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Analysis: Information Literacy and Sociology 390

Dr. Heather Griffiths  
Spring 2017

When deciding what course would be a good fit with The Chestnut Library Fellows, I selected Sociology 390: Social Behavior and Interaction, because it is my model course. I developed the course from scratch, thoroughly assessed every aspect over time, and, when I want to highlight my work as an online instructor, this is the course I use. Integrating Information Literacy into Sociology 390: Social Behavior and Interaction offered potential benefits from both an instructional and student learning perspective. I found library reference materials invaluable tools that facilitated student learning in a number of ways. First, participating in the Chesnut Library Fellows program introduced me to library resources I was not previously familiar with. Second, creating an assignment focused on information literacy assisted my students in achieving overall course learning objectives. Third, participation in this pathway helped identify several areas in which my students need targeted and focused interventions.

I began with a standard online syllabus template and Canvas course. This template is common to all my online courses, but specific content related to supplemental course materials (such as PowerPoints), quizzes, exams, videos, and writing assignments vary by course subject. In Sociology 390, the major paper was a movie analysis. I replaced the movie analysis paper with a new annotated bibliography assignment designed to emphasize all five ACRL standards, which focus on the student ability to:

- Determine the nature and extent of information needed (ACRL (Standard One)
- Access the needed information effectively and efficiently (ACRL Standard Two)
- Evaluate information and its sources critically, and incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base (ACRL Standard Three)
- Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose (ACRL Standard Four)
- Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally. (ACRL Standard Five)

The ACRL standards aligned with two of my course learning outcomes, which focus on the student ability to:

- Differentiate between statements based on scientific (empirical) evidence and those based on opinions.
- Write clear, logical, analytic, and well-organized reports and papers.

The goal of the project was for students to locate, access, and critique relevant social psychological research to complete a twenty-five source annotated bibliography that conformed to the ASA style. After participating in the Chesnut Library Fellows Workshops in December 2016 I refined the project further, outlining a timeline for students to hit benchmarks throughout the semester. Students were required to review the online Information Literacy orientation, identify a topic for their annotated bibliography, and submit that topic for approval by February 4<sup>th</sup>. Of 32 students enrolled, 25 ultimately submitted a topic for approval, though not a single student submitted a topic by the official deadline of February 4<sup>th</sup>.

To gain familiarity with the American Sociological Association (ASA) reference style, students were instructed to review a reference website I routinely direct students to, called Purdue OWL. They were also instructed to review the Writing Resources available in the Chestnut Library LibGuides by

February 18<sup>th</sup>. While I was already familiar with Purdue OWL and used it as my preferred source of ASA citation and reference models, I did not realize that there was a Writing Resource LibGuide. I was pleased to find an additional resource for students, and as a result of my participation in the Library Fellows program, I will now include this resource in my online course and syllabus template.

By March 4<sup>th</sup>, students were supposed to submit draft annotations for at least one published book, one electronic journal library resource, and one Internet resource for my review. Only seven students submitted sample work, and about half waited until mid-April to begin this phase of the project. The final annotated bibliography was due on April 29<sup>th</sup>. Twenty-seven students turned in a paper, with fourteen students earning a final grade of 90% or higher. Six students turned in only the initial draft of one published book, one electronic journal library resource, and one Internet resource for my review. I carefully reviewed the assignment instructions and concluded that these six students had not reviewed the assignment instructions, assignment rubric, or library orientation. It is also unlikely that these six students had any contact with Ms. Amerson, since they were all equally puzzled at their poor grade. In an abundance of care, I requested two colleagues independently review the course and the assignment to make sure that a student taking the course could understand the assignment expectations. Both colleagues agreed that following the syllabus and completing the work according to the timeline would result in students receiving reminders that the final product was an annotated bibliography of at least 25 sources from at least two different sources.

Because Sociology 390 was an online class, I worked with Ms. Diana Amerson to develop an Information Literacy orientation suitable for use with distance learners. In addition, students were required to contact Ms. Amerson at least once over the course of the semester. Options for students to address this requirement included face-to-face contact, an e-mail dialogue, or a phone call.

I admit I had mixed success in persuading students to access and use the Information Literacy orientation or initiate contact with Ms. Amerson. Generally, those students who did not successfully complete these two assignments turned in annotated bibliographies that were below average. This suggests that both the Information Literacy orientation and contact with Ms. Amerson contributed to the success of the above average papers.

One way of assessing the impact of the course on information literacy in students was the Information Literacy pre-test/post-test assignment. Students were assigned the pre-test during the first week of classes. They were instructed to download the test from Canvas, complete the test, and turn in a digital copy of the test, by midnight on January 21. Of thirty-two students enrolled in the class, four did not submit the pre-test, nineteen scored 75% or higher (15/20 and higher), and nine scored less than 75% (14/20 and below).

Following the completion of the coursework related to information literacy, including the library orientation, contact with Ms. Amerson, review of the Purdue OWL website, review of assorted materials on the Charles W. Chestnutt Library website, and completion of the Annotated Bibliography assignment, students were instructed to complete the post-test, which was due at midnight on May 5<sup>th</sup>. Of the thirty-two students enrolled in the course, two did not submit the post-test, twenty-four scored 75% or higher (15/20 and higher), and six scored less than 75% (14/20 and below).

Clearly, there was some improvement over the course of the semester. The results were not as dramatic as I expected. It is possible that students in the Sociology department complete a higher than average number of research papers earlier in their college career, providing them with a higher

than average level of information literacy. It is also possible that the students enrolled in online classes are forced to rely more on digital resources, and thus get more practice with information literacy skills, than students enrolled in traditional face-to-face classes.

There is one question on the pre-test and post-test that students consistently answered wrong. When asked “Which is the primary place(s) to find research on the subject of academic dishonesty published by scholars, experts or professionals?” the vast majority of students responded with choice (a) The Internet when the correct answer was (d) in books and scholarly journals. Since so many library resources are available on the Internet, I can certainly understand their reasoning. It is possible that adjusting this question slightly will yield more accurate results.

I did not notice vast changes in the quality of student work on the annotated bibliography, since the assignment was newly developed. There was no noticeable change in the quality of discussion board posts compared to previous semesters. I always emphasize proper ASA style citation and referencing, and I always require a variety of sources be used to write essays throughout the semester. For example, there are thirteen discussion board essays in my sixteen week Sociology 390 online course, and each essay must include citations and references for material from the textbook. Additionally, there are essays that require cited and referenced YouTube videos, websites, songs, journal articles, and newspapers. From this, I conclude that I had already included some best practices related to Information Literacy, so the additional of the library orientation, bibliography assignment, and contact with Ms. Amerson supplemented the material already available. I suspect that the additions to the course facilitated student learning, rendering the course learning objectives easier to achieve.

There are several actions I can take to enable greater levels of student success on this paper, which might increase the score on the post-test when compared to the pre-test. First, I can include a question about the paper on my class preparedness quiz, which is a quiz regarding my class policies, grading, and organization. Second, I can now display a sample paper for students who may not be familiar with an annotated bibliography. Third, I can add a question regarding student progress towards the goal of finding and annotating 25 total sources to my midterm. Fourth, I can bold font the phrase, **“Students will turn in 25 annotated sources according to the instructions outlined in the Annotated Bibliography assignment”** in both the syllabus and the area of the course in which they will turn in their work. Finally, I can assign points to students for reviewing the library orientation and initiating contact with Ms. Amerson (or other available library staff). This would generate more paperwork and a greater volume of e-mails, but would help ensure an understanding of project requirements and a timely completion of the project.

Assigning an annotated bibliography helped identify several areas in which my students need targeted and focused intervention. First, some students struggled with identifying a suitable topic for an annotated bibliography. The most common issue was students selecting a topic that was too broad, such as “Aggression and Altruism,” “Collective Behavior,” or “Love.” Alternatively, if somewhat less frequently, students picked up a topic that was too specific, such as “Status Attainment.” Students who identified their topic early in the semester had ample time to refocus an overly broad topic, or expand an overly limited topic. Students who waited did not have time to refocus, and consequently struggled to find appropriate sources.

Second, students struggled with following the ASA style. While I provided an extensive Sociology writing guide in addition to the Purdue OWL site and a self-scoring ASA style worksheet that

students could practice with, a major obstacle to student success was the unwillingness of students to adopt the ASA style. While Sociology 390 is a course intended for Sociology majors, and the ASA style is usually the preferred style for publications in ASA journals, students are more familiar, and therefore more comfortable with, using the American Psychological Association (APA) or the Modern Language Association (MLA) style. The differences in the two styles are subtle but immediately obvious. I am as yet unsure of the best course to follow when introducing students to the ASA style. I am reluctant to deduct points for their failure to comply with the style in every detail, since my primary concern is that students avoid plagiarism through consistent, correct citing and referencing. When I deduct enough points to affect their letter grade, students complain that my grading is too strict, since they cited and referenced their sources (even if they used the wrong style). When I deduct only a few points for not correctly using the ASA style, the students are not motivated to comply with instructions to only use the ASA style, since it is time consuming to break the habit of using the APA style they are most familiar with.

Third, students struggled with writing basics. The most common issues with overall quality were improper word use, issues related to subject-verb agreement, sentence fragments, run-on sentences, misuse of words, missing or extraneous commas, and inappropriate capitalization. In my other classes I require students to submit their written work to SmarThinking for a review. While I encouraged students to take advantage of this service, I did not make use of SmarThinking a component of their final grade. I plan to require this for future versions of the annotated bibliography assignment to address bad writing habits.

I will probably use the annotated bibliography assignment the next time I teach Sociology 390. I saw no significant gaps in the preparation offered by the December 2016 Chestnut Library Fellows Workshops. If there is one thing I would change in my approach to integrating the pathway, it would be reinforcing the assignment requirements to the point of redundancy. I thought I had created several "reminders" as to what students should have been working on, but the six students who turned in only three annotated sources still missed the "reminders." Clearly, I need to emphasize the final product in more areas of the course. I do wish I had been provided with a digital file of the pre-test and post-test that could be inserted directly into Canvas, where it would be automatically scored. I was reluctant to type in the questions and responses myself, since I did not want to risk altering the wording of the pre-test and post-test, thus inadvertently changing the validity and reliability of the test. If I have one suggestion for the 2017-2018 program, it is that a Canvas-ready file be prepared for import into the relevant courses.