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Grace Veach

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PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

How an English Professor and a Librarian Engaged Hispanic Students’ Emerging Information Literacy Skills

Dagmar Stuehrk Scharold
Lindsey Simard
The University of Houston–Downtown (UHD), a designated Hispanic-Serving Institution and Minority-Serving Institution, self-describes its student body as “many first generation college students, students who work full or part time, students who may have family obligations and students who transfer from community colleges and other higher education institutions” (“About UHD,” 2012). Given the diverse student population of UHD (primarily urban and first-generation students), information literacy approaches need to deviate from the standard. In this chapter, we explore how a faculty-librarian information literacy collaboration benefited freshman students through leading and participating in a campus-wide Human Trafficking Awareness Day. While we recognize that our approach to information literacy benefits all students, in this chapter, we will concentrate on why this approach specifically addresses the needs of Hispanic students and reinforces key information literacy concepts in this group.

THE NEED FOR A DIFFERENT APPROACH

While the librarian community has acknowledged that many researchers view the “one-shot” library instruction as flawed, it is still a common instruction model and the one UHD librarians use for almost all information literacy sessions. In this model, students receive one session of library instruction, usually around an hour long. This is their only interaction with a librarian unless they seek research assistance on their own. However, one short interaction is not enough to allow students to absorb information literacy skills into their long-term memory (Artman, Frisicaro-Pawlowski, & Monge, 2010). Given the relationship between information literacy and writing, it follows that “Through collaboration and shared responsibility, writing teachers and librarians can better incorporate information literacy instruction within composition programs and improve students’ research options and behaviors,” as Margaret Artman, Erica Frisicaro-Pawlowski, and Robert Monge attest (2010, p. 93). Plus, it is easier to extend library instruction into a course with a research focus than it is to incorporate information literacy into the curriculum of the university (Artman et al., 2010). Clearly, the “one-shot” approach is not used because it is most effective. However, at UHD the “one-shot” approach lessens the strain on librarians and allows faculty members to devote class time to the topics of the course. Having a librarian co-teach or assist a professor throughout a course is not feasible given the overall staffing it would require. In our project, the librarian taught a traditional information literacy session, followed up in the classroom for four to six classes, and participated in the Human Trafficking Awareness Day programming with the students.

THE NEED FOR INCREASED EXPOSURE TO LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANS

The increased librarian presence as a participant in the project serves as library outreach as well, which is an important goal when targeting students who have had limited experience with school librarians. In our project, the librarian, Lindsey, represented the library at the Human Trafficking Awareness Day,
demonstrating the library’s commitment to student-created events, and she furthered her role as library ambassador by assisting in the classroom. By including a librarian in the college classroom, students have the opportunity to build a personal relationship with a librarian and receive individual attention. Considering Dallas Long’s (2011) confirmation that “library use is strongly linked with student persistence in higher education, and Latino students have lower rates of academic library use and proficiency than other racial/ethnic groups of students” (p. 511), it is reasonable to include more librarian exposure outside of the library (in this case, the classroom) to encourage library use at UHD and boost student graduation rates, specifically with regard to Hispanic students.

Outreach is also important for UHD students because they may not understand the role of the academic library and are likely to have had limited exposure to school librarians before attending UHD. According to Long (2011), the academic library “does not translate easily to [Hispanic students’] personal experiences with libraries in other contexts of their lives” (p. 510). Long also highlights an individual Hispanic student who noted that white students are more likely to use the library because “they grew up with better libraries” (2011, p. 508). While this is one individual’s opinion, it is true that UHD students may not have had access to an adequate school library. Many of UHD’s feeder schools are located within the Houston Independent School District (HISD) (“Gear Up,” 2010). However, HISD employed only 118 librarians in 2011, less than one librarian for every two schools (Radcliffe, 2011). According to HISD data cited by Jennifer Radcliffe (2011) in the Houston Chronicle, “More than 80 percent of HISD libraries fail to meet state guidelines for staffing and book collections, and an additional 20 percent of the district’s 289 schools don’t even have functioning libraries” (para. 2). Although HISD participates in the robust TexShare resource-sharing program, it is unlikely, given the shortage of librarians and information resources, that UHD students have had access to a librarian or librarian-led information literacy instruction. Indeed, UHD professors have lamented to librarians that they are alarmed at incoming students’ inability to perform basic research, noting accidental plagiarism and use of nonacademic sources as specific problems.

Another factor contributing to the need for librarian outreach at UHD is the number of Hispanic students who are first-generation college students. Arturo Gonzalez (2011) highlights that “Hispanic college students stand out as being primarily first-generation college students—65% of all Hispanics—even when compared to blacks (50%)” (p. 95). First-generation college students experience disadvantages when compared to their peers and are more likely to not complete a bachelor’s degree within six years (Gonzalez, 2011). One of the Hispanic students mentioned in Long’s (2011) study also commented on the lack of parental urging to use the library as opposed to white students’ parents. Clearly, the library can be overlooked as an academic support service without one generation to pass down information about college library use to the next generation. When students lack information literacy skills due to their inexperience with library support, there is a good chance that this also can prevent students from being successful in their freshman-level writing courses, possibly preventing them from completing their college degree.
THE ENGLISH COMPOSITION COURSE

At UHD, English 1302: Composition II is the second course in a two-course composition sequence and is a required course for the General Education core curriculum. In Composition II, the primary focus is to teach students to write an argumentative, researched essay through a series of scaffolded assignments. Layered onto students’ nascent academic writing skills introduced in Composition I, students are also expected to become proficient in information literacy skills in Composition II. Given the complexity of managing all these new skills, students often fail to complete the course. It becomes a “barrier” course, causing many students to either repeat the course multiple times or, in extreme cases, drop out of college altogether. Given the percentage of Hispanic students at UHD, according to Silas Abrego (2008):

The keys to improving access to college for more Latinos and retaining those who enroll through to graduation are (1) an understanding of their educational background coupled with strong academic and financial services; (2) a learning environment that encourages active learning; (3) and role models and activities that promote self-confidence. (p. 78)

As the composition professor, Dagmar had students in the course choose the course reader from a list of nonfiction selections at the beginning of the semester. Students research each book and then vote on the one they want to read. By a clear majority, students chose The Slave Next Door: Human Trafficking and Slavery in America Today by Kevin Bales and Ron Soodalter. Dagmar’s idea to help retain more students in the course was to implement a project-based learning approach that would not only give students agency but also provide them with an opportunity to connect their research to a real-life situation. Dagmar contacted Lindsey to see if she was interested in doing something different with the course, and she then assigned the Community Awareness Project, which would showcase freshman students’ work to the university community at large. Lindsey and Dagmar both felt that students would gain confidence in their writing and researching skills and be better able to transfer those skills to other courses in the curriculum through the project. We also wanted to engage the students collaboratively in the course, which often can be perceived as a solitary endeavor.

THE COMMUNITY AWARENESS PROJECT

In pursuing the opportunity to fully engage students with the course and the library, we grounded our project in Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s (1991) study of masters and apprentices. In Lave and Wenger’s (1991) study of five different types of apprenticeships, they analyze the social dynamics of the master and apprentice relationship with regard to the communities of practice in which they function. Lave and Wenger (1991) created the term “legitimate peripheral participation” to encompass a way of studying the modern form of apprenticeships. Lave and Wenger define legitimate peripheral participation as follows:

Learning viewed as situated activity has as its central defining characteristic a process we call legitimate peripheral participation
[sic]. By this we mean to draw attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community. (p. 29)

For Lave and Wenger, the learning that takes place in a master/apprentice relationship is determined by the production of knowledge through a given activity. In our case, the given activity of the Community Awareness Project would create opportunities for students to become “legitimate peripheral participants” and move them toward integration within the academe by giving them a voice in shaping the course and making their research visible as newcomers to the university community.

The Community Awareness Project was student directed, allowing them to decide how they wanted to present what they learned in the course. The only caveat was that they had to showcase their research in a way that would attract their peers at the university as well as the surrounding community since the event would also be open to the public. Given the topic of the course, human trafficking and modern-day slavery, students decided to coordinate a Human Trafficking Awareness Day on campus. In groups, they organized the schedule of events, created and distributed promotional materials, and contacted guest speakers from within the UHD community and local nonprofit agencies affiliated with human trafficking awareness. Students would also showcase the research they were working with for their researched argumentative papers. To facilitate the logistics of coordinating the event, Lindsey and Dagmar arranged for the facilities at the university needed to host the event, parking for guest speakers, and technology needs, as well as sending student-generated promotional materials to printers and contacting the appropriate university personnel to promote the event to the public.

The research component for the course began with the “one-shot” delivery of library resources by Lindsey, including traditional print sources and multimedia sources. Students then formed topic-specific groups and decided what they wanted to do to contribute to the event. As the students worked on the research in preparation for their researched argumentative papers and the event, Lindsey would join the class on the days when we were workshopping the various aspects of the program. We hoped that Lindsey’s presence in the classroom would, according to Anne C. Moore and Gary Ivory (2003), change the perceptions of librarians that Hispanic students hold. Moore and Ivory (2003) note:

All students should find librarians friendly and supportive, but because Latinos and other minority students have often found the university unfriendly, we must make particular efforts with them. . . . With close relationships, librarians can join faculty in the classroom to connect with students. (p. 228)

We employed a team-teaching approach to demystify the library’s role at the university. Both Dagmar and Lindsey assisted the groups with all aspects of their projects, ranging from basic information literacy skills, such as finding reliable sources, using the UHD databases, and citing appropriate images for promotional materials, to locating Houston-area anti-human trafficking organizations as a source for potential speakers, to figuring out how to create a QR code. We also assisted students with communication skills, such as
providing feedback on individual students’ topic-specific “elevator speeches,” helping students to practice what they would say about their research during the event. In this aspect of the project, we facilitated students in making the connection between what they were writing for an audience in print to interacting with the larger audience of their peers and other members of the university community.

For those students who decided to showcase their research, they accomplished this through a variety of ways. This part of the event was staged near a high-traffic student area. Some students chose more traditional routes, creating poster presentations and looped PowerPoint presentations. Some students, being more outgoing, had tables with samples of fair trade chocolate and locally grown fruit from the farmer’s market as a way to engage their peers in discussions about fair trade and human trafficking. Others had laptop computers available so that students could take a human trafficking awareness survey through the website slaveryfootprint.org. Their peers could interact with the website and then talk about their survey results with the student group. Students in the course also created and distributed cards with a QR code for the slaveryfootprint.org website to those who were not interested in stopping at the event. No matter the method for delivering the information, all groups were required to create some sort of handout, providing a summary of information about their particular topic and websites for more information.

Other students chose to participate in organizing a structured program for the event that was held in the university’s auditorium. This part of the event consisted of a screening of Call + Response, a human trafficking awareness documentary, and various guest speakers. Students who participated in this part of the event chose research topics that focused on the effectiveness and limitations of what can be done to help the victims of human trafficking. Students contacted local Houston human trafficking awareness groups and individuals associated with the City of Houston’s task force on human trafficking as well as professors in UHD’s criminal justice program and arranged for them to speak. On the day of the event, students also introduced the speakers they contacted and facilitated the question and answer sessions following each speaker.

Overall, the project was a success in many ways. Over the course of the day, we had over 200 participants attend the auditorium program, with professors bringing entire classes to hear speakers and/or to view the film. A head count for the research showcase was not taken, but we can assume this was successful because students ran out of handouts before the end of the event. Students found that participating in the event helped to solidify the research they had been reading and further reinforced what they learned through listening to the guest speakers. During the question and answer sessions, students in the course asked substantive questions based on their research, thereby creating a high-quality group discussion. Since students had not yet written their final paper, talking to others outside the course provided opportunities for them to be open to new ideas or alternative viewpoints that could extend their research. This translated into the final version of their papers and persistence in the course. Finally, students maintained the connection they established with Lindsey after the event was over, with many continuing to work with her on the final paper.
THE BENEFITS OF OUR COLLABORATION

The collaborative approach allows students the opportunity for guided reinforcement of information literacy concepts and better satisfies the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. While students engaged with all six frames during our approach, Searching as Strategic Exploration, Information Has Value, and Scholarship as Conversation were especially relevant to our approach. The librarian can assist students when they cannot find sources and encourage them to persevere in their search for the best information, rather than take the first source they find, thereby supporting dispositions associated with Searching as Strategic Exploration: “persist in the face of search challenges,” “understand that first attempts at searching do not always produce adequate results,” and “seek guidance from experts.” By participating in presenting a campus event, students were able to interact with the topic on a deeper level, thus developing the Information Has Value and the Scholarship as Conversation dispositions. Students become information authorities during Human Trafficking Awareness Day; that is, they “see themselves as contributors to the information marketplace rather than only consumers of it” and learn firsthand about the “skills, time, and effort needed to produce knowledge” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016, p. 6). Likewise, students see how information has power by meeting people in their community who use findings similar to the students’ research results to create their approaches to ending human trafficking and gain support for their efforts.

In addition, students “[contributed] to scholarly conversation at an appropriate level,” one of the tenets of Scholarship as Conversation, by interacting with professionals working against human trafficking within their city, presenting posters and papers to campus, and discussing the topic with their peers during Human Trafficking Awareness Day (p. 8). The combination of our approach and the seriousness of the topic requires students to think about the issue of human trafficking in a local and personal context; they must consider their values while they interact with their research results and analyze sources to be informed participants. Ideally, students “understand the responsibility that comes with entering the conversation through participatory channels” when they present information during the event on a human rights issue and “recognize they are often entering into an ongoing scholarly conversation and not a finished conversation,” one they can continue to participate in within their community because of their high-quality research and resulting synthesis of information (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016, p. 8).

Our approach further engages students through project-based learning, and could also be perceived as a service learning opportunity, brought about by the topic of human trafficking, a noted issue in Houston, to further these goals (Texas Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2010). Margit Watts (2006) believes that service learning provides the opportunity for real-life problem solving and notes that real-life experiences make students more engaged with what they are learning. In addition,
Watts (2006) notes, “An important learning objective is to develop information literacy skills from the perspective of the student as an end user in real-life situations” (p. 43). As students research human trafficking, they develop the skills to research similar social issues locally and globally that affect their lives. Through our collaboration between faculty member and librarian, we guided freshman students into the university community by providing them with a real-life venue to showcase their research. This partnership is essential to mentoring and supporting Hispanic students through the first year of their university career. As Abrego (2008) asserts:

A support network comprised of staff, faculty, and peers is crucial to the student’s ability to successfully navigate the campus. . . . Almost all of us who have successfully graduated from college can identify one faculty member who made a difference in our educational career, either by inspiring us, believing in our potential, or being a role model. (p. 88)

We would like to think our collaboration through this project has succeeded in inspiring all of our students to continue to take action on a real problem within the Houston community, believing in our students’ potential to organize and deliver a successful program, and becoming role models for our students.

NOTES

1. According to the 2012–2013 UHD Fact Book, all students enrolled by ethnicity are as follows: American Indian .6%, Asian or Pacific Islander 9%, Black 27.5%, Hispanic 40.2%, White 19.5%, International 2.3%, and Unknown .9%. See http://www.uhd.edu/about/irp/documents/Fact_Book_2012-2013.pdf

2. In 2014, a revision to the Texas core curriculum will be implemented in all public universities across Texas. UHD will maintain a two-course sequence for freshman composition. For more information on the Texas General Education Core Curriculum see: http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/index.cfm?objectid=6AB82E4B-C31F-E344-C78E3688524B44FB

3. For the past four years, students overwhelming chose this book, and continue to do so, over any others offered.

4. As a direct result of this course, one student was able to secure an internship with the City of Houston’s Office of International Communities. Through his internship, the student participated in planning a citywide human trafficking awareness event, “Shine a Light on Human Trafficking,” held September 24, 2013. See http://houstonsvoice.com/2013/09/23/live-streaming-shine-a-light-on-human-trafficking/

REFERENCES


