

SCIL Works 2008 Presentation

Evolving Instruction from Systematic Searching to Situated Learning: A Problem-Based Learning Approach to Research Methods in Religious Studies

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Religious Studies 281 is a library research methods course. Originally a BI session, it has grown to an 8 week, one unit, class. My goal is to develop techniques for providing information literacy instruction that approximates and supports real research processes within the discipline. Resource oriented exercises, based on the idea of the systematic literature search, did not scale successfully to the larger framework; thus, the problem became to structure a Research Methods in Religious Studies class to be process oriented, grounded in real problem solving, analysis, and research techniques. The conception of the 'learning community' is the structural metaphor which motivates this evolution.

Some theoretical approaches discuss research as a 'conversation'. Articles discuss the notion of the 'conversation' as a rhetorical model for teaching the research process, and the idea of knowledge as a social construct. The 'conversational' model proposes that the social group be identified as a 'discipline' or a 'community of practice'. I went back to theory again, to investigate the ideas behind 'socially shared cognition' and 'situated learning'; which led me further, to the integration of Problem-Based Learning into this curriculum.

Initially, the goals established for the course were met, but they were not rigorous enough, nor did they meet the need of the students. Feedback was very positive, but indicated that this content was needed earlier in the curriculum. Since the course was initially considered to be a complement to the senior research class, most students had nearly completed all their course work. Subsequently, the department has made it a 1 unit, lower division requirement. This class is in constant development, and evolving, into a more rigorous and effective program for information literacy.

I developed, following the literature on Problem-Based Learning, a framework for guiding group inquiry through various categories of resources, following the flow of the inquiry. Beginning with the internet and covering key disciplinary resources, it is designed to show the benefits and limitations of each class of resources and is largely group taught.

Major implications for stakeholders to consider are the time required for librarian-faculty collaboration and the commitment of class and instructional hours.

This course is not a programmatic application for the campus information literacy sessions which are implemented as part of University Life 101. It may provide a model for other departments to consider, particularly in the humanities.