

Meri Rose Ekberg

Synopsis of a Significant Experience

Library and Information Literacy Instruction (LILI) Practicum, Spring 2016

Abstract:

As the culmination of my experience in the Library and Information Literacy (LILI) program at UW-Madison, I was asked to independently develop the learning outcomes, lesson plan, and class activities for a library information session presented to the students of Philosophy 341: Contemporary Moral Issues. This course fulfills a general university Communication B requirement, and as such the students were asked to complete academic research and writing in the form of a term paper that evaluated and critiqued an argument on a contemporary moral issue, using both philosophical and informative sources. The students were primarily new to philosophy research, and had an entry level knowledge of library resources that included some familiarity with database searching.

Learning Outcomes:

Drawing on the professor's syllabus and the description of the writing assignment, I established a list of learning outcomes that provided the students with the tools necessary to complete their assignment and gain an understanding of the field of philosophy research. I aimed to create outcomes that framed information in the way James Elmborg described it: "the raw material students use to solve these problems and to create their own understandings and identities, rather than as something 'out there' to be accessed efficiently."¹ As such I aimed to emphasize why these strategies and tools were helpful for their development as researchers.

By the end of the session, students will be able to:

1. Locate and navigate philosophy sources in order to evaluate their topics
2. Use advanced search and refine options to narrow their results
3. Analyze and select appropriate subject terms to improve search results
4. Compare and contrast article databases in order to find relevant articles
5. Name 3 ways they can get help from a librarian

Lesson Plan:

Although unfamiliar with philosophy resources, I developed a lesson plan that covered the primary databases, including PhilPapers, JSTOR, and Philosopher's Index. Using the sample topic of "Gun Control" I used PhilPapers to show students how they could find summary information, and then narrow their topic to a focused research question. Moving on to JSTOR, I modeled search strategies needed to narrow the number of results in order to find the most relevant materials.

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Repeating the same search in Philosopher's Index provided me with the opportunity to show the students how to broaden a search when a query was unsuccessful, and discuss why search strategies need to change depending on the database. In this case, we moved from an interdisciplinary database that initially returned too many results, to a subject focused database that initially returned too few results. While in Philosopher's Index I also instructed students to mine article search terms in order to locate synonyms for alternative searches.

The lecturing portion of this session totaled 20 minutes, which allowed me to spend the following 30 minutes on a partnering activity and independent research. Minimizing lecture time was important to me, because under a learning paradigm "students must be active discoverers and constructors of their own knowledge."² As Robert B. Barr and John Tagg described, in this model of education, "knowledge is not seen as cumulative and linear, like a wall of bricks, but as a nesting and interacting of frameworks."³ Following this model, I began by demonstrating strategies and then provided students with both a structured activity and free time to explore these tools and experience how the pieces come together in order to do effective research.

Activity:

I developed a worksheet and partner activity in order to accomplish my fourth learning outcome "students will be able to compare and contrast article databases in order to find relevant articles." This activity was prompted by Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson's second principle of undergraduate education: "good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated...Sharing one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions sharpens thinking and deepens understanding."⁴ With this in mind, students were instructed to share with a partner the topic for their paper they were most interested in, and together brainstorm keywords they would use to search in a database. After selecting which topic to begin with, one student searched in JSTOR and the other in Philosopher's Index, using the same exact keywords. The worksheet (attached below) included a series of questions that asked the students to compare the results they got from each database. This included simpler questions, such as "how many results did your search return?" to questions that involved close looking, such as "did any items appear in both databases?" After 5-8 minutes they changed to their partner's topic and swapped databases.

This activity provided students with the opportunity to verbalize their ideas, get peer feedback, and explore two relevant databases. At the end of the activity we had a short discussion about database coverage and students shared their findings. My goal for this activity was to have students experience first hand why they need to use multiple databases when doing research, instead of taking a "Google search" approach and assume all the necessary material will appear in a single database.

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Assessment and Review:

In order to assess student learning, I asked questions throughout the lecture and collected the worksheet. The responses I saw on the worksheet showed me that students were able to 1) navigate to the relevant databases, 2) read the interface and article records in order to find the needed information, and 3) find articles relevant to their topics. During the activity I overheard students discussing the databases and how they differed, and after the activity many students chose to continue working on the worksheet rather than do independent research. At the end of the session, some students asked to take photos of their worksheet, which I think implies they found it useful. During independent research many students remembered to mine the search terms, and narrow or broaden using the strategies I modeled.

Overall, I believe I accomplished my intended learning objectives, and also fulfilled my aim of keeping students engaged in the subject. Developing the worksheet was a great experience for me, and pushed my creativity and instructional abilities further than a typical information session. In the future I will continue to incorporate partnering and hands on activities as a transition before independent research, because I believe it made the students more comfortable using the database and expressing their questions with their classmates. If I were to have more time to continue to project, I would be interested in considering other questions I could have asked on the worksheet in order to get the students to dive even deeper into the databases. I think my presentation of the information and the activity I designed went very well, and I am satisfied that the students left with an understanding of how they can use these tools to their advantage, or how to reach out to a librarian if they need help.

Works Cited

Barr, Robert B., and Tagg, John. "From Teaching to Learning - a New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education." *Change* 27, no. 6 (1995): 12-25.

Chickering, Arthur W., and Zelda F. Gamson. "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education." *AAHE Bulletin*, 1987, 2-7.

Elmborg, James. "Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice." *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 2 (2006): 192-99.

¹ Elmborg, James. "Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice." *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 2 (2006): 198.

² Barr, Robert B., and Tagg, John. "From Teaching to Learning - a New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education." *Change* 27, no. 6 (1995): 21.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Chickering, Arthur W., and Zelda F. Gamson. "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education." *AAHE Bulletin*, 1987: 2.