Less Is More: Uses and Benefits of the 10-15 Minute Instruction Session

Jeffrey M. Mortimore, Bennett College
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Jeff Mortimore, Reference Librarian
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Obligatory Statistics

- One of 11 HBCUs in N.C.
- 736 Undergraduate FTEs (AY10/11).
- High percentage of first-generation students.
- 114 library instruction sessions this year.
- 1,300 session attendees.
- Avg. 60 reference transactions per semester week.
Service Gains

Service gains since AY08/09:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>AY08/09</th>
<th>AY10/11</th>
<th>% Change</th>
<th>Rank among N.C. HBCUs per FTE*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instruction Sessions</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>2nd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session Attendance</td>
<td>990</td>
<td>1,395</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>2nd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Weekly Reference Transactions</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>3rd</td>
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*Rankings based on dividing indicator by FTE per 2010-2011 UNC Statistical Abstract.
Service Strategies

1. Focus on students’ perception of encouragement.¹

2. Coordinate instruction & assets with established learning model (i.e., Kuhlthau’s Information Search Process).²

3. Encourage faculty-librarian partnering & collaboration.

4. Increase session format mix & marketing....

¹ Mortimore, Jeffrey, and Amanda Wall. 2009. “Motivating African-American Students through Information Literacy Instruction: Exploring the Link between Encouragement and Academic Self-Concept,” Reference Librarian 50:1, 29-42.

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Less Is More?

Why offer short instruction sessions?

Qua Faculty
- Vitiates the “we don’t have time” defense.
- Increases perception of session’s purpose & goal-directedness.
- Gateway to collaboration.

Qua Students
- Respects attention spans & reduces session “burnout.”
- Replicates research context & preferences.

Qua Services
- With the right assignment, drives students to the reference desk.
- “Embeds” the librarian without interfering with library staffing.
“Library Instruction Lite”

Goals for short instruction sessions...

- 10-15 minute maximum instruction time,
- Hosted in classrooms with projection but *without* student workstations,
- Lecture focused on website navigation with keyword searches and item views in 2-3 resources,
- Pursuant to a discreet graded research task or scaffolded assignment.
“Library Instruction Lite”

Target courses for short instruction sessions...

Large freshman- and sophomore-level general education lecture courses with:

- Known research-writing components,
- Full curricula,
- Students of varied (and generally low) engagement, and
- Historically low participation in library instruction.
Test Case: HI 203

- African American history lecture course.
- Four sections per semester.
- +/- 120 freshmen and sophomores, the majority of whom are *not* history majors.
- Long-standing final research paper assignment, traditionally due at the end of the semester.
- No history of library instruction prior to Fall 2009.
Original Assignment:

“Research and write about any Civil Rights Hero or Heroine of your choice. In addition to introducing the reader to the major events, activities, and accomplishments of your hero or heroine’s life, your paper must clearly address the following points:

• Why do you consider this person your hero/heroine?
• What are some of the short-term consequences of your character’s heroic accomplishments?
• What do you consider to be his/her most enduring legacy?
• What is the relevance of his/her legacy to the on-going struggle of African Americans for racial justice and equality?”
Outcomes

- Last-minute research.
- Poor source quality.
- Poor use of sources.
- Rampant plagiarism.
- Poor to non-existent formatting.
- Poor to non-existent citations & bibliographies.
Revised Assignment

Exact same paper prompt, but...

- Multiple-stage portfolio project.
- Three-part scaffolding, including...
  - Preliminary bibliography (8 sources)
  - Annotated bibliography (6 sources)
  - Final paper (4 sources)
- Preliminary & annotated bibliographies *marked* by the librarian for source quality & formatting.
- All components *graded* by the professor.
Assignment Sequence

**Week 1**
- Professor presents the assignment
- Professor provides supporting handouts

**Week 2**
- 10-15 minute library instruction session
- Librarian reviews assignment & her role in grading

**Week 3**
- Preliminary bibliography due
- Librarian marks, professor grades

**Week 5**
- Annotated bibliography due
- Librarian marks, professor grades

**Week 8**
- Portfolio with final paper and revised preliminary & annotated bibliographies due
- Professor grades
The HI 203 Instruction Session

1. Introduce self.
2. Review assignment, timeline, and supporting handouts.
4. Navigate to library website.
5. Navigate to subject guide.
6. Search name in encyclopedia (e.g., *Credo*). Look at article, hyperlinks, and example citation. Note additional keywords & article bibliography.
7. Search name or alternate keyword in periodical or ebook database. Look at article, hyperlinks, & example citation.
8. Display example print resource(s).
9. *Reiterate marking/grading role of librarian & invite students to visit library.*
10. Answer questions and leave!
The HI 203 Instruction Session

1. Introduce self.
2. Review assignment, timeline, and supporting handouts.
3. **Emphasize marking/grading role of librarian.**
4. Navigate to library website.
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6. Search name in encyclopedia (e.g., *Credo*). Look at article, hyperlinks, and example citation. Note additional keywords & article bibliography.
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Supporting Handouts

Example MLA Bibliography

Annotated Bibliographies Guide
Experiences

• Lots of questions about reference hours & appointments.
• Considerable confusion about source types & authority, especially with open web resources.
• Ambivalence about page formatting, but lots of questions about formatting of bibliographic entries.
• Fewer questions about in-text citations (because less well emphasized in assignment scaffolding).
• Varied response to feedback on assignments:
  • ~30% quick & consistent
  • ~50% eventually
  • ~20% little or none
Outcomes: HI 203 Portfolios

Improved...

- Resource Quality
  *(marked & graded twice before final paper)*

- Resource Use
  *(marked & graded once before final paper)*

- Formatting and Bibliography
  *(marked & graded twice before final paper)*

...and less evidence of plagiarism to boot,
although in-text citations remained dicey....
Outcomes: Library Services

**Week 1**
- Professor presents the assignment
- Professor provides supporting handouts

**Week 2**
- 10-15 minute library instruction session
- Librarian reviews assignment & her role in grading

**Week 3**
- Preliminary bibliography due
- Librarian marks, professor grades

**Week 6**
- Annotated bibliography due
- Librarian marks, professor grades

**Week 8**
- Portfolio with final paper and revised preliminary and annotated bibliographies due
- Professor grades
Outcomes: Assessments

Each portfolio produces with a complete history of progressive librarian-led feedback & student revision:

- Three sets of resources
  (identification of need, location & selection of sources)
- One set of annotations
  (evaluation of sources)
- One final paper
  (evaluation, effective & ethical use of sources)
- Three basic MLA-style formatted documents
  (effective & ethical use of sources)
Benefits

- Less time in class, which matters with a small staff!
- Opportunity to engage new or hard-to-reach faculty, departments, or courses.
- Less faculty resistance, especially if you are offering to help improve assignments & grade papers while taking up less class time!
- Opportunity to highlight collaboration & librarians’ curricular & instructional design role.
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Benefits

- The session is too short to fall asleep.
- Reduces abstraction, especially for students with very limited research experience.
- Makes using library resources & services a necessity, or...
- At least, creates the impetus to use library resources where engagement is low.
- The librarian may be approachable even when the professor isn’t.
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Benefits

With the right assignment....

- Produces plenty of assessment.
- Embeds the librarian, if asynchronously, but *in spite of* one-shot instructional limitations.
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Benefits to Info Lit Pedagogy

With the right assignment, time-limited instruction...

- Moves problem solving & information seeking out of the (artificial) instructional environment.

- Encourages personal and/or group responsibility to engage resources, research tools, and professional means & modes of communication.
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- Encourages critical thinking about information needs rather than delivering what may be perceived as a mechanistic approach to locating, evaluating, & using resources (which also may foster an exaggerated sense of librarian/researcher expertise).

- Emphasizes use of reference services, which are more relational and better replicate lived information seeking.
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Costs & Considerations

- Contingent on quality of assignment, which may be contingent on quality of collaboration.
- Contingent on student awareness & understanding of assignment prior to instruction.
- Limited resource coverage.
- No guided practice.
- Coordination between instructional & reference staff.
- Time to mark assignments & paper management.
- Librarian may be drawn into grading disputes.
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Candidate Courses

Good Candidates:
- Lower-division lecture courses with a research component already in place
- New, disengaged, skeptical, or time-pressed faculty
- Sufficient TAs
- Neophyte and/or disengaged researchers working outside of major

Weaker Candidates:
- No pre-existing research component
- Highly specific research needs or expectations for instruction
- Insufficient TAs
- Developing or advanced researchers working in major
- Seminars (?)
“One Sentence Summaries”

Using an online encyclopedia, have students identify and read a scholarly definition of a course concept or topic and write a one-sentence summary. One guideline you can offer is that of the 5 W’s (who, what, when, where, why?).

“Headlines”

Using a newspaper database, have students identify and read two or three newspaper articles on an issue or event, and then propose one or more headlines for their own article. Have students explain those features of the issue or event to which their headline draws the reader’s attention.
Example Low-Stakes Research & Writing Assignments for Short Instruction Sessions

“Abstract Writing”
Using a periodical database, have students identify and read an article on a course topic and write an abstract for it. Use abstracts available in the database itself as models. Have students identify the main thesis, the data collection procedure, the findings, and the conclusions.

“Directed Paraphrasing”
Using a periodical or newspaper database, have students identify and read an article on a course topic, identify the thesis paragraph, and paraphrase it. Have them print off and turn in the original paragraph with their own.
Thank You!
Questions?

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