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Publisher Routledge

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Journal of Library Administration

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t792306901>

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Online Publication Date: 01 January 2009

To cite this Article Rao, Srivalli, Cameron, Agnes and Gaskin-Noel, Susan(2009)'Embedding General Education Competencies into an Online Information Literacy Course',Journal of Library Administration,49:1,59 — 73

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/01930820802310858

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01930820802310858>

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Embedding General Education Competencies into an Online Information Literacy Course

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ABSTRACT. *Assessing core competencies for students who are enrolled in purely online programs poses a challenge to colleges and universities. Our institution has chosen an existing online information literacy course to incorporate and assess general education competencies for an overseas cohort of transfer students. This article presents a brief overview of the course and describes the way in which the course was redesigned to embed and assess the five general education competencies (critical thinking, information literacy, critical reading, quantitative reasoning, and writing).*

KEYWORDS *core competencies, information literacy, online courses, general education*

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education are increasingly aware of the need to assess core competencies so that graduating students are able to think and read critically, research and use information, analyze quantitative data, and write effectively and fluently. Accreditation requirements and the job market are placing greater importance on mastery of the core competencies of critical thinking, information literacy, critical reading, quantitative reasoning, and writing (Breivik, 2005; Van Dusen, 1997).

COURSE DEVELOPMENT

Mercy College has in place a 3-credit junior seminar course (JRSM 301) to assess general education competencies. All domestic students must take the course after successfully finishing 60 credits and before completing 90 credits. The topic of the junior seminar course is the Hudson River, and is

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offered both as an onsite and online course. Our institution has an overseas cohort of students who come in with up to 90 transfer credits through previous coursework, internships, work experience, or life experience. On average, they take 30 credits over three semesters (fall, spring, and summer) to finish their degree requirements. The topic of the junior seminar course, namely, the Hudson River, has no relevance to these overseas students. Our institution decided to use an existing online information literacy course to incorporate and assess general education competencies for these transfer students whose native language is not English. Embedding general education competencies into an existing required information literacy course also frees up three credits that these students can use to take another elective. The 3-credit course titled LISC 260—*Using Electronic Resources for Research* has existed as a required course for this overseas cohort of students since the fall of 1999. The course was initially developed as a required course to introduce the Mercy College Libraries' resources to this cohort of overseas students. Full-time librarians teach this course as an overload. The course was initially not open to domestic students, but now any student who meets the prerequisites can also take this online course as an open elective. Since domestic students are required to take the junior seminar course on the Hudson River in order to graduate, giving a choice of topics makes the course more interesting to domestic students as well.

The course lasts for 8 weeks during fall and spring semesters and is divided into eight modules with five quizzes. Summer sessions are shorter; the summer version of the course runs for 6 weeks. There is no midterm exam, final exam, project, or term paper for this course. Sixty percent of the grade is based on the quizzes and assignments and 40% on discussion and class participation.

Each quiz addresses a specific competency. We identified the modules where the five competencies would fit best. A document containing the five general education competencies (critical thinking, information literacy, quantitative reasoning, critical reading, and writing) statements, as outlined in the *Mercy College Undergraduate Catalog*, are posted by the instructor on the course page at the beginning of the class.

The choice of topics is determined by the instructors teaching the course. Students could choose a topic at the beginning of the course with the instructor's approval and do all the five quizzes on the same topic; the instructor can assign specific topics to specific students or let students choose from a list of topics given by the instructor. We suggested a list of topics that included

- art;
- health care in the United States;
- careers;
- history;
- drama;

- literature;
- education;
- music;
- environment;
- pollution;
- global economy; and
- rivers.

All instructors follow a prescribed course outline and the competency-based quizzes. We also came up with some suggested questions for additional assignments. Each instructor may choose and adapt these questions and include their own to make up additional assignments for each competency (Caldwell, n.d.; Feyl, 2005).

Revisions to the course were approved in the summer of 2005. We decided that the spring of 2006 would be a good time to implement the change. This schedule would give the instructors the entire fall semester of 2005 to prepare to teach the revised course.

EMBEDDING COMPETENCIES INTO THE COURSE

We will discuss our rationale (Caniels, 2005) for embedding the five competencies into five modules in the 8-week session. The competencies are introduced in a sequence beginning with critical thinking, information literacy, and quantitative reasoning, followed by critical reading and writing.

Prior to the incorporation of the five general education competencies, instructors had some leeway in deciding which of the five modules to assign the five quizzes to, as long as they followed the same basic course outline. In the revised course, however, it was decided (based on the topics and contents of the modules) that the five competencies-based quizzes would most logically fit into the following modules and that all instructors should follow the same guidelines for administering them.

Critical Thinking Competency

This competency was placed in the second module covering the topic “Developing Search Strategies” in the second week of the course. In this module, students are required to select a topic and develop logical terminologies and search strings. This task requires a great deal of critical and analytical thinking and therefore lays the groundwork for the other competencies. The quizzes and assignments for this competency involve breaking or narrowing down the topic into subtopics, comparing two topics or ideas, and similar skills. It is hoped that students will be able to adopt Boolean and other search

logic in clear and precise ways in their analyses and interpretations of their topic and use the search strategies they develop for continued assignments throughout the rest of the course.

Information Literacy Competency

The information literacy competency is introduced in the fourth module in the fourth week of the course. As part of the course, students are required to learn about the Mercy College Libraries' indexes and databases, which this module addresses ("Information Literacy," n.d.). It also appropriately follows the third module posted in the third week of class, which deals with online book catalogs and e-books. These resources include those covered in a traditional information literacy instruction session; consequently, this competency seemed to fit most logically into this module. The module also includes the topic of citation style formats, namely the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Modern Language Association (MLA), used in citing the information found in these resources. Students seem to like this module for the most part because it exposes them to resources they either did not know about, or because they were not aware that their own college offered such a rich array of online indexes and full-text electronic databases.

Quantitative Reasoning Competency

The quantitative reasoning competency posed some of the most challenges when it came to choosing the appropriate module for placing the competency and developing the quizzes and assignments. This seminar course is a library research course with no statistics or mathematics component. Many students enrolled in the course are not mathematics or statistics majors, hence some creativity was needed to evaluate their mathematical and computational skills. Students are given this competency in the fifth module during the fifth week of the course, which deals with subject-specific sources. It was decided that, to assess this competency, a quiz analyzing data obtained in a tabular format from one of the databases subscribed to by the library would fulfill the requirement. Students are given a choice of various countries and related data, and are asked to create some comparative demographic profiles. This approach has worked well because it gives students the opportunity to focus on countries and data that interest them.

Critical Reading Competency

Trying to evaluate the critical reading skills of a cohort of students whose first language is not English can be difficult. The critical reading competency fits

naturally within the sixth module in the sixth week of the course, which deals with evaluation of information found on the Web. Students are asked to critically read the information found on Web sites. The quiz varies from instructor to instructor. Some will assign specific Web sites while others will give the students the option to choose. Students are then required to critically evaluate the information found on the Web sites on the basis of the criteria presented in the lesson in the module on evaluating information found on the Web.

Writing Competency

Evaluation of the students' writing competency was by far the most difficult part of assessment in this course, even before it was revised to embed competencies. The seventh module in the seventh week includes a section on copyright, intellectual property, and plagiarism. It was considered appropriate to introduce writing competency in this module. The quiz for assessing this competency, like some of the others, varies slightly from instructor to instructor, but the objective is always the same, namely, to assess the students' ability to adequately demonstrate what they have read and learned in standard written English, applying all the required elements of grammar and punctuation, in an organized logical sequence.

Since the introduction of the competencies in the spring of 2006, several sections of this course have been taught and the results have been mostly positive. The choice of topics seems to work well and students seem to eventually grasp the relationship of the competencies to the quizzes as well as their significance to the general education curriculum—although constant reminders are necessary to achieve this understanding. To this end, instructors also post each competency statement in the module chosen and include a brief description and explanation of the competency. In addition, there are repeated opportunities for students to ask questions for clarification, and many times instructors will grant extensions to complete the assignment or quiz to students struggling with them.

TEACHING THE COMPETENCY-EMBEDDED COURSE

Instructors in the LISC260 course follow a general format for setting up the course, either the 8-week or the 6-week session. We have included (Appendix A) the basic course outline that we have developed for an 8-week session, which all instructors follow.

Besides the five competency-based quizzes, the instructor teaching the course may include additional assignments. We have added a set of suggested sample questions (Appendix B) that we have developed, which instructors can use or adapt for additional assignments.

The first week of the course is spent in classroom introductions. The instructor provides a few readings on basic topics about the Internet and the World Wide Web. The first module posted in the first week deals with basic search mechanisms, subject directories, search engines, and similar matters.

There is a lecture to introduce the topics for each week's module, a discussion topic for the week, and an assignment for the week. Ideally, once the instructor has developed the course, its contents should flow smoothly during each semester that the individual instructor teaches the course. However, as those of us who have taught online or onsite know, there is constant "tweaking" necessary as links disappear, hot topics become passé, and new ideas, methodology, and technology appear like magic. Also mandatory for online courses is the need for clear instructions—one cannot "wing it" online—as the material must be uploaded well in advance of opening the module for students to view. While teaching styles, interests, and emphases differs from one individual to another, all instructors have made the effort to be consistent in the competency-added components of the course.

As mentioned, the students are informed at the beginning of the course that there is a competency component to the class. An expanded explanation of each competency, as introduced into the course, appears under the heading of Course Documents. Brief explanations for the competency are also given in the instructions for the quizzes and weekly assignment. For the critical thinking competency, students are asked to select a topic, such as pollution, global warming, electronic surveillance, or similar subjects, and review the issues on or related to the selected topic. Then students are asked to

- put the topic in context (historical, world significance, and so on);
- identify at least three positive and three negative issues related to the topic;
- identify spokespersons for and against the issue; and
- give a personal stance on the issue.

The answers could be short but must be clearly stated. Once the topic is chosen, a student may continue to use the chosen topic for additional assignments in the competency component or other class assignments.

The second competency is information literacy and the topic chosen for "critical thinking" is further researched. The quiz and assignments for this competency ask students to

- find resources (articles in journals, magazines, or newspapers in databases subscribed to by the Mercy College Libraries) on their topic;
- find books on their topic using WorldCat, Book Index and Reviews, or the Mercy College Libraries' online book catalog, followed by researching for a review of the selected book;

- evaluate each of these sources, rating them on a scale of 1 to 5, from “very” useful to “not” useful; and
- cite the selected sources in MLA or APA format.

As part of basic readings for the course, students have been introduced to and given assignments on Internet basics, information storage systems and search strategies, online catalogs, indexes, databases and using the Web for research. The information literacy competency has been introduced and incorporated into the ongoing weekly online lectures or lessons as well as separated out for very specific quizzes and assignments.

The third competency, quantitative reasoning, uses the CountryWatch database. Typically, students are asked to

- choose two to four neighboring countries;
- select a 5-year time frame;
- collect data on three to four variables on each country within the given time frame;
- download the data;
- interpret the changes and note trends within the country; and
- compare changes and trends between the countries.

The CountryWatch database displays the data in a table format and also puts them in a downloadable Excel spreadsheet. Almost all students do a good job of analyzing the data. Working with students from halfway around the world has been very informative. Their opinions and interpretations of the data in the quantitative reasoning assignment are usually very interesting. Sometimes they will challenge the data and bring in other resources to support their claim.

Besides the competency quiz on evaluating information found on the Web, a typical assignment for the critical reading competency is analyzing an article chosen by the student or selected and posted online by the instructor. Students are asked to state,

- the subject of the article;
- what the author is saying about the subject;
- the main ideas; and
- support for the main ideas.

Next, students are asked to

- state at least two facts in the article;
- provide support for the facts;
- list at least two opinions given in the article;

- give the author's conclusions; and
- define some of the subject-specific or topic-specific words from the article.

Instructors teaching the course have found that students may read and understand the information found in an article or Web site, but reading the information critically and evaluating it is not always easy for students who are nonnative English speakers. Instructors often have to judge what the student is trying to convey based on the student's participation in the discussion forum and other private course-related e-mail communications.

Last, but not least, is the writing competency. Like critical reading, written communication poses extreme difficulty to the overseas student population because of the expected English-language skills required. These skills, of course, had been part of the assessment from the onset—either in the regular assignments, in the competency-based quizzes, or in the discussion topics—as short answers, paragraphs in discussion postings, descriptions or opinions, and the like. As part of the writing competency quiz, students are asked to write a short essay based on a reading. Here, there is latitude for instructors in the selection of the reading, but the essay guidelines are clearly defined. The student must

- have a thesis statement (agreeing or disagreeing with the position taken in the article);
- develop the position with at least three points;
- support the stance with quotations from the reading or another source; and
- come to a conclusion.

Proper English usage, spelling, grammar, and correct citing are required. The greatest challenge for the instructor is proving beyond a reasonable doubt that the writing is truly that of the student presenting it, since there are not too many prior writing samples to draw from. The student's discussion postings help, but there is often some disconnect—sometimes a huge disparity—between the tone and language of the student's discussion postings and the almost flawless essays presented for assignments and quizzes. It is indeed interesting to note the variations in the writings depending on the context. Writing in the discussion area may be in broken English, short answers may be very choppy, but answers to the writing competency quiz and assignments are almost always very well put together. Instructors have to frequently make the painful decision of either accepting the work as that of the presenter, or going through impossible lengths to prove otherwise. Translating and the use of translators and translating programs by students are always issues that instructors face, be it an online or an onsite course.

As with any online course, finding the fine line between staying in the background and acting as a moderator and facilitator so that the discussion

takes a natural course, interrupting discussions to make a point, to commend a good message, or to reprimand rudeness, requires effort on the part of the instructor (Shannon & Henner, 2002).

CONCLUSION

The course that we have titled *LISC260—Using Electronic Resources for Research* is a continuous learning experience for us. The inclusion of competency assessment into the course has been an interesting challenge. While almost all of the competencies are addressed and evaluated throughout the course, pulling each one out, integrating them into the topics discussed in the modules, and assessing them separately has been interesting and has heightened our awareness of the skills employed in specific class assignments and quizzes.

One downside has been some compression of the original course content and class discussion to make room for embedding the competencies. This compression is more keenly felt in the shorter summer semester's 6-week sessions. On the other hand, students have commented upon completing the course that while the main focus was finding electronic resources for research, studying the five competencies within the course was like a "course in a course." Several students have commented that the seamless way in which the competencies were introduced and integrated into the course modules made them understand and relate to the course content better.

Mercy College is expanding its international student body. New agreements are being negotiated with cohorts from Israel, Turkey, and London Guildhall College in the United Kingdom, to name a few. The college is also investigating opportunities in Guatemala, the Netherlands, and Belgium, but nothing has been finalized yet with these populations. The course, *LISC260—Using Electronic Resources for Research*, will be a required course for these new cohorts of students for the time being. Assessing core competencies for students whose native language is not only not English but also as different as Arabic, Hebrew, Spanish, and Turkish, will be an interesting challenge.

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APPENDIX A MERCY COLLEGE LIBRARIES

LISC260—Using Electronic Resources for Research Course Outline

Internet Basic*

1. Introduction
2. History of the Internet
3. Browsers: Netscape and Microsoft Explorer
4. Glossaries

Module I: Search Mechanism

1. Subject Directories
2. Search Engines: First and Second Generations
3. The Invisible Web
4. Discussion Topic for Week I

Module II: Developing Search Strategies

1. Boolean versus Natural Language Searching
2. Boolean with Keyword Searching
3. Phrase and Proximity Searching
4. Discussion Topic for Week II
5. Critical Thinking Competency**
6. Quiz I

Module III: Library Catalogs Online

1. Mercy College Libraries' Catalog
2. Local Library Catalogs

3. WorldCat
4. Library of Congress Catalog
5. E-books
6. Discussion Topic for Week III

Module IV: Indexes and Databases

1. Indexes on the Mercy College Libraries' Web site
2. Full-text Databases on the Mercy College Libraries' Web site
3. Other Fee-based Databases on the Internet
4. APA and MLA Formats for Citing Resources
5. Discussion Topic for Week IV
6. Information Literacy Competency**
7. Quiz II

Module V: Using the Web for Research

1. Business Resources
2. Health Information
3. Social Sciences Resources
4. Education and Others
5. Discussion Topic for Week V
6. Quantitative Reasoning Competency**
7. Quiz III

Module VI: Evaluating Web Sites

1. Criteria for Evaluating Web sites
2. Discussion Topic for Week VI
3. Critical Reading Competency**
4. Quiz IV

Module VII: Miscellaneous Topics

1. E-mail, Usenet Groups, Wikis, Weblogs, and Listservs
2. E-business
3. Security of Information on the Internet
4. Copyright, Intellectual Property, and Plagiarism
5. Discussion Topic for Week VII
6. Writing Competency**
7. Quiz V

Module VIII: Course Wrap-Up

1. Discussion for Week VIII

*Readings will be assigned to cover these topics on ERs, as an introductory content page on the course page, etc.

** Competency Statements as outlined in the Mercy College Undergraduate Catalog will be posted.

APPENDIX B MERCY COLLEGE LIBRARIES

LISC260—Using Electronic Resources for Research Sample Questions for Short Assignments

Critical Thinking

1. Using a Venn diagram, do the following:
 - a. Explain, in your own words, your understanding of Boolean logic
 - b. Using AND, OR, and NOT, compose three search statements on your topic to demonstrate your understanding of Boolean logic
2. Choose two of the full-text databases available on Mercy College Libraries' Web site, and do the following:
 - a. Explain what you think are the strengths and weaknesses of those two databases
 - b. Do they employ Boolean logic? How do you know?
 - c. Do you think they could improve their search methods? How?
3. Why do you think academic libraries, despite the proliferation of the Internet and its massive amount of free information, still need to subscribe to expensive databases?
4. What do you think would be the consequences if all search engines were created equal (same algorithms, same search strategies, etc.)?
5. Go to the ProQuest database, retrieve (for example) the 2005 full-text article by (John Doe), and do the following:
 - a. In your own words, summarize what the author is saying
 - b. Do you agree with his/her hypothesis? Why do you agree/disagree?
 - c. What do you think would happen if everyone thought like that?

Information Literacy Competency

1. Do a search on the topic using a search engine and two appropriate databases on the Mercy College Libraries' home page. Use the same search statement for both the search engine and the databases. Did the search engine or the databases give you better results? Pick two articles from the

- database search and two Web sites and cite the four sources using the APA/MLA format.
2. Choose a scholar or a researcher in the field. Find a biography of the person and two articles by or about the person. Find one or two books the person has authored or edited. Cite the sources using the APA/MLA format.
 3. Career information. Find an encyclopedia, a reference book, one newspaper article, one journal article, and one association Web site on a career in the field. Cite the five sources using the APA format.

Quantitative Reasoning

1. Choose two countries, one developed and one underdeveloped. Find two research articles, one on each country, with statistical data that relate to the topic you are investigating. Compare and contrast the two countries using this statistical information.
2. Choose a natural disaster, for example Hurricane Katrina, the eruption of Mount St. Helens, the tsunami, etc., and discuss the impact it had as it relates to your topic, quoting statistical data to illustrate.
3. Pick a social issue in your topic area and find an original research study. Summarize the article using the scientific method of introduction, methodology, results and conclusion. Include discussion of independent and dependent variables.

Critical Reading

1. For this assignment you are asked to read two research articles that relate to your topic and answer the questions given below for each article.

(Instructor may specify which articles the students will read, place articles on electronic reserve, post the articles in the course, limit the choice of topics, specify criteria for selecting articles, and so on.)

Questions:

- a. Give the title of each article.
- b. In each article, state what the authors are saying about the topic.
- c. Give the main idea(s) of each article with at least one supporting idea for each of the main idea(s).
- d. List at least two (2) facts given in each article and provide support of the facts.
- e. List at least two opinions expressed in each article.
- f. In each article, what does each author conclude?
- g. What is the point of view of each author? It could be supportive, biased (slanted to support a side), negative, or positive. Give two examples to support your answer.

- h. Write a summary or outline of each article, highlighting the key issues each article deals with, using the data presented.
2. You will examine the site http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page, read what it is about, and answer the following questions:

Questions:

- a. Explain what exactly is Wikipedia.
- b. In what way does it differ from traditional printed dictionaries, thesauri, and encyclopedias?
- c. Choose three words in each of the above articles that relate to the topic of the article and find the meaning of the words.
- d. Write an essay presenting the arguments for and against Wikipedia and give your conclusion as to the value of Wikipedia as a reference source.

Writing

Topic 1: Free Speech vs. Internet Security

Public Agenda (http://www.publicagenda.com/issues/debate.cfm?issue_type=internet)

You will be using the Public Agenda Web site to compose a short essay that tests your English writing competence. The Public Agenda site presents both a general overview of issues related to free speech, privacy and security on the Internet as well as providing a link to a discussion guide that provides balanced pro and con viewpoints.

For the essay you will need to argue a position regarding regulation of content on the Internet. You may choose to be either for or against regulation or you may choose a position somewhere in between. Your answer must be at least 600 words (two double-spaced word-processed pages) and must be supported by information taken from the Public Agenda site. You should begin with an introductory paragraph and finish with a concluding paragraph and have at least two supporting paragraphs in between. You will be judged on how well you identify and formulate a position (often called a thesis statement and usually found at the end of the introductory paragraph), how well you organize your ideas effectively and develop them into a logical paragraph structure, and how well you support your position with specific evidence from the Web site.

Needless to say, you will need to demonstrate a command of accepted English sentence structure and grammar, including attention to punctuation and appropriate vocabulary.

Topic 2: Evaluating Web sites for Authority

Johns Hopkins (<http://www.library.jhu.edu/researchhelp/general/evaluating/index.html>)

You will be using the Mercy Libraries' suggested Web page for evaluating Internet resources titled *Evaluating Information Found on the Internet*,

produced by Johns Hopkins University, to compose a short essay that tests your English writing competence. The article provides a concise and in-depth analysis of the primary reasons why information on the Internet should not be trusted at first glance. More importantly, it provides guidelines and skills to enable you to evaluate information you find on the Internet. Please read the article carefully.

For the essay you will first need to select a Web site discussed in any of the course modules. Then you must apply the lessons and skills learned in *Evaluating Information Found on the Internet* to that Web site. Your resulting essay must be at least 600 words (two double-spaced word-processed pages) and must be supported by information taken from the article. You should begin with an introductory paragraph and finish with a concluding paragraph and have at least two supporting paragraphs in between. You will be judged on how well you identify and formulate a position (often called a thesis statement and usually found at the end of the introductory paragraph), how well you organize your ideas effectively and develop them into a logical paragraph structure, and how well you support your position with specific references from the Web site. For this essay your thesis statement must identify the Web sites you have chosen to study and state your position (whether the Web sites conform, do not conform, or conform partially to the Johns Hopkins guidelines.)

Needless to say, you will need to demonstrate a command of accepted English sentence structure and grammar, including attention to punctuation and appropriate vocabulary.