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Dangerous Liaisons?
Collaboration on the College Campus
and the Teaching of Research skills

Abstract

At an American undergraduate college that does not have an Information Literacy program, a faculty member has been cooperating with the librarians to produce, revise and update a set of five Library Exercises which, in the context of a freshman writing course, offer students the fundamentals in Information Literacy skills. My presentation conveys the views of faculty and library staff concerning cross-institutional collaboration and emphasizes the need for institutional support.

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This presentation is dedicated to the staff, past and present, of the Deree College library. Their expertise, dedication and assistance over the years have made it possible for me to complete numerous projects, including this presentation.

Dangerous Liaisons? Collaboration on the College Campus and the Teaching of Research skills

Introducing Deree College and myself

As a professor in the English department at Deree College, the undergraduate division of the American College of Greece, I teach literature to English majors. In a 2003 article entitled "Teaching Multiculturalism to a Greek Student Body" Deree English department chair Helena Maragou defines teaching "a primarily, but not exclusively, Greek student body on an American campus located in Athens, Greece" as a challenge that requires Deree faculty to become accustomed to a "hybrid educational context." In such a versatile and swiftly changing educational environment my job is further complicated by the fact that my own pedagogical approach is a hybrid since it has been influenced by the educational systems of the countries where I acquired degrees in higher education: Greece (BA), the US (MA), and the UK (PhD). In addition to teaching, I coordinate the two Writing Centers of the American College of Greece where I also tutor together with 10-12 English department colleagues, assisting students with any academic project across the disciplines. One of the more frequent tasks I have as a Writing Center tutor is to help students negotiate difficulties in understanding and completing research projects. Although I have no formal training in library instruction or Information Literacy, my experiences in higher education have led me to support lifelong learning as the most valuable tool that a college education can impart.

Deree College Students

Whether Greek or international, Deree College students come from a variety of educational backgrounds: private and public high schools, Greek and international colleges. Regardless how varied their linguistic and academic competencies are, my students have one weakness in common: they have significant difficulties in researching a topic in a library setting. Online subscription databases which offer full-text articles, indexes in print or on CD-

ROMs as well as WebOPAC, the online catalog, are the means students have to use to retrieve reference material, periodicals and books. Even proficient net surfers have difficulties acquiring the Boolean search skills required to find the most relevant material through online databases or WebOPAC. Today's students are challenged further when they have to distinguish between types of information, when they have to evaluate the reliability of their sources and when they must select intelligently and use ethically a variety of resources. Hence the need for any institution of higher learning to invest in helping students acquire, in the words of Ilene Rockman, "the ability to find, evaluate, analyze, integrate, communicate, and use information to solve problems, create new ideas, make decisions and turn data into meaning"; in short, to become and remain information literate throughout their lives.

The data I have collected in almost twenty years of full-time teaching at the Pennsylvania State University and Deree College confirms that undergraduates view the writing of research projects as the mechanical repetition of a meaningless exercise: this outlook results in indifference, plagiarism and resentment. As Emmons and Martin noted in 2002, "students continue to view the researched essay as an academic exercise more than a quest for knowledge." Not only students but faculty also entertain inappropriate notions concerning the library and its role in the academy. In an institution which lacks both a Writing-Across-the-Disciplines and a liaison program linking librarians and faculty, library staff is perceived as having technical, not scholarly skills and the term Information Literacy is still perceived to mean computer savvy.

Deree College Library

The ACG main library, Deree College library, one of the largest and most comprehensive English language libraries in Greece with over 120,000 titles, overwhelms freshmen who have no experience navigating the various collections. Like the majority of libraries worldwide, the Deree College library is in a state of transition in relation to some parts of its collection: orders in print focus almost exclusively on new books for the Main Collection; for periodicals and some reference material print subscriptions are abandoned in

favour of electronic means of storing information. This new emphasis on online resources confuses students who cannot easily tell the difference between subscription databases and free-access web resources: to novices, information that reaches their computer screen seems identical at first. Deree College undergraduates think Google provides the answers to all their search queries and consider the library as a large building with plenty of space for studying or completing homework assignments. Most of them would rather not have to use this space for research purposes.

EN 1111, the EN 1111 Students and the EN 1111 Library Exercises

Deree College lacks a compulsory Information Literacy program for new students but continues to rely on hour-long orientation workshops which present basic library skills. Offered each semester and recommended strongly to new students, they are unfortunately attended by a small percent of incoming freshmen. The only compulsory course which integrates research, critical thinking and writing is EN 1111, the second of three compulsory composition courses, in which they have to complete a 2,000-word research essay. EN 1111 teaches students how to conduct research in a college library and how to produce a properly documented paper following the guidelines of the Modern Language Association (MLA). The course's rhetorical context focuses on argumentation and students are expected to follow process writing, handing in at designated times a topic proposal, an outline and basic literature review of their sources, one or more drafts and the final project. The majority of freshmen who come to the Writing Center for help are concerned with improving their performance in EN 1111.

In the late 1990s English faculty realized the need for students to receive more adequate and sophisticated training in research methodology than simple bibliographic instruction. To ensure that students acquire the necessary Information Literacy skills the English department decided that a set of research exercises would be developed and integrated in EN 1111. The decision coincided with the acquisition of more and more material in a variety of formats (until the mid-1990s the Deree College library worked with print resources and a small collection of periodical titles in microfilm). Since 2001 I

have been the instructor responsible for devising and continuously updating the EN 1111 library exercise in collaboration with the librarians.

My Role as Liaison

In addition to the EN 1111 library exercise, which constitutes the only integrated effort to equip students of all majors with information literacy skills, I revise and update, again with assistance from the librarians, a two-page list of library resources for English majors. As informal liaison between academic departments and the library staff, I have also assisted—at the request of the respective academic departments—the Sociology instructors to develop appropriate hand-outs for conducting research in the social sciences; I have conducted a research-skills workshop for Communications majors; and I have assisted the Music department in devising meaningful guidelines for writing research papers in Music courses.

I should note that I was not appointed or formally selected as liaison; Deree College has no structures that recognize such collaborations and as far as I know I am still the only faculty member in any department that has such a close relationship with library staff. My colleagues do not envy or challenge my role as liaison either: like faculty in other universities, they view collaboration as “a time-consuming task that no one else wants” (Chu). As for the various library staff members with whom I have collaborated over the past seven years, they have been extremely helpful and responsive to all my queries (including the ones related to resources necessary for the composition of this paper!) despite consistent understaffing and straining of personnel resources. As the exception that justifies the rule, I am perceived as a rather unique case of a faculty member who has a deeper understanding into library issues and problems.

At Deree College and elsewhere, as research reveals (Julien and Given), librarians find they are of two minds when closer relationships with instructors begin to establish themselves: are they to treat faculty as equals or as clients? Are they expected to be modest and deferential or to voice an opinion when they realize that the library cannot provide adequate material on an assigned

topic that is dated or obscure? Is the teaching of Information Literacy a task that belongs in the classroom or the library instruction space? Librarians want to receive acknowledgement for their own instructional abilities—Jenkins calls librarians “teachers at heart”—but they also want the faculty fully involved in the teaching of Information Literacy skills. Library staff worldwide comment unfavourably on the teachers who never bring their students to the library; but they resent equally those faculty members who send their students and do not join them during instructional sessions or faculty who sit through such sessions looking either visibly unengaged or marking papers in full view of the lecturing librarian. In short, librarians view the majority of faculty as delinquent and un-teachable students who need lessons themselves in manners as well as research methodology. As Julien and Given conclude, “many librarians feel they do not get the respect they deserve.”

Faculty and Librarian Collaboration Issues

In the context of such alienating perspectives it is easy to lose sight of the fundamental link that necessitates faculty-librarian collaboration: the literacy needs of students. Librarians frequently find that faculty requests are at odds with student needs: while librarians seek to build a solid reference collection and enough basic titles to satisfy undergraduate assignments, some faculty members may complain that their own research needs in their specialized areas are only met through full-text articles in subscription databases. Without clear, coherent and college-wide processes governing faculty-librarian relationships, gaps in communication can be detrimental to the learning process, even the future of the academy at large. Teachers and library staff need to collaborate now more than ever: as production of academic material multiplies at terrifying rates; as disciplines fragment into smaller and smaller areas of expertise; as budget cuts require that university libraries try to acquire more resources with less funds; as innovations in technology constantly modify the meaning of the term Information Literacy. The challenges of the Information Age can be addressed properly and student needs met proactively if clear and meaningful faculty-librarian relationships are established.

(Mis)Perceptions of the Librarian's Role

In the early 1980s the perception of the librarian's role began to change (Schloman 1989) in direct relation to acknowledging that constant developments in technology as well as the market place necessitate the acquisition of Information Literacy skills. As a term and a directive that implies the development of critical thinking skills and of lifelong learning habits, Information Literacy appeared in 1989. According to the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education of the Association of Colleges and Research Libraries, "Academic librarians coordinate the evaluation and selection of intellectual resources for programs and services; organize and maintain collections and many points of access to information; and provide instruction to students and faculty who seek information" (Mozenter 2000). Academic librarians now are given faculty status and are increasingly viewed as partners to faculty: in the words of Veaner (1985), the librarian should be seen as a "proactive analyst, counselor, consultant, and intermediary in the cycle of scholarly endeavor and communication." Encouraging positive perceptions of librarians is the role of liaison programs that "provide communication to teaching faculty about new library services and strengthen the role of librarian" as access facilitator to a wide range of resources (Mozenter 2000). For faculty and librarian relationships to flourish both sides must acknowledge that their roles in fostering student learning are complementary; they must, in the words of Julien and Given (2002/03), "find common ground in the instructional environment."

At colleges like Deree which have not formally established liaison programs, faculty misperceptions of library staff thwart successful collaborations. For some teachers libraries may still be storehouses and the librarians may be viewed as buyers and suppliers who work in self-indulgent ways. Deree faculty who juggle teaching six to nine courses a year with other academic responsibilities want to see the library staff in a supporting role. Frequently faculty expect students to take their research questions to the reference desk, not the instructor's office. Emmons and Martin argue that "many instructors are themselves new to the idea of research as a rhetorical process" (2002). Misperception is not a one-way street: a 2000 survey found that nearly all

librarians feel that faculty are “unfamiliar with current library tools” and “unaware of the nature of librarianship” (Feldman and Sciammarella). Reference librarian C. M. Larson, in a 1998 opinion piece tellingly entitled “What I Want in a Faculty Member,” suggests that unless clear communication, basic familiarity of research tools and collaboration on designing course assignments exist, faculty will not recognize that “librarians are in the same business of serving students’ needs” (Julien and Given).

Barriers to Successful Collaboration

Are librarians concerned that faculty may (or do) confuse “serving” with servitude, as librarian Paul Jenkins notes in his book Faculty-Librarian Relationships? Are librarians eager to defend themselves and their expertise because in some institutions like Deree College they do not have faculty status? Or because even in institutions where they do have faculty status, they find that it makes little difference? As developments in technology add new challenges to Information Literacy and budget cuts leave many libraries understaffed, faculty and librarians may find they have little time and emotional strength to invest in each other or to ponder calmly on mission statements. Perhaps on most campuses it remains unclear whether librarians train faculty who train students or whether libraries are training grounds for both. Caught in the intense demands of their professional lives, librarians and faculty may neglect to remind themselves frequently enough that their efforts address a common audience, students, who sees them both in a similar role: that of educator. Research indeed supports that a feeling of trust and an awareness of roles and needs are essential for cross-institutional relationships to be forged (Chu 1997).

When both sides abandon catastrophic self-definitions which center on issues of power and superiority, strides will be made towards forging respectful and productive working relationships. Patricia Senn Breivik, Founder and Chair of the National Forum on Information Literacy, suggests that the kind of attitude expected of librarians “is not one based on control but rather one of servant leadership.” For such a paradoxical term to shed its negative connotations and become accepted many more years may need to pass. As long as

librarians view faculty as uninvolved and unhelpful or even as arrogant and insulting and as long as faculty perceive library staff as possessing mere technical skills, existing polarities will perpetuate a gap that unless bridged can only grow wider with time. The victims of such long-term miscommunication are not only the educated scholars on either side of this divide but more importantly the ones who find themselves unwittingly caught in this debate: the students. How are students to become empowered unless cross-institutional collaboration assists them in embarking into lifelong learning?

Conclusion

In “Teaching Multiculturalism to a Greek Student Body” Maragou argues that as educators in multicultural environments we need to “redefine” our approach to syllabus construction in order to engage “both learners and teachers” into “what seems to have been long forgotten . . . *thinking*.” I would add another obvious but equally neglected parameter: the need for mutual respect among all members of an academic community. We are all united through a common goal to assist students in becoming as proficient as possible in all areas of thinking—and how can this be achieved in the Information Age if Information Literacy is not included in a college curriculum? Undergraduate students can be guided effectively into finding research projects valuable, developing their writing skills, and finding their own voice. This process is demanding and requires the collaboration not only of the students and their teachers but also of academic and library systems within institutions of higher learning. As teacher, tutor and researcher, I encourage students and colleagues alike to make full use of the resources of the ACG libraries. After so many years of successful collaboration with librarians I feel that I am a member of a “formidable team,” to use Curzon’s term. I do not think liaisons are ever dangerous in an academic setting; for all of us at institutions of higher learning the only hurdle we need to clear to reach this obvious conclusion is the campus politics of isolation.

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