Meeting Them Where They Are: Library Instruction for Today’s Students in the World Civilizations Course

Christopher V. Hollister

QUERY SHEET

This page lists questions we have about your paper. The numbers displayed at left can be found in the text of the paper for reference. In addition, please review your paper as a whole for correctness.

"There are no Editor Queries for this paper."

TABLE OF CONTENTS LISTING

The table of contents for the journal will list your paper exactly as it appears below:

Meeting Them Where They Are: Library Instruction for Today’s Students in the World Civilizations Course

Christopher V. Hollister
Meeting Them Where They Are: Library Instruction for Today’s Students in the World Civilizations Course

Christopher V. Hollister

ABSTRACT. The world civilizations course is an increasingly integral component of undergraduate curricula in the United States. History instruction literature reveals much discussion about desired learning objectives for students in the course. Given today’s complex educational environment, meeting those objectives can be a challenge. Instructors’ frustrations are implied, and often expressly stated, regarding the poor quality of their students’ research skills. This has an impact on instructors’ perceptions and design of the course. As a solution, the author of this paper discusses faculty-librarian collaboration to integrate library instruction into the University at Buffalo’s world civilizations curriculum. A multifaceted approach is described, which combines traditional, contemporary, and novel instructional techniques. Preliminary data collected to assess the usefulness and effectiveness of this approach are reviewed.

KEYWORDS. Faculty-librarian collaboration, history instruction, information literacy, Library instruction, outreach, world civilizations

Christopher V. Hollister is Information Literacy Librarian at the University at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY 14260 (E-mail: cvh2@buffalo.edu).
OVERVIEW

The world civilizations course goes by many names: ancient civilizations, ancient history, global history, world history, and so on. The course is sometimes split into two separate, semester-long classes based on periods of history (e.g., Prehistory to 1500 CE, and 1500 CE to present) or regions of the world (e.g., western civilizations, and nonwestern civilizations). Typically, the course is a general education offering, and often it is a requirement for all undergraduate students.

The most commonly expressed objective for the world civilizations course is for students to think critically about course subject material, and the most common method of having students do so is the assignment of an essay or a term paper that involves research and reflection. When the course is a general education requirement, research ability and critical thinking are often the competencies listed as core learning objectives. Such is the case with the University at Buffalo. The author will discuss this below.

As much as ever, today’s students require assistance with research and reflection, and faculty-librarian collaboration can be an elegant solution for helping them to develop these essential academic skills. The fact that students need instruction in this area is not a new phenomenon. However, students in the Internet age come to higher education with different needs and expectations. They have new and evolving learning styles, which have a significant impact on instructional design. Instruction must be targeted to meet students where they are, and educational partnerships are touted as an effective approach for doing this. As Emmick (1989, 381) writes, it is necessary for history teachers and librarians “to work together to build a library educational process that will benefit both partners as well as the student.” Given today’s complex and rapidly evolving educational environment, Emmick’s assertion is as true as ever.

LITERATURE REVIEW

World civilizations teachers voice their desire to have students think critically or “historically” about course subject material (Warren, Memory, & Bolinger 2004). For this, they assert the necessity of
research, immersion in source materials, and reflection. Particular emphasis is given to the use of primary source materials (Drake & Brown 2003; Hsiung 2004; McWilliams 2004; Tobin 2001). As Rakoff (2003, 29) writes, “If you want to get your undergraduate students engaged in the study of history, there is no substitute for getting them to do their own research using original sources.” Still, a review of the history instruction literature reveals much faculty frustration regarding the poor quality of their students’ research skills.

According to Dobbs (2005, 33), “For many undergraduates, the major research project requires skills and commitment they may not possess or involves them in a process about which they are not entirely comfortable.” Olwell and Delph (2004, 22) describe their prototypical history students who “lurch along nearly unaided toward producing a paper in the final weeks of the semester.” Sipress (2004, 351) discusses “the failure of many students, even bright and motivated students, to provide concrete evidence to support their assertions about the past.” Interestingly, the authors cited above do offer case studies and some useful suggestions for overcoming such obstacles. However, faculty-librarian collaboration and library instruction are often overlooked as part of the solution.

History instruction literature does provide some excellent examples of faculty-librarian partnerships and course integration of library instruction (Carlson & Yungblut 1998; Fisher & Morgan 2003; Johnson & Spitzer 2005; Tucker, Rosenberg, Swierenga, & D’Aniello 1984). Indeed, some of these works are written or co-written by librarians. Julie Still (1997), for instance, suggests useful ways that history teachers may wish to structure their students’ research paper assignments, so as to make the best use of library resources. Library literature provides a few additional examples (Elliot 1989; Fabian 2001). In addition, library literature provides a wealth of case studies that document faculty and librarians uniting to integrate library instruction into the curricula of many academic disciplines (Rockman 2004). Evidence of faculty-librarian collaboration in the world civilizations course, however, is not overwhelming. Emmick (1989, 375) argues that history faculty and librarians, once close academic allies, have grown apart and that it is essential for the two parties to “rebuild the commitment and close productive partnership that once existed.” The author of this paper will demonstrate how this is being done at the University at Buffalo.
THE WORLD CIVILIZATIONS COURSE

Background

The University at Buffalo’s world civilizations course is a general education requirement for all undergraduate students. It is a two-semester course; the first semester is UGC-111: World Civilizations, Prehistory to 1500, and the second semester is UGC-112: World Civilizations, 1500 to Present. (In the class catalog, the course is listed as World Civilizations 1 and World Civilizations 2.) There are 13–16 sections of the course offered each fall and spring semester, and each section has 175–225 registered students. Each section is taught by one faculty member and a team of teaching assistants. Sections meet three times weekly; twice in a full-sized lecture hall led by the faculty member and once in recitations of 20–24 students led by teaching assistants.

There is no world civilizations department. Instead, there is a World Civilizations Committee under the umbrella of the university’s General Education Program, composed of faculty members from a broad range of academic departments including anthropology, architecture, art history, classics, comparative literature, geography, history, philosophy, political science, psychology, and urban planning. The committee meets once a month during the fall and spring semesters “to discuss course management and scholarly topics as they pertain to the teaching of World Civ” (Fabian 2001, 151). Teaching assistants are strongly encouraged to attend these meetings, and often do. Historically, a librarian has been appointed to the committee. The author of this paper is the current library appointee.

Since world civilizations is a general education course, it must meet the program’s minimum guidelines for student performance. These guidelines include two core competencies: critical thinking and information management (State University of New York [SUNY] 2000). For critical thinking, students must demonstrate the ability to “identify, analyze, and evaluate arguments as they occur in their own or other’s work; and develop well-reasoned arguments” (SUNY p. 2). For information management, students must “understand and use basic research techniques; and locate, evaluate and synthesize information from a variety of sources” (SUNY p. 2). The insistence of these competencies provides the impetus and the opportunity for faculty-librarian collaboration.
Challenges

Sections of the course are not standardized in terms of syllabi, textbooks, modules, or coursework. Faculty come to the world civilizations enterprise from a broad range of academic disciplines and world experiences, which has a significant impact on their interpretations of world history, their selections of course materials, their teaching styles, and their expectations for students. Moreover, faculty teach the course on a rotating basis. So, there is no single model of faculty-librarian collaboration that can be applied from section to section, or even from semester to semester. Faculty have widely differing views on the role of library instruction in their sections of the course, and the extent to which library research is required for coursework. They also differ in terms of their ability or willingness to collaborate with the libraries. As a result, student access to library instruction varies from section to section.

Teaching assistants for the course are graduate students who, like faculty, come from a broad range of academic disciplines. Their appointments are for one academic year. Although some are appointed for a second year, the nature of their time on campus, as students, is transient. Also, teaching assistants come to the course with little if any teaching experience. Some of them are given specific instructions by the faculty they serve under, and others are given complete academic freedom. As with faculty, there is no single collaborative solution that can be applied.

The number of world civilizations students every semester poses a significant challenge in terms of library instruction. During the 2005 fall semester, 3,600 students were registered in the course; for the 2006 spring semester, there were 3,300. Furthermore, as a general education requirement, the course is primarily populated by underclassmen. During the 2005–2006 academic year, 81% of all world civilizations students were freshmen. It is generally understood that this population of students is most in need of library instruction.

Student attitudes toward the world civilizations course are generally not positive. Many do not understand the nature of general education courses as preparation for their academic careers, and they view the world civilizations course as merely a repeat of their high school history classes. Some students simply resent the course as a requirement. And some students, accustomed to smaller classroom environments and more personalized instruction, do not adapt well
to class sizes on the average of 200 students. When combined with students’ regard for the library as “a place to be avoided” (Tucker et al. 1984, 391), providing useful and effective library instruction can be a significant challenge.

Solutions

Aggressive librarian outreach is required to contact and collaborate with the large, widely scattered, and ever-changing number of world civilizations faculty and teaching assistants each semester. It is the author’s experience that librarians are not always, but often, the initiators of proposed partnerships. Historically, the first World Civilizations Committee meeting of the fall semester is well attended by faculty and teaching assistants. The author presents at this meeting each year to discuss the educational role of the library, and to report on the previous year’s successful faculty-librarian collaborations. Follow-up invitations to partner with the library are sent via a courseware discussion list to which all world civilizations instructors are subscribed. In addition, the author contacts new faculty and teaching assistants individually to meet face-to-face. The combination of these three outreach activities generates most of each semester’s new librarian-teacher partnerships. Prior arrangements are made for instructors with whom the author already has established working relationships.

The provision of library instruction is multifaceted, reflecting the broad range of faculty expectations and preferences, and the students’ rapidly changing learning styles. Methods include traditional librarian presentations and librarian-led working classes. It is noteworthy that University at Buffalo librarians are trained and skilled in the use of active learning techniques in the classroom. More contemporary and novel instructional methods include course- and assignment-specific Web guides, course- and assignment-specific courseware guides, and fine-grained guides targeted to world civilizations students through their personalized library channel on the University at Buffalo’s Web portal. The author collaborates with administrators of the General Education Program to create a teaching CD-ROM that includes a suite of library resources and services targeted to world civilizations instructors. Also, the author provides library instruction and research assistance in person, by telephone,
Many faculty and teaching assistants prefer the traditional one-shot model of library instruction, where the librarian is invited to present during one class session on the effective use of library resources. Some instructors use the one-shot session for their full 200-plus student lectures, but most prefer to use it on the 20–24 student recitation level. For the latter, sessions are scheduled to meet in networked computer classrooms, allowing students to gain important hands-on experience using electronic library resources. More important, University at Buffalo librarians fervently believe in the usefulness, effectiveness, and necessity of active learning in the classroom. Regardless of class size, librarians are adept at employing active learning techniques to engage and involve world civilizations students in their own learning.

Instruction is always targeted to specific research assignments, giving students further impetus to absorb and retain information from the lessons. Timing is also critical. The author works with instructors to make certain students understand their assignments and have their research topics selected before library sessions. Sessions are also scheduled for when students are actually working on their assignments, which is typically later during the semester. During the 2005–2006 academic year, the author coordinated one-shot library instruction for 6 full 200-plus student sessions and for 34 recitation level classes, reaching an estimated 1,200 students.

Each semester, there are a number of world civilizations faculty and teaching assistants who prefer, for reasons of practicality or instructional design, to teach the course without a formal library instruction component. Often, these teachers provide their own research instruction. The author collaborates with the office of the Associate Dean for General Education each academic year to create a CD-ROM, Tools for Teaching (2005). This product, distributed to all world civilizations instructors, provides a targeted suite of useful teaching and library resources. The author’s contribution is intended to promote the educational role of the library, to encourage instructional partnerships, and to provide library resources necessary for instructors to guide their students.

The author works with world civilizations faculty to create and maintain course- and assignment-specific Web guides. Separate course guides are maintained for UGC-111: World Civilizations,
Prehistory to 1500 (University at Buffalo Libraries, 2006a), and for UGC-112: World Civilizations, 1500 to Present (University at Buffalo Libraries, 2006b). These are used by the author for instructional purposes, and they are intended to assist students in getting started with their research projects. Formerly, these guides were static HTML files, and their usage was easily tracked. They are database-driven now, which makes tracking their use difficult. Ongoing communication between the author, faculty, and students is required to assess the usefulness and effectiveness of these guides.

Assignment-specific Web guides are created each semester at the request of individual instructors, and for the purpose of assisting students with more targeted research instruction. This has become a preferred instructional method among many world civilizations faculty members. Typically, they will link to these guides from their course Web sites or their courseware sites (e.g., Blackboard). Some instructors invite the author to their classes to teach from the guides, and others provide their own teaching. The author meets with instructors, preferably before each semester, to discuss the content of assignment-specific guides, and instructors preview the guides before they are made publicly available. Since they are relevant only to specific class assignments, these guides are removed from the library Web server following the end of each semester. Examples from the 2005–2006 academic year include guides on how to find, identify, and use primary source materials, how to research the impact of historical inventions, and how to compare and contrast the origins and the spread of world religions. Each guide provides directions for doing research, suggested sources materials, and the author’s contact information for further assistance. The increasing popularity of guides targeted to specific assignments suggests a measure of usefulness and effectiveness.

The author collaborates with the administrator of MyUB—the University at Buffalo’s Web portal—to provide another layer of library instruction for world civilizations students on their personalized campus portal pages. MyUB has several channels built into it, including MyLibrary, which is used for pushing targeted library resources based on students’ academic status and their areas of study. On average, 80–85% of world civilizations students each semester are freshmen. And, on average, that figure represents roughly 80–85% of the entire freshman class. So, targeted library resources for world
civilizations students, such as the guides noted above, are pushed to the MyLibrary channel for all freshman students. User statistics indicate that the MyLibrary page was visited 14,725 times during the 2004 fall semester. This usage included 458 clicks on the subject guide for World Civilizations, Prehistory to 1500. With 150-plus resources available to all students on the MyLibrary page, the world civilizations Web guide was the eleventh most used during that semester (Hollister & Jarvis 2005). Albeit the nature of this use is not known, the numbers suggest another measure of success in meeting students where they are.

One-on-one instruction is often preferred by students and faculty alike. The author’s contact information and availability appears on course- and assignment-specific guides, on students’ personalized portal pages, on courseware sites, and on syllabi. World civilizations instructors are frequently reminded to share this information in class. The author has office hours for face-to-face, telephone, e-mail, and instant messaging instruction. During the 2005–2006 academic year, the author held 113 one-on-one research instruction sessions with world civilizations students: 57 in person, 47 by e-mail, 6 via instant messaging, and 3 by telephone.

The libraries’ commitment to world civilizations students extends to the reference librarians, too, who provide a significant amount of one-on-one instruction at the reference desk, on the phone, through e-mail, and via instant messaging. The author provides e-mail alerts on a reference librarian listserv regarding the specifics of research assignments and instructors’ preferences for source materials. Reference statistics for this enterprise are difficult to track. Each semester, librarians document their reference interactions for a designated two-week period. The multidisciplinary nature of world civilizations coursework means that these interactions are often recorded for the disciplines of classics, geography, history, philosophy, political science, and others. Still, during the two-week sampling period of the fall 2005 semester, there were 47 recorded reference interactions with world civilizations students. During the spring semester of 2006, that number jumped to 76. Given the likelihood that a number of world civilizations reference interactions were recorded for other academic disciplines, and that this was only a two-week sample, it can be confidently stated that the libraries’ instructional commitment to the world civilizations course is considerable.
FACULTY FEEDBACK

Assessing the effectiveness of library instruction in its many forms is difficult, as noted above. As such, the author surveys world civilizations faculty at the end of each academic year. Given a general sense of survey fatigue that is present for faculty and librarians alike, the author conducts this survey through e-mail and asks only the following:

“I have selected each of you for this e-mail message because of our work together during this academic year. Would you please be kind enough to comment on the provision of library instruction for your world civilizations students this year? It is important to note that this is not about me. Instead, it is about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of library instruction in terms of the desired learning outcomes for your students. The University Libraries wish to provide useful, relevant, and high-quality instructional services. Your comments and suggestions are crucial to that end. As ever, I am grateful for your generous attention to this matter.”

The 2005–2006 survey was e-mailed to nine world civilizations faculty members. There were eight respondents to the survey, and their comments were universally positive. The following are most representative of those comments:

“I am confident that the instruction my students have received from [University at Buffalo] librarians has been an essential ingredient in helping the students develop research abilities and improve the research papers I require in my classes. Not only do they benefit from the classes held in the library but also from the bibliographies and databases you and other staff have compiled. Were any reviewers to consult the paper topics I have assigned and looked at the resources that the library has developed, I am sure they would recognize the value of our collaboration.”

“I have been teaching World Civs I and II for many years now, and I am happy to testify to the improvement in the quality of student scholarship since I elected to integrate library
seminars directly into my course. The quality of research topics has improved greatly, and overall research quality has improved measurably. Since I have been utilizing a highly similar topical requirement in this repetitive, survey type course, I can see clearly the improvements year by year over a five-year span.”

“I have come to reply upon the quality of [the] libraries instruction for these students each year, and would hate to think about teaching the course without this important support component.”

“Library instruction is a central part of World Civ because three-quarters of the enrollment is new freshmen and undergraduate work is a new experience for which they are unprepared. For the TAs, library instruction is a way to strengthen their teaching by guiding students through required research and writing assignments. For some new TAs, the assistance is particularly important because they also don’t have the experience to structure library research. For the faculty, library instruction assists with matching assignments with feasibility of research and grading the finished product. All in all, a key part of the course.”

**CONCLUSIONS**

The world civilizations course is an increasingly important component of undergraduate curricula. Instructors face many challenges in getting today’s students to engage and think critically about course subject material. Research and reflection are necessary for genuinely learning and understanding course material. These are often identified as core competencies and required learning objectives for academic departments or programs. Such is true for the world civilizations course discussed in this paper. However, students lack these academic skills. Creating faculty-librarian partnerships to integrate research instruction is a solution that makes sense for all parties, but most important, for the students. As Haywood (1969, 295) writes, “The teacher historian undoubtedly can give meaning to approaching history from a standpoint of attitudinal objectives; the librarian can be invaluable as the student begins ‘doing’ history: As he handles the material, the librarian becomes essential. The historian creates
the climate, the librarian molds the craftsman. It can be a healthy partnership.”

Identifying core competencies and learning objectives for academic disciplines or areas of study is suggested as a sound approach for initiating faculty-librarian collaboration. Though the term “information literacy” is not commonly used outside the library environment, the concepts frequently certainly are. This approach to integrating information literacy on a curricular level should be the basis of additional research.

Identifying core concepts and learning objectives can also inform the content and various methods of providing library instruction. A multifaceted approach for providing instruction is suggested to meet today’s students where they are—in person, in the classroom, on the Web, on courseware sites, through e-mail, via instant messaging, and on personalized Web space. As demonstrated above, no one method will usefully and effectively reach all students. However, this approach provides the best opportunity to reach as many students as possible.

Received: 10/31/06
Revised: 12/12/06
Accepted: 12/18/06

REFERENCES


