



Beyond Embedded: Creating an Online-Learning Community Integrating Information Literacy and Composition Courses



Mary Beth Burgoyne¹, Kim Chuppa-Cornell^{*}

Library Faculty, Chandler-Gilbert Community College, 2626 E. Pecos Road, Chandler, AZ 5225, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 January 2015

Accepted 1 May 2015

Available online 23 May 2015

Keywords:

Information literacy
Learning communities
Library instruction
Assessment

ABSTRACT

This article recounts our experience developing an embedded librarian model which evolved into a fully integrated learning community, pairing online composition with an online information literacy credit-bearing course. Our assessment of student success measures indicate that the positive trends we found under the embedded librarian program have continued to improve under the formal learning community model. We discuss the results of our qualitative and quantitative measures of the program's impact on student success and share our recommendations for further developments.

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INTRODUCTION

While sitting in meetings, attending conferences, reading journal articles, and sharing with colleagues, library faculty often hear a common theme regarding the challenges of defining their role to their larger campus communities. Many library faculty spend the majority of their day teaching, yet their classroom experience may not be recognized as such by colleagues in other disciplines because the teaching occurs outside of credit-bearing courses. These challenges have led library faculty to seek new partnerships and opportunities, such as being embedded in courses as a co-instructor and teaching information literacy in independent, credit-bearing courses. This article recounts our experience developing an embedded librarian model which evolved into a fully integrated learning community, pairing online composition with an online information literacy credit-bearing course. Our assessment of student success measures and pre–post test results indicate that the positive trends we found under the embedded librarian program have increased overall under the new learning community model.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While we first learned of the concept of an “embedded librarian” at a local higher education technology conference in 2009, the term has occurred in the literature for a number of years. Barbara Dewey (2004) explains the term derived from its recent use in journalism, referring to reporters joining military units to bring war correspondents closer to

the action. Many authors have written about their experiences being embedded in various classes and other campus initiatives as a means of bringing information literacy closer to the students in a more sustained and robust way than available during a general library tour or a one-time library instruction class (Hall, 2008; Owens, 2008; Ramsay & Kinnie, 2006). Other scholars may not use the term “embedded librarian,” but they describe similar kinds of extended teaching collaborations in which interdisciplinary faculty co-plan, co-teach, and co-assess information literacy curriculum designed for a targeted class. Often the lessons occur over multiple class periods strategically scheduled throughout the course of the semester to maximize deep learning and retention (Mazella, Heidel, & Ke, 2011; Sanabria, 2013; Victor, Otto, & Mutschler, 2013). In some cases, the authors refer to this kind of extended teaching experience as a “learning community” either due to the high level of collaboration across the interdisciplinary faculty involved in the class (Barone & Weathers, 2004); or due to the inclusion of library faculty in an already established learning community of linked content courses as a means of integrating information literacy into the curriculum (Voelker, 2006).

However, our review of the literature found few articles discussing the integration of for-credit information literacy courses with other credit-bearing content courses in a formal learning community model, which is often defined as a cohort of students who are co-enrolled in multiple courses and the curriculum is intertwined to be mutually supportive (Arp, Woodard, Lindstrom, & Shonrock, 2006). Vickery Kaye Lebbin (2006) describes her experience of teaching a three-credit information literacy course paired with a composition course around the theme of research and writing. Lebbin does not include much information on the development of the learning community or about working with her partner instructor; the focus of her article is on assessing the effectiveness of the model in terms of students' perceptions of their

^{*} Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 480 732 7022; fax: +1 480 857 5136.

E-mail addresses: mary.burgoyne@cg.edu (M.B. Burgoyne),

kim.chuppa-cornell@cg.edu (K. Chuppa-Cornell).

¹ Tel.: +1 480 988 8125; fax: +1 480 857 5136.

learning and their experiences in the learning community. She concludes that students grew in the information literacy areas measured and demonstrated clear appreciation for the learning community structure in their qualitative comments. For example, many students described the value of applying their research assignments directly to their composition assignments and argued that neither course would be as effective if taught separately.

BACKGROUND—STUDENT POPULATION AND LIBRARY INSTRUCTION AT CGCC

The design of our learning community model grew out of the collaborative nature of our college culture. Chandler–Gilbert Community College (CGCC) is one of ten colleges in the Maricopa County Community College District (MCCCD) and has a student annualized headcount of 19,297, drawing students primarily from east valley communities in the Phoenix area. According to the *CGCC Fact Book (2014)*, 70% of the CGCC student body is part-time credit seeking, and 76% of the student population is 24 years of age and under. Twenty-three percent of the students take at least one online course, either as hybrid or completely online.

Students who plan on earning a degree or taking college-level English, Reading, or Math for transfer are required to take placement tests and meet with an advisor before registering for classes. However, because MCCCD practices open enrollment, mandated or prescriptive first-year courses exist only for students needing college-readiness courses. Consequently, students often postpone the courses they perceive to be the hardest or most time-consuming, until their final semesters before transferring to another institution or graduating from CGCC. Required freshman composition, ENG 101 and ENG 102, often falls into this category. Students do not realize that the foundational rhetoric, reading, and information literacy skills learned in freshman composition are expected and applied in their other college courses, regardless of discipline.

From its beginning, the library at Chandler–Gilbert Community College has sought to focus on information literacy instruction and faculty partnerships across disciplines. Library faculty established especially strong relationships with composition faculty teaching the research-writing course ENG 102. While we were connecting well with the face-to-face classes, we realized we had not developed an effective strategy to partner with our online ENG 102 faculty. Our direction came when we attended a local higher education technology conference in spring 2009 and heard two colleagues from a sister college present their experience developing an embedded librarian program. While their focus was developmental students and face-to-face classes, we recognized that this concept would work well online. That summer library faculty and online ENG 102 faculty met to co-create our embedded librarian program, which we called “Personal Librarian.”

From fall 2009 to spring 2013, all sections of online ENG 102 included a “Personal Librarian.” Library faculty and online composition faculty co-designed the curriculum, which included common elements such as a shared pre/post-test assessment and rubric; online discussions led by library faculty; grading responsibilities for library faculty assessing students’ research; shared instructional videos created by the library faculty; and a source-evaluation assignment (a “CRAP”-test). Fortunately, we were able to establish fairly stable partners over the semesters, which included both full and part-time composition faculty and only full-time library faculty. The group met twice a year, to review the curriculum and set the upcoming learning objectives based on the most recent assessment findings (for more information, see [Kadavy & Chuppa-Cornell, 2011](#)). Overall, we found that the program was successful in that students’ works demonstrated a stronger use of more academic sources and their retention rates increased from 57.6% average retention prior to the “Personal Librarian” program to 65% average retention after the inclusion of a library faculty in every online ENG 102 course.

Although these successes were promising, library faculty worried about the scalability of the program—how many courses could one

library faculty member be embedded in effectively? In fall 2012, our division chair suggested formalizing the relationship by transforming the embedded model into a learning community, pairing online ENG 102 with a 1-credit online information literacy course, LBS 201 “Electronic Resources: Concepts and Skills.” This model would address the issue of scalability in that part-time library faculty could participate as the instructor of the credit course. In addition, the timing corresponded well with an institutional increase in support for learning communities and the growing body of research showing the positive effects of library instruction on student success measures, such as GPA, persistence and graduation rates ([Cook, 2014](#); [Emmons & Wilkinson, 2011](#); [Wong & Cmor, 2011](#)).

The two departments met and agreed that all online ENG 102 courses would become a 4-credit learning community, paired with the 1-credit online LBS 201, “Electronic Resources: Concepts and Skills” beginning fall 2013. The teaching partners participated in a day-long learning community workshop in summer 2013 to begin transforming elements of the embedded librarian model into this new, more robust format. The LBS 201/ENG 102 4-credit, 16 week learning community was offered with four sections in fall 2013 and five sections in spring 2014. Effective in fall 2014, the IFS, Information Studies, prefix replaced the LBS prefix. IFS 110 “Critical Research for College Success” with updated learning outcomes superseded LBS 201, and four sections of IFS 110/ENG 102 were offered in fall 2014.

Both the IFS (LBS) and ENG classes adhere to established standards for their curriculum. IFS 110 has followed the [Association of College and Research Libraries’ \(ACRL, 2000\)](#) Information Literacy Competency “Standards, Performance Indicators, and Outcomes” and now will be guided by the [ACRL’s Information Literacy Frameworks \(2015\)](#); likewise, the online ENG 102 faculty follow district-level competencies, while often shaping their instructional design and focus for distinctive student cohort interests, such as veterans, STEM and public policy.

The library and composition partners have worked together to create an integrated curriculum in which “instruction is taught by discipline area instructors, with the academic skills serving as a means of developing critical thinking about disciplinary content” ([Perin, 2011](#), p. 1). Library faculty focus their curriculum on scaffolded learning customized to the ENG 102 cohorts, designing different activities and formative assessments while still subscribing to information literacy performance and outcomes standards. The integrated curriculum includes discussion boards, student reflections, peer reviews of source selections, annotated bibliographies, and common pre–post tests across the different sections of the learning community. For example, one brainstorming activity requires students to find an encyclopedia article in the library databases on their proposed topic and use the content of the article to generate a graphic through the online tool Wordle, which produces a visual of the article’s most prevalent words. Students analyze the graphic for synonyms or related subtopics to use for continued research in preparation for writing their essay in the online ENG 102 class. Another activity requires students to research a classmate’s topic and to find a relevant full-text journal article for him/her. The students share their findings through the discussion board, including their search strategy, the article PDF, and their rationale for the article’s relevance. This activity broadens students’ understanding of their topics and potential research strategies in preparation for writing an argument essay in the ENG 102 class.

In order to effectively support this integrated instructional environment, the partners meet multiple times each semester to review and assess the information literacy and rhetoric curriculum, outcomes, assessments, and learning activities, as well as communicate throughout the semester. Anecdotal evidence from our meetings indicated that students were evolving into stronger writers and exhibiting research rigor with source selection, evaluation and synthesis. We did not have as many students withdraw from the courses, and it seemed that more students were successfully completing the courses with higher grades. However, we wanted to gather institutional data as

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