

# Mapping Current Practices to A&I Common Elements

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As the A&I Planning Group shapes the future first-year seminars, we offer these thoughts about our current involvement with this part of the curriculum. In particular, we focus on how that involvement maps to the common elements of the new A&I seminars and how librarians' existing goals are a good match with the aspirations of the seminars. Librarians' roles range from assisting with assignment development to in-class instruction to one-on-one work with students. Through these experiences, we have a broad awareness of assignments across the curriculum and understand how common learning goals are accomplished through a range of pedagogical techniques and disciplinary contexts.

In 2008-2009, librarians directly supported 11 of the 21 first-year seminars. The following examples come from our collective recent experience. We welcome the opportunity to provide additional feedback as A&I planning continues.

## **Introducing Students to a Liberal Arts Approach to Learning**

- In order to encourage students to explore ideas in areas unfamiliar to them, a librarian talked about ways to follow up Convocation or other lectures on scientific topics in areas where students may not have done coursework.
- Librarians help students become aware of different disciplinary approaches to a common theme. For example, librarians often lead discussions brainstorming possible disciplinary approaches to a given topic as a method of identifying where to look for scholarship in those areas.

## **Strengthening Habits of Critical Thinking**

- A librarian taught how to use the Citation Index to determine if a scientific article has been debunked or is still considered valid.
- To demonstrate the contextual meaning of facts in printed research materials, students in the library session compared encyclopedia articles published by different groups or at different times about the same historical person or event.
- Highlighting multiple angles for answering a single question, a librarian displayed a series of statistical tables, from different sources, about the same type of crime (police reports, court records, prison data, victimization surveys, public opinion reports, etc.) and asked the class to brainstorm more possible sources for researching that crime.

## **Strengthening Habits of Cooperation with Fellow Students**

- It is common within library sessions for students to work together by dividing up research tasks (e.g., searching in different databases, comparing web resources, going out to the stacks, etc.) and sharing with each other what they have learned and answer the question, "What is the one thing you want your classmates to know?"
- In a seminar where students were asked to create annotated bibliographies for each other to use in their research, a librarian devoted a session to helping students create and use annotated bibliographies with a specific audience in mind.
- A seminar devoted a single thread in their Moodle forum to resource sharing. Students, faculty, and librarians contributed resources of interest to the class along with brief descriptions.

### **Fostering Intellectual Independence**

- In finding a research topic, librarians teach not just technical search techniques, but also broader strategies. For example librarians talk through ways to follow up on ideas that students find engaging and develop original questions.
- Librarians point out that reading for comprehension -- what students are used to doing up to this point -- is just one kind of reading. Librarians emphasize in class that researchers also read for bibliographic leads, models of writing, and potential evidence to use in their own arguments.

### **Introducing Students to the Ways in Which Scholars Ask Questions**

- What counts as an "interesting" question that can be covered in a 5-page paper? For one seminar, a librarian showed students a small number of journal articles and led a discussion comparing their scope of topic as compared to their length.
- Another librarian led a discussion of the interesting elements of an article, both in terms of its topic and approach. Students were then encouraged to use this new ability to assess their own nascent questions.

### **Finding Evidence**

- Librarians routinely help students find a wide range of evidence for their research papers, such as books, journal articles, government documents, statistics, reports, working papers, etc.
- For assignments other than the traditional research paper, librarians also help students find information, such as supplementary material to help them make sense of their readings, licensed images for posters, and how to use documentation to research and understand a number.

### **Ethically Using Evidence**

- In a library session on when, why and how to cite sources, a librarian asked students to study a paragraph that referenced a book but never explicitly cited it. Students talked in small groups and as a class about where citations should go and tried to find the sources behind a couple of (very incomplete) citations in their text book.
- In a session about researching statistics, a librarian talked about how numbers can be used in different ways to tell different stories. She also emphasized that since statistics can be used to manipulate a story, a good author will use numbers not just to persuade, but in a good faith effort articulating both the strengths and the limitations of a measurement.

### **Evaluating Evidence**

- Librarians routinely help students think about the relevance, credibility, and authority of the sources they find.
- Librarians help students form the habit of asking themselves, "Who has caused this to be published and why?" This takes the form of thinking about the politics and economics of publishing and asking themselves if the credentials, training, backing of publisher and author contribute to the appropriateness of the source for the given argument.

### **Constructing Arguments**

- A librarian led a discussion calling on students to explore the kinds of questions that can be asked using a specific statistical table, such as how one can't make a time series claim from a single instance and cannot make claims about individuals based on aggregate information about a population.

- While librarians don't directly teach the construction of arguments, librarians contribute to this goal in library instruction by being explicit about (a) finding and evaluating evidence that will be persuasive to the audience and matches their goals, and (b) using that evidence in a transparent manner according to the conventions and rhetoric of their intellectual communities.

### **Offering Tools to Help Students Become Reflective Learners & Thinkers**

- Librarians give students specific pointers with a keen eye toward building transferable habits, such as:
  - Keeping a research journal that tracks search details (e.g., keywords, descriptors, authors and sources searched) as well as search strategies employed.
  - Looking for authorship as a way to give them a hook into the scholarship of a topic, such as a signed author in an encyclopedia.
- Librarians help students recognize that scholarship doesn't happen in a vacuum and asking for help is part of the scholarly process. Librarians refer students as appropriate to other support mechanisms on campus such as the Writing Center.

### **Giving Students Opportunities for Critical Reading, Discussion, and College-Level Writing**

- Librarians and faculty members occasionally lead a discussion of a course reading as part of a library session. Locating discussion of content relevant to the course in the context of library instruction makes explicit the connection between information gathering and knowledge production.
- Assignments involving library research give students practice engaging in all of the previously discussed areas, either independently or in groups. Library sessions, when appropriate, give students a chance to discuss these processes with their classmates.