

Information Literacy Grant – Final report

Course: Writing 106 and 107 - Composition and Rhetoric

Semester taught: Spring 2011

Course Enrollment: 35 students in three sections

Instructor: Eva Polizzi, part-time adjunct, English department

Library Faculty Member: Betsey Moylan

Writing 106 and 107 are three-credit mandatory classes for all freshmen. By the end of the semester, the students were required to logically and effectively organize a well-informed essay both for academic and public purposes. The emphasis for the Term Paper in this class was on finding an original focusing question and developing it into an essay that did not have to rely heavily on sources. The success of the assignment hinged on the students' ability to locate, evaluate and incorporate appropriate sources that inspired their critical thinking about their topics rather than directed it, hence the importance of incorporating information literacy into the syllabus.

Course Objectives:

As an adjunct in the composition program, I am so often frustrated by the lack of curiosity and originality in student essays, yet, due to the nature of such mandatory classes, I find that there is little room to spark or foster such wonderful qualities. In the spring 2011 semester, I wanted to take a different approach to teaching the class. With every assignment I intended to guide the students through the critical thinking process from gathering information to fine tuning their final paper. I incorporated several library sessions, in-class exercises and assignments that all lead up to the term paper; in other words, the students were working on their Term paper from the very first day on, fulfilling the requirements for the class in segments that all contributed to the final product.

Course Objectives as related to the Information Literacy Program:

Students practiced how to search relevant material first to find a topic and then a focusing question for their term paper. They practiced useful annotating techniques: double-entry journal, believing-doubting journal, summary writing and rhetorical analysis of a text, so they could learn how to evaluate the sources and how to incorporate their findings without paraphrasing or quoting too much. I was hoping that this way they would move beyond the often times last minute Google search before their assignment is due, and they would improve their information literacy skills significantly.

Assessment and Timeline:

I gave the students a rather informal pre-test at the beginning of the semester. First, we watched a you Tube clip that demonstrated how two college students paid their tuition in dollar bills at one university in Colorado. After some discussion and reflection on this act, I asked the students to write their first Journal (Preliminary Investigation) to explore why they chose their major and

their future career. Since many did not know much about the actual job they might take upon after graduation, we spent one class in the library where I gave the students a vague prompt (on purpose) to research their intended career in any way they felt comfortable. Without exception, they all stayed glued to their computer screen and turned to Google for help.

Then they had to write one journal about a personal challenge and another one about their values. The fourth assignment asked them to interview someone with work experience possibly in the field they are considering working. In the meantime we spent three more classes in the library. First, the students were simply asked to read just about anything within the context of work. This sounds like an elementary task, but it proved to be hard for them. I recommended print sources, but almost all of them resisted and kept searching on line with vague search terms. Few stumbled upon great articles that later inspired the topic they decided to further explore. Some asked for help from librarians. Many of them just wasted time. The second time, Professor Moylan gave the students a very practical presentation on how to search for the best possible sources within the topic they will settle. At this point, some students started to consider sources other than the ones in the world wide web. Things started to look up! We went back for a third time when they could further research their topics. More students talked to librarians and started to look into print sources. In Journal Five they had to evaluate three sources with the help of any of the annotation exercises we previously covered in class. In Journal sixth, they had to synthesize their findings with their original focusing question and see how pleased they were with the results. Some of them realized

1. that they needed different or better sources, or
2. that their original focusing question was drastically challenged or changed by the research, or
3. they simply did not have enough to say and the entire paper was based on sources (i.e. on others' thoughts)

We had about three weeks left for the drafting process, which also included one more session in the library. With the help of Professor Moylan and librarian Kevin Norris, we tried to check both the in-text citation and the Works Cited page for each student. In the smaller classes this was successful; in a class of 18 it is not possible to do in 50 minutes.

Final thoughts

I consider the class a successful and inspirational pilot to future classes taught in this manner. I even believe that a Freshman Seminar could be offered teaching information literacy. I guess the trick is to present it to the students so that they do not have a chance to dismiss the idea thinking they know everything they need to know about research. They don't. It is not news to us, instructors, but it is a challenging part in teaching this particular class. Almost all of my students admitted that the citation process was the hardest for them, but almost none of them realized that the real value of their paper, besides their own thoughts, of course, heavily depended on what sources they opted to use. Deciding on relevant and appropriate sources and incorporating them seamlessly and intelligently proved to be very hard for the majority of them.

Both Professor Moylan and I agree that it was worth dedicating extra effort and time to include information literacy into Writing 106 and 107, and we intend to keep working together in the fall to improve upon the class.