

A Suggested Blueprint for Developing Literacies

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Abstract : At the American University in Dubai, the library provides workshops for 1st year students which work with classroom teachers' attempts to build literacies (information, thinking, reading, research, etc.) necessary for student success at University and in society in general.

The American University in Dubai (AUD), like many overseas universities based on the American liberal arts curriculum, has set itself the following mission:

The Mission of The American University in Dubai is to provide for the varying educational needs of a culturally diverse and geographically dispersed student body with the goal of preparing students academically, personally, and professionally for successful careers.

To assist in achieving this mission, AUD has identified the following among its Purpose-Related Goals:

- To foster the development of critical thinking and lifelong learning skills; and
- To provide academic programs, services, facilities and technologies that support team-based learning and contribute to students' intellectual development and personal growth

As a Liberal Arts University, AUD requires its students, regardless of degree program to complete specific courses which fall under the umbrella of “General Education Requirements.”

The purpose of the “General Education Requirements,” according to the University catalogue is to provide students with a curricular environment aimed at broadening and deepening intellectual awareness and perspective, historical understanding, and global education, thus enabling such students to grow personally as well as professionally.

Three of the courses which are required of all AUD students regardless of degree program are English 101 (ENGL 101) Composition and Rhetoric, English 102 (ENGL 102) Advanced Composition and Literature, and University 101 (UNIV 101) The University Experience.

The collaboration between these courses and the AUD Library will be the basis of discussion.

In general, under the Liberal Arts Umbrella, the English/Communications courses have identified desired student outcomes as:

Upon completion of the required English/Communications courses, students will have learned how to:

- Organize and communicate thoughts, ideas and information in written and verbal expression to create effective and efficient documents and presentations;
- Successfully conduct and integrate research material into communication; and
- Develop critical reading and thinking skills in order to function in today's society as an effective recipient and disseminator of information.

It is difficult for any one course, or even one degree program to develop students' multiple literacies which are identified as desirable skills for AUD's graduates. For the most part, the courses and degree programs rely on the information/knowledge/literacy levels acquired in the General Education/Liberal Arts courses. This reliance increases the pressure to make sure students receive and acquire a "solid foundation" in the aforementioned literacies.

List of Literacies to be Developed

Information Literacy

- Research
- Negotiate library resources successfully

Language Literacy

- English (majority of students are non-native speakers)
- Language of their specific discipline (or the discipline in which they are conducting research)

Reading Literacy

- Interacting with sophisticated texts
- Applying appropriate reading strategies for given reading tasks (Skimming, Scanning, Close Reading)

Problem Solving/Critical Thinking Literacy

- Logic
- Reasoning
- Organization
- Plans

Recipient Literacy

- Distinguishing important information from "other"
- Filtering information
- Questioning validity/reliability of information

Literature Literacy

- Critical analysis of literature
- Identification of literary devices

General Academic Literacy

- The language of academic
- Appropriate and inappropriate behaviour at University
- Intellectual discourse

Many of these literacies are developed in the classroom during many of the General Education courses, but not all. This is where the series of Library workshops in support of the identified courses comes in. Before every academic term, in my role as Coordinator of the Undergraduate English courses and the University Experience courses, I sit down with the Library staff and work out a schedule for the required workshops for these three courses. During the Fall and Spring Semesters, the task is a daunting one. For the upcoming Fall term, there are 14 sections of UNIV 101, 15 sections of ENGL 101, and 9 sections of ENGL 102. That's a total of 53 workshops.

University 101 – The University Experience

This course is specifically designed to help students make the jump from secondary school to University. This course is normally taken in students' first semester at AUD. In fact, for the Fall 2006 semester, we currently have fourteen sections scheduled and may have to add one or two more. Originally considered a "fluff" course, the course was recently re-designed to warrant being a "for credit" course. Topics covered include Time Management, Study Skills, Preparing for Exams, Overall University Resources, Health, Conflict Resolution, Student-Teacher Interaction, and Cultural Diversity. The course also has a Community Service requirement. It is during Week 3 of this course that students get their first interaction with the AUD Library. The first workshop (1 hour) covers some basic library information:

- general library overview
- What is where?
- Library procedures (printing, reserve materials, checking out resources, etc.)

- Library services
- Library personnel
- Searching library catalogue

Attendance at these workshops is mandatory. They are conducted during a scheduled class meeting. This workshop is the beginning of an on-going effort by the Library to improve students' level of information literacy. The workshop is conducted in a special "computer classroom" in the library. Although the UNIV 101 course doesn't specifically ask students to do library-based tasks until later in the semester, we realize that some of the other courses in which students are registered may require this. In fact, much of the course content of UNIV 101 is directly related to feedback from other faculty, in terms of what they would like to see students be prepared to do and students be aware of.

The second workshop takes place during Week 7 of a 15-week semester. It is in this one-hour workshop that students are prepared for specific UNIV tasks. Part of the UNIV course involves students reading articles on various aspects of University education ("Are Liberal Arts Dead?" "Secrets of Successful Students" "The 7 Deadly Sins of Students and Professors") and produce a brief response to the content of the article. Over the course of the term, students are required to submit 4 of 6 reading responses. For the first three (3) assignments, students are given a collection of articles from which to choose. These are available through the Library Reserve Desk. For 4-6, students are required to search the on-line databases available through the Library. The topics are specified (Student Behavior, Student Assessment, Student-Teacher Relationships), but students conduct their own searches. It is with this task in mind that the second UNIV library workshop is conducted.

The general areas covered by this workshop are

- focus on databases
- search strategies (keywords, title, text words, etc.)
- reading strategies within search strategies
- deciphering results list

In fact, the Library staff use the “Student Behavior” topic as the subject of the demonstration and walk the students through a computer search to identify potential articles with which to complete the task. During this workshop, the focus is on search strategies and how to most efficiently combine terms to narrow the search results for a given task. Databases which will be of assistance to students in research in their chosen fields of study (i.e. Business) are also identified during the workshop.

During both workshops, the classroom teachers are also present and occasionally “jump in” to relate a concept to previous classroom discussions or topics already covered during the semester. A central concept stressed throughout both workshops is efficient use of time and resources.

Over the last two academic years, since these UNIV 101 workshops have been included as a mandatory part of the curriculum, Library staff have noticed general student use of the Library has significantly increased.

ENGLISH 101 Composition and Rhetoric

This is the first level of “for credit” English courses at AUD. During the first half of the course, the focus is on developing a solid foundation of Academic Reading and Writing Skills using general academic texts and producing general expository essays both in and out of class. During the second half of the course, the focus turns to the rhetorical style of “Argument” and the integration of research into essays. It is during this time that the Library conducts its workshop for ENGL 101.

It should be noted that some students will be taking UNIV 101 and ENGL 101 concurrently, and these students often adopt the “oh, I’ve already had this before” attitude to the ENGL 101 workshop, which occurs just after the second UNIV 101 workshop. However, the ENGL 101 workshop is focused specifically on those resources which will help students

complete their third paper assignment in that class. The UNIV 101 workshop won't suffice.

The specific areas covered in the ENGL 101 workshop are

- review of databases
- focus on
 - o Opposing Viewpoints (database)
 - o CQ Researcher (which has PRO/CON section)
 - o Taking Sides (books)

During the first portion of the ENGL 101 course, much time has been spent in the classroom developing students' Academic/Critical Reading skills. Here in the workshop these are emphasized. It is pointed out to students that they will use all of the various reading strategies (scanning, skimming and close reading) during the research process. Once students open an article on the results list, their search term(s) will be highlighted either in bold or in red. Students can quickly *scan* to see how many times these occur. If not many, students can conclude this article will probably not be helpful. If there are numerous occurrences of the terms, students then go back and *skim* the article to get a general idea of the content. If it still seems as though the article will be helpful, students can mark the article and print it later and *close read* it for understanding. Again, this helps students to connect what is going on in the workshop and what is currently taking place in their courses, both English and others.

Many instructors (both in ENGL and in other content areas) are beginning to limit students' use of .com sites in their research. Therefore, the Library staff, during the workshops instruct students in Advanced Search techniques in various search engines in order to generate an appropriate list of results for a given project. This also helps students understand the different levels of quality of research material.

Prior to the workshop, the ENGL 101 faculty have forwarded their Research/Argument assignments to the Library staff. The workshop for each ENGL 101 section is content-specific on that class's specific assignment. Again, collaboration is done between the ENGL 101 faculty and the Library staff in the molding of the assignment itself. Once the assignment is submitted, the Library staff often conduct a preliminary search for

materials suitable for completion of that assignment. Often this results in suggestions regarding either narrowing or broadening the assignment, depending on the availability of materials.

It is during the ENGL 101 course and this workshop that the idea of proper in-text citation is constantly emphasized. Students are made aware that it is not only in ENGL 101 that they must cite properly, but in all of their courses in which they are expected to integrate outside source material into their projects. Failure to do so could result in permanent dismissal from the University. Also emphasized is that “Oops” or “I didn’t mean to” are not sufficient defenses. The American University in Dubai has an Academic Honor Code which all students sign, and it is imperative that all faculty hold students accountable for upholding the pledge. Unfortunately, this is one area of collaboration that still needs some work.

ENGLISH 102 – Advanced Composition and Literature

Recently, the English curriculum was re-designed because our accrediting body requires that there is a Literature component in the curriculum which all students are required to take. To fulfil this requirement, this course was created, combining the previously introduced concepts of critical reading/thinking, research and argument, and applying these skills to literary texts.

The skills which are focused on in the ENGL 102 Library workshop include

- focus on “hard” literature resources in the library
- focus on specific literature-based databases
- review of search strategies

The ENGL 102 Library workshop takes place during Week 2 of a 15-week term. Again, the ENGL 102 faculty forward to the Library staff the first reading assignment of the term. The Library staff use this as the basis for the workshop demonstrations. Because students are assumed to have completed ENGL 101, the review of search strategies is brief, and most of the workshop time can be spent on the literary-specific information. An analogy which was

used by one of the workshop presenters which was helpful to the students both in ENGL 102 and their other courses is this: “If you are shopping for a pair of shoes (literary criticism), you can go to a Department Store (general, all-purpose database), and, yes, they will have shoes. OR you can go to a shoe store (specifically literary database), where they will DEFINITELY have shoes, and a much wider variety of shoes than at the Department Store.” Hopefully, students will understand that if there is a topic-specific database, *that* is where their search should begin.

OVERVIEW

So, if we go back and revisit our “Literacies to be Developed” list, it can be identified which literacies are targeted where and by whom during the General Education courses.

Information Literacy

- Research (Library and UNIV 101 and ENGL 101 and ENGL 102)
- Negotiate library resources successfully (Library)

Language Literacy

- English (majority of students are non-native speakers) (ENGL)
- Language of their specific discipline (or the discipline in which they are conducting research)

Reading Literacy

- Interacting with sophisticated texts (ENGL)
- Applying appropriate reading strategies for given reading tasks (Skimming, Scanning, Close Reading) (Library and UNIV and ENGL 101 and ENGL 102)

Problem Solving/Critical Thinking Literacy (ENGL 101 and ENGL 102)

- Logic
- Reasoning
- Organization
- Plans

Recipient Literacy (Library and ENGL 101 and ENGL 102)

- Distinguishing important information from “other”
- Filtering information
- Questioning validity/reliability of information

Literature Literacy (Library and ENGL 102)

- Critical analysis of literature
- Identification of literary devices

General Academic Literacy (Library and UNIV 101)

These literacies are the foundation upon which the content-specific courses in the degree programs build. If these literacies are not there or are shaky, it will be difficult for students to succeed in their chosen field of study. More work needs to be done in terms of making sure faculty in the upper-level courses are reinforcing the skills developed in the General Education courses. Anecdotal evidence from students indicates there is some inconsistency in this area. Without the consistent need to demonstrate their literacy skills, students may neglect them and then when they are required to produce these skills, they will not be up to the necessary standard. In addition, if upper-level courses are not requiring these skills, students will view the General Education courses as just so many “hoops” they must jump through before moving on to their “important” courses.

There are numerous areas in which a student must be literate in order to successfully negotiate the world of academia and also the “real world.” The endeavour of developing these literacies begins during the foundation of a student’s academic career in the General Education courses. However, for students to graduate as critical readers and thinkers, life-long learners, and effective recipients and disseminators of information, it can’t end there.