

Barb Macke and Pam Bach

# The dilemma of the “disappearing” FYE librarian

## Or . . . The little PowerPoint that could

### The dilemma

Freshmen enrollments reached record numbers on the main campus of the University of Cincinnati in both 2010 and 2011 (5,521 enrolled in 2010, and 6,197 in 2011).<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, at the same time, budgetary constraints similar to those felt by many public universities during the past two years were responsible for the untimely “disappearance” of our first-year experience (FYE) librarian position.

This “disappearance” left us with an apparently unsolvable dilemma—we were still receiving many, many requests for library instruction from professors and FYE program directors who were accustomed to bringing their students into the library during the first quarter of their freshmen year, but we had no one to teach them.

We thought about “just saying no,” but then realized that a hard-line, no-can-do policy would reflect poorly on our institution and our role in the academy. A negative approach was out of the question. We would be cutting off service pathways to students when our institution was strategically directing us to “. . . establish new communication and service pathways to students and faculty based on their needs and expectations.” Saying no was not an option for another reason—we genuinely *like* freshmen around here. We want to see them, we want to serve them, and we relish the opportunity to establish new service pathways to them.

Initially we felt that we didn’t have either the human or the technical tools at hand to solve this problem.

But my grandpa always used to say, “If you don’t have what you need, just use what you have.” In other words, if you don’t have a Phillips-head screwdriver, a kitchen knife properly employed will usually do the job. In order to address our problem we had to resort to a kitchen knife solution.

### The solution

We began to test our kitchen knife solution in the spring of 2010, anticipating a large entering freshman class in 2011. In order to adequately provide instruction for at least some of these first-year students without the benefit of an actual librarian, we knew that we really had to have clear and concise learning objectives, as well as a cohort of students and faculty to cooperate with us.

Even though as librarians we can be very fond of telling folks what they *ought to know* about the library, we figured that in our new lean, mean version of library instruction, it was much better if the learning objectives came directly from the programs and the faculty involved.

We had to shake off the *ought to know* and pare things down to the *really need to know* for this assignment. We soon discovered a perfect partner in one of the most robust and friendly FYE programs on cam-

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pus—the first-year experience seminar for the Allied Health Professions. In fall 2010 there would be 13 sections of FYE Allied Health with approximately 25 students per section. Members of the Allied Health faculty were strong supporters of the library, and many of them sorely lamented the loss of our FYE librarian. In other words, they wanted us. *They wanted us bad.*

It was a calculated risk, but in the long run it really paid off. Our collusion started with two very focused and productive meetings with the FYE Allied Health faculty during the spring and summer quarters. What did they want their students to learn about the library? What kind of research assignment were they going to give?

We worked with the faculty to cut the assignment to the bone, and keep the goals very simple. Their students needed to know who the librarians were that could help them, how to log in to our restricted library resources, how to execute a simple search in one library database, and how to distinguish between scholarly and not-so-scholarly resources.

The FYE faculty needed a product that was flexible and could be adapted to different in-class situations and teaching styles—something that could be used independently by the students, something that faculty could understand and use in collaboration with their own teaching, and something they could start and stop in a classroom setting.

We looked around the library. We didn't have sophisticated video creation capability or expertise at our disposal. No movie stars. No fancy-schmancy instructional designers. No state-of-the-art video software. No production staff. And, of course, no time in our schedule.

But we did have modest little PowerPoint, a decent headset and a mic, and a few stable, simple, and straightforward Camtasia videos mounted on our Web site and YouTube. And so we went to work. It was a shaky start, but we had a positive outlook and a strong desire to reach these students in any possible way.

And so we created the Little PowerPoint that could.<sup>2</sup>

It was a fairly unsophisticated product—a 13-minute narrated PowerPoint with a few embedded, student-produced mini-tutorials to add a little variety. The PowerPoint first explains the off-campus login process, and then leads students to the library homepage. From here they learn how to locate the database, Academic Search Complete, and how to execute a search related to careers in Allied Health. Some simple search strategies (using AND, OR, NOT, and \*) are also included. An embedded mini-tutorial helps students discriminate between popular and scholarly material—they must select at least one of each in order to complete their assignment. Students are also introduced to MLA and APA citation styles, and, more importantly, to some positive reasons for citing in academic papers.

With help from our campus Faculty Technology Resource Center we converted the whole thing into a video that could easily be loaded onto our YouTube channel or a Blackboard site. It was easy to play, easy to access, and easy for faculty to use in the classroom. Maybe a little boring, maybe a little too long, but students *could* complete their FYE library assignment if they followed the steps in the video. And faculty could stop the video at any point and introduce live searching in their electronic classrooms.

Next, a draft version went out to the graduate teaching assistants in Allied Health Sciences. The reaction was more positive than we anticipated. The verdict: it would work.

### **The assessment**

Now for the ultimate academic question, after viewing the PowerPoint and completing the assignment, did the students learn anything? Our close collaboration with the FYE Allied Health faculty also afforded us the opportunity to develop and deliver a pre-PowerPoint and post-PowerPoint assessment tool. We really wanted to know—did they learn what they were supposed to learn

about the library? Did we achieve our very modest, but respectable learning outcomes?

Results of the pre- and post test showed the average score improved by 15% with post tests at a 96% success rate. For many of the students, the tutorial covered new areas of learning: accessing library resources, finding articles online, identifying scholarly articles, and searching effectively. The most challenging items involved understanding the Boolean operators AND and OR, describing a scholarly article, and accessing the full-text of an article.

And how did they use what they learned? First-year students in the Allied Health Program are enrolled in a three-quarter seminar sequence. The PowerPoint and the accompanying library assignment were on the syllabus for mid-quarter in the fall term. But since these students stay together for an entire academic year, we had the unique opportunity to conduct some additional assessment and to satisfy our curiosity about teaching products like these.

Did students remember anything from this 13-minute PowerPoint and its attached assignment? Did they use anything they learned?

More than four months later, at the end of winter quarter, we conducted a follow-up survey (via Survey Monkey) to see how students had used what they learned. The survey was entirely voluntary, and we anticipated that the response rate would be very low. But much to our surprise, 75 students replied to our survey. More than 80% of these students indicated that they had applied what they learned (transfer of knowledge) from the narrated PowerPoint to several other classes, including English Composition, Psychology, Physiology, Art, and Public Health.

What do new students really need to know about the library? We couldn't pass up the opportunity to get some free advice, so we asked Allied Health FYE students to identify what they thought were the most important things for new students to know

about the library. The top three answers: searching effectively, finding articles, and citing sources. They nailed it. These are the core skills and building blocks for doing good research.

### **What went right, and what went wrong**

Let's talk about the good stuff first. We believe the project succeeded because the narrated PowerPoint was very tightly tied to an assignment with a limited number of learning outcomes developed by faculty and modified (to be more attainable) by librarians. Both the faculty involved and the librarians had extensive experience with first-year students. It was a collaborative effort to give students a few basic research skills and introduce them to a few basic research resources, and the assignment was an integral part of their first quarter studies.

But how did the FYE faculty feel about it? At the end of the academic year we met again with faculty and told them to "give it to us straight." Did the PowerPoint work for them? Did it achieve their goals? We acknowledged that it was a poor substitute for the face-to-face instruction their students used to receive, but was it still okay? On a scale of 1 to 10, could they at least give it a 6 or a 7?

We braced ourselves, but the response was overwhelmingly positive. Faculty liked the flexibility of the PowerPoint—some stopped the presentation several times during the class session so that students could practice live searching and discuss their results. Other faculty indicated that they expected students to view the video independently and then complete the assignment on their own. No significant technical issues were reported. For the most part they found it a useful tool and wanted us to repeat the process for the upcoming year.

But things weren't completely rosy from our perspective. A 13-minute narration can get a little boring, and we felt that a livelier, nonlibrarian narrator might have

done a much better job. And then there was the issue of updating content—impossible. Once recorded, the PowerPoint was virtually unchangeable, and we all know how frequently library resources change. There were even some minor changes on our library homepage that happened over the summer, and these could not be incorporated into the final product.

### What next?

So the little PowerPoint was okay, and it did an adequate job of introducing a large cohort of 2010 first-year students to some of our library resources, and to our resourceful librarians. But do it over again in 2011? And then every summer thereafter? Create several personalized versions for different FYE programs? No way. It was a good first idea, but we felt that it was not sustainable. However, members of the FYE faculty were still knocking on our door and now there are more of them (faculty from the FYE Social Work program wanted a similar product to help their students do

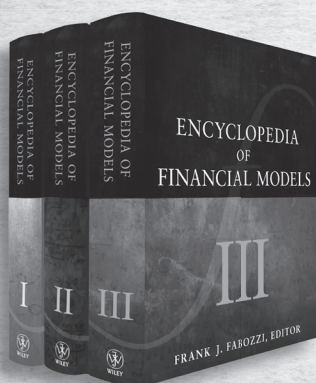
the research necessary for their end-of-year poster presentations).

We decided to try using the CampusGuides product as an assignment-driven, self-paced instructional tool in 2011–12. It appears to have the features we need—it is flexible, technologically stable, and easy to update. So here we go again . . .<sup>3</sup> And although the jury is still out on our CampusGuide, this two-year process has taught us a lot about collaboration, working within the parameters of a compact and well-defined assignment, and adapting to changing technologies. We don't know what next year will bring, we only know that we'll be ready for it.

### Notes

1. Student Profile Reports for 2010 & 2011, Office of Institutional Research, University of Cincinnati, [www.uc.edu/provost/offices/institutional\\_research/student\\_reports.html](http://www.uc.edu/provost/offices/institutional_research/student_reports.html).
2. [www.YouTube.com/watch?v=DxIY\\_cdho-c](http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=DxIY_cdho-c).
3. <http://guides.libraries.uc.edu/fye>. *WZ*

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