Understanding the problem before you solve it
Effective resource-based assignments

BY LINDA NEYER

This year, I blogged some presentations at the PaLA Annual Conference on the College & Research Division's blog, http://crd-pala.blogspot.com/, including the one given by Dr. Terence Mech, library director at King's College in Wilkes-Barre. Dr. Mech's presentation, "Understanding the problem before you solve it: Effective resource-based assignments", contained so many valuable ideas for academic librarians that it deserves wider exposure.

Dr. Mech has published and spoken frequently on information literacy and student learning, and each year he also generously provides the King's College Information Literacy Assessment to any interested institution of higher learning (including Bloomsburg University). He has said repeatedly that using the King's College Information Literacy Assessment is a way of opening a conversation with faculty about student learning. His PaLA presentation filled in a good deal of the context for this faculty-librarian conversation, delving into student learning, faculty teaching, and the changing landscape of higher education.

Dr. Mech started by stating that research shows very little learning actually takes place in the classroom, including in our 50-minute library instruction sessions. Students typically spend just 16 hours a week in class, roughly 10 percent of their total time. Most of their learning, therefore, must take place outside of class. Well-designed resource-based assignments can extend student learning outside of class in a number of ways:

- Helping students acquire and refine critical skills;
- Reinforcing lectures and other materials;
- Preparing students for future learning activities;
- Assessing what students have already learned;
- Teaching students to apply previous learning in a new situation;
- Helping students acquire their discipline's conventions;
- Allowing students to explore their own interests;
- Letting students work at their own pace;
- Enabling students to use resources outside of the classroom;
- Encouraging independent learning and self-discipline;
- Facilitating the best use of class time.

However, the reality is that most college professors have never studied how to teach and are usually not skilled at designing effective assignments. On the contrary, most faculty have focused on mastering their subject, not on teaching, and most have never aspired to be teachers. In addition,

- Most faculty still concentrate on knowledge acquisition, despite the current emphasis in higher education on "critical thinking";
- Most faculty (like most librarians) are social introverts and do not particularly enjoy the social interaction of teaching;
- Most faculty dread grading or evaluation of student work, late or sloppy student work, and plagiarism;
- Most faculty view teaching as a very private act; they don't like "unwelcome intrusions";
- More faculty consider themselves to be passive learners (54 percent) than active learners (46 percent).

In contrast, about 70 percent of today's students consider themselves to be active learners and only 30 percent passive learners. In addition to being "hands-on learners", they also like to multi-task, and they feel comfortable using technology. Furthermore,

- They dislike busy work and want to know the "big picture" before taking the time to learn something;
- They prefer to work collaboratively, consulting their peers before they consult their teachers or librarians;
- They like structure, clarity, problem-solving, and immediate feedback;
- They have a weaker background in general knowledge than do previous generations: they are certainly no less intelligent, but 86 percent of them report some gaps in their own learning.
In interactions with students, we often observe students who don't know how to complete an assignment either because they don't understand it or they weren't adequately prepared for it. When we get a copy of an assignment, we wonder how much help we should give to students before sending them back to their professors. We often hesitate to give instructors feedback to let them know specific difficulties students are having with an assignment, yet we know on a practical level what works and what doesn't work in terms of resource-based assignments.

Lynn Cameron at James Madison University has described some traits of exemplary assignments:

- They break down what needs to be done in increments, for example, on a weekly basis;
- Students are given instruction on where to look for resources;
- They are taught how to cite their sources;
- The assignment may not be a paper, it may be a pamphlet or some other product;
- Terms like “peer-reviewed” or “substantial” are clearly defined;
- Students are told what they need to consider, for example, issues, trends, etc.;
- The assignment begins with the learning objective, the thing that students should be able to learn and do. For example: “To learn to write more effective literature reviews, students will first read and evaluate reviews written by other students to determine what makes an effective review”;
- They make it clear how the student's work will be evaluated; a rubric lets students know what hoops they have to hit.

Dr. Mech suggested some ways in which librarians can help student learning and faculty teaching:

- The most controversial — don't do library instruction without a classroom assignment! This one evoked a lot of discussion from the group. Dr. Mech has established this as a policy at his institution. Studies have shown that when instruction does not have a purpose, learning does not take place and classroom and student time is wasted (how true!). For librarians who don't feel comfortable turning down a request, Dr. Mech suggested they try stating their reasons politely and respectfully.

- Give faculty feedback on their assignments; let them know tactfully what is working and what isn't working in terms of their students' abilities. For example, a professor may have assumed that students know how to use a periodical index to find articles by an author, but students may not even know what a periodical index is.

- Work with your teaching center; they can support and provide you with an avenue to reach out to faculty.

- Remember that real change takes time, it won't happen overnight — be patient!

- My favorite suggestion: Focus on working with innovative faculty who enjoy teaching and who are willing to take risks in their teaching. They will energize you. Don't waste too much time on those who just don't care or who are negative. How can you recognize innovative faculty? By and large, they come from interdisciplinary fields and non-traditional backgrounds (perhaps as adult learners), they identify with the institutional mission, they enjoy teaching on all levels (freshmen, upper level, and graduate), and they like to talk about teaching.

Institutions of higher education are under tremendous pressure right now to prove that they are teaching students and students are learning. Librarians can contribute to their institutions by working with classroom faculty to help them develop effective resource-based assignments that support student learning. Dr. Mech's presentation encouraged all of us to step out of our comfort zone and make an effort to reach out to faculty at our individual institutions. Surprising things can happen!

Last fall two of my colleagues and I gave a brief presentation on designing effective resource-based assignments to faculty at our campus teaching and learning center, titled “I can't find anything on my topic!: Leveraging the library's resources”. We were pleasantly surprised at how many faculty attended and at the number of requests for library instruction that grew out of the presentation. In preparing for our presentation, we discovered the James Madison University Library’s Web site for their three-day information literacy workshop facilitated by Dr. Mech in May 2006. JMU faculty from 18 departments and their liaison librarians participated in the workshop; working in collaboration, each pair developed an information literacy assignment that was to be implemented during the academic year, available at http://www.lib.jmu.edu/instruction/2006assigments.aspx. (Dr. Mech will be going back to JMU in May to facilitate their third annual faculty workshop.) Obviously, Lynn Cameron and the other librarians at JMU have forged excellent working relationships with their faculty. Just imagine what can be accomplished at your institution — in fact, I'd love to hear from you about your outreach efforts.

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