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Moving Students to the Center through Collaborative Documents in the Classroom

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CHAPTER 2*

Moving Students to the Center through Collaborative Documents in the Classroom

Maura A. Smale and Stephen Francoeur

Introduction

As the Web has matured, so have opportunities for active participation and engagement online. Collaborative document creation allows groups of people to create and edit text in a shared space, and educators across all subject areas have embraced these tools in their classes. Library instructors are no exception—the authors have used collaborative documents with students in multiple instructional settings.

We believe that collaborative documents can embody critical pedagogy in the library classroom. Creating and editing collaborative documents can acknowledge students' prior experiences with research and the library and de-center the library instructor as the sole research expert in the room. Although we may not be fully immersed in critical pedagogy at all times, in using collaborative tools we can make the classroom a more liberatory experience. A process is opened up that allows the teacher and students together to explore more equitable and open-ended ways of posing problems. Students who might

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never dream of raising their hand in a workshop often feel safer and more empowered to contribute online, especially when they see their classmates doing so. This practice can actively work against the banking approach to learning discussed by Freire¹ and grant students more agency in their education.

This lesson was designed for a single-session research class for undergraduate honors students. Each of us was asked to offer a workshop for students working on advanced research projects with faculty in a variety of departments across our colleges. In addition to incorporating critical pedagogy into the library classroom, a strength of this lesson is that it acknowledges students doing research in multiple disciplines, which can be challenging to accommodate in a single workshop. It could also be used in most any one-shot workshop where students are working on an assignment with a research component.

Learning Outcomes

- Use advanced search techniques and strategies for library and Internet resources to find the information for their honors research projects
- Explain what citation management tools they can use for their honors research projects
- Feel more confident in their ability to do research and to view themselves as researchers
- Choose from options for engaging the help of a librarian

Materials

- Computer classroom with one computer per student, an instructor computer, and a projector and screen (it's fine if students have to share computers)
- A Web-based, collaborative document application, such as
 - EtherPad, hosted by Wikimedia: <http://etherpad.wikimedia.org>
 - PiratePad: <http://piratepad.net>
 - Google Docs: <http://docs.google.com>

Preparation

Since this lesson relies on collaborative documents to enable students' research needs to drive the content covered in the session, preparation focuses more on the classroom and tools and less on creating instructor notes for the class. There are, though, some things you can do to help the workshop run smoothly:

- Set up the computer classroom, including loading or logging into any websites needed during the session. You can save time by loading the collaborative document into the student computers before the workshop begins or prepare a custom shortened URL (such as tinyurl.com/honorsworkshop) that students can easily type into their browsers or that can be posted onto the course website or learning management system or sent via e-mail.
- Prepare the collaborative document by adding these questions to it, with enough space under each for students to type their answers:
 - What are you best at when doing research?
 - What questions do you have about doing research?
- Note that some collaborative document applications limit the number of simultaneous users; create more than one document for students as a workaround.
- In our experience over multiple semesters, students often raise similar questions in each session, which lead to discussion of a broadly similar set of resources and strategies during the class. It may be useful to create a template for a handout that you can customize to reflect the discussion, questions, and resources covered in each class.

Session Instructions

1. Begin by welcoming students and sharing the goals of the lesson: to talk about advanced search techniques and strategies that they can use to find the information they need for their honors projects.
2. Ask a few questions to learn more about students' research interests and prior experiences with library instruction (this helps warm up the class):
 - a. How many of you are doing research in the biology department? Math? Human services? (Repeat for the majors or disciplines at your institution.)
 - b. How many of you have come to the library with another class to learn about research? How many times? If you transferred from another school, did you go to the library there to learn about research?
3. Introduce the collaborative document and ask students to take five to ten minutes to answer the two questions on the document. Let them know that everyone will be typing their answers in together and that they don't need to add their names to the document; it's completely anonymous. Tell students that their answers to these questions will shape the topics covered in the session today.

4. Once most students have stopped typing, call them back together to review and discuss the answers. During this discussion you will be able to see what students' experiences with research have been and also where their needs lie.
5. For the rest of the class, you can share information about the specific resources and strategies that students highlighted in the collaborative documents. Be sure to check in often to see whether students have questions. It is also useful in decentering the instructor to try and draw out students who have expertise in specific research resources or strategies and ask them to explain or demonstrate to the class. Novice researchers can be uncomfortable with the inherently iterative nature of research, for example encountering unsuccessful search results, using a variety of search terms, and so on. Bringing students' questions and perspectives to the fore and allowing their needs to shape the discussion acknowledges the messiness of research.
6. In our experience, the topics covered in these sessions typically include these:
 - a. Brief discussion of the differences between library and Internet sources, quick explanation of publishing and editorial review
 - b. Advanced search in Google, especially searching within a domain type or site
 - c. Introduction to Google Scholar, especially setting Scholar Preferences for your library
 - d. Quick reminders about library resources: books in the catalog, articles in the databases, use the link resolver, remember interlibrary loan
 - e. Subject-specific library research: databases by subject, library's research guides
 - f. Discussion of keywords, subject terms, and using them for better searching
 - g. Brief overview of citation managers: what they are, why they're useful, and examples (Zotero, EasyBib, RefWorks)
7. End the class by asking students if they would like to share their e-mail address with you so that you can create a handout to e-mail to them for their future reference. This also ensures that students have your e-mail address in case they wish to contact you with questions.
8. Some collaborative document applications available online will not allow you to save the content of the document, so you may need to copy and paste or e-mail the document text if you would like to save it for your future reference.

Assessment

At the end of the workshop, ask each student to write on a piece of paper three new things they learned about research today and what one thing they wish had been covered or that they didn't completely get. Students don't need to put their names on the paper before they hand it in.

By comparing the questions students asked in the collaborative document with the student responses to the assessment questions, the librarian can reflect on the types of questions and problems students come in with and the kinds they leave with. This information can suggest improvements for the next time the honors workshop is offered.

To assess the affective learning outcome for this session, ask students to rate their comfort level with research for their honors projects before and after attending the session.

Reflections

Though some students are initially hesitant to type in the shared space, especially if these Web applications are unfamiliar to them, in our experiences they have shed their hesitation quickly. Many students have never used a collaborative document before; very few have ever done so with a dozen or more simultaneous authors. When students first see the blast of a group activity on the page, they tend to get giddy and joke around on the page a bit. After a while, they settle down and seem very engaged by the activity. Feedback that we have received from students and the staff and administration in our respective honors programs has been positive—students have appreciated that we start where they are and that we tailor the session to their specific needs. Using collaborative documents enables us to bring critical pedagogy into library instruction to resist what Bryan Kopp and Kim Olson-Kopp describe as “*a transfer of objects that fosters the development of skills in the service of others*” (italics in original).²

In our experiences, the move away from the library instructor controlling the content of class and toward more student-centered learning that collaborative documents enable has resulted in more successful library instruction sessions. However, we do have some concerns with using collaborative documents in the library classroom. While students may be able to articulate what they know they don't know (i.e., ask questions or describe the kinds of things they don't know how to do), they are unable to tell us about the unknown unknowns they have. In a one-shot, there may not be time for the mutual exploration by students and teacher of these unknown unknowns. Additionally, the guest lecturer role that library instructors take on in single session instruction may constrain our opportunities to truly cede authority to students in the

library classroom. Over the course of a semester, we might have that kind of time, and collaborative documents may also be used in multiple instruction sessions or even in a semester-length course.

We would also like to note our reservations with the use of no-cost, third-party Web applications not run by the college or university. While they can offer opportunities that institutional software does not—for example, this lesson would not be possible in Blackboard, our institution’s learning management system—they are inherently unstable services and could disappear at any time. This is likely less of a concern for a single-session workshop but may be a consideration when using collaborative documents in a semester-length course. It is also worth considering the ethical implications of using no-cost tools provided by corporations like Google. We should be aware that corporate platforms may use the demographic and other information entered by users for advertising or other purposes and consider the platform’s terms and conditions and privacy policy. As the oft-repeated saying goes, when you don’t pay a fee for a service, you are the product.

Final Questions

Internet access is required for this lesson in the way we have described it, yet critical pedagogy is not restricted to the computer classroom (we hope!). How could you do the same kind of activity if the classroom’s Internet connection went down? Can you think of a way to do this on paper, sticky notes, or a whiteboard? What would be lost from the activity if you couldn’t do it online?

Notes

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2000).
2. Bryan M. Kopp and Kim Olson-Kopp, “Depositories of Knowledge: Library Instruction and the Development of Critical Consciousness,” in *Critical Library Instruction*, ed. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010), 56.

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- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 2000.
- Kopp, Bryan M., and Kim Olson-Kopp. “Depositories of Knowledge: Library Instruction and the Development of Critical Consciousness.” In *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*. Edited by Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier, 55–67. (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010).