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Action-Packed Action Research:

How Comic Books, Questions, and Reflection Can Transform Information Literacy Instruction

*Sarah Laleman Ward, Stephanie Margolin, and Mason Brown**

Introduction

“It was a great teaching experience because it was highly developed and a coherent whole as well as innovative. I couldn’t have gained nearly as much from reading or hearing about it as I did by participating in it.”¹

Hunter College is a large, public, urban, commuter college in New York City, part of the City University of New York (CUNY). The four Hunter College libraries interact with and support a range of liberal arts disciplines and professional programs. SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge) is a higher education opportunity program offered in CUNY’s senior colleges.² One crucial element of Hunter’s SEEK program is a mandatory five-week Summer Bridge for incoming freshmen that includes non-credit academic coursework as well as workshops, tutoring, and social activities. For several years, Hunter librarians supported SEEK students by offering workshops on an as-requested basis. In 2014, the co-authors were invited to develop a four-session library instruction series for all participants in the Summer Bridge program. This paper describes how the development and implementation of this new curriculum ultimately contributed to a transformation impacting our library’s entire instruction program.

The co-authors collaboratively developed the curriculum during the 2014-2015 academic year, in preparation for summer 2015. The curriculum guides students through the question-asking process, using comics as source material. Focusing on questions as the foundation of the research process was deliberate as, in our experience, asking questions is often given short shrift in information literacy instruction. One-shots, our most frequent mode of instruction, tend to focus on the mechanics of searching for and tracking down resources. However, we frequently see students struggling with developing research questions. According to our plan, students worked in small groups to develop their question-asking skills within an academic context. We chose to work with comic books for the question-asking process in order to use materials that:

- Gave text and images equal weight
- Were more approachable than the traditional scholarly articles and research databases that students might expect

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- Put students on an equal footing with each other, and with us as instructors; while one of the co-authors is well-versed in comics, none of the instruction librarians had experience using them in this way.

As we developed this curriculum, we learned from our research that the comics and questions curriculum (CQC) was innovative and likely to be new to the students. But as we began to share our curriculum with participating colleagues, we slowly realized that this work was equally innovative and transformative for us as instruction librarians.

Where We Started

In 2014–2015 when this project began, Hunter already had a robust instruction program and the Hunter instruction librarians were collegial and diverse in experience and practice. Although we are a friendly group, in reality we spent much of our time teaching and developing lesson plans alone or in partnership with classroom teachers, rather than with our fellow librarians. There was little effort toward standardization within the library instruction program, and a strong belief in academic freedom. Each individual librarian-classroom instructor pair determined what content would be addressed in each instruction session and how it would be delivered, with no instructional oversight within the libraries. And although we liked to talk about our work in an informal way, we had limited professional development within our department.

That said, in 2014–15, as we co-authors were developing the CQC, several positive new instructional activities were taking place. First, at our regularly scheduled reference and instruction meetings, conversations would occasionally focus on instruction strategies and content ideas. We also spent time collaboratively addressing challenges, such as how to talk to classroom faculty about what we do, the misconception that information literacy can be taught and remembered in a single instruction session, and how to advocate for ourselves and our areas of expertise when planning instruction for classes. Second, a nascent peer observation program began fostering openness and sharing among colleagues. Third, the co-authors each began experimenting with their own instruction in different ways. In early 2014, two of the co-authors, Margolin and Ward, developed an instruction menu that aligned the ENGL 120 (required freshman composition course) program learning outcomes with the ACRL framework in a series of three lessons, each of which would take an entire class period to cover.³ The menu was intended as a jumping-off place for librarians to begin the conversations with ENGL 120 faculty about what could be reasonably covered in a one-shot instruction session, and how the library instruction session could be scaffolded to fit into the ENGL 120 program overall. The third co-author, Brown, began using question-asking activities in his regular instruction sessions and shared his experiences with colleagues.

Transforming Teaching through Active Learning

As summer 2015 approached and the co-authors prepared to teach the CQC, we realized that, with over 150 students each participating in four, one-hour sessions, for three concurrent sessions each day, we needed to enlist our colleagues' assistance. Generous with their time, even in the summer, seven volunteers agreed to join the team. This time, however, we asked them to approach their teaching differently than they had in the past by participating in a curriculum that was challenging, innovative, and new. We invited our colleagues to join us in an experiment where they would deliver lessons that were unfamiliar, at times perhaps uncomfortable, and not of their own devising. Our colleagues thus transitioned from teachers to students while learning the CQC. While lifelong learning is one cornerstone of higher education and information literacy, our colleagues did not necessarily offer to teach this course in order to learn. This transition, then, was significant, and was quickly followed by yet another unintended innovation: active learning strategies as a means for teaching the new curriculum to our colleagues. To be clear, this work was done quickly and with little reflection in the moment. No one had yet begun to think of this collective participation as a means to transform our teaching.

Due to time constraints, there was no standard training session on the specifics of the CQC. Rather, our instruction colleagues plunged into the material head-first. They learned the curriculum in daily planning sessions prior to teaching the lesson, and reflected on their experiences in daily post-mortems, which we documented as notes on whiteboards. The instructors used this opportunity to talk with us, plan ahead, and discuss what worked, what did not, and collectively decide what could be done differently. We noted their discomfort with the fact that we were asking them to guide students through each lesson by asking questions rather than imparting information, and a concern that appropriate and needed content had been eschewed in favor of new strategies or ways of thinking. Our colleagues noted the following: “Not giving them sample questions was hard,” and “What is the point of all this? (ask the students).”⁴ These expressions align with the findings of Goodwin, Miller & Cheatham, who were early adopters of active learning. They found that their students were often uncomfortable with active learning, even though objective evidence suggested that they had learned the material as well as, and in some cases better than, those who had received more traditional instruction.⁵

With our research process more firmly established the following summer, we conducted a survey in 2016 of those who taught with us in either summer. Of the nine people surveyed, we received five completed responses. Faculty survey responses suggest the value of active learning as a strategy for training or transforming one’s teaching. First, one colleague confirms the very newness of our curriculum compared to their usual methods, stating “Repeated experience with this program would probably be helpful, especially for librarians like me who ordinarily do a different type of instruction; doing it once provides an introduction that can be built on.”⁶ Further, highlighting the value of active learning, one librarian appreciated “[e]xperiencing the whole process. It was a great teaching experience because it was highly developed and a coherent whole as well as innovative. I couldn’t have gained nearly as much from reading or hearing about it as I did by participating in it.”⁷

How and Why Does Active Learning Support Teacher Training?

Gunersel and Etienne describe how rare pedagogical training is for higher education faculty, but also how important such an experience can be.⁸ Bryan found that, for academic librarians, teaching skills are often “supplemented by either on the job training and/or professional development.”⁹ Operating on the assumption that student-centered learning is preferable to—or at least equal to—teacher-centered learning, Gunersel and Etienne note how hard it can be to help teachers effectively make this transition. They assert that, for training to be effective, it needs to engage faculty as learners, and discuss how faculty might apply such strategies in future lessons.¹⁰ Though this was accidental active learning and we did not initially plan this curriculum to have a ripple effect, preparing for and teaching the CQC clearly engaged our library faculty as learners. We continue to witness these strategies transforming many colleagues’ lessons. Furthermore, we continue to have discussions about how to include such strategies in our regular semester’s teaching.

Collaboration is a key feature of active learning for students, and was critical to the success of the faculty in our program. As a start, our faculty relied on each other in the classroom, since each section was taught by a pair of instructors. We also formed a de facto cohort and study group as we collectively immersed ourselves in the project each summer for two weeks. Ortlieb, Biddix and Doepker effectively identified some of the positive impacts of collaboration on peers and describe the process as “learning through collegiality.”¹¹

Accidental Action Research

As we developed, taught, and revised the CQC we found ourselves in the midst of a surprisingly fruitful, albeit accidental, action research project. Jefferson defines the five primary stages of action research as being “(1) strategic planning, (2) implementing the plan (action), (3) observation, evaluation and self-evaluation, (4)

critical and self-critical reflection of the results, and (5) making decisions for the next cycle of action research: the revised plan.”¹² While our initial plan did not include a clearly stated action research component, the daily planning and post-mortem sessions with all of the active instructors became a crucial part of our process. Additionally, each session had two librarians co-teaching, which allowed for both peer- and self-observation. The co-authors oversaw and observed in 2015, but did not teach. Notes from these observations were also shared in the post-mortems, providing recommendations and help with refining pedagogical strategies. Following the post-mortem meetings, the co-authors met as a smaller team to revise the curriculum, based on the day’s feedback, for the next class. Any potential improvements were observable in the next day’s teaching. We were thus able to continuously modify and improve our curriculum as we were teaching it, leading to action research on our individual performance and assignments, and to the entire CQC.

The discussion-based iterative process was ultimately well received by the other instructors. From our faculty survey, one participant, commenting specifically on the differences between the action research and active learning aspects of this project and their normal teaching style, reported: “The most distinct difference was the team process. Pre-lesson preparation and post-lesson reflection were conducted with the entire instructional team. This is normally a solo process for me.”¹³ Another respondent replied that “[t]he pre and post discussions are fantastic opportunities to learn from the insights and creativity of my colleagues.”¹⁴ Mitchell et al. report that one very beneficial tool in teacher training is the use of “connections with others,” commenting that “teachers learn best from other teachers.”¹⁵ We found similar value in such things as examining and critically reflecting on one’s beliefs and experiences, in order to achieve transformation.

Learning from Each Other

We believe the CQC and the processes in which we engaged are innovative, and the transformative effects are being felt year-round throughout our instruction program. The CQC launched robust discussions among colleagues that continue, and in turn provide an environment conducive to experimentation with teaching. From the increased collaboration and interest in both the pedagogy and practical strategies of instruction, a number of new programs have developed in our library. It should be clarified that the CQC was not the singular antecedent to these new programs. Rather, our instruction program was in a state of ferment regarding our offerings and practices, spurred partially by the push for assessment from the college administration as well as our own internal desire to identify ways to demonstrate our value to and impact on our students.

The most visible programs are our regularly scheduled discussions about instruction, including First Fridays and our intersession Instruction Days in January and June. First Fridays were launched by our colleague John Pell, who received an ACRL Assessment in Action grant and participated in the CQC in 2015 and 2016. Interested instruction librarians convene on a monthly basis during the semester to discuss instruction-related topics. The content is developed collaboratively by the group. Whether centered around a common reading or theme, or conducted as lightning sessions sharing tools or strategies, these discussions provide time and space to delve deeply into instruction topics of interest to the group. First Fridays allow us to think together about ways to incorporate new ideas into our own teaching practice. Additionally, two of the co-authors (Margolin & Ward) plan two Instruction Day workshops per year, one in January and one in June. These half-day workshops range from hands-on activities to robust discussions of current issues in library instruction, as well as practical strategies and activities to incorporate into one-shot instruction sessions.

The cooperation extends beyond these face-to-face sessions. We built an instruction repository folder in Google Drive where librarians share worksheets and exercises. Colleagues adapt and remix these materials as needed. We engage in an informal peer observation program which we have recommended to other colleagues

in CUNY, our university system. We ask our colleagues to share one new thing they tried in their instruction each semester, which has allowed all of us to see that something as simple as reflecting on our own instructional practice can begin the process of transformation. Through these many measures, we are able to see an interest in engaging with new ideas about teaching and learning: reflection, inquiry, active learning, and experimentation. Overall, we see increasing collaboration among our colleagues not just in sharing tools and strategies, but also in team-teaching. For example, in the spring 2017 roster of LIBR 100, our one-credit course, four out of the seven sections are being team-taught.

The SEEK CQC acted as a catalyst for ourselves and some colleagues, moving us toward liberating our teaching in interesting ways. Although the commitment to academic freedom remains, most Hunter instruction librarians welcome the changes made in recent years, particularly with regard to sharing ideas for lessons and activities.

What Comes Next?

The innovative CQC we developed for the SEEK program and taught to our colleagues has transformed our library's instruction program but, in the spirit of action research, both the intervention and the transformation are ongoing. We made changes in both the student-facing and librarian-facing materials from 2015 to 2016. As we prepare for 2017, our teaching experiences, as well as lessons learned from sharing our work with colleagues outside our own institution, will help us move in new directions once again. We will be more deliberate in our action research and with the improvements that come to our work from each recursive experiment. We will take better measures and collect more evidence to give weight to those further innovations. We will be more purposeful with our training and practice, and with how we work with colleagues to share our curriculum so that they, too, can guide students through it.

We see four key features in our initial CQC: comics as source material, question-asking as a frame, active learning as a teaching method, and action research as an approach to transformation. While we may, at some point, move away from comics in the SEEK program, the question-asking, active learning and action research have become entrenched, not just in this particular curriculum, but in our teaching program more broadly. These ideas are being seen more frequently in our library classrooms, not just by the authors, but by our colleagues. We see a renewed interest among our instruction librarians in their teaching practice. Reflecting on our two-year experience with this curriculum, we believe that this transformation can be replicated to other campuses and instruction teams as well.

Notes

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