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Maureen Barry

Wright State University - Main Campus, maureen.barry@wright.edu

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Librarians as Partners in Service-Learning Courses (Part I)

Maureen Barry, Wright State University

Service-learning is a high-impact educational practice that engages students (Kuh, 2008) and is a growing trend in higher education (Campus Compact, 2011). In 2008, my co-instructor and fellow library staff member, Cheryl Lauricella, and I incorporated service-learning in our for-credit information literacy (IL) course because we recognized that connecting information literacy to the real world through service-learning would lead to increased skill retention and engagement with the curriculum (Barry, 2011). Before this realization, when I taught my first few for-credit information literacy courses as a new professional, I asked my students to research a hobby or something related to their major. I thought that choosing a topic of interest to them would be the best way for them to engage with the course. While it was helpful, inevitably a good portion of students conducted research about such weighty topics as Ohio State University's football team. No offense to the Buckeyes, but I began to realize there must be some way to make better use of the students' research. After talking to a faculty member on campus who teaches several service-learning courses, it occurred to me that I could incorporate service-learning in the information literacy course. Based on the success of that IL course, I took the initiative to incorporate service-learning into other parts of my job at Wright State University (WSU) as coordinator of library instruction for first-year seminars and composition courses.

Drawing from my experiences at WSU as a service-learning instructor and librarian-partner for two service-learning projects, in this article I discuss two case studies that describe the librarian's role in service-learning courses.

An Overview of Service-Learning

Service-learning is defined as "a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities" (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2011). It is not volunteerism, nor is it an internship or practicum; service-learning is different than other types of experiential education in that it "is a structured learning process" (Burns, 1998, p. 39) and it is tied closely to course curriculum.

For further clarification, the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (2011) offers this example:

If school students collect trash out of an urban streambed, they are providing a valued service to the community as volunteers. If school students collect trash from an urban streambed, analyze their findings to determine the possible sources of pollution, and share the results with residents of the neighborhood, they are engaging in service-learning. In the service-learning example, in

addition to providing an important service to the community, students are learning about water quality and laboratory analysis, developing an understanding of pollution issues, and practicing communications skills. They may also reflect on their personal and career interests in science, the environment, public policy or other related areas. Both the students and the community have been involved in a transformative experience.

As this example illustrates, service-learning partnerships should be mutually beneficial for the institution and the community partner. Reflection is another integral component of service-learning experiences in that it ties the service to the learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999).

The Librarian's Role in a Service-Learning Course

A wide variety of librarian-faculty collaborations are described in the literature, particularly in terms of library instruction or information literacy instruction for composition courses, first-year seminars, distance-learning online-only courses and the like (Mounce, 2011; Gaspar and Wetzel, 2009; Raspa and Ward, 2000; Frazier, 2006). Yet only a handful of these articles describe librarian-faculty partnerships in service-learning courses. Riddle (2003) provided some theoretical models of engaged library instruction in service-learning courses, and Nutefall (2009) described her experiences as librarian-partner for a service-learning first-year composition course at George Washington University. Likewise, there is no shortage of literature about faculty and community partner collaborations in the service-learning literature, but very few articles describe the librarian's role in a service-learning course. One of these rare examples, Hernandez and Knight (2010), described one such course in which the librarian (Knight) helped students research policies and other issues that affected the community partners for a service-learning political science course. Thus, the work I will discuss in the following sections is relatively uncharted territory and will allow others to learn more about the roles of academic librarians in service-learning courses.

Case Study 1: The librarian becomes a partner in an existing service-learning course

In 2010, I became librarian-partner for a service-learning composition course, ENG 102. This partnership began because I sent the Nutefall article to an English instructor, Stephanie Dickey, who regularly incorporated service-learning into her composition courses. She enthusiastically agreed to try a similar model for the upcoming fall quarter.

Dickey required her students to write analysis and persuasive papers and present their research to stakeholders, as

they would be required to do in any of her composition courses; however, in her service-learning course, these documents and presentations would be related to the course community partner, in this case, first-time partner the Friendship Food Pantry, located on WSU's campus.

In the summer of 2010, Dickey and I met with the AmeriCorps VISTA member responsible for coordinating the planning and daily operations of the food pantry, Rebecca Fensler, to plan the research components of the course. Fensler had unique information needs. Since the campus food pantry was not yet open, the questions that she wanted the students to answer included:

- Why does Wright State need a food pantry? How will it help students?
- How do we educate the campus and community about the need for the food pantry?
- What potential community and campus partners could we approach for help?
- How can we promote the pantry to people who might need it and others who may donate to contribute to its success?
- What policies will we need to implement to ensure the pantry's success?

In addition to the required writing assignments and academic research that tied closely to the community partner's needs, students also completed on-site service hours during which they coordinated food drives and shelved donations in the temporary food storage area. The purpose was to provide the students with a more direct and tangible connection to the community partner.

Dickey added my name to the syllabus, scheduled class in the library on two occasions, and required each student to meet with me (or one of my colleagues) individually. In addition, Dickey invited me to take part in reflection activities on the class blog. During the first instruction section, I taught the students how to use Google Advance Search features to find web sites in the .edu domain about other campus food pantries. I also demonstrated some limiters so that students could find food insecurity statistics on government web sites. Then, we dove deeper into the library databases during their second visit. Students found news articles about other campus food pantries in LexisNexis Academic, and information about the broader topic of food insecurity in the social work and sociology databases.

In addition to the research assistance I provided, the students also interacted with other library services. They toured the library multimedia lab (the Student Technology Assistance Center or STAC) and the Presentation Practice Room. A STAC staff member, Beth Anderson, encouraged them to create videos for their presentations and to use the Presentation Practice Room to rehearse.

At the end of the quarter, Dickey and Fensler invited Anderson and I, along with other campus stakeholders including potential donors, decision makers and other department representatives involved in making the pantry a reality, to attend the students' presentations. Throughout the service-learning project, the students were aware that their work and research would be presented to a campus-wide audience. They were highly motivated to succeed since their work would affect the campus community.

These ENG 102 students had a fully-integrated library experience as they used multiple library services throughout the quarter. It was a time-intensive endeavor, but it was meaningful for all involved – the students, instructor, food pantry coordinator and myself. It was, without a doubt, the most positive and extensive interaction I have experienced with undergraduates aside from those in my own IL courses. My hunch is that most librarian-partners for service-learning courses may not be as fully integrated into the course as I was in this instance. However, my experiences are applicable even for those librarians who only meet once or twice with service-learning students. Partnerships in service-learning courses are in some ways different than typical librarian-faculty collaborations because the students experience unique information needs related to very specific populations and community issues. Also, students are not submitting work for their instructors' eyes only, rather, the audience becomes the community. It is critical for a librarian in a service-learning course to understand the community partner, in addition to the course learning objectives, in order to successfully support the students and their information needs.

Case Study 2: The librarian approaches the instructor, community partner and the service-learning office in order to establish the service-learning partnership

As the Librarian for First-Year Students, I often struggle with what kind of introduction to the library would be most appropriate for new students. Research suggests that students pay attention to and retain more of library instruction sessions when they are tied to an assignment (Malenfant & Demers, 2004). However, first-year seminar courses at WSU do not require any research assignments. As such, most of my presentations featured library services, rather than information literacy skills. I thought, based on my experiences in my for-credit course, that requiring the students to research for a community partner would be a meaningful assignment, and therefore students would be more likely to retain the skills they learned. In 2010, I approached a campus colleague, Craig This, who teaches a first-year seminar course (UVC 101) and he agreed to pilot the project with me. In anticipation of this, I had already approached Project READ, a literacy agency, via email and the director agreed without hesitation to accept research provided by WSU students.

Next, I met with the faculty liaison to WSU's service-learning office, Sarah Twill, and she helped me develop a

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brief service-learning project that would introduce students to research, fit into one or two class sessions (in addition to homework) and benefit the community partner. She had used a similar project herself in one of the Social Work courses she taught.

The course I would be working with was UVC 101: Super Hero, Super Student, a comic book and super-hero themed one-credit first-year seminar. When This (the instructor) and I met with Project READ staff, we took with us the sample service project developed by Twill and one of her colleagues. The assignment required students to: 1) Research how comic books helped reluctant readers; 2) Create some sort of promotional material (a brochure or a poster, for example) to educate friends, coworkers, family or others about Project READ, and 3) Collect small monetary donations, if possible, from these friends, coworkers and family members to purchase comic books or graphic novels for Project READ. During the meeting, This, Project READ's director, and I determined that it would also be mutually beneficial if students compiled some resources for an annotated bibliography that addressed the questions: "What are the connections between comic books or graphic novels and literacy?" and "How do comic books promote literacy among reluctant readers of all ages?" The topic fit nicely within the theme of the UVC 101 course, giving students the best chance at retaining the information literacy skills they would practice while compiling resources for Project READ. As he continued planning his syllabus for the quarter, This realized that he might be pressed for time if he had to facilitate his UVC 101 students' success in both the annotated bibliography and also the promotional material with money collection parts of the project. He thus decided to as-

sign only the annotated bibliography to ensure that he would have enough class time throughout the quarter to cover other important course material. Project READ still benefitted from the promotional material and money collection part of the project because This assigned that to students in a different class he taught in sociology.

This scheduled two library visits for his UVC 101 course. The first visit included an introduction to library services just as we provided for all first-year seminar (UVC 101) classes. During the second visit, I helped the students navigate the scholarly education literature to find sources that answered Project READ's research questions. Since the education literature provides plenty of evidence to support the connections between comic books and literacy, one library instruction session was sufficient. Students used the sources they found during the library instruction session to complete the annotated bibliographies for homework. In the end, Project READ's staff was grateful for our help (as we did work a resource-constrained non-profit could not readily do on its own) and used the research students found to write grants and prove to potential donors the need for more comic books and graphic novels.

References

See reference list here, <http://bit.ly/AAf6GN>

In Part II, I compare and contrast how service-learning partnerships can be similar or different than typical faculty-librarian collaborations and offer advice for librarians who may have the opportunity to support or become a partner in service-learning courses.

(Mentoring Students...Continued from page 5)

MLIS students in experiences that cultivate their interest in and experience with information literacy instruction. Some librarians may understandably feel that students must take responsibility for their own professional success, and therefore that the onus is upon students to seek out mentors, but as noted earlier, we can't rely on students to know what they don't know. Regardless of whether you seek out students, or choose to allow students to seek you out, adopting a mentoring philosophy will help you to make a difference.

Conclusion

The benefits of mentoring relationships are many for all involved. There are currently 54 accredited library and information science master's degree programs throughout the United States and Canada (American Library Association, 2011), and with thousands of enthusiastic students motivated to build relationships and gain experience, opportunities for practitioners to mentor LIS students are abundant.

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