies upon the development and nurturing of collegial collaborative relationships. Learners benefit tremendously from the combined instructional capital of partners as each brings unique perspectives and strategies into the instructional design. For the language arts teachers at our school, department-wide collaboration among themselves and with the librarian helped establish uniform expectations for research and fostered meaningful discussions regarding scope and sequence held wider implications than we initially envisioned.

In this setting, the research paper had been a required core assessment for decades. However, it was not fully honoring the inquiry process nor efficiently leveraging technology and learners' information fluency skills. Although there might be various isolated reasons for this issue such as staff and leadership changes, or misaligned professional development, professional staff recognized the design of the original project was the fatal flaw. This became especially apparent as problems arose when the same project was conducted simultaneously by several different instructors, all of whom had different requirements for learning outcomes, resource usage, and documentation – as well as disparate writing approaches. From the vantage points of the librarian and language arts department chair, these disparities resulted in learners graduating with an inconsistent level of information fluency, research and writing skill sets. We (the librarian and department chair) determined that lasting changes had to be made, and that we needed to partner with the other two language arts teachers to accomplish this change.

In order to prepare for a massive revision of the senior research project, it became important to lay the groundwork for a shift in teaching practice. Over the course of two years, the librarian

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