



Beyond Scaffolding: Constructing Student-Centered Instruction in Sociology and Information Literacy

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The College of New Jersey



Overview

How we built a better sociology research methods course through a focus on information literacy and practices



Tell us

Where do your students struggle in the research process?

1

Context

The College of New Jersey

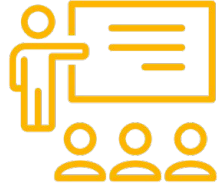
- Public, comprehensive, and strongly liberal arts-centered
- Primarily undergraduate institution
- Enrollment
 - ~ 7,000 full-time undergraduate students
 - ~ 300 full-time masters students
- 15 librarians (8 subject specialists), 350 full time faculty
- Teacher-scholar model for our faculty and librarians
- Deep engagement of our undergraduates in research



Erin Ackerman (left)
Social Sciences Librarian and
Interim Assistant Director for Public
Services

Lynn Gazley (right)
Associate Professor of Sociology





Sociology 302: Quantitative Research Methods

- Required course, minimum grade for credit
- Standard syllabus
- Faculty rotation
- Write a research paper in journal article format including statistical regression

Widely regarded as the “killer class” of the major

2

Where we started



“Here’s the syllabus and the four main assignment descriptions.”



Image: *Project Runway's* Tim Gunn says "Make it work."

**“I’m your
new librarian.”**





Lit Review session

- Purpose of a literature review
- Questions to think about
- Norms of academic writing based on templates used in *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* by Gerald Graff & Cathy Birkenstein (W.W. Norton & Company)

Many studies document a connection between _____ and _____ (X date; Y date; Z date).

3

The problem



Hopes & Dreams

- Acquisition of methods/research skills
- Engagement with scholarly debates within sociology
- “A great methods course can be a highlight of a college career...”



Reality

- Steep learning curve in multiple, simultaneous areas
 - Cognitive: Statistical thinking, conceptual logic
 - Skills: Writing, SPSS, literature research & analysis, data literacy.
 - Metacognitive: executive function, time management
- High initial anxiety
- Many transfer students and education majors



*This course is **difficult and challenging**. The department could do a better job and making sure students are aware of the workload of this course before taking it on. **I withdrew from this course** during a previous semester.*



4

The rehab phase



“Librarians do that?”

“I could look at those assignments....”



Major transitions

Our partnership

From “please share your assignment so I can tailor the workshop” ...

...to “I could look at it when you're writing it to make sure you aren't asking students to do things they don't know how to do”

The assignments

From “find 10 articles indexed in Sociological Abstracts and list them in ASA format” followed by a literature review, then the final paper...

...to *enhanced scaffolding*: Broke assignments into smaller pieces and provided lots more hands on support



Key Interventions

- Modest change of language in framing of project
- Pre-searching session exercises; flipped classrooms
- Suggested citation chain in assignments
- Early semester assignments emphasized grouping articles
- Required draft lit review before discussion
- Structural: Department added additional 80 minute lab to course



Tell us

What has created opportunities for faculty/librarian collaboration in your experience?

“

*The course was so **valuable, helpful, but stressful.** It was one of the most difficult classes I've ever taken but so rewarding.*

Still needs work

Students were finding better stuff but still struggling to write about it and connect to statistical analysis





Q & A

A collection of tools including a hammer, pliers, a brush, and various nails and screws scattered on a yellow background. The tools are arranged in a way that suggests a process of deconstruction and reconstruction. The background is a solid yellow color, and the tools are in various orientations, some pointing towards the center and others towards the edges. The overall composition is clean and minimalist.

5

Tear it down, rebuild it



“Yes.”

“The department gave me permission to redesign 302.
Want to work with me?”

Why isn't scaffolding enough?

We needed to focus on what we wanted students to be able to do, not what we wanted them to build. Shifted from the expert perspective to that of the novice.





Form follows function

- Inclusive Excellence: an active stance toward student success
- Focus on concepts (realized that if you are going to synthesize, what are you going to synthesize around?)
- Student-centered pedagogies
- Embed information literacy framework throughout
- Process, not product



Focusing the course

- Social problems affecting college students
- Course readings: sociological research on college students
- IL frames: Authority is Constructed and Contextual, Research as Inquiry

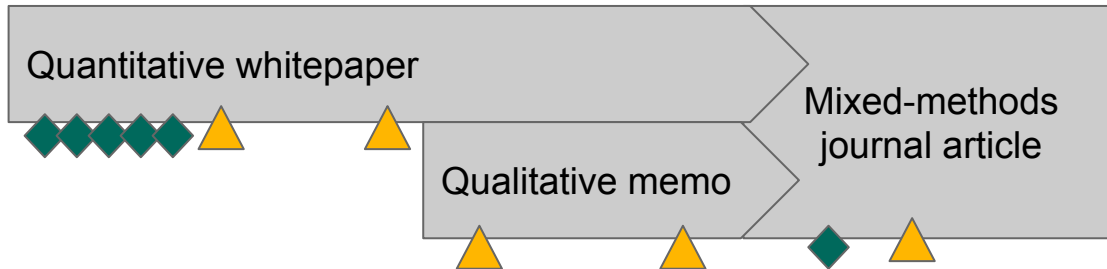


Course changes

Original course



Current course



▲ Opportunity for feedback on lit review

◆ Preparatory assignment



Article dissection

Students break down sections of a model paper for tips and tricks for readers and writers of sociological articles

IL frames: Information Creation as a Process; Scholarship as Conversation

Student feedback, FA19

	Useful	Not useful
Novel	14	1
Done it before	3	1



Searching and engaging

- Not starting with the research question
- Meaning, not matching
- Rather than “find 10,” select and guided engagement with *one*
- IL Frames: Searching as Strategic Exploration, Research as Inquiry



IV

DV

↑ social media

(+)

↑ stress levels

(+)

↑ lack of sleep

↑ late night tweets

(+)

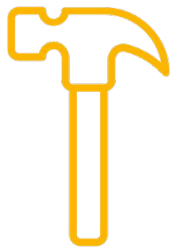
↓ length of tweets

(-)

Visualizing causal models

Students were asked to diagram arguments in 5 published articles.

IL frames: Searching as Strategic, Research as Inquiry, Scholarship as Conversation



Synthesizing around concepts

Who talked about this concept?	Dependent Concept	What variables do I have that could measure this concept?
(Dickinson 2010), (Morgan, Gelbgiser and Weeden 2013), (Beutel, Burge and Borden 2019), (Beutel, Burge and Borden 2018) and (Dickinson 2010)	Pursuing a STEM or non-STEM major choice.	major1, major2 and majorcol could both be recoded to show the amount of college educated respondents who studied some kind of STEM major.
(Riegle-Crumb, King and Moore 2016), (Mullen 2014), (Beutel et al. 2019), (Beutel et al. 2018)	Pursuing a major dominated by a single gender.	major1 and major2 could be used to show which majors each gender chose at the highest rates.

Image: Conceptualization table assignment



Making conversation

- Lit review workshop
- Organization around concepts
- Building an argument
- Demystification
 - “Academese”
 - “Even your professors write lousy lit review drafts.”
- IL frames: Scholarship as Conversation, Research as Inquiry



*For me, like, this time is kind of like helping me connect everything together...**my literature connects relatively [well] with the qualitative stuff and not the quantitative** so, like, this assignment helps me, like, kind of find, I guess, **a way to piece everything together,** especially the free writing part.*

Results and reflection



Academic results

- All students that completed assignments passed through
 - Success no longer predictable by demographics!
- Draft literature reviews > final papers in previous years
- 20% of students continued with their research

Students didn't just feel better, they learned more.



*(Most helpful advice): To **use the literature as models for the papers that we are writing.** It was helpful in giving me the knowledge of **how to structure my paper** and also **how to write in high academese***

SEARCH FOR ARTICLES

ID FOCUS OF RES. WHY MATTERS

FORMAT/CREATE LIT REV

READ/ANALYZE PAPERS / USE AS MODELS

METHODS BEHIND DATA COLLECTION

CONCEPTUALIZING/OPER...ZING

INDEPENDENT R. IN REAL WORLD

I CAN DO THIS - IM INTELLIGENT & ABLE

ETHICS/PROTECTED CLASSES

PROBLEM SOLVING - DEEP THINKING

INTERPRET REGRESSIONS, TABLES

SPSS -> + MORE SKILL

TIME MANAGEMENT

STRESS MANAGEMENT

SHARING/TALKING ABOUT RES.

BE ABLE TO SIT WITH YOURSELF

STRETCH...

DR. ACKERMAN'S DAYS

BREAK DOWN PAPER INTO PIECES

CONCEPTS SIT W/ MY WORK & THINK

LABS AIMED @ FRIDAY ASSIGNMENTS, TIME TO TALK & CONSIDER, BLUE PAPER

WORKSHEETS & DEMOS, PRACTICE EXAMS ON MY OWN

PACS, COLLECTIVE PROBLEM SOLVING, CONCEPT MAP ON BOARD, INTRO ON BOARD

* MAKE A LIST/SUMMARY @ END OF LAB

EXAM 2 - LINK/PREP MORE CLEARLY
- NOT PRACTICAL

In-class evaluation:

1. What skills did you gain?
2. What in the course helped you gain them?

TIME W/ SPAGHETTI ROUND ROBIN
LABS - FEEDBACK DAY
STRUCTURE -> PARTNERS
1-1's
THANKS

BLUE PAPER
COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING CREW



(Advice to others): Trust in the process; The course is structured in order to help you best succeed, and while it may seem daunting in the beginning, you WILL make it through this class.



Lessons learned

- Faculty → Librarian
 - Find a great partner in pedagogy
 - Early incremental success → credibility → new opportunities
- Librarian → Faculty
 - Windows of opportunity in faculty frustration with course design and grading
 - Faculty are novices, too
 - Empower faculty to teach information literacy
 - Faculty as IL ambassadors

It's not the students. It's the course.



Thanks!

Any questions?

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Credits

- “Olivia” Presentation template by [SlidesCarnival](#)
- Ice cream, tool photographs by [Unsplash](#)
- Icons by [NounProject](#)