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Integrating Library Research Skills into the BSW Curriculum via E-Mail

Gail Folaron
Mary Stanley

ABSTRACT. Junior level social work students were found to have a limited understanding of, and familiarity with, library technology. A class listserv created to facilitate student discourse in Practice I was found to be a successful medium for integrating information on library skills and technology. A social work librarian participated on the listserv for the purposes of familiarizing students with the role of reference librarians, introducing information on library research skills and developing student-librarian relationships. Pre- and posttests reveal that student understanding and usage of library technology increased over the semester in which library and technology instructions were provided. Other potential uses of e-mail are addressed. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com]

Rapidly changing library and information technologies have made it difficult for social workers to uphold their ethical responsibility to keep current with advancing knowledge in the field. In an effort to stimulate interest in emerging technologies and support student competence in library research skills, electronic information retrieval strategies, and online communication, a BSW educator and a university librarian collaborated to provide basic technology training and ongoing support to students in a Social Work Practice I course. Students were exposed to the Internet and provided with instructions and tutoring on the use of various library

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technologies such as CD-ROM indexes, online catalogues, gopher systems, and word processors. Ongoing technology support and instructions were offered throughout the semester by the librarian via e-mail communications.

THE CHANGING LIBRARY AND STUDENT TRAINING

Students today must be minimally computer literate to effectively use university libraries. Online computer catalogs and CD-ROM data bases have become standard in many libraries, replacing paper card catalogs. The increase in library technology has made some library services inaccessible to students who are not comfortable with, or knowledgeable about, computers. Yet, lack of comfort or familiarity with computers is only one barrier found to hinder effective library use among university students in general. Other barriers include library anxiety (Mellon, 1988), inadequate skills (Schuck, 1992; Lubans, 1983), and lack of training (Dale, 1988). Further, familiarity with the library and regular use and comfort with computers does not necessarily translate into effective student use of library resources such as online catalogs (Schuck, 1992).

Universities are addressing some of these problems by incorporating library skills training into freshman and sophomore curricula (Blumenthal, Howard & Kinyon, 1993; Cameron & Hart, 1992; Thompson & Van Fleet, 1992; Mellon, 1988). However, not all students benefit from these trainings due to the part time nature of their study or the order in which they sequence their courses. In addition, the lack of standardization among online systems and CD-ROM data bases and the changing nature of graphic user interfaces on university library online systems requires that students be updated regularly on library changes and resources.

The literature suggests that students generally need basic library training (LaGuardia, 1992) with the new library technologies requiring hands-on instruction to maximize student understanding and success (Jackson-Brown & Pershing, 1993; Stierman, 1992). Changing technologies, software and online databases require ongoing training so students can regularly upgrade their skills. Software changes affect student satisfaction and success (Becker, 1992) and are especially problematic for students enrolled on a part time basis.

The rapid growth of the information highway further compounds the problem of inadequate research skills and information gathering. It is no longer sufficient for students to review dated printed resources when electronic journals, current research, works in process, pending legislation, and academic data bases are available on the Internet. Familiarity

with the World Wide Web, online bulletin boards, gopher systems, and academic listservs is essential if students are to obtain up-to-date information.

FACULTY-LIBRARIAN LIAISONS VIA E-MAIL

Collaborative librarian-instructor teaming is strongly recommended for reaching students and teaching effective research methods and library skills (Blumenthal et al., 1993; Cameron & Hart, 1992; & Dale, 1988). Librarians are able to assist students in developing systematic research skills and accessing high tech information systems. However, students have been found to avoid utilizing the services of reference librarians for fear of appearing incompetent (Mellon, 1988). Instructors can bridge this gap by familiarizing students with the librarians and their role in a university library.

E-mail interactions over a class listserv can be used to link librarians with students and insert information on library research skills and relevant reference materials into any social work course in the curriculum. Listservs are electronic discussion groups in which people with common interests interact via e-mail. Listservs have been used successfully by instructors to extend class discussions (Folaron, 1995; Quinn, Mehan, Levin & Black, 1983) and bring experts into the classroom (Folaron & Stanley, 1995). Other e-mail interactions has been used to enhance student/teacher contact (Poling 1994; Saiedian 1993; D'Souza, 1992; D'Souza, 1991; Palola, 1989), empower silent or shy students to voice their needs and thoughts (Folaron, 1995; Poling, 1994; Rivera, Singh, Messina & McAlister, 1994; Lowry, Koneman, Osman-Jouchoux & Wilson, 1994; Smith, Haeryon & Bernstein, 1993; Saiedian, 1992-93; D'Souza, 1991), and to expose students to different methods of information gathering (Smith, Haeryon & Bernstein, 1993). The conjoint efforts of a university librarian and social work educator interacting with students through e-mail over a class listserv can enhance learning and provide information that ordinarily would not be included within a specific course or the curriculum as a whole due to the time restraints.

INTEGRATING TECHNOLOGY INTO THE CLASSROOM

Junior level BSW students enrolled in Social Work Practice I completed a pretest on library technology knowledge and usage the first day of class. The class was a mix of traditional full time and non-traditional part-time

students, with a mean age of 36. There were 5 male and 21 female students. Eleven of the students lived in small towns and rural communities outside of the county in which the university is located. All 26 students were Caucasian.

The survey results indicated that most students were unfamiliar with computers, library services, and the library electronic resources. Only 13 of the twenty-three students who responded had ever used a word processor although 19 had personal computers in their homes. Two students indicated that they were not at all familiar with word processors. This lack of knowledge and experience severely hindered student efforts in locating books, searching data bases and accessing other library services.

E-Mail Training and the Class Listserv

To increase student comfort with computers, students were required to participate on a class listserv via e-mail. Students were introduced to e-mail basics in a three-hour training session on the first day of class. Instruction was given by a computer consultant and took place in a computer lab where students could immediately experiment with the computers and e-mail system. Students were provided with an introductory manual which covered e-mail basics, such as how to log on, send a message or reply, edit, save and delete messages, and log off.

Throughout the semester, students were required to communicate regularly over the class listserv, reflecting on the classroom lectures, discussions and assigned readings. The objectives in establishing a class listserv were to encourage students to remain current with their reading assignments, improve comprehension and retention of the material, improve writing skills, facilitate a collegial support network, and increase students' comfort with computers.

Library Skills Training and Classroom Integration

The private class listserv have become an integral component of Practice I. Membership on the listserv was expanded to include the social work librarian in the second year of its operation. The librarian has since remained an active participant. The purpose of including the librarian was to facilitate a relationship between the librarian and the social work students with a goal of increasing library utilization. The librarian participated by answering library-related questions, responding to students' messages and occasionally infusing information about Internet capabilities and library resources.

The students were introduced to the librarian in week two of the semester when class was held in the library computer lab. The librarian presented an overview of available electronic reference materials and taught basic searching strategies. Students were instructed in the use of CD-ROM indexes and abstracts, the online card catalog, and the World Wide Web. Students were able to explore these resources with the computers at their stations. At the conclusion of the session, students were given the office phone number and e-mail address of the librarian and encouraged to seek her assistance as needed.

INTEGRATING THE LIBRARY INTO THE CLASSROOM

Generalist Social Work Practice I is among the first courses taken by students admitted into the Social Work Program. For this reason Practice I was an appropriate course in which to integrate library information. Among the objectives of the course are the expectations that students will be able to demonstrate (1) an awareness of the Code of Ethics and social work professional values; (2) beginning understanding of professional practice as it relates to ethnic minorities of color, women and other oppressed groups; and (3) beginning understanding of the research literature which supports the knowledge base and practice skills of the social work profession. To achieve these objectives students are assigned library research projects.

Assignments for Generalist Social Work Practice I

Library training has been found to be enhanced when students perceive the relevance of the information by having an assignment requiring the use of the skills (Dale, 1988). The first written assignment for Practice I is a library scavenger hunt. Students are required to locate and use reference materials, CD-ROM databases, on-line catalogs, and journal articles to answer a series of questions. For many students this is the first time they use social work reference materials. The scavenger hunt assignment is designed to acquaint students with social work reference materials and to increase their knowledge of ethics and ethnic sensitive practice. For example, students are expected to locate an article which focuses on ethical issues related to social work practice and then provide the instructor with the trail by which the article was found. The trail must include the reference from the printed edition of *Social Work Abstracts* (i.e. the page and volume from which the reference was found) and a copy of the abstract printed from the CD-ROM *Social Work Abstracts* database. Students are

expected to then find the journal in which the article was located on the on-line catalog and record the call number and library holdings. Additional scavenger hunt questions are related to ethics and ethnic sensitive practice and require students to locate and read excerpts from social work reference materials such as the *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, the *Social Work Dictionary*, and the *Social Work Almanac*.

Once students demonstrate proficiency in locating library reference materials and professional journals they are expected to write an annotated bibliography. Librarians suggest that bibliographic essays and annotated bibliographies take the greatest amount of skill and provide the most intensive training in the finding, using and evaluating of information. Lubans comments, "when such exercises are not offered, these inadequacies are perpetuated, even at the graduate level" (Lubans, 1983: 136-7).

To complete this assignment, students must read, cite in APA format, summarize, and reflect upon 10 articles focusing on a particular social problem, field of practice or special population. Students must include at least 3 journal articles that specifically address oppressed populations within the area they selected. The purpose of this assignment is to develop library research skills, familiarize students with electronic databases, improve written communication, increase awareness of oppression and assist students in exploring their own personal values and beliefs.

Computer anxiety was an obstacle to completing assignments for a few students at the beginning of the semester. During preliminary instructions students were observed to be at varying levels of comfort. While some students interacted comfortably with the computers, others needed basic instructions and practice with the hardware, particularly the mouse. Early in the semester students sought support from the instructor, librarians and domestic partners when writing e-mail messages and searching for library materials via the online catalogue or CD-ROM indexes. Students with home computers were less anxious with the technology and appeared more eager to use library technology and participate over the class listserv. Student comfort generally increased over the course of the semester as evidenced by students' response to the librarian's technological instructions given over the class listserv. For example, six students immediately experimented with Gopher following an e-mail message sent by the librarian on how to access that system. Others reportedly printed out the instructions for experimentation over the winter break.

Survey Results

By the end of the semester all 25 students who completed the post test survey were familiar with word processors. Nineteen students used com-

puters to complete their class papers, an increase of six, and 21 students had personal computers in their homes at the end of the semester, an increase of two. During the semester, six students had modems installed in their computers. All students could describe the term "electronic highway" and knew how to access it as compared to only one student at the onset of the course. The use of library reference materials also increased. Student knowledge about how to use the online catalog to locate books within the library increased from 10 students to 25 and knowledge and skill in locating books from remote sites increased from five to 20. At the end of the semester, 23 students reportedly used and understood the CD-ROM indexes as compared with only five at the beginning of the semester.

E-MAIL AS A TEACHING AND NETWORKING TOOL

The primary purpose of instituting a class listserv was to encourage active student involvement with course materials. Students were expected to send messages biweekly, thereby requiring that they remain current on course reading. E-mail assignments served to expand class discussion time and had the advantages of allowing for full student participation with time for thoughtful reflection. A secondary gain was the opportunity for commuting students to form a social support network.

The purpose of adding the social work librarian to the listserv was to bridge the library with the classroom. The intent was to familiarize the students with the librarian, library resources and the data bases found on the Internet. The students had 24-hour access to the instructor and social work librarian through private e-mail communications and over the class listserv.

The instructor and librarian interacted as equals with the students over the listserv. Students set the tone and agenda for discussions and the instructor and librarian reacted. Discussions included personal reflections of classroom lectures and assigned readings, chapter summaries, debates on controversial issues proposed in the course materials, fears and apprehensions about applying course content to real life situations, and side discussions of mutual interest such as why individuals chose to major in social work and family reactions to their decision. Individuals who related course material to personal experiences brought the material to life and were frequently validated by other students.

The librarian interacted with the students frequently by joining discussions, offering advice and information regarding student concerns, answering questions regarding library access and infusing technology information. The instructor rarely participated over the listserv but generally

reacted privately to individual students. The reason for this passive approach was to allow students full expression and ownership of the listserv. Exceptions to this stance were made when a student misinterpreted course material or when a point of netiquette (network etiquette) needed to be addressed for the benefit of all.

DISCUSSION

Feedback from students in Practice I who participated over the class listserv has been overwhelmingly positive. Nearly all of the students recommend that the e-mail assignments be continued in its present form. Others suggested small modifications generally pertaining to volume. The complaints regarding e-mail were minimal and concentrated mainly on the time required to complete the assignments. These complaints were almost exclusively from students who did not own personal computers and who were frustrated with the necessity of making extra trips to the library or computer lab. These students invariably found a backlog of messages which frustrated them further.

In the four years since participation over the class listserv has been a required assignment many changes have taken place in the high tech environment. Each year new software improves access to the Internet. Netscape, for example, connects home computers with the World Wide Web increasing student access to demographic data, major newspapers, current legislation, ERIC databases, and other information relevant to class papers and projects. Netscape is free to students and anyone connected to an educational institution. However, the system is not equally accessible to all students and this presents an ethical dilemma for the instructor.

Initially, many of the students who commuted a long distance to school and students with young children were especially enthusiastic with the networking possibilities and increased access to the university library. Over time, however, it has become more difficult to access the university system due to increased traffic. Students are often frustrated by the delays, especially if they set aside a particular time during the week to use the computer lab and then are unable to get into their electronic mailbox. This problem is further compounded by students who commute from different calling areas. Some of the commuter students pay long distance charges to access the university system; others buy online services to improve access and/or reduce phone charges. Both commuters and local students who do not own computers find it necessary to rearrange schedules to spend extra time on campus to complete assignments. Is it ethical to require some students to

invest extra time in course assignments because they cannot afford a personal computer or because they live at a distance from the school?

It is difficult to draw a balance between preparing students for social work practice in the 21st century and burdening them with additional expenses and time heavy assignments during their education. One solution is to provide the training, reduce the number of required exchanges over the class listserv, and increase flexibility of due dates. This will not reduce the frustration of students who find a backlog of messages when they sporadically log onto the system but it will provide the opportunity for quiet students to express their views at a comfortable pace and for the librarian to continue to teach library skills. With less restrictive requirements and more flexibility students will be more responsible for their own learning and will get as much from the assignment as they put into it.

Despite the inconvenience, totally discontinuing the listserv and the e-mail exchanges does not seem to be a viable option. The richness in the exchanges of student messages and the learning reported by the students as a result of using the technology and sharing experiences outweighs the disadvantages. Students who avoid computers are at a severe disadvantage in the library and may soon be less marketable as agencies increase their dependence on computers. If students are to compete following graduation they must be capable of using computer programs and telecommunications software.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

The e-mail assignment and library training have proven to be successful educational experiences as evidenced by student self reports, instructor observations and the findings on the pre- and posttest. The class listserv provides a safe environment for discussion where students explore and express opinions, debate sensitive topics, provide feedback on course presentations and assignments, and build collegial support networks. Through e-mail students in this course have increased access to the instructor and librarian and can interact on a collegial level. Listservs eliminate structural constraints between the instructor and student and have the potential for broadening learning opportunities and building a supportive and intellectually stimulating community of learners. This is the positive payoff for students who learn on a commuter campus.

The potential for linking students with experts from within and outside of the university is unlimited with e-mail. In this experiment communicating with students over the class listserv was found to be an effective method for integrating additional content on library skills into the curriculum. The

experiences and finding discussed in this article can serve as a model for increasing student-library or other student-expert collaborations. On a small scale e-mail communications can bring together students from different classes to enhance learning. Student teachers, for example, have used electronic networking from their individual school placements to communicate with instructors and colleagues in other school settings (Bull, Harris, Lloyd & Short, 1989). This application could be used with students in social work practicum settings with the listserv expanded into a beginning practice class so that junior social worker students could learn from the experiences of the seniors students in agency placements. On a larger scale, students can interact via e-mail with experts throughout the world.

SUMMARY

A class listserv for students in Social Work Practice I was originally set up to facilitate class discussions and encourage completion of reading assignments. In the second year of its existence a social work reference librarian joined the listserv to bridge the library with the classroom and to provide students with ongoing training and support with library technologies. The results of a pretest on technological knowledge and library skills, given on the first day of class, indicated that the students had serious deficits in both knowledge and skills. To build a relationship with the students and address their knowledge gaps, the librarian interacted with students over the listserv by commenting on messages sent, introducing information related to library technologies and the Internet, and answering student questions. A posttest given at the close of the semester indicated that student competence and comfort with library technology increased considerably. E-mail proved to be an effective means of infusing additional information and training into structured course content. Students downloaded information sent over the listserv and integrated it at varying paces. At the end of the semester student skills increased and praise for e-mail was high. The overwhelming majority of students suggested that the class listserv be continued with future classes.

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The Connected Classroom: Modeling the Evaluation of Practice by Evaluating the Classroom Group

Miriam L. Freeman
Deborah Valentine

ABSTRACT. This article describes an innovative educational tool designed for the dual purpose of evaluating teaching and learning and teaching skills for evaluating practice. Drawing from the literature on feminist pedagogy, group process and classroom evaluation the authors designed and implemented a classroom evaluation instrument and process for enhancing teaching and learning. Results of this evaluation process are presented and its strengths and limitations are discussed. Use of this tool models one approach to evaluating group work practice interventions while at the same time providing useful data to improve students' experiences in the classroom. Copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery, 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com

The challenge of evaluating teaching effectiveness is an ongoing concern for professors committed to enhancing their teaching competence and their students' learning. In addition, faculty members teaching in professional programs as social work, nursing, and counseling are concerned with teaching students to evaluate their own practice. This article describes an innovative educational approach that addresses both aspects of teaching in higher education. The authors will discuss

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