Faculty-Librarian Micro-Level Collaboration in an Online Graduate History Course

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Abstract

This paper describes a micro-level faculty-librarian collaboration implemented at the authors' state university to address students' information literacy deficiencies in a graduate-level history research methods course. The setting, implementation, and evolution of the partnership are described in detail to suggest a model for other instructors. Additionally, consideration is given to issues of working in an online course environment and the benefits of micro- versus macro-level librarian support. Consideration is given to future steps for strengthening the partnership and measuring its impact on student outcomes.

Suggested Subject Keywords

Academic libraries; Faculty outreach; Faculty-librarian collaboration; Information literacy instruction; Critical Thinking; Partnerships

Introduction

A combination of factors at Sam Houston State University (SHSU) created an ideal setting for a History Professor and History Librarian to experiment with an intensive approach to faculty-librarian collaboration. The goal was to incorporate information-literacy instruction into every part of a course syllabus, from beginning to end, with a consistent librarian co-teaching presence and ongoing communication and adaptation on the part of both collaborators.

The authors' observations of history students at their institution suggested that inadequacies in student preparation for the process of conducting research were not limited to the undergraduate level, but extended into graduate sections as well. In their cumulative 26 years at the institution, the authors have encountered—from the different perspectives of professor and librarian—certain persistent gaps in the critical thinking and information-literacy skills of history students at all levels. Recognition of these shared observations led to the conclusion that a robust faculty-librarian collaboration in the graduate setting was not only justified, but needed.

The Master of Arts in History degree program at SHSU offers students the option of a thesis or non-thesis track. Students pursuing the non-thesis track must complete a research methods course to learn the historical research process, since they do not develop these skills intensively through the creation of a thesis. Furthermore, as the History MA program has moved increasingly into the online course environment, this research methods course is now taught almost exclusively online, introducing new challenges into the process of teaching students how to engage with research concepts, processes, and materials. Dr. xxxx xxxxx, Professor of History, and xxxx xxxxx, Associate Professor in the Newton Gresham Library, began a partnership to enhance information-literacy instruction in this research methods course and to develop a model for close faculty-librarian collaboration in online graduate education.

Literature Review

From its rise as a professional movement in the 1960s up through the late 1980s, academic library instruction underwent an evolution from simple instructional materials developed by librarians for student self-use; to basic library skills orientations; to discipline-specific or assignment-specific in-class presentations by librarians; and sometimes even to for-credit courses on library skills, taught outside the context of another academic discipline (see, e.g., Hopkins, 1981; Kirk, 1984; Knapp, 1966; Rader, 1975). However, throughout this period, references in the literature to *course-integrated instruction* or *faculty/librarian partnerships* almost exclusively denoted a librarian working with faculty in order to tailor individual presentations or an individual research task to a specific class, but did not refer to the integration of the librarian into the holistic process of constructing a syllabus or executing a course (see, e.g., Elliot, 1989). Likewise, concepts such as *integrating library instruction into the curriculum* usually referred to the fostering of the idea that classes across the curriculum should plan time to include these one-shot librarian presentations, but not to the integration of a librarian into the entire lifespan of a course.

In the early 1990s, emphasis began shifting from bibliographic instruction to information literacy, and this changed how librarians envisioned and practiced instruction (see, e.g., Baker and Litzinger, 1992). However, a 1994 annotated bibliography on librarian-teacher partnerships demonstrated an overwhelming continued emphasis in the literature on one-shot instruction (Avino, 1994). In 1996, Patricia Woodard published a study of an experimental partnership in which librarians were allowed to teach 1 of 5 segments in a team-taught course and also participated in student evaluation; her literature review indicates that this was a new concept in the library science literature. Evan Farber's 1999 survey of librarian-faculty collaboration was

optimistic about the future, especially because of recent technological impacts on pedagogy and

research methods, but still short on relevant examples of successful and reciprocal collaboration.

The last several years of the 1990s saw a few other examples of collaborative teaching

beginning to emerge, but the concept didn't recur frequently in the literature until the early 21st

century (see, e.g., Raspa and Ward, 2000; Sanborn, 2005). Around 2005, case studies co-

authored by teaching faculty and professional librarians began appearing (see, e.g., Bhavnagri

and Bielat, 2005; Tuttle and McKinzie, 2007), while professional books centered on bringing

course-integrated library instruction into the online environment, via the emerging concept of

embedded librarianship, arrived on the scene around the turn of the 2010 decade (see, e.g.,

Kvenild and Calkins, 2011).

As Curzon (2004) noted, despite the importance of developing a "powerful partnership

between faculty and librarians," the process is often stymied at least in part by a basic lack of

faculty understanding concerning the depth and complexity of collaboration that librarians seek

(29). As Curzon states, "Most faculty feel that they have established a partnership with

librarians, if they have thought about it at all, when they have requested a one-hour…session for

their students and given class reading lists to the bibliographer" (29-30). Meulemans and Carr

(2013) echo this idea, observing, "Professors often recognize that students need research help...

They know that the library may be able to help; but have little idea how. And so, a request for a

tour of the library is made, assuming that this will achieve the desired outcomes" (82)—however,

these authors go on to emphasize the belief that responsibility rests squarely with the librarian to

use such restrictive faculty requests as opportunities to open discussions which might lead to

more constructive partnerships. They assert a need "to shift from a service orientation" so that

librarians can "finally arrive as full collaborators and partners in the teaching and learning endeavor" (1, 89).

However, even as faculty-librarian partnership has become more accepted and more widely emphasized in recent years, much of the relevant literature on the topic has understandably focused on undergraduate students (see, e.g., Hoffmann and Adams, 2012; Hoffmann and Wallace, 2013; Kenedy, 2011; Kobzina, 2010; Pritchard, 2010; Tucci, 2011), and many articles still focus on collaborations of a more limited scope—resulting principally in between one and three instruction sessions, sometimes also supplemented by a course guide or individual student consultations—or on the development of stand-alone information-literacy courses (see, e.g., Crosetto, Wilkenfield, and Runnestrand, 2007).

The body of literature concerning faculty-librarian collaboration in graduate education is not yet as well developed (see, e.g., Bhavnagri and Bielat, 2005; Coats and Beric, 2011; Edwards and Black, 2012). Monroe-Gulick and Petr (2012) accurately observe that, in general, "incoming graduate students" are "often overlooked in library instructional programming, much of which focuses on teaching basic research skills to the undergraduate" (315). Their study found that "faculty involvement" does play a central role in helping students to build research skills (333), and this seems to justify a need to develop more robust pedagogical partnerships between faculty and librarians at the graduate level.

Micro-Level Partnership Case Study

Institutional and Departmental Setting

Sam Houston State University (SHSU) is a public university in a traditionally rural, agricultural area of southeast Texas. Though the institution has in recent years achieved a classification of Carnegie Doctoral Research University, it is historically a teaching-centered

school and prides itself on its success rates with undergraduate students, especially among

populations such as first-generation college attendees. At the graduate level, the university may

be most widely associated with its programs in education and criminal justice, but masters and

doctoral degrees are offered in numerous other disciplines as well, including an MA program in

the Department of History. SHSU has seen significant growth in online instruction during the

21st century, and online graduate-level courses were launched by the Department of History in

2002.

In addition to the MA program has moved more exclusively online over the past decade, the history

faculty has increasingly worked to develop and improve methods of online instruction that

support the history discipline's general consensus concerning graduate history learning

outcomes. Over time, a departmental interest arose for rubrics in which a thread of information

literacy underlay most of the learning outcomes. This growing interest in information literacy,

coupled with the simple fact that online students had a greater need for digital information

access, created a new awareness that greater faculty-librarian contact would be needed in order

to successfully achieve the desired outcomes.

In addition to the impetus provided by local developments, broader trends in the

evolution of the history profession in the digital age also motivated an increased interchange with

librarians and the reconceptualization of course planning. Development of digital library

collections and digitized archives has significantly altered the logistics of conceiving, planning,

and executing professional history projects (see, e.g., Townsend, 2010; Rosenzweig, 2011). This

trend can only accelerate in the coming years, and librarians are ideally positioned to assist in

integrating the concepts and methods of digital history into course planning. The authors came

together with a shared belief that, through graduate classes built in partnership with librarians,

history faculty may more successfully train new history professionals in all the possibilities of
their field as it is developing in the 21st century.

Research-Methods Class Setting and Syllabus

History MA students at SHSU may opt for a thesis or non-thesis track. Students choosing
a thesis route work closely with an individual faculty member and demonstrate their mastery of
history-learning and information-literacy outcomes through the production of a thesis. Students
on the non-thesis track instead take additional courses and a research-methods seminar. That
seminar, HIST 6394, occupies an essential niche in the non-thesis students' curriculum. Students
not writing a thesis would otherwise have no directed training in research methods. Although
they would of course produce research papers in other classes, those classes would in most cases
emphasize subject content and expect students to possess or develop research skills on their own.
Because of its unique position in training graduate history students in the research process, HIST
6394 was selected as a best starting point for developing a librarian-faculty partnership in both
creating and executing the class.

Course assignments were designed to scaffold the research and writing tasks that students
were expected to master. For instance, in the first assignment, students were meant to focus
primarily on the fundamental expectations of graduate-level history writing by revising and
expanding a truncated and cryptic passage on a historical topic. The assignment also
incorporated minimal engagement with library reference sources. As the semester progressed,
the scope and rigor of each assignment increased in terms of writing and critical thinking, while
also demanding more sophisticated skills of information discovery and evaluation as students
engaged with both primary and secondary research materials in a variety of formats and contexts.

The course culminated in a final project wherein students produced a research prospectus, including a fully researched explanation of the historical question and the proposed specific line of inquiry into it; an annotated list of principal historical actors and principal researchers; an annotated bibliography of scholarly articles; and an annotated bibliography of archive websites—either fully digitized collections or robust digital finding aids—along with an essay specifically assessing the applicability of the collection, and particular unique items within it, to the proposed line of historical inquiry. This final assignment, in addition to demanding the highest expectations concerning history learning outcomes, also demanded the highest demonstration of information literacy and research skills, each of which a student should have been bolstering during the preceding scaffolded assignments.

Librarian's Instructional Goals

When the HIST 6394 partnership was initiated in the fall of 2012, the History Librarian formulated only simple instructional goals: to maintain a consistent presence in the online course throughout the semester, to connect students to useful library resources, and to be available to address student questions upon request. These goals reflected the library's overall instructional goal to embed with a *macro presence*. The benefits of macro-level embedded, wherein librarians create general tutorials, guide, and activities which can be easily added as modules across many online courses, are that it requires a smaller time commitment from individual librarians and offers greater scalability. As an embedded librarian program grows, however, the amount of personal interaction and support which a student receives from a librarian is significantly reduced (Shank and Dewald, 2003; Wright and Williams, 2011).

As the HIST 6394 partnership continued into the spring of 2013, the librarian pursued more substantive goals: to integrate more fully into the course a series of information literacy

lessons and exercises for students to consume at will; to increase communication with students, especially encouraging them to examine critically the success (or lack thereof) of their information-seeking activities; and to enhance students' abilities to self-assess their own information skills. These goals reflected a shift in the librarian's mind toward a more *micro presence*, in which a librarian works closely with an individual faculty member and shapes her contributions much more specifically to the goals and needs of a specific class.

Micro-level embedding is usually viewed as more time-intensive than macro-level embedding, but it also provides students with a greater opportunity for personal interaction and assistance. This type of micro presence might not be reasonable for all sizes and types of classes, and would certainly be unsustainable across an entire campus as enrollment increases and more courses move online. However, for a graduate-level capstone course with a small enrollment cap and a significant emphasis on research skills, the librarian's experience suggested that this more intensive, micro-level support was not only justified, but also demonstrably more effective. For the spring 2013 session of HIST 6394, the librarian engaged at the micro level, working closely with the professor to review the learning outcome objectives of every course unit, discuss the information literacy aspects of those objectives, and outline accompanying library instructional materials to support students at every step.

Initial Course Design Strategies

Initial approaches to the librarian's course role beginning in the fall 2012 followed a pattern of limited collaboration: although the librarian was embedded in the online course environment and available throughout the semester, her primary support came in the form of a single course-specific research guide. Beyond that, she largely waited for students to bring questions to her. Students could access the single course guide through a link labeled "Your

Library Resources" in the main menu of the course's Blackboard site. This guide provided

general assistance in source discovery, according to the librarian's assumptions concerning the

level of help that the graduate students would require; in retrospect, these assumptions severely

overestimated the information literacy of the average student in the program. The guide's

emphasis was on providing access points: sample book titles, links to ebooks and databases, and

search widgets for the library catalog and key databases. However, because not all students in the

class would focus on the same time period or topic for their final project, these sample access

points were necessarily broad and not particularly helpful to individual students. Furthermore,

little instruction on the actual use of these access points was provided, and almost no attempt was

made to engage students in the development of their information literacy skills.

Meanwhile the librarian also provided numerous personal consultations at the request of

students. Several students asked similar questions multiple times, particularly about the

identification of digital archives, as they continued to struggle with fundamental concepts

relating to search strategies and the organization, navigation, and evaluation of information

resources. The course guide, as it was initially conceived, was clearly not serving to fill the gaps

in the students' information literacy skills.

Evolution of Course Design Strategies

Based on personal consultations with students, the librarian determined that the greatest

deficiency in student understanding was related to the critical identification and evaluation of

sources. The students knew how to search with Google and how to find websites in general, but

they did not understand the more precise, specialized methods to search for and identify digital

archives specifically. Furthermore, after locating any sort of information source, they were not

succeeding in the critical evaluation of its quality, authoritativeness, or accuracy. And finally,

even if an identified information source was not necessarily of poor quality, the students still did

not succeed in accurately judging whether this source would be appropriate for use in the context

of a graduate-level academic research prospectus. For spring 2013, the librarian redesigned her

support approach from the ground up to address these deficiencies. Starting from the most

fundamental question of where instructional support should occur, the professor and librarian

agreed that the librarian's presence should not exist at one single menu point, but should be

woven visibly throughout every unit of the course.

To achieve this, first a single Virtual Office was created in Blackboard, containing

discussion tools for both professor and librarian, as opposed to the first-semester approach of the

librarian creating a distinct "Librarian's Virtual Office." This joint space actually increased the

librarian's visibility to the students—since they would discover one-click contact methods for

her whenever they entered the Virtual Office to communicate with their professor—and it also

laid the groundwork for the expectation that the librarian would serve as a collaborative educator

in the course. To further bolster this perception, rather than waiting for students to request help,

the librarian took advantage of several key opportunities during the semester to send emails to

the class, just as the professor was doing, to proactively inform or remind them of posted

resources, share tips or ask thought-provoking questions about their research process, and

encourage them to take advantage of opportunities for personal librarian support.

Furthermore, both professor and librarian agreed that, each time a student was given the

requirements for an assignment, they should immediately see library assistance tailored towards

the information literacy needs of that specific assignment. This resulted in five smaller, more

focused guides targeting the five distinct units in the course, as opposed to a single guide with a

course-wide scope. Each unit guide was embedded within a Blackboard course unit, directly

below the assignment instructions. The librarian hoped this approach would increase student

awareness of her availability and would present the instructional material in smaller, more

digestible pieces that better corresponded to the points of need.

In developing these unit guides, engaging the students more actively in the learning

process was a major goal. The new guides were more visual and more active than passive in

nature. Informational graphics, demonstration videos, and interactive practice exercises were

added liberally. For example, interactive, drag-and-drop style exercises allowed students to

practice the construction of Chicago-style footnote and bibliography citations. Screen-capture

videos illustrated topics such as improving the precision of JSTOR searches; using Google

Advanced Search to search for digital archives; organizing citations and creating bibliographies

with EndNote Web; and more. Meanwhile, graphics custom-designed by the librarian vividly

illustrated various aspects of the information discovery and evaluation process.

More importantly, rather than highlighting simple access points, the redesigned guides

emphasized lessons about how to more effectively search and evaluate information. The prior

semester's experience had proved that, despite their advanced academic level, graduate students'

initial information literacy ought not to be overestimated: participation in a graduate program

and competence in that program's content did not necessarily guarantee a student's competence

in information literacy. Although some students were better prepared than their peers, many still

struggled because they had not yet fully grasped certain fundamental definitions and ideas.

Therefore the new guides centered on carefully explained lessons which were incrementally

presented in order to progressively build student understanding of information literacy issues

such as defining an information need; assessing the feasibility of a research topic; constructing

and refining effective searches; critically evaluating potential sources; and more. These lessons

were heavily supplemented by original visual diagrams, screenshots, step-by-step walkthroughs

of example research scenarios, and other such tools. Lesson content and organization were

additionally aided by ideas and quotes from published sources such as *The Information-Literate*

Historian by Jenny Presnell (2007), thereby providing students both solid instruction as well as

additional suggested sources of knowledge in this area.

Because the identification and evaluation of digital archives was a task with which

students struggled most severely in the fall—and because this was also a central component of

the course's final project—the librarian's course redesign emphasized this area of identifying and

evaluating sources. In the first semester of collaboration, the librarian had presumed a certain

level of student understanding about digital archives and simply provided examples of specific

archives. However, in the spring course redesign, the new instructional approach made no such

assumptions about prior understanding and began by addressing these fundamental questions:

what is an archive, what is it for, and *how do researchers discriminate between sources?* The

History Librarian, in collaboration with SHSU's Special Collections and Archives Librarian,

developed a special guide to define the concept of archives, both physical and digital; to define

and demonstrate the use of finding aids; to suggest core tools for discovering archives and

finding aids; and to instruct students in the critical evaluation of websites containing digitized

historical materials. Details were provided concerning discrimination between digital archives

and digital exhibits and why the distinction should matter to a history researcher; resources

concerning paleography or the reading of old handwriting were also addressed. Furthermore,

instruction was provided on effective ways to use the native search and browse functions within

digital archives, or to use finding aids in physical archives, in order to explore the detailed

contents of a collection. In this way students could learn to interact critically with online sources

at a deeper level, assessing the value of specific items to historical inquiry, rather than stopping

at the superficial level of simply identifying an archive whose title sounded relevant to the topic

area of the research question.

In addition to crafting these information literacy modules for each course unit, the

librarian maintained direct personal contact with each student throughout the semester. She

provided students with targeted guidance on conceptualizing and articulating their research

needs; formulating a research plan; executing the mechanics of successful searches; and

addressing the technical issues of navigating subscription-based library resources and online

archival sites. The online course environment, coupled with the widely varying schedules

maintained by online students, presented unique communication obstacles, because the librarian

and students were never able to meet face-to-face, work together hands-on when problems arose,

or establish the rapport and trust that often comes from such personal interaction. To address

these challenges, the librarian welcomed contact by a wide array of mechanisms, including a

Blackboard discussion forum, private instant messaging, email, and telephone. Furthermore, as

discussed earlier, she proactively sent emails to the class as a whole, as well as individual

students, to offer support and check in on progress.

Similarly, the professor and librarian also maintained a constant line of communication,

via both email and face-to-face meetings, to discuss which students seemed to be struggling with

which topics or assignments, what contact or intervention had already been undertaken by either

professor or librarian, and how the challenges might be further addressed by one or both

instructors. As the course partnership continued through the spring and into the summer semester

of 2013, maintaining this close contact with both professor and students significantly improved

the librarian's ability to adapt instructional materials in accordance with user needs and further

enabled her to witness the flourishing of students' comprehension of information literacy concepts. From the teaching side, the professor was constantly informed of which students were or were not engaging closely with the librarian and was able to witness the positive impact of the partnership on students' coursework.

Future Plans

At the end of each semester, HIST 6394 students have been invited to anonymously share their thoughts and experiences regarding the course in an online feedback survey, and these responses have been overwhelmingly positive. Nevertheless, despite the professor's and librarian's strong sense that this micro-level collaboration has already been succeeding during its three-semester run, more formal assessments are needed, and room for additional improvement certainly still exists. A pre-test of information literacy skills will be adopted or developed for use in future semesters to more effectively gauge students' beginning knowledge and thus shape the focus and direction of instruction. Assignment guides will be continually refined based on pre-test results, as well as ongoing interaction with and feedback from both professor and students.

With the idea of continuous improvement in mind, the authors are also currently developing a rubric for evaluating students' mastery of core information-literacy competencies, based on their final annotated bibliographies. The overall structure of the rubric is modeled after a rubric used by the SHSU Department of History to evaluate student learning outcomes, while the information-literacy standards and performance indicators are modeled on the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000). Also being consulted in local rubric development is a draft version of an Information Literacy Guidelines rubric, which is being developed by the History Section of the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), a division of the American Librarian

Association (ALA).[1] The rubric aims to assess each student's level of development in phrasing

research questions, utilizing available and appropriate search tools, recognizing and using

appropriate sources of many types, evaluating primary and secondary sources across various

characteristics, and correctly synthesizing and organizing information in a bibliography. The

rubric, in combination with the adoption of an information-literacy pre-test, will also allow

evaluation of the faculty-librarian partnership's effect on student outcomes.

Data from this rubric will not only add to the professor's basis for grading final projects,

but will provide feedback for the librarian concerning the areas of greatest challenge for the

students. In this way, each semester's performance assessment will feed into the improvement of

existing instructional materials, as well as the creation of new materials, to support the course in

future semesters. In traditional one-shot instruction sessions—and even in most instances of

macro-level embedded librarianship—this sort of continuous feedback loop can be difficult if not

impossible to achieve. Often librarians develop and revise instructional materials based only on

faculty syllabi and (with luck) some anecdotal information from student consultations or student

feedback. With the HIST 6394 partnership, the authors have instead tried to create a system

wherein the librarian responds to intimate engagement with the final products of student work.

Preliminary anecdotal data seems to suggest that the collaboration is benefitting the

students, or at least those who were least prepared for and most challenged by the information-

literacy demands of the course. Early in the semester, several students demonstrated significant

difficulties with identifying and evaluating appropriate information sources; by the end of the

semester, however, the type, quality, and appropriateness of these students' selected sources

showed a marked improvement. Currently the number of students who have been involved in

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[1] The authors wish to thank Sara E. Morris, Chair of the History Section of ALA's RUSA, for sharing the draft document.

this collaborative effort is still too small for statistically significant analysis; however, after a

more substantial amount of data has been collected, the authors hope that the combined results of

pre-test, rubric, and other forms of assessment will confirm the apparent positive impact of this

partnership on student outcomes.

Conclusions

Over three semesters so far, the professor and librarian have maintained constant contact

to exchange ideas, describe challenges and experiences with students, and routinely reevaluate

and adapt the course as needs became apparent. Areas where the librarian repeatedly addressed

student confusion helped to shape the professor's future approach to assignment instructions: the

collaboration increased his awareness, for instance, of the need to not assume pre-existing

student comprehension of concepts such as *archives* and to more carefully define or demonstrate

such concepts in course lessons and assignment instructions. In essence, collaboration with the

librarian has served to improve aspects of pedagogy to better support student needs. At the same

time, the professor's evaluation of student assignments has permitted him to suggest new areas in

which the librarian should develop instructional support tools, areas which did not occur to her

during her initial conceptualizations of library instruction for the course. For example, the

professor identified a need for guides about how to evaluate research project feasibility and how

to become familiar with the research and writing approach of a specific discipline. Thus the

collaboration with the professor has also served to improve library instruction, compared to what

the librarian would have provided if guided merely by a static course syllabus. Furthermore,

discussion regarding individual students' progress and areas of difficulty has helped both

instructors to better facilitate student success. Overall, the ongoing, communicative nature of this

partnership has substantially benefitted both collaborators and students.

The authors hope that the micro-level collaboration in this course, and the unique feedback loop it provides, will continue to enable rapid and significant refinement of instructional support for this course, thereby continuously improving the development of students' information literacy skills and producing students who are more thoroughly prepared to conduct historical research in the 21st century. Furthermore, the authors hope that the model of collaboration shared in this case study might benefit other instructors.

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