

Assessing the Effectiveness of Collaborative Subject-Specific Library Instruction

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Abstract: In the fall semester of 2012, the communications librarian and the business librarian at the University of Arkansas began working together to provide collaborative library instruction. The librarians collaborated on instruction for Communication 1313, a course that focuses on the fundamentals of public speaking. Due to the course being a requirement for business majors, many sections of the course were made up entirely of business students. The business sections were identified, and the librarians worked together to provide instruction to these sections. The instruction sessions included general library information, and information about communications and business resources. In the spring of 2013, the librarians will once again work together to provide instruction to business students taking Communication 1313. Through the use of surveys, the librarians will determine how effective their collaboration efforts were. The librarians plan to look at the perceptions the students have about performing library research at the beginning of the semester, and they plan to see how those perceptions have changed by the end of the semester.

Keywords: Academic library, information literacy, collaboration, instruction, communication, business

1. Introduction

The University of Arkansas Libraries is a Research I institution that provides materials and services to a growing number of undergraduate and graduate students. In fact, from 2007 to 2012 the University's freshman population grew 39% from 4,373 to 6,081. This study was designed to look at an alternative method for providing library instruction by using a team of librarians to determine if continued value can be found in face-to-face instruction using a team-teaching approach.

The Libraries have delivered instruction services for many years with the primary contact with freshman students occurring in the introductory English

Composition classes. For many years individual composition classes were offered by at least two librarians in different library venues from 7:30am to 6:00 pm daily for two weeks in the month of October. Some students were also given instruction sessions in concert with their Introduction to Communication.

Due to the growing number of students, several changes in personnel assignments occurred within the library. In 2007, the librarian for communication was given additional duties in scientific areas and the performing arts librarian became liaison for the Communication Department. Requests for instruction classes had diminished and she was not requested to provide any classes until 2009 (9 classes). During this same period, it was determined that the load for teaching “Compathon” had become unwieldy and efforts began to create online tutorials to lessen the need for face-to-face instruction. By 2010, the number of library composition classes dwindled to fifteen. With the retirement of the English librarian in 2010, the number of classes stabilized at around twelve per year. At the same time, instructors in the Communication Department found greater need to familiarize their students with the library, and this resulted in an increase in library instruction sessions from twenty-one in 2010 to fifty-six in 2012.

The Communication Department also decided to change the focus of its classes in 2010 moving from an introductory classes toward public speaking. By fall 2012, most of the sections were specifically classes for business majors, with several others having students from the general student population or those majoring in communication.

As the makeup of the Communication 1313 classes shifted to mostly business students, requests for library instruction began to increase. The communication librarian began working with the newly-appointed business librarian to create and deliver library instruction that included a discussion of both communication and business resources. The model functioned well, providing the impetus for the librarians to survey the students in the spring semester classes in order to determine the impact, from the students’ perspectives, of the team teaching general library concepts as well as materials for their informative, persuasive, and public policy speeches.

2. Literature Review

The literature covering the topic of collaborative library instruction mostly discusses the relationships between librarians and teaching faculty. There were very few studies that discussed the collaboration between librarians to provide subject-specific library instruction. There are a few examples in the literature where librarians have collaborated on one-shot library instruction sessions, and there are also cases where they have collaborated to create semester-long library research courses.

Zhang (2001) examined how different units on a college campus could collaborate to enhance library instruction sessions. Reference librarians, technical services librarians, teaching faculty, and the campus information technology department collaborated on various library instruction initiatives. Weaver and Pier (2010) also looked at how a collaborative effort between teaching faculty and librarians could result in innovative ways to teach information literacy to communication students. In this case, oral communication faculty collaborated with instructional librarians to create an embedded librarian program. The embedded librarian worked with oral communication faculty to design the course, and they also provided research and instruction support to students throughout the course.

Dugan (2008) described a collaboration between a group of business librarians and an agriculture librarian to deliver instruction and provide other research assistance to students in an agribusiness marketing class. Daugman, McCall, and McMahan (2008) looked at how librarians who were subject specialists for religion, literature, music, and the arts came together to design a credit-bearing library research course in the humanities. Benefits, such as the shared workload among participating librarians, and drawbacks, such as student confusion surrounding the teaching model, are described in this study. McCallum and Collins (2011) wrote about the collaboration between a reference and catalog librarian as they worked together to provide instruction to an anthropology department on their campus. The reference department typically handled library instruction, and the catalog librarian, the anthropology department's liaison, worked with a reference librarian to design instruction specifically for anthropology students.

Another consideration for this study was the creation and utilization of pre and post- tests or surveys to evaluate library instruction. The literature includes many examples of assessments that study the skill levels of students before and after classes as well as the "affective" measures of comfort and familiarity. In 2011, Latham and Gross assessed first-year students who attended training to improve below-proficient levels of information literacy. Skill tests, surveys and interviews were conducted with students after skills workshops. As a result of the training, students did report increased confidence with library and research skills. A similar study was conducted by Zoellner, Samson, and Hines in 2008 and used affective assessment tools to evaluate perceptions of students in public speaking classes. The results of this study showed a statistically significant increase in the confidence of students related to using the library for research purposes.

3. Methodology

Communication 1313 (Public Speaking) classes were chosen for this project. These classes were chosen due to the high presence of business students in the class sections, and due to the overlapping nature of the communication and business disciplines. In addition, these sections were targeted due to the limited

opportunities for students to receive additional library instruction over the planned survey period. The students in the sections were primarily freshmen. Two surveys were created by the business librarian and the communication librarian, one to be administered before the library instruction, and one to be administered after the library instruction. Both surveys utilized a Likert scale. The pre-instruction survey was used to gauge the comfort and familiarity students had with the library website, services, and other general library information. The post-instruction survey asked the students about how their understanding of the library had changed since the instruction, and if they knew how to access and use library resources.

The pre-instruction survey was given to two hundred and eighty one students in nineteen different sections of the Communication 1313 class. The library instruction was performed to help students understand how to find information for informative and persuasive public policy speeches. The sessions provided an overview of the library, the services, information about subject librarians, citation information, database search strategies, using the library catalog to access books and government documents, and demonstrations of various electronic resources that could be used to help with the speech assignments. The specific communication resources that were demonstrated in the instruction session included *CQ Researcher*, *Polling the Nations*, *Lexis Nexis Statistical Insight*, and *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. The resources used to highlight business information were *Business Source Complete*, *Lexis Nexis Academic*, and *EconLit*.

After the library instruction sessions, the librarians arranged times to follow-up with Communication 1313 instructors to administer the post-instruction survey. The post-instruction survey was not immediately distributed after the session so the students had time to use the resources and information given in the sessions for their speeches. Two hundred and thirty students completed the post-instruction survey. Only those students who had completed the pre-instruction survey were given a post-instruction survey to complete. The data for the pre and post-surveys were analyzed as a whole to identify any trends that may have been present.

4. Survey Results

Pre-Instruction Survey

The students were given a pre-instruction survey with seven statements about the library, its resources and services, and they were asked to provide a response using a five-level Likert scale. The five levels were strongly agree (with a score of 1), agree, not sure, disagree, and strongly disagree (with a score of 5).

Survey Questions
1. I am familiar with the library's website.
2. I am comfortable citing my sources.
3. I am comfortable with finding scholarly resources through the library.
4. I feel comfortable accessing public speaking resources through the library.
5. I feel comfortable accessing business-related information through the library.
6. I feel comfortable contacting someone in the library when I need help with general research.
7. I can identify someone in the library who can help me with research in a specific area.

Table 1. Survey statements used in library instruction sessions

The first three statements on the survey dealt with familiarity with the library's website, level of comfort when citing sources, and level of comfort when finding scholarly resources. The average score on the first statement, I am familiar with the library's website, was a 2.69. This indicates that the students as a whole fell closer to the not sure designation on the Likert scale than the agree designation on the Likert scale. The average score on the second statement, I am comfortable citing my sources, was a 2.20. While this average falls between the agree designation and the not sure designation on the Likert scale, it leans closer to the agree side. The average score on the third statement, I am comfortable with finding scholarly resources through the library, was a 2.60. Again, this average falls between agree and not sure, but overall the students were not sure how to locate scholarly sources through the library.

The next two statements on the survey dealt with accessing public speaking resources and business information. The average score on the fourth survey statement, I feel comfortable accessing public speaking resources through the library, was a 3.10. This is an indication that the students were not sure how to locate public speaking resources in the library. The average score on the fifth survey statement, I feel comfortable accessing business-related information through the library, was a 3.13. This average score is an indication that the students felt unsure about finding business information in the library.

The last two statements on the pre-survey were about contacting someone in the library for research help. The average score on the sixth survey statement, I feel comfortable contacting someone in the library when I need help with general research, was a 2.12. Based on this average, it can be assumed that the students agreed with this statement. The average score on the seventh survey statement, I can identify someone in the library who can help me with research in a specific

area, was a 2.65. This average indicates that the students were not sure about who to contact for specific research help in the library.

Post-Instruction Survey

The post-instruction survey asked the students to answer the same statements based on what they learned in the instruction session, and their experiences using the library and its resources after the session. Students were requested to identify whether they had greater confidence in using the resources or finding assistance within the library using the same five-level Likert scale. The following graph provides a representation of the pre and post-test responses.

As Table 2 demonstrates, the average scores on the post-instruction survey statements were as follows: website familiarity, 1.77; citing sources, 1.88; finding scholarly resources, 1.78; accessing public speaking sources, 2.06; accessing business resources, 2.28; contacting general research help, 1.77; identifying subject specialists, 1.79.

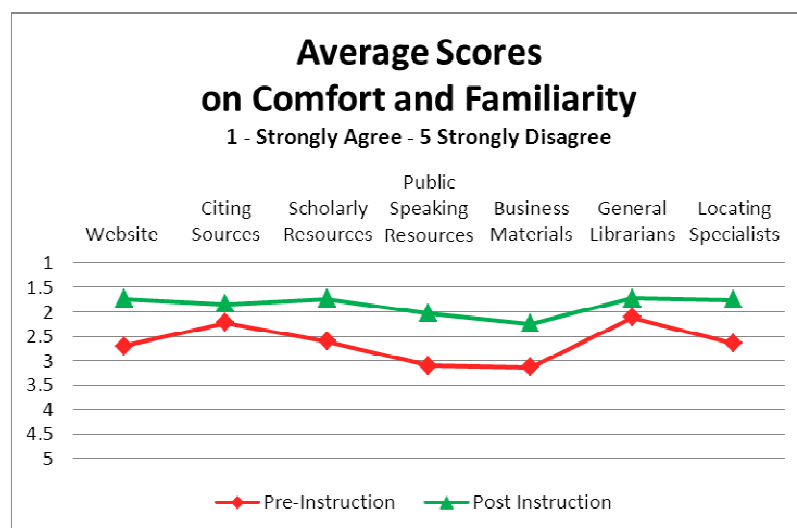


Table 2. Pre and post-survey averages

5. Discussion

As previously indicated, the sections of Communication 1313 chosen for this study were targeted for multiple reasons. First, the classes were made up of students who were majoring in business. This provided a great opportunity for two librarians with different subject specialties to design and deliver library instruction for a group of students who would potentially benefit from the collaborative instruction. Second, the library instruction sessions were held during the spring semester when there were very few library instruction sessions

offered by other librarians on campus. This decision was made to gauge the impact of the collaborative library instruction sessions without the potential influence from other library instruction sessions that were not involved in this study.

The results of the pre and post-instruction surveys indicated an increased student perception of competency in library skills over all areas surveyed. Particularly, the students indicate greater confidence in finding resources for public speaking and for business. The average pre-test scores and the most common answer in the surveys in these questions were 3 (not sure). The most common answer after instruction is 2 (agree). These scores would indicate that the focus on resources in both areas was assistive, even when classes were not comprised solely of business students.

Additionally, the students also indicated improved comfort in using the libraries' website, in finding subject librarians and identifying scholarly resources. The most frequent response in both the pre and post-surveys in these areas was 2 "agree." However, the lower average scores in the post-survey indicated overall student improvement. The change in average response would suggest that students who had less familiarity with the libraries' sites and services were assisted by the overviews of these topics.

The students indicated little change in the areas of familiarity with citing sources and in comfort with finding assistance for general questions. Based on feedback from instructors and upper division undergraduate students, we feel that the students taking our survey may be overstating their abilities in this area. A deeper analysis in this area may help us understand the disconnect between students' perceived knowledge and their scholarly output.

Due to the lack of a general library orientation class for public speaking students, part of the sessions were spent providing general information on the physical spaces and the use of the library catalog. Based on the data, we see room for improvement in familiarizing the students with subject-specific resources. In order to do that, more time would need to be devoted to these topics during the sessions in lieu of general library orientation. To make this possible, new methods for ensuring basic awareness of the library and its collections should be developed for use before class sessions. This could involve a collaborative effort between the librarians and the Communication 1313 instructors to develop a pre-instruction activity that provides the students with an overview of the library.

We plan to continue research into the collaborative teaching model through an investigation of written comments provided on the surveys. Additional areas of interest may include considerations of class length, use of in-class assignments, the development of a pilot program implementing the pre-instruction library

orientation, and an analysis of business-only communication sessions versus those with mixed populations.

The data support the original assumption made at the beginning of this project about subject-specific collaboration. Overall, there were significant increases in familiarization with the various subject resources. This model could potentially be adapted to include other disciplines. This has been tested to a smaller extent in collaborations between the engineering librarian and the business librarian for an industrial engineering class, and the communication librarian and journalism specialist for an African American film class. Subject-specific collaborations may not work in all cases. For a model like this to be successful, subject librarians have to be willing to work together to explore the areas that overlap.

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