A Collaborative Approach to Information Literacy in the Freshman Seminar

Elizabeth Blakesley Lindsay, Washington State University

Lindsay is the Head of Library Instruction. She also is an adjunct professor for the University of Maryland University College. In addition to her MLS, she holds an MA in comparative literature.

Abstract
This article discusses the collaboration between the Libraries and the Freshman Seminar Program at Washington State University. Many goals related to information literacy competencies as defined by the library and higher education associations are met through this partnership. The librarians have an active role with the seminars and also take part in the peer facilitator training process.

Introduction
Anyone who has taught or participated in a library instruction session knows that teaching students research skills without a specific context is usually a waste of time. Without a particular assignment or project, students are not motivated to learn and often do not come away with a clear understanding of what resources the library can offer. Working with a freshman seminar over the course of a semester has been rewarding for the students, who have learned both concrete research skills and higher order critical thinking and information literacy skills, and also for the librarians. Playing a part in the training process for the undergraduate students who actually deliver the freshman seminar has been another successful venture. Through another course, GenEd 300, librarians spend eight weeks teaching information literacy and research skills to a group of students who need that information not only for their coursework, but also for their upcoming jobs as freshman seminar peer facilitators. This collaboration between the librarians and the Freshman Seminar Program has provided the librarians with the opportunity to teach motivated learners, and the material can be seen having an immediate, real impact.

GenEd 104: Freshman Seminar
General Education (GenEd) 104, known as Freshman Seminar, is an elective class at Washington State University. Washington State University is a land-grant research institution with enrollment of approximately 17,000 students. The university has a strong general education program and a writing portfolio graduation requirement. Since its inception in 1996, GenEd 104 has been a strong contributor to the general education program. The freshman seminar program is managed by the Student Advising and Learning Center. Unlike other freshman seminars, first year experience courses or “university 101” classes at other schools, GenEd 104 does not include any curriculum explicitly dealing with study skills, time management or money management skills, health and wellness issues, or learning the history of the institution (Preparing Freshmen 35). Rather, as the program brochure clarifies, students learn how to increase their problem-solving skills, develop research strategies, critically evaluate information sources, use technology to investigate and present information, and work as a member of a team. The program also strives to help students improve their chances for success in college. Seminar participants have subsequently earned higher grade point averages than their peers and a higher percentage of seminar participants have stayed in college than the rest of the student body (Preparing Freshmen 39; Henscheid 24).
Gen Ed 104 is a two-credit course which is linked to another course that fulfills a general education requirement. Recent linked courses have included GenEd 110 and GenEd 111, the two semester world civilization course required of all students, as well as 100-level courses in communication, anthropology, biology, sociology, animal science, fine arts, and food science. Students enrolled in a section of GenEd 104 are all also enrolled together in the linked course, allowing for a true learning community experience. Students choose a topic as an entire class, then break into smaller groups. Each group is then responsible for refining and focusing the topic, performing research and creating a multi-media presentation as a final project. To foster this approach, the class is taught in a computer classroom, which is arranged with circular tables. This design allows for peer collaboration and interactive learning. Having no “discernable ‘front’ of the room” also reduces lecture-style delivery (Henscheid 22).

The design of this learning space is also important given that GenEd 104 is different than other freshman seminar courses not only in curriculum design, but also in delivery and staffing. An undergraduate leads the seminar, rather than faculty members or academic services staff personnel. An undergraduate peer facilitator is responsible for planning activities, using a course-wide syllabus, facilitating the class sessions and discussions, and providing feedback, including formal grades. A graduate student facilitator and another undergraduate, particularly trained for technological support work, are also involved in the process, albeit a bit less directly. Jean M. Henscheid notes the reasons for deciding upon this structure including the financial savings, but more importantly, that a number of research studies show the value and benefits of peer instruction (21). This also led to the decision to make the seminar content “strictly intellectual,” as opposed to the content often found in these courses that is delivered by student services staff or teaching faculty, to avoid the “course becoming a forum for socializing or personal counseling facilitators are not qualified to provide” (Henscheid 21).

The Librarians’ Role

In addition to input of the linked course faculty in the final project, all GenEd 104 classes meet with a librarian at least once. A librarian is assigned to each section, and that librarian works with the peer facilitator to become familiar with the topic being covered by the group. The librarian designs a resource guide, which includes ideas for article databases, search strategies for locating books, a list of useful reference books, and some high-quality websites. During the library session, the students learn how to use different resources and gain practice with defining their topic and selecting search strategies. In previous years, librarians also delivered a second class session on plagiarism and citation, but the peer facilitators are now delivering that content. Librarians are invited to take part in the mid-point project review process, as well as the final grading process using a critical thinking rubric designed by the university’s center for teaching, learning, and technology.

As Katherine Strober Dabbour points out, “just in time” or course-integrated instruction, sessions related to a specific course assignment, is effective, but “just in case” instruction may be viewed as less effective or less involved in the curriculum (300). Throughout her article, Dabbour makes a case for employing active learning to reinforce important concepts, even if there is no specific research assignment. Although we meet with the GenEd 104 students in connection with their project, we see them early in the semester when they have usually not solidified their topic. In acknowledgement of that, the sessions tend to combine the specific tools often covered in a course-integrated sessions, such as the library catalog and article databases, but the
sessions also focus a great deal on effective search strategies across different types of resources and on evaluating content. We allow time in the session for the groups to work together, hopefully gaining inspiration from the array of resources to help them try out strategies and narrow their focus. We also provide active learning exercises to reinforce the concepts, knowing that the tools they need may change as their topic evolves. Activities used by different librarians include having the groups brainstorm keywords for their topic, try out searches with those terms, and report back to the others about their strategy and results. We also often employ guided activities so that they gain practice with evaluating sources. Critical thinking is an important goal of the course, and the librarians work to bring critical thinking and information literacy skills into the heart of the sessions.

Critical thinking underpins the assessment process for the final projects. The critical thinking rubric is used not only to evaluate the final projects but also to guide the students through the process. Students know from the beginning what the rubric covers, and that knowledge should guide them in designing better projects. The rubric consists of six parts, which are all rated on a scale of 1-6. Points 2, 4 and 6 are defined as "emerging," "developing" and "mastering." The six areas assessed are identifying the problem; identifying other perspectives and positions; identifying one’s own perspective and position; using and evaluating supporting data and evidence; identifying conclusions and implications; and presenting the information in an appropriate manner. Librarians, peer facilitators, graduate facilitators, Student Advising and Learning Center staff and other academic faculty work in teams to evaluate the projects using this rubric. Librarians have played a particularly important role in assessing the quality of the supporting data and evidence. Analysis of the projects' bibliographies has allowed us to collect some data and also gather anecdotal evidence for our own assessment procedures. The peer facilitators also rate their students’ projects as the official grader, with consideration of the additional input.

Throughout the course, librarians assist the students with their research process, but all of their experiences in GenEd 104 foster information literacy. The course itself covers a number of the information literacy competency standards identified by the Association of College and Research Libraries, including the fourth and fifth standards. These standards deal with organization of information, revision, communication of data and research, and ethical use of materials. The final project requires them to produce a multi-media presentation, using images and other media files appropriately, organizing multiple perspectives on the topic, and using sound design principles. The librarians’ input ensures that students are able to do all of this after gaining experience and skill in the areas outlined in the other three competency standards: determining their information need, selecting and using information resources and tools, and synthesizing and evaluating the materials located.

**Facilitator Training**

Information literacy skills and the input of librarians are also crucial elements in the peer facilitator training program. Becoming a peer facilitator involves much more than just applying for the job. After an intensive application and interviewing process, students who are selected to become facilitators enroll in Education Administration (EdAd) 497 and GenEd 300 for training. EdAd 497 is team taught by faculty and graduate instructors from the Student Advising and Learning Center, and the course includes practical and theoretical aspects. Students read and discuss research articles on topics such as student motivation, grading, rubrics, learner-centered education, facilitation, visual communication, group dynamics and other communication issues.
In addition, as part of the class requirements, they observe a GenEd 104 class. As the semester progresses, they gain experience helping with the facilitation and are responsible for leading one class session themselves. The final project for EdAd 497 is a multi-media presentation of materials, activities and lesson plans for a portion of the GenEd 104 syllabus.

Another component of their training comes from their enrollment in GenEd 300. GenEd 300, Accessing Information for Research, is taught by librarians and has several different faces. There is a version taught online for distance program students, and the on-campus course is offered in several ways. Different sections are offered to focus on humanities, social sciences, sciences, and education. Sections for health sciences and music are in development, and sections for special populations, such as Honors College students, are also being offered. The section for the EdAd 497 students is different than the others in terms of focus and scope. Not only do they need to learn how to do research in educational resources for their training as facilitators, but they also need to learn how to conduct research for the popular topics that GenEd 104 students often select. In addition, they need to know how to help their future students with research problems. While each class does have a librarian contact, the facilitator will field — and respond to — most of the questions the students will have about the projects during the semester.

The GenEd 300 section for the facilitators covers some theoretical material not handled in the other sections, such as research processes and methodologies and the use of information. The first few weeks of the course are devoted to readings and discussions about how students seek and use information and the role of the internet in research and communication. The students are given the chance to examine their own views and approaches, and to consider how those have changed since they were freshmen. The readings include the Pew report on college students’ use of the internet (Jones 2002), an article on faculty assumptions about undergraduate research (Leckie 1998), a newspaper article on student and teacher attitudes toward using the internet (Harris 2002), and a research article regarding the “information age mindset” (Frands 2002). Students write a brief paper addressing their views on how the information age and technology have affected education and will affect their future teaching.

The curriculum then moves into practice with examining and using process models, such as the Big Six and concept mapping, for their own work and for helping their future students organize their projects. GenEd 104 students tend to choose broad, unwieldy topics, and approximately two weeks of the syllabus will be devoted to exercises in asking the “right” questions, formulating arguments, examining assumptions, and focusing the larger topics into workable ones. The peer facilitators gain the tools and knowledge they will need to do this from GenEd 300 and EdAd 497.

The course also addresses practical matters, such as an advanced session on the library catalog, in-depth use and analysis of the article databases, and detailed active learning regarding finding materials, whether they are in print, available electronically or outside the library system. In addition, the students learn how to effectively use internet search engines and a good deal of attention is paid to evaluating sources, particularly web-based ones. Even the savviest students learn during these class sessions. Many of these students, even those who consider themselves excellent researchers, always use the same search engine and are surprised to learn that different engines provide different materials. These upper-level undergraduates hone and expand their information
literacy and competencies as they gain concrete tools and strategies that will enable them to help other students become information literate.

GenEd 300 also provides the facilitators with the training and materials they will need to teach their students about plagiarism and citation. A series of active learning activities have been designed by librarians to help students explore definitions of plagiarism and determine whether selected passages have been handled properly. Discussions and practice with citation formatting occurs throughout the class, including database searching activities and formal papers.

The final project for GenEd 300 has taken different forms as the EdAd 497 syllabus changes. Most recently, students chose a topic of interest and worked as a group and independently. Topics included grading, motivating students and the benefits of freshman seminar programs. The small groups made an oral presentation to their classmates about the topic and their findings. In an individual written paper, students addressed their topic and findings, and also examined their research process, recounting their strategies, analyzing their results and noting what could have been more effective or still needs to be done.

Conclusion
Collaboration between the librarians and the Freshman Seminar Program has led to improvements in the students’ final projects and also to an increased awareness of and competency in information literacy skills among the students. The librarians have also benefited professionally and personally from being involved with the seminar groups, providing tailored instruction and research assistance and playing a crucial role in the assessment of the final projects. Further, the librarians’ involvement with training the upcoming peer facilitators has added to the importance and value of the libraries’ involvement with the educational process. Through work with the seminars and with GenEd 300, the librarians are making an impact in an academic program that strives to create information literate, critical thinking citizens.

References