

Kathy Campbell

When a librarian enters the classroom

My experiences teaching a freshman experience class

When I entered library school in 1978, I envisioned a career spent helping patrons to discover the right books for their informational needs or their reading pleasure. I never saw myself in a classroom teaching undeclared freshmen how to adjust to university life. Despite all my expectations, times do change, and for three fall semesters, I co-taught a freshman experience class at East Tennessee State University (ETSU).

What is Academic Advantage?

Academic Advantage (AA) is one of several programs at ETSU that is devoted to student success. It is a two credit-hour course designed to help undeclared freshmen make the transition from high school to college by covering topics such as successfully managing time, understanding professors, note and test taking, developing critical thinking, learning about campus services, exploring various majors and careers, and participating in campus events. Class size is limited to 25 students as well for a second class (usually history, psychology, sociology or philosophy) as part of a cohort group. The class is offered only during the fall semester and is compressed into 10 weeks so that students have time to apply the lessons learned from AA to their other classes. With one exception, each AA class is co-taught by one faculty and one professional staff member.

Classes in the AA program qualify as one of four writing intensive courses that students at ETSU are required to take in order to graduate. In AA courses, students are required to write 15 pages and revise 5 of those pages.

Besides the writing assignments, all students in AA are required to read the same book, which is selected by a consensus of the AA instructors. They strive to select a book that will help generate student discussion both in and beyond the classroom.

Librarians as classroom instructors

The subject of librarians teaching AA was first brought up at an ETSU library faculty meeting in April 2003. Our dean read a memo from the director of performance funding and academic assessment. The memo, seeking potential teachers, was addressed to Persons Interested in Freshman Success. At the time my reaction was, I'm interested in freshman success, but not that interested. However, the memo interested two other librarians who signed up to take the training workshop in preparation to teach in the AA program. Soon after signing up for the workshop, one of the librarians left ETSU for another job, leaving a teaching position open. Before leaving, she suggested to the person overseeing AA that I might be a good person to take her place. The rest, as they say, is history.

Although I agreed to participate in the training workshop and teach an AA section, I approached the idea of teaching with some misgivings. I regularly taught library instruction classes and enjoyed doing so, but there is a big difference between teaching within

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the context of someone else's class and teaching one's own. A primary misgiving involved the role of the librarian in the university. It seemed to me that as circulation and reference statistics decreased and funding became tighter, the librarians at Sherrod Library were having an identity crisis. We knew that we offered a significant contribution to the university community, but did we have to take on new roles as teachers or advisors in order to prove our usefulness? Another misgiving had to do with my own ability to teach, since I had never taken a single education course. To be frank, I wondered if I had anything to offer a class of undeclared freshmen. Then there was the nature of the course itself. Instructors were expected to cover a lot of ground in a very short time. I was not sure that we could do it, much less do it well.

My experience

Putting misgivings aside, I met with my co-teacher and began planning our class. Co-teaching can have several benefits, including the division of labor with regard to lecturing, grading assignments, and meeting with students. The differences in areas of expertise can also result in a better experience for the students. It can also have its share of downsides, including inequitable sharing of the workload, ego conflicts, and problems with differences in teaching styles.

Fortunately, I had a very positive experience co-teaching the course. I taught with the same person for three years, and it worked well because we had similar thoughts regarding how the class should run. Moreover, my co-teacher helped me curb my tendency to grade too hard. She also listened and offered good advice when I felt frustrated with the quality of papers or the behavior of particular students. Best of all, we complemented each other since she was particularly knowledgeable about matters regarding financial aid, scholarships, and scheduling, whereas I was more knowledgeable about matters relating to conducting research and citing references.

When I signed up to teach AA, I had no idea how time consuming it would be.

Indeed, my life during the fall semester seemed to revolve around AA. Although my co-teacher and I invited guests to speak to several sessions and split the remaining ones between us, the class demanded a lot of time. Since we made a decision not to require a textbook for the class because of the expense, I had to create materials for each class by culling information from several books as well as the Internet. Although I tried to make this material interesting and fun, frankly, I had no idea how to make topics like note taking or how to prepare for and take tests fun. More time consuming than preparing for class was grading papers. Both of us would read each set of papers and make comments and recommendations for improvement. Since we liked to return one set of papers before we received another, I was always pushed to complete the grading.

The course turned out to be a good fit for teaching a writing intensive class. Instructors were discouraged from assigning a 15-page paper, so we prepared eight writing assignments ranging from several one-page papers about campus events to a five-page paper about career choices. These assignments permitted students to reflect and write about their experiences. Since students taking AA had not completed the required composition courses that are a part of the general education curriculum, we were encouraged to cut them some slack in grading their papers. Since only two of our papers required research, I thought that students in our group had the opportunity to pass an easy writing intensive class.

Many of our students did not agree with that thinking. Students felt they were always working on a paper. I was surprised to discover that many students preferred writing research papers rather than those requiring only reflection. Over the three years I taught AA, students regularly told me that it was the most stressful class they were taking because of the amount of required writing (which was more than that for English 1010).

The best part of teaching AA was the close contact it allowed me to have with the stu-

dents in our section. As a reference librarian who also taught library instruction classes, I did have contact with students, but it was limited to questions regarding their research. AA gave me the opportunity to interact with students on a wider basis through discussion both in and outside of class.

One of the first things we asked students to do when class started was to take the CSI, a 194-item questionnaire designed to evaluate a student's likelihood of graduating. After receiving the results, we met with students to discuss strategies to maximize their satisfaction with ETSU. AA instructors also met with students after the midterm if their Early Semester Progress Reports indicated that they were in danger of unking courses. I truly enjoyed these meetings as it gave me an opportunity to discuss whatever was on the students' minds—from immediate problems of homesickness and unsuitable roommates to personal matters involving vacations, cars, diet and exercise, as well as how to have enough time for work, school, and a social life, too.

The most frustrating part of teaching for me came when I read the student evaluations. It was obvious that the class did not live up to many of their expectations. Their comments were sometimes unsettling: I thought it would be more fun than it was (Whatever happened to learning?); "Teach how to write a paper first, cut down on activities/projects—some people have to work, play sports, etc. (Excuse me, but shouldn't getting an education be the number one priority?); TOO MUCH WORK. Sometimes I didn't have enough time to do the work for my real classes. (It felt real to me when I was preparing for class and grading papers.) I really never did understand what the students expected from the course. Perhaps it would have been helpful if I knew how the class was presented to students during orientation. I was particularly disappointed that students felt that many of the assignments were nothing more than busy work.

It appeared that students were unaware of the requirements of a writing intensive course

since they were unhappy with the amount of required writing. I had mixed feelings about the amount of writing in the course. Part of me felt that if we wanted students to have a good introduction to college life, then we should design the course so that the work load would not be too demanding and students could look forward to receiving a good grade. On the other hand, if the course was writing intensive, then I felt that the grade should reflect the quality of the writing, which would result in lower grades for many students.

Fortunately, there were favorable student evaluations, as well: Helped me realize that the university will try to help make things better/more convenient for students . . . ; I am happy I took this class, it was better than I thought ; Was really beneficial. All speakers were extremely helpful. All pertained to college life. Without this positive feedback, I could not have taught AA for three years.

My recommendations

I learned a number of things over the course of three years teaching AA. Here's what I would tell other librarians interested in teaching a similar class:

If possible, resolve any misgivings you might have about teaching before you enter the classroom.

The dynamics of each class will be different. By all means consider student evaluation relative to your teaching, but also keep in mind the objectives of the class.

Ask the students during the first session what they expect to get from the class and be prepared to adjust your classes whenever advisable to meet their expectations.

Explain how your assignments can help your students meet their expectations.

Encourage your students to stretch themselves by going to different types of campus events.

Don't be surprised to discover that freshmen can be a lot more conservative and closed-minded than one might expect.

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(SL name: Adam Reuters), who cover major news stories about SL and Linden Lab. The site also contains a blog written by Krangal that covers practical elements related to SL residents. *Access:* <http://secondlife.reuters.com>.

Second Life Herald. This site was founded in 2003 by philosophy professor Peter Ludlow as the *Alphaville Herald*. It was originally dedicated to reporting on the Alphaville server of The Sims Online, but soon branched out to cover other virtual worlds. In 2004 the site was rechristened *The Second Life Herald* due to its emphasis on SL. The *Herald* is considered a muckraking publication by some as it often takes a negative view of Linden Lab and its administration. The stories found on this site often have adult themes and deal with the seedier side of SL. The site is a good resource, however, for keeping up with the darker elements and more unusual goings-on in the virtual world. *Access:* <http://www.secondlifeherald.com>.



("When a librarian . . ." cont. from page 608)

Overall, I think that teaching the AA course has been a positive experience for me. It has caused me to develop in ways that I could not have imagined back in 1978. I did not teach AA this past fall, and I miss the interaction with my students and co-teacher. Believe it or not, I even miss grading student papers.

I think that many librarians have a set of skills developed from teaching library instruc-

("Google maps and Second Life" cont. from page 612)

The Moraine Valley Library's Google Maps and Second Life Project was successful, even if we recognize significant changes that should be made if undertaken again. The students completed useful assignments and engaged the text in ways they might not have if we had moved forward with this project. Many times, and this time in particular, it is difficult to know how

Second Life News Network (SLNN).

SLNN reports on news occurring in SL and real life stories that affect SL and its residents. The site began in October 2006 to offer unbiased coverage of SL. Regular reporters for SLNN are all SL residents who have been using the platform for at least three months. The network also accepts stories from freelance writers. *Access:* <http://www.slenn.com>.

Notes

1. Brain interface lets paralyzed man walk in Second Life, Fox News. Retrieved from www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,361822,00.html.

2. T. Loftus, Virtual world teaches real-world skills: game helps people with Asperger's practice socializing (Feb. 25, 2005), MSNBC. Retrieved from www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7012645/.

3. B. Ruberg, How to spark remote learning, *Forbes* (March 19, 2008). Retrieved from http://www.forbes.com/2008/03/19/life-lessons-gaming-tech-innovation08-cx_br_0319innovations.html. //

tion and working at the reference desk plus a commitment to students that make them potentially excellent teachers for a course like AA. While teaching a freshman experience class is not something that I would recommend for every librarian, if you find yourself wondering if you might enjoy it, by all means try it. The opportunity to get to know what students think and feel will definitely make you a better librarian. //

useful a technology may be without opening the door when opportunity knocks.

Notes

1. One Book, One College Web site, www.morainevalley.edu/malcolmx/maps/index.html.

2. GMapEZ can be found at n01se.net/gmapez/. //