

# The river's rising, and all we have are teaspoons

## Designing instruction for a renovated library

by Katherine Furlong and Michael C. McGuire, with Paul Welch and Jill A. Reny

The library staff was jubilant. The 1998 spring semester was finished, building renovations were complete, the jack hammers fell silent, and the plaster dust settled. Staff vacancies were filled, and the library's electronic classroom was fully functioning. The University of Maine at Farmington's (UMF) Mantor Library had survived an extraordinary year of change, and it was time for a well-deserved rest.

The creation of an electronic classroom had resulted in a four-fold increase in instruction over one semester. While the instruction team of five librarians (two were new staff members) and one paraprofessional sometimes thought they wouldn't survive the long, cold winter—they had made it through. Springtime in Maine, and an easy summer ahead. Life was looking up.

And then came the faculty senate meeting.

The faculty senate, after much discussion of a common core of learning, implemented a new class, Liberal Arts (LIA) 101, "Explorations in Learning." A one-credit class required of all incoming first-year students,

LIA 101 would be a common introduction to college life and college resources. The library was one such resource, and it was decided that each class would have a formal visit to the library at least once during the semester. Up to this point the library's instruction

program was focused on course-integrated instruction at the point of need, not general orientation sessions. We would need to shift our focus for these 31 new instruction sessions, while accommodating the fact



Library Instructor Michael McGuire works with a student in the classroom portion of the instruction session.

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Students retrieving clues from a mystery tour poster.

that there would be no reduction in the number of English Composition and other discipline-specific classes. The result: nearly 100 instruction sessions were anticipated for the 1998 fall semester, doubling the library's teaching load. It was now summer, and a member of our instruction team announced her intention to start a phased retirement program. While a search committee was formed, we knew we would not only face this increased course load with no increase in staff or funding, we would be functionally decreasing our number of instructors.

### The river was rising

Of course the staff changes and building renovations weren't the only challenges facing the library. That same summer, the UMF system migrated to a Web-based catalog, adding 20 public access PCs with Internet connections, while removing the familiar amber-screened VT100 terminals that had been in place for nearly ten years. Some databases formerly on CD-ROM were switched to Web versions with a new vendor. The end result, while a powerful system of databases, was very different from the resources available at the end of the previous academic year. We were also continuing community outreach through a Bell Atlantic Excellence in Education Information Literacy Grant, allowing us to teach classes to area school teachers and children.

We needed help. The idea of using undergraduate teaching assistants had been suggested. UMF has a strong education department, providing a rich pool of talent, but the library had no means of paying stu-

dents for their work. While the idea of using interns or work-study students was suggested, staff members felt that something more was necessary. It was then that the university's president created a new Student Employment Initiative, providing funds to hire students for innovative projects. We wrote a proposal for a teaching assistant, and it was funded. During the interview process, we discovered the possibilities and talents possessed by students. We had so many qualified applicants, we decided to hire a second teaching assistant using the traditional federal work-study program.

We had help. We had classes scheduled. We still didn't know what we would be teaching the students in LIA 101. We needed goals and objectives.

The basic goal of the library's part of LIA 101 was to provide an introduction to the library, its staff, and resources. We were hoping to dovetail the LIA classes with sessions students would likely receive in their first-year English Composition course. LIA would provide a foundation, allowing librarians teaching the English Composition courses to offer more advanced searching and information evaluation techniques.

The LIA 101 session would feature a physical tour, orienting students to the library's resources. This would be followed by a hands-on introduction to our online resources in the electronic classroom. We knew we wanted to employ active learning techniques, and have students perform several searches on the catalog as well as physically finding books on the shelves. We wanted the experience in the library to be positive and fun, and to ensure student success.

But how were we going to reach these goals? We had a worksheet on using the catalog that had been developed several years ago, but that seemed deathly boring to our student teaching assistants, and many of the teaching team agreed. The User Education librarian had been learning Java scripting and had started creating a self-paced online tutorial, but it would not be ready for the start of classes in September. It was past time to find out how other libraries coped.

A literature search revealed many articles and ideas. The most helpful proved to be *Pro-*

grams that Work, papers that were presented at the 24<sup>th</sup> National LOEX Library Instruction Conference. After reading about several of the model programs, we were intrigued by the University of Puget Sound's "Library Mystery Tour."

This program was, in turn, based on an ALA National Reading Program. Students played the role of detective and followed clues that led them throughout the library to solve the mysterious death of the much despised Professor Tweed.<sup>1</sup>

The Puget Sound model seemed ideal, and it was created by a library facing a similar situation. Designed as an individual, self-directed orientation, the Puget Sound Mystery Tour involved little librarian interaction. But the lack of librarian interaction, we felt, was also its weakness. We wanted librarians to be active partners in instruction, a relevant part of the university experience. It was time to modify the model.

We knew that group interaction was a strong aspect of the LIA 101 framework, and we decided to incorporate the group into our library orientation. Instead of individual detectives setting out to solve the puzzle of the dead Professor Tweed, our design added the twist of detective agencies.

Class size was expected to be small, between 12 and 16, so we created four different sets of clues that would allow the groups



Students searching the stacks for clues during the mystery tour.

to explore the building and learn about the library's services and resources. We would start the class together, provide a ten-minute physical orientation and tour, then proceed to the electronic classroom for a brief introduction to the online catalog. Once each student had successfully used the catalog for some basic searches, we would then break the class up into teams or agencies of three or four students. Each agency was given a letter with background information and its first clue. The first team to solve the mystery would receive a reward.

### **Sandbagging**

We had help, we had goals, we had a plan to meet those goals. The levees were holding, and we thought we could withstand the flood. We presented our modified mystery tour to the full instruction team, only to find out that the library director, a very influential team member, hated it. He had grave misgivings about the appropriateness of the exercise and thought it was a bit too cute for our audience. Instead, he preferred our existing worksheet exercise.

In a spirit of compromise, we decided to try both, and to let the evaluations show which teaching method was better. Having options for teaching LIA 101 accommodated different teaching styles and made it easier to persuade all teaching team members to participate.

We now had to modify the old worksheets for our new Web-based catalog and resources, but this was no problem. We had to find a way to physically create the Mystery Tour clues so that they would withstand repeated assault. Again, no problem. We also had to teach all of the other English Composition and subject specific classes, coordinate the community outreach sessions, and hire new staff members. And train our student teaching assistants and cover the reference desk and maintain the technology and all the "other duties as assigned." We were starting to see a few problems after all.

### **What really happened**

By the end of the semester, we taught over 90 instruction sessions, including 29 sections of LIA 101. The student-teaching assistants often led the physical tours, while

staff members would work in the electronic classroom to introduce the catalog. The library worksheet was adapted to conform to our group work model. Students worked in pairs to answer the worksheet questions, went out into the library stacks to retrieve a book specified on the worksheets, and then brought it back to the classroom.

Roughly half the LIA sections were given the Mystery Tour. Even those instruction team members who initially disliked the Mystery Tour idea liked the way it required students to visit remote parts of the often-confusing library building.

Faculty members provided mixed comments. Those who actually participated in the tour with their students gained the most from the exercise. As would be expected, some teams simply ran like mad through the library, frantically seeking the distinctive black skull-and-crossbones Mystery Tour motif designed by our teaching assistants. Others took their time and painstakingly pondered each clue.

Just as the Mystery Tour initially polarized our instruction team, the students who returned the evaluation survey either loved or hated the exercise. Those who hated it, really hated it. Various evaluations rated it as condescending, childish, stupid, and pointless. Others found it "strange, yet amusing"; some thanked us for the great experience. More than 70 percent of respondents thought we should continue to use the tour. No one mentioned the chocolate we provided as a reward to the victorious detective agencies. But regardless of which LIA 101 program they participated in, over 70 percent of respondents indicated they were comfortable using the technology in the library, could locate a book in the catalog and on the shelves, and would ask a question of a librarian if they needed help.

In various faculty meetings, feedback has been mostly positive. Many instructors have been pleased by the hands-on focus of our program. Faculty members who had never scheduled subject-specific library sessions began to bring their other classes to the library because of positive experiences in LIA 101.

### **If we had it to do all over again**

Given the chance to do it all over again, we might politely decline. The challenges of

learning a new position, learning new library resources, teaching those resources to new students, and conducting a regional Information Literacy Program are daunting at best. Adding to that the challenge of creating a curriculum for 500 first-year students was truly overwhelming.

Using undergraduate teaching assistants as part of the solution has been one of the most rewarding aspects of the past semester. We gained valuable insights into the undergraduate psyche and were able to create a stronger instruction program due to their input. The assistants participated directly in 20 percent of the sessions as well as supported all aspects of the library's instruction program. We hope that the teaching assistants also gained worthwhile experience. Working with the program may, however, have had an unforeseen impact. Both teaching assistants, who started the semester as education majors, have switched out of education into other fields. Nevertheless, we will be expanding the program in the upcoming semester.

We are still trying to find the perfect exercise, one that combines demonstrations, student participation, and actually walking through the building. Part of our problem in refining our work is due to the failure of our initial evaluation instrument. The evaluation return rate was very low, and we made the mistake of trying to evaluate the Mystery Tour and the worksheet exercise on the same form, assuming that students would know which part of the form to complete. We now know that we have to have separate, distinct evaluations for every class and exercise.

LIA 101 has given the library new exposure, has introduced first-semester students to the library in an entirely new way, and has allowed us to expand our role on campus. It's been a fun semester. We just hope it gets easier from here!

### **Note**

1. Lori Ricigliano, "The Library Mystery Tour: a Freshman Orientation Program that Works," in *Programs that Work, Papers and Sessions Material Presented at the 24<sup>th</sup> National LOEX Library Instruction Conference*, ed. Linda Shirato (Ann Arbor, MI: Pierian Press, 1997), 207-212. ■



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