

Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Practice

Setting up for Success

Implementing a Learning Outcomes-Based Pre-Class Communication Process

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Librarians in a teaching and learning department at a large research institution linked their pre-class communications process to learning outcomes for foundational information literacy. Doing so enabled clearer messaging, collaborative goal setting, and more focused information literacy classes.

Background

Teaching and learning librarians are asked to fill a tall order when it comes to delivering instruction. We face the challenge of imparting knowledge to a group of individuals to whom we are complete strangers within a typically short period of time. We are briefly plugged into the syllabus, and into the experience, of our students' education. We face instructor expectations, spoken and unspoken, for the way our lessons will fit into the grand scheme of their course. What we do is often but a moment in time within a semester – for us, for the students, and for the instructors we work with. This brief moment can be one of excellent chemistry and engaged learning that jet propels our students into their research projects, or it can be one that falls completely flat. At the heart of this dichotomy is communication.

As an instruction coordinator, I know that communication is something teaching librarians typically take great pains to do. "Be in touch early and often," is a saying that often bounces around the halls of the library I work in. At this institution, we have a prescribed flow of messaging – instruction requests come in through a form and are triaged, librarians and rooms are assigned and confirmed, librarians reach out to instructors to hold a conversation (usually via email), instruction happens, sometimes students come back for consultation. It is a cycle that happens like a well-oiled machine.

Nevertheless, when the library instruction "season" is upon us each semester, it hasn't been unusual for colleagues to share comments such as, "The instructor said the students would be ready, but they didn't even know the assignment yet!" Another commonly voiced issue is, "I have no idea how I'm going to teach this class. The instructor wants me to cover everything about research in 50 minutes!"

Sometimes the frustrations crop up after a session was delivered. “I can’t believe the students didn’t have their topics,” is a phrase no librarian wants to have to utter. Another is, “I had this great lesson planned, but I got there and the instructor asked me to be sure to cover this one database (or topic) and it took the whole class!”

If you’ve been a teaching librarian for any length of time, chances are good that you’ve experienced something like one (or all!) of these scenarios. And this is despite the fact that you’ve got a seemingly solid communication flow in place for planning instruction.

Given these recurring challenges to successful teaching and learning, the Library Learning Services Department at Penn State University set out to remedy some of these common pitfalls. We recognized that when it comes down to the brass tacks of planning individual instruction sessions, the pre-class communication between the librarian and the instructor has the power to set the stage for success or mediocrity in the classroom – and it has nothing to do with the ability of either educator. The instruction request content, timing of conversations and preparations, topics of conversation, and level of instructor engagement all play important roles in successful preparation for teaching. Each of these elements of communication with the course instructor is a potential fail point. However, much can be achieved through implementation of a thorough and consistent instruction consultation process. This article offers a communication process that lays a strong foundation for a successful class.

Review

Literature related to the communication process for planning library instruction perhaps unsurprisingly appears most often in works intended for beginning librarians. Themes that arise from these guiding works are communication as a collaboration with course instructors and taking care to select a manageable amount of content to cover within a single class session.

In *The One-shot Library instruction Survival Guide*, Buchanan and McDonough discuss librarian communication with course instructors as a road to a collaborative relationship. They point to librarianship as a “misunderstood profession,” necessitating that librarians clearly explain and emphasize our roles as teachers (2014). They note that “[c]ourse instructors will ask for what they think you can provide based on their own perceptions of what librarians do. You will need to negotiate with the instructor to identify and focus the intended learning goals, and establish the best ways to meet those needs” (p. 12). Benjes-Small and Miller (2017) also emphasize the importance of forming a partnership with course instructors. They advise that “the more you communicate before the library workshop, the more effective your session can be” (pp. 108-109).

A major point of frustration and confusion that surfaced in every source reviewed was that of defining and then teaching what is considered to be a reasonable load of content in a single session. Oakleaf et al (2012) encourage librarians to counter the tendency for course instructors (and librarians!) to want the one-shot library instruction session to be jam packed with every research concept imaginable by considering first what “students actually need to know at the end of your time together” (p. 7). They encourage this as a conversation to undertake with the course instructor, and in reference to excess material that is not essential to the core of the lesson they instruct, “if it does not fit, offload it” (p. 7).

Using Learning Objectives to Establish Common Goals

The Library Learning Services Department at Penn State University’s University Park campus is situated as the hub for teaching and learning geared toward foundational-level researchers. The ten librarians within this unit teach via a variety of modes, including digital badges, online learning objects, workshops and orientation events, and one-shot face-to-face classes. While we work in multiple modes, face-to-face one-shot classes remain the largest

component in our teaching portfolio, at a rate of approximately 125 sessions per semester. Our primary teaching partners in these efforts are English as a Second Language (ESL 15), Rhetoric & Composition (ENGL 15), and Communications, Arts, and Sciences (CAS). Of these, ENGL 15 comprises approximately 65% of our teaching load.

ENGL 15, in particular, is taught primarily by graduate students in the Penn State Program for Writing and Rhetoric. What this means is that every fall brings a new cohort of instructors, who are most certainly new to Penn State, and who may also be new to teaching. With so many people to communicate with on an ongoing and cyclical basis, a clear message and mode of communication is extraordinarily important. Finding a common language with our teaching partners has been key to effective instruction and a successful relationship.

Buchanan & McDonough (2014) write, “The key similarity that librarians and teaching faculty share is the common goals of student success. Course instructors do not want to grade bad research papers and projects” (p. 9).

In order to facilitate conversation that delves into this common goal at Penn State University, we have established a standard set of learning outcomes that serve as a vehicle to a common understanding of what the library class will accomplish. Because the instruction that the Library Learning Services Department provides is geared toward beginning information literacy knowledge and skills, we developed a set of learning outcomes that we have termed *foundational learning outcomes*. Each learning outcome can either stand alone as the basis for an intensely focused lesson plan or learning activity, or it can be combined with one or two other outcomes for a broader scope to the class (Appendix 1). All learning outcomes are written to 1) enable design of an active learning session for students with a measurable learning goal(s) and 2) facilitate conversation with course instructors about our common goals for an upcoming library class. When holding these conversations, Benjes-Small & Miller (2017) suggest asking “What do the students need to leave the session having learned?” instead of asking the instructor what they want you to teach (p. 109). This question evokes two additional questions that information literacy learning outcomes guru Debra Gilchrist (2015) notes as essential to instructional design:

- How will the student demonstrate the learning?
- How will you know the student has done this well?

These questions could translate to asking the instructor what they hope to see the students accomplish when it comes to using research in their papers. What will the students need to be able to do in order to succeed?

Holding conversations based around questions such as these opens the door for you to offer instruction based on learning objectives rooted in your own expertise in research skills and library resources. Black & Allen (2019) assert that “[t]o be truly effective in our instruction, it is essential to collaborate with professors to agree on learning objectives and appropriate means to help students achieve them” (p. 94). They also note that the librarian’s ability to demonstrate “solid knowledge of the principles of instructional design” can bolster our credibility in the eyes of the instructors with whom we are working (p. 94). As Gilchrist (2015) notes, establishing learning outcomes enables the librarian to be intentional in their plan for what takes place in the classroom. “[Outcomes] ground us...and [outcomes] are also the agreed-upon elements that we as a faculty or group of educators within our institution come together about, and, after lots of discussion, agree really on what is important. What are the common things that we say are our curriculum?”. Gilchrist’s point about agreement as to what is important is at the heart of these conversations with instructors. Additionally--a point not to be undervalued--learning objectives also offer the opportunity to give a limited set of options for material or topics to cover during a class, combatting the tendency for instructors to tell you that they want you to cover “all of it.”

The Communication Process

Learning outcomes certainly provide the meat of the conversation with course instructors, but a successful teaching experience relies on the communication process which is built around these outcomes. For the 2018 calendar

year, the librarians of Library Learning Services all followed a consistent communications process, designed to not only establish and confirm logistical elements of a class, but also to facilitate in-depth conversation and ultimately understanding around shared learning goals for the students we would be teaching.

Because all Penn State librarians across disciplines and locations use the same common instruction request form to receive instruction requests, the form is generic and does not include information about the specifics of the library class content. Thus, key to setting the tone for collaborative planning with the instructor was the confirmation response that instructors received upon booking a library session (Appendix 2). In addition to detailing the facilities and time information for the library class, the emailed confirmation included a list of four learning objectives which might be addressed through the lesson. Additionally, the email message opened the door to further conversation between the instructor and the assigned librarian(s) by letting the instructor know that they could “expect to hear from one of the librarians soon regarding the learning objectives and workshop design for the library instruction session.” Also included in this message were our expectations of the instructor – that they respond to our confirmation message to verify the scheduled session(s) and that they be present for the class.

Buchanan & McDonough (2014) note that it’s important to take the conversation with course instructors beyond the functional details of the session, such as number of students, what the assignment is, and how much time can be devoted to instruction. Holding a face-to-face meeting, phone call, or video conference can be an incredibly effective way of moving beyond these foundational points and diving into the meat of what the library class will be – learning objectives and learning activities that support them. Thus the next step to our communications process was for the librarian(s) to immediately respond to the confirmation notice with a brief greeting, which included an introduction of the librarian(s) and a promise to be back in touch one to two weeks prior to the scheduled class, in order to discuss the goals and objectives for the class (Appendix 3). The librarians then made sure to mark their calendars accordingly with reminders to reach out again at the promised time. This interaction, while simple, served to set the stage for an engaged conversation with the instructor about their goals for the students’ learning in the library class.

As promised, one to two weeks prior to the class, the librarian contacted the instructor again (unless the person had reached out on their own) to set up a time to meet. This message served as an invitation to meet and discuss the learning objectives for the upcoming library class. The librarians crafted email messages that would 1) review what was already known about the students’ assignment, 2) ask whether there had been any updates to the assignment or any other details about the class, and 3) invite the instructor to a brief meeting to discuss the learning goals they had for their students. In-person meetings and phone calls or video chats were always offered as a first option, with email as the least stressed mode (Appendix 4).

The final step in the pre-class communication process was to carry out a meeting with the instructor via their selected mode. While the number of in-person meetings held was not tracked, anecdotal evidence was that a surprising number of instructors were enthusiastic about meeting in person or over the phone. Prompts for discussion during these meetings included:

- What is students’ knowledge of the assignment and/or topics?
- How does the instructor define student success with the research assignment?
- What information literacy and/or research knowledge/skills does the instructor view as important for the students to know?

The first question served to strongly encourage the instructors to introduce the assignment prior to the library session *and* to have their students come to the library with topics to explore through the class. We stressed that we could conduct learning activities to support the objectives for the class, but that they depended upon the students being able to engage directly with their assignment. In the conversation about student success and learning goals, instructors

often listed skills such as selecting the “right” resources, using “credible information,” and knowing how to find and use library databases.

The librarians’ job in this conversation was to listen, and to reflect the goals as they understood them. Next, the librarians could translate the instructor’s language into library and research skills (information literacy) language, using the learning outcomes as a vehicle. For example, if an instructor expresses that they really want the students to use credible sources for their research and not so many biased resources, the librarian might reflect, “It sounds like you want your students to be able to do a better job of evaluating the information they find.” This one reflective sentence accomplishes both clarification and reframing into the language of the foundational learning outcomes. The librarian might go on in this instance to articulate their plan to build a lesson around the learning objective: Students will be able to critically evaluate different sources of information and identify key criteria needed in an authoritative source. An optional element for discussion might be a specific learning activity the librarian planned to use; however, that wasn’t necessary to accomplishing the goals of the conversation – establishing a shared understanding of learning outcomes. An example of how this might play out in an email conversation can be found in Appendix 5.

Plan, Teach, and Follow Up

Armed with clear learning objectives for the upcoming class, the librarian can then build out a lesson plan designed to arm students with the skills they need in order to do well with their instructor’s research expectations. As a help to our librarians, and in effort to provide consistency in library instruction classes, we do maintain a repository of class activities that are designed to meet our articulated foundational learning outcomes. In many cases, the librarian is able to draw from these and plug them into their lesson plans. It is important to note that in implementing this communication process, we did not do anything to fundamentally change our classes or the typical contents of our lesson plans. However, the pre-class communication, in many cases, added a new dynamic to the sessions in the form of increased instructor engagement. It was observed that when instructors had an idea of what to expect during the library class, and the precedent for engagement in the learning process had been set through previous communications, the instructors were more likely to be active in answering student questions during class, assisting with independent research time, and supporting particular research strategies we might cover during the lesson. Following the class, it was also helpful to touch base one more time with the instructor, thanking them for giving of their class time for library instruction and inviting a continued relationship.

Caveats

What is good practice without a few caveats? Following an entire year of employing this communication process, Library Learning Services held a debrief to discuss as a group what was going well, what could use some tweaking, and what just did not work. Generally, there was agreement that clear communication centered on our established learning objectives for information literacy was extremely helpful in delivering a more meaningful library instruction class. One caution that arose was that, although our pre-instruction conversations were intended to help instructors narrow focus to what was the most important in terms of learning objectives, it was still not uncommon for the instructor to give a response that akin to “I want you to teach them everything about the library.” This could turn into a teachable moment, but one that had to be navigated carefully so that it didn’t seem we were just saying, “No.” One possible solution for this could be to remove the list of possible learning outcomes from the confirmation email (Appendix 2), leaving it to the librarian to offer assignment-based suggestions at the time of the conversation. This would prevent the situation in which the instructor responds to that email with a message affirming all of the learning outcomes as important. It is also important to consider the amount of time it will take to carry out so many consultations. For example, if a librarian works with fifteen different instructors, that is fifteen slightly different

conversations to keep track of. Many of our librarians work with more. The juggling of individual sessions' pre-consultations, along with small but not insignificant differences in what each instructor valued for their students, was often cumbersome for librarians. Many used calendar reminders to prompt them to send consultation invitations, but even so the increased workload was a challenge. Also challenging was scheduling these consultations. The instructors' and librarians' time is always at a premium – fitting in even a 30-minute consultation can be quite challenging. Finally, our communication process has many steps for the librarian to keep track of – confirmation response; consultation invitation; responses to the consultation invitation (which can become lengthy); the consultation itself; the class; and the follow-up. Multiplied by the number of instructors the librarian teaches for and, it's a lot to keep track of. Going forward, we are considering removing and/or simplifying some of these steps. In particular, the confirmation response can probably be removed from the process without detriment; a sentence could be added to the first confirmation email that indicates that the librarian will reach out 1-2 weeks before the class.

Conclusion

Having a clear, consistent, and robust communication process that engages instructors early can help to set the stage for a more meaningful library class. When articulating goals for the session, established research-related learning outcomes can serve as an invaluable tool for framing the conversation and coming to a common understanding of what the students need to take away from class in order to be successful with their assignments. As with any departmental process or procedure, it is important to revisit the practice and assess what is working well and what is not, what has utility and what does not.

References

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Appendix 1. Learning Objectives for Library Instruction

Learning Objectives for Library Instruction:

At the foundational level, students will be able to:

- recognize that there are a variety of resources available to assist in their research needs, including the Libraries' home page, the ENGL:015 or CAS:100 course guide, and the Ask a Librarian service.
- determine the most appropriate information source or search tool (e.g. LionSearch, Google, or other database) for their information need.
- distinguish between different information formats (scholarly article, newspaper article, blog, etc.) and determine the appropriate format for their research needs.
- identify keywords based on their topics or research questions and revise their search terms as needed in order to conduct an effective search.
- use information resources in order to gain an understanding of a research topic and generate research questions.
- refine search results using built-in database features and/or search term refinement in order to locate resources that meet their specific information needs.
- critically evaluate different sources of information and identify key criteria needed in an authoritative source.

As they delve into the process of writing and research integration, students will be able to:

- locate citation generator tools and the libraries' citation guides in order to create accurate citations in the appropriate style.
- practice ethical use of information, avoiding plagiarism and copyright infringement, in order to produce academic-quality, original works.

Additionally, librarians strive to give students a strong sense of the library as a place for safe and supported academic activity.

Appendix 2. Class Confirmation Email

Hi [instructor name]!

I am writing to confirm your library class request for [date and time]. Your class will be held in [room and location].

I have forwarded the instruction request including your instruction lesson to the librarian, [name], who is copied on this message. **You can expect to hear from [the librarian] soon regarding the learning objectives and workshop design for the library instruction session.**

The learning objectives for your customized library instruction session will address some combination of research and information seeking skills, which may include:

- Topic exploration and evaluation
- Information source evaluation
- Identification of appropriate keyword search terms
- Generation of research questions

Please feel free to be in direct communication with [the librarian] with any questions or comments prior to your class's visit to the library. The library will send you three emails to verify your session. If we don't hear back from you after the third email, your session will be canceled.

We strive to meet your assignment objectives and empower your students to carry out research at the [institution name]. In the event that you yourself cannot be present for a library instruction session, we ask that you arrange for a substitute instructor who is also familiar with the course assignments to attend, and that the substitute be designated to administer attendance. Your presence enhances student success and reinforces the value of the library as a resource. Thank you for your cooperation!

Many thanks, and please let me know if I can be of further assistance—

Best,

[(department) Admin Assistant]

Appendix 3. Librarian Response to Confirmation Email

Hi _____,

I just wanted to quickly introduce myself as the librarian who will be conducting the research session for your students on [date] in [room location]. I'm really looking forward to working with you and will touch base about a week before the session to confirm your goals for the session.

Please let me know if you need anything before then. Otherwise, I'll look forward to talking to you more the week of [date]!

Best,

[Librarian]

Appendix 4. Example Invitations to Meet

Example 1:

Hi _____,

I am looking forward to working with your classes on [date]. Since we like to tailor our classes to your students' needs, it could be helpful to find a time to chat (in person, over the phone, or through email) about your goals for the session. I see in your request your class will be working on their annotated bibliography [insert assignment name here] and you'd like to discuss plagiarism [note topics if they were given in the class request]. Can you tell me more about what you'd like to accomplish in the session and what stage of the bibliography your students will be at? That will help us craft a session that will be the most useful to your students and their research.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best,

[Librarian]

Example 2:

Hi _____,

[My colleague] and I are looking forward to leading the library workshops for your English 15 classes on [date] in [room location]. I see that the students will be working on a position argument and then a productive counterargument paper [insert assignment name here]. Could you tell us about your goals for the session? We can then see how those align with what we offer and propose some learning outcomes. Let us know if you prefer to talk in person or phone and we can set something up.

Otherwise, we can just email back and forth.

Thanks!

[Librarian]

Appendix 5. Instructor Consultation via Email

Dear [Instructor],

Thank you for all the information about the assignment and your goals....

I think your goals align very well with what we can offer. Recently in the library, we have developed a set of learning outcomes to define the scope of our teaching, so once we hear back from instructors about their vision, we suggest a few specific learning outcomes for the workshop.

For your session, here are the outcomes that I think match your goals best:

"By the end of the library session, students will...

1. recognize the variety of resources available in the library for their research needs (course guides, databases, Ask a librarian, etc.)
2. select appropriate search tools for their assignment (e.g., CQ Researcher, Opposing Viewpoints, Lionsearch, our local resources page)
3. identify keywords based on their topics and revise search terms as necessary.

Does this sound right?

If not, please let us know so we can adjust.

...Would you also like a short source evaluation activity? Since your class is 75 minutes, we could work something like that in, which some instructors like but others prefer to do themselves during regular class time.

Just let us know and if desired, we could add one in.

Best,

[Librarian]