



# REFLECTIVE INFORMATION LITERACY

## Empowering Graduate Student Teachers

*Anne-Marie Deitering, Hannah Gascho Rempel, and  
Tim Jensen*

It was 2013 when we met for the first time. We came together to discuss the future of information literacy in WR 121, Oregon State's required First Year Composition (FYC) course. The librarians in the room, Anne-Marie Deitering and Hannah Gascho Rempel, brought a long history of faculty-librarian collaboration in FYC at Oregon State.<sup>1</sup> Tim Jensen, the Director of Writing, was brand-new to the university, but not to thinking about research and writing in FYC. Little did we know at that point that this meeting was the start of an intensive three-year period of experimentation and change for our program.

In 2013, if you had asked any of us to describe our goals for information literacy in FYC, those goals would have focused almost entirely on the undergraduate students enrolled in the course and the research-related skills and concepts those students needed to be successful. And on one level, that has not changed. Our overarching goal in FYC is still student success, and we are still committed to helping FYC students grow as researchers and writers. On another level though, our strategy for achieving that goal has changed, and so have the assumptions we bring to that work. By 2016, our focus had shifted to helping

graduate students—the graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who deliver most of the instruction in FYC—more effectively teach academic research skills as part of the writing process.

Our journey was iterative and sometimes indirect, supported by trial and error, data gathering and analysis. First, a combination of assessment projects and in-depth studies suggested that the most effective research instruction in FYC came from classroom instructors. In our initial response to this insight, we focused on tools, strategies, and training to help the GTAs build their skills as researchers. However, when we assessed that work, we found that focus was too narrow. In its current form, our training program for GTAs focuses on helping them grow as critical, reflective teachers of research and writing.

There are some elements specific to our context that are important to understand. First, the undergraduate enrollment at Oregon State grew dramatically between 2008 and 2012,<sup>2</sup> and this growth had a clear impact on FYC, essentially doubling the number of sections taught each term. Secondly, most of these sections are taught by GTAs who serve as the instructors of record for their sections. However, the School of Writing, Literature, and Film at Oregon State does not offer PhD programs at this time, and these GTAs are enrolled in two-year master's programs. They start teaching their first term on campus, and just as soon as they begin to feel comfortable as teachers, they are ready to graduate. Finally, while these GTAs serve as the instructors of record for their sections, they deliver a standardized curriculum developed by the Director of Writing.

Until 2013, this curriculum had followed a traditional path, culminating in a researched “argument paper” due at the end of the term. Dr. Jensen planned to replace this argument paper and the two shorter papers that preceded it with a six-week critical analysis project (CAP). Using rhetorical analysis as a framework, this unit leads students through three structured rounds of writing and revision before they complete a researched analysis of a rhetorical artifact. With a new director and an exciting new curriculum, this was clearly a moment to think differently about our work. This meant that we also needed to surface and to challenge the assumptions we were bringing to this conversation.

## Testing Assumptions

Our work benefits from a shared commitment to experimentation and testing assumptions. We believe strongly in the power of a well-designed pilot, and in any given term a handful of FYC sections are devoted to testing new assignments or approaches. In 2013, we created a new, inquiry-focused lesson plan for the required library session and did a variety of assessments to test the results. We wanted to know if we should continue to require students to use peer-re-

viewed sources and if we could effectively teach students how to find and use those sources in a stand-alone, one-shot library session. The results were clear: after a stand-alone library section, students still did not understand these sources well enough to use them effectively. More importantly, an analysis of their final papers showed that they were not changing their habits to include a wider variety of sources.

We followed the pilot up with a small-scale qualitative study tracking five undergraduate students through a full term of FYC. Some of those students were in sections using the argument paper assignment, and some were doing the CAP. We conducted two long interviews with each student during the term and analyzed their graded work. These in-depth analyses revealed several important themes, but one in particular is relevant to this story: the critical importance of face-to-face conversations between the student and their FYC instructor. In all five cases, the most significant gains in thinking, inquiry, and evaluation skills happened as the result of these conversations. From this realization, we concluded that we needed to radically shift the focus of our direct instruction, from undergraduate students to the GTAs.

As we thought about how to integrate ourselves into this support system, we had some concerns based on past experience. Over the years, the vast majority of the GTAs we have worked with have been committed to their students, conscientious, responsible, curious, and willing to work very hard. However, they are also balancing several roles: writer, student, future professional, parent, partner, scholar, teacher, and more. There is always a subset of these students for whom rhetorical theory or information literacy is a priority, but this is never the norm, nor should it be given the structure of their graduate programs. We realized that our pilot programs in the past, which depended on GTAs to volunteer to try new approaches, had relied too heavily on that subset of students who were predisposed to focus on research and evidence. We needed to ask different questions that addressed what the GTAs already knew, and what they needed to know. And we needed to begin thinking differently about who our learners are.

## Listening to and Learning from Graduate Students

As we prepared to embark on a new approach to providing information literacy instruction, we felt it was crucial to evaluate the GTAs' readiness to teach this content and to evaluate the effectiveness of the training experiences and support materials we provided to the GTAs. We scheduled IRB-approved interviews with each of the incoming GTAs prior to the start of the 2015 school year to dis-

cover what their preconceptions were about the academic research process, as well as their pre-existing skills, dispositions, and conceptual understandings of the academic research writing process. During these intensive forty-five-minute-to-one-hour interviews, several themes about these incoming GTAs emerged.

GTAs' past experiences differed depending on their prior educational experiences, but when asked to rank their facility with research and writing, most of the incoming GTAs interviewed tended to rank themselves fairly high. They reported having previously developed a range of research skills as undergraduates, including using specific preferred databases; practicing research strategies like using one good source to find another along with advanced and Boolean search; using evaluation strategies such as scanning results for specific types of articles; reading sources from a critical perspective, and then being willing to change their argument based on what they found in their sources; and a (perhaps overly) well-developed skepticism of resources like Wikipedia. Several of the interviewees spoke of their interactions with the library as a lightbulb moment and placed a high value on the research experience. However, there were also GTAs who experienced anxiety around the research process and were not comfortable with academic research.

When asked to reflect on past positive research experiences, many of the interviewees talked at length about encouraging environments, interesting assignments, and supportive feedback experiences created by their college teachers or editors (in the case of those interviewees with professional writing experience). Even though the interviewees also discussed important elements of positive research experiences such as their deep engagement with the topic, the teaching behaviors modeled to the interviewees were highly influential in creating their overall positive experience. This is an important recognition as modeling can play a seminal role in the learning experience.<sup>3</sup> As these GTAs were learning to become teachers, encouraging them to reflect on positive aspects of their own learning experiences had the potential to provide them with ideas for their own classrooms.

Based on these interviews at the beginning of the term, we felt confident that the majority of the GTAs were equipped to begin introducing their undergraduate students to the academic research process. As will be described in more detail in the next section, we provided a preterm training session and followed up throughout their first term with additional training sessions based on reflective activities.

At the end of the term, we asked this cohort of GTAs to debrief their experiences with teaching academic research writing both via individual and small-group freewrites. In small groups, GTAs reflected on the pain points they identified in their classes as well as their evolving goals for student research. For example, in these small groups GTAs noted struggles with explaining “why we

do research,” the challenge of “finding research that complicates,” and sought more ideas for developing “scholarly citizens.” Individually, GTAs wrote about what they hoped their students would take away from future research writing projects. One GTA noted, “I want them to understand the principles of research far more than I want them to understand the practice of research.” Another GTA observed, “I also want them to realize that this is a good time to challenge their research comfort zones because it’s a safe environment to fail in.” Finally, another GTA shared, “I need to spend more time understanding sources and incorporating them. BUT HOW DO YOU MAKE THAT FUN?!”

Clearly, these GTAs were embracing the main goals we had for FYC too. Their questions and struggles were sophisticated and realistic, and their observations were grounded in interactions with their students throughout the entire course of the term. Our exploration of these GTAs’ backgrounds and their learning gains throughout the term made us confident that our assumption that focusing our efforts on GTA development as a way to ultimately improve undergraduate student learning had been well founded.

## Teaching the Teachers

Once we were willing to remove ourselves as outside experts who parachuted into the course once per term to deliver all the required research skills, we were able to fully shift our attention to focusing on graduate student instructors as our primary learner audience. This adjustment in our thinking opened up the option for transforming our pedagogical approach to a professional development model instead of a classroom-based model. Similar programs where a small group of experts provides training to a larger group of instructors to more efficiently reach more students is frequently called a train-the-trainer or teach-the-teacher program depending on the professional grounding of the instructors. We use a teach-the-teacher model because our goal is to introduce GTAs to pedagogical approaches they can adopt in their own way rather than presenting a set of pre-packaged search exercises or a stand-alone library module.

However, other libraries have successfully implemented train-the-trainer programs. For example, at the University of Kentucky, science librarians taught biology teaching assistants how to teach database searching and how to use a citation manager. The process was primarily implemented as a way to sustainably reach the larger numbers of undergraduate students enrolled in introductory biology courses, but a valuable side benefit was that the teaching assistants could provide more specific information literacy examples relevant to the class and were more likely to address these issues at other points in the term.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, at the University of Colorado, a train-the-trainer program was implemented with

art graduate students as a way to sustainably maintain an information literacy program that could reach large numbers of art undergraduate students, but was found to also help the graduate students develop their own teaching and information literacy skills.<sup>5</sup>

So what does transforming our practice as librarians in a teach-the-teacher program with FYC GTAs in our context look like? Our training program with the FYC GTAs begins as part of their orientation week before the school year begins and continues throughout their first term. Throughout this training program our goal is to develop critically reflective instructors who are able to thoughtfully grapple with the research challenges their students encounter, but who also know when and how to ask for help from an expert when it is needed. This teaching goal was a transformative shift for us away from teaching graduate students discrete skills such as how to navigate our ever-changing database interfaces, how to use link resolvers, or how to construct a search strategy. These are valuable skills, but because of the nature of the kinds of sources undergraduate students actually need for their writing assignments, the rapidly changing landscape of search and discovery, and the fact that most undergraduate students struggle more with choosing a topic than with finding a few sources,<sup>6</sup> we have come to believe that graduate student instructors are better served by developing the capacity to reflect on the barriers to their students' engagement with the research process and then iteratively trying out different ways to address those barriers depending on their particular student audience. In other words, rather than providing the appearance of easy answers to information literacy questions, we seek to provide a framework graduate student instructors can use to address a range of sticky problems.

The new FYC GTA orientation is a week-long marathon that takes place one week before school begins and covers everything from how to use the campus course management system to how to create lesson plans. We meet with the GTAs for the equivalent of a half-day during that week. We focus on a few key concepts in this session because we understand that the GTAs may be feeling overwhelmed with all the information they have received and that they might be experiencing confusion or anxiety over the prospect of teaching a course for the first time in the very near future. We introduce the importance of supporting students throughout the topic selection phase of the research process and focus on curiosity as a habit of mind that can facilitate new forms of exploration.<sup>7</sup> We model the value of examining assumptions as a way to develop critical thinking skills for both students and teachers.<sup>8</sup> And we use curiosity-driven reflection and assumption hunting as a way to develop inquiry-based research questions.

Throughout the orientation activities, we encourage reflection in a variety of ways. We model reflection by presenting our own assumptions on issues such as the importance of curiosity and the purpose of assigning research assignments

to first-year students. We share evidence-based pedagogical best practices. We provide opportunities for the GTAs to try out assignments similar to what their own students will encounter. We give concrete activities that are scaffolded to move from abstract idea generation to more focused research questions. And we engage in small- and large-group discussions around the affective barriers first-year undergraduate students face.

Once the term begins, new FYC GTAs are required to take a weekly seminar course that continues their introduction to teaching first-year composition. We visit the seminar course at regular intervals throughout the term and lead the GTAs in reflective activities designed to encourage them to engage with the ways their students are experiencing the research process. GTAs are especially encouraged to consider how to give feedback on the research process, to broaden their expectations of what appropriate research sources are and what the actual pain points are for their students in the research process. We also provide time for the GTAs to share the questions and struggles they are having as teachers, not only as they experience teaching the research process, but also as they face the real problems their students—who are also brand-new to college—encounter.

This is the third year that we have taken the approach of focusing on GTAs as our primary information literacy audience. Assessment results show that over the course of the term the majority of undergraduate students grow in their ability to consider multiple aspects of the rhetorical situation when evaluating their sources. The evidence indicates that giving GTAs agency over how information literacy is introduced and reinforced in their classes has been a positive for both undergraduate learners and the graduate student instructors. Our changing perspective of librarians' role in the delivery means that rather than conceptualizing our teaching as introducing a few tools and information literacy ideals to undergraduate students without a clear sense of how and when they might use these skills over the long term, we now emphasize providing GTAs, who will hopefully move on to other teaching posts after graduation, with reflective practices they can continue to use and adapt throughout their careers.

## Notes

1. Jeanne R. Davidson and Carole Ann Crateau, "Intersections: Teaching Research through a Rhetorical Lens," *Research Strategies* 16, no. 4 (1998): 245–57, [https://works.bepress.com/jeanne\\_davidson/6/](https://works.bepress.com/jeanne_davidson/6/); Anne-Marie Deitering and Sara Jameson, "Step by Step through the Scholarly Conversation: A Collaborative Library/Writing Faculty Project to Embed Information Literacy and Promote Critical Thinking in First Year Composition at Oregon State University," *College and Undergraduate Libraries* 15, no. 1–2 (2008): 57–79; Paula S. McMillen, Bryan Miyagishima, and Laurel S. Maughan, "Lessons Learned about Developing and Coordinating an Instruction Program with

- Freshman Composition,” *Reference Services Review* 30, no. 4 (2002): 288–99, <https://doi.org/10.1108/00907320210451277>.
2. “OSU Enrollment Sets Record,” *Corvallis (OR) Gazette Times*, November 9, 2012, [http://www.gazettetimes.com/news/local/education/osu-enrollment-sets-record/article\\_e9b0298e-29cd-11e2-aaf6-001a4bcf887a.html](http://www.gazettetimes.com/news/local/education/osu-enrollment-sets-record/article_e9b0298e-29cd-11e2-aaf6-001a4bcf887a.html).
  3. Stephen D. Brookfield, *Teaching for Critical Thinking* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012).
  4. Patricia Hartman, Renae Newhouse, and Valerie Perry, “Building a Sustainable Life Science Information Literacy Program Using the Train-the-Trainer Model,” *Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship*, no. 77 (Summer 2014), <http://www.istl.org/14-summer/refereed1.html>.
  5. Alexander Watkins and Katherine Morrison, “Can Only Librarians Do Library Instruction? Collaborating with Graduate Students to Teach Discipline-Specific Information Literacy,” *Journal of Creative Library Practice*, February 27, 2015, <http://creativelibrarypractice.org/2015/02/27/can-only-librarians-do-library-instruction/>.
  6. Alison J. Head and Michael B. Eisenberg, *Truth Be Told*, Project Information Literacy Progress Report (Seattle: The Information School, University of Washington, November 1, 2010), [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2281485](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2281485).
  7. Anne-Marie Deitering and Hannah Gascho Rempel, “Sparking Curiosity: Librarians’ Role in Encouraging Exploration,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, February 22, 2017, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2017/sparking-curiosity/>.
  8. Brookfield, *Teaching for Critical Thinking*.

## Bibliography

- Brookfield, Stephen D. *Teaching for Critical Thinking: Tools and Techniques to Help Students Question Their Assumptions*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012.
- Davidson, Jeanne R., and Carole Ann Crateau. “Intersections: Teaching Research through a Rhetorical Lens.” *Research Strategies* 16, no. 4 (1998): 245–57. [https://works.bepress.com/jeanne\\_davidson/6/](https://works.bepress.com/jeanne_davidson/6/).
- Deitering, Anne-Marie, and Sara Jameson. “Step by Step through the Scholarly Conversation: A Collaborative Library/Writing Faculty Project to Embed Information Literacy and Promote Critical Thinking in First Year Composition at Oregon State University.” *College and Undergraduate Libraries* 15, no. 1–2 (2008): 57–79.
- Deitering, Anne-Marie, and Hannah Gascho Rempel. “Sparking Curiosity: Librarians’ Role in Encouraging Exploration.” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, February 22, 2017. <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2017/sparking-curiosity/>.
- Hartman, Patricia, Renae Newhouse, and Valerie Perry. “Building a Sustainable Life Science Information Literacy Program Using the Train-the-Trainer Model.” *Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship*, no. 77 (Summer 2014). <http://www.istl.org/14-summer/refereed1.html>.
- Head, Alison J., and Michael B. Eisenberg. *Truth Be Told: How College Students Evaluate and Use Information in the Digital Age*. Project Information Literacy Progress Report. Seattle: The Information School, University of Washington, November 1, 2010. [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2281485](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2281485).
- McMillen, Paula S., Bryan Miyagishima, and Laurel S. Maughan. “Lessons Learned about Developing and Coordinating an Instruction Program with Freshman Com-

position." *Reference Services Review* 30, no. 4 (2002): 288–99. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00907320210451277>.

"OSU Enrollment Sets Record." *Corvallis (OR) Gazette-Times*. November 9, 2012. [http://www.gazettetimes.com/news/local/education/osu-enrollment-sets-record/article\\_e9b0298e-29cd-11e2-aaf6-001a4bcf887a.html](http://www.gazettetimes.com/news/local/education/osu-enrollment-sets-record/article_e9b0298e-29cd-11e2-aaf6-001a4bcf887a.html).

Watkins, Alexander, and Katherine Morrison. "Can Only Librarians Do Library Instruction? Collaborating with Graduate Students to Teach Discipline-Specific Information Literacy." *Journal of Creative Library Practice*, February 27, 2015. <http://creativelibrarypractice.org/2015/02/27/can-only-librarians-do-library-instruction/>.

