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T/RS 121: Introduction to the Bible
Information Literacy Stipend: Final Report
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Project Goals

As a candidate for the Information Literacy Stipend this year, I decidedly modified my course, T/RS 121: Introduction to the Bible, to contribute to my students' conversance with secondary source material for their research. While the previous sessions of this course were conducted with research papers assigned, the ability of my students to effectively use library resources and incorporate them into their own thinking and original argumentation proved to be lacking. When I was chosen to receive the stipend this semester, I worked with librarian Donna Witek to determine what ways the assignments of the course and the general course schedule could be changed to promote information literacy. The specific goals we had in mind, as stated in my proposal, were two of the information literacy standards. First, we hoped to develop in students "the ability to determine the nature and extent of information needed." That is, since they would be reading a text as difficult and foreign as the Bible, we wanted to cultivate their curiosity and even their own self-awareness, such that they could realize when understanding was beyond their grasp and they needed a secondary resource. Second, we hoped to see students learn "to evaluate information critically and to incorporate selected information into their knowledge." While there is an easy tendency in a technological culture to jump to the first and most readily available resource, I hoped to see students think about the sources they used, learning to be aware of the usefulness of what they found.

Project Development

To contribute to these goals, Donna and I developed a graded series of assignments, to lead the students slowly toward a more effective use of information. After the first few weeks of class, the first assignment was given; it was specifically titled the "Information Literacy Assignment." Donna and I selected three passages from secondary sources on the Bible, from various kinds of library resources on the Bible, a journal article, a detailed commentary, and a chapter from a monograph. Each selection dealt with one passage from the Bible we had discussed in class. Students had to choose one of the three, write a summary of its contents, but also write two evaluative paragraphs: one on how the resource contributed to their understanding and knowledge about the primary source, one on what concepts or terms from the secondary sources went beyond their understanding. We hoped these requirements would lead students to begin thinking self-reflectively on the way they encountered secondary information.

The day this first assignment was due, I scheduled a class period with Donna in the library. Here we wanted to hear feedback from students on their first encounter with secondary biblical sources, but also to indicate the importance information literacy would have for the rest of the class. Donna overviewed the basic kinds of materials they would be encountering in the library, and we discussed the way the later assignments of the course would continue to build on those prior regarding the kind of sources used. It was important to Donna and I to be forthright on the importance of our information literacy goals for the course, so that students knew to adjust their focus when working on the course assignments.

The later two information-focused assignments of the course were papers, one short in length on a passage from the Old Testament, one longer on a passage from the New Testament. While the first assignment had given the resources and merely asked students to learn how to engage with them, for the papers students had to learn to find resources themselves. Donna developed a library research guide for the course, which reminded students of the kinds of resources they should be using for each assignment and also showed them good ways to search for relevant materials. Besides the Bible, one library book source was required for the short paper, and three sources were required for the longer paper. For the longer paper, students were required to find one source from the reference collection, both to help them gain familiarity there and to help keep the regular shelves stocked with books. The only electronic resources I allowed were journal articles from the library databases, but students were cautioned that, though these were easy to access, they would often prove difficult to use effectively.

Both of these assignments endeavored to change the focus of students' presentation of primary source ideas. Rather than attempt to master the text on their own and present their own commentary as original, I hoped to see students engage critically with the secondary sources, such that they saw themselves as partners or opponents with others as they interpreted a text. I hoped to develop an awareness of the larger community of interpretation that is essential for work in the humanities, regardless of the specific subject matter.

Assessment and Reflection

It was rewarding to contribute to student learning regarding their use of secondary resources, and any difficulties encountered only strengthened my conviction that we were developing important skills that did not come naturally to many students. Indeed, I did encounter some resistance from students, especially regarding the prohibition of online resources. To complete the assignments with a good grade, students had to learn to deal solely with library resources, and this was unfortunately unfamiliar to many of them. During the process I myself had to consider how necessary skills with physical books will be in the digital future, but I thought that students will lean on their electronic skills in many other courses; here, they had to learn to retain the ways of the past (which for many of us are still important for work in the humanities). Moreover, this was shown to be essential because many of students' early attempts to find resources demonstrated a real lack of evaluation in their choices, as if the first resource found was necessarily the right one. I emphasized that finding good sources was a key to making paper writing *easier*. Without having to fish for passable information, papers could be composed by relying on the strength of reliable scholarship.

One weakness of my project was in not developing an assessment plan that could track the progress of the class or of particular students over the course of the semester. This would have been the most effective way to measure the success of the project. However, for the final paper, Donna developed a rubric that nevertheless assessed the final results of the course. The assessment criteria was as follows: "Student demonstrates effective source evaluation as evidenced by selecting and incorporating source(s) into research assignment that are appropriate to the information need or task." To be considered proficient against this standard, a student had to show that he or she "refines [his or her] own ideas about research in conversation with source(s) used." According to my assessment, of the 65 students evaluated from two sections of the course, 36 of them were marked as proficient. Of the rest, 23 were considered "acceptable", 5 showed "basic" skills, and 1 "insufficient." Though the final evaluation would ideally have been compared to the proficiency of the students as they began, I believe that comparison would

show a great improvement on the part of students in my course. The project itself was designed less to measure student progress but more to be a means of that progress and growth. Each assignment completed was one step toward greater information literacy that each student doubtlessly made in his or her own way. Especially given the cultural forces that tend to lead students to rely on superficial information, I think this kind of project in information literacy is fully worthwhile. With a bit of extra planning, a course such as mine could be adjusted to strengthen a crucial aspect of a student's education. I hope my own students will continue to demonstrate the skills they developed in the duration of their studies at Scranton.