Teaching Information Literacy Through a Class Web Project

(A Case Study in the Blues)

by Bryan Sinclair, Public Services Librarian & Associate Professor
Ramsey Library | UNC Asheville | email: sinclair@bulldog.unca.edu
homepage: http://www.unca.edu/~sinclair

Abstract

In Fall 2003, freshmen enrolled in a pilot section of First Year Experience at UNC Asheville were taught information literacy skills by way of a semester-long, hands-on Web project. The content and theme of this section, "Jazz and Blues in American Culture" http://www.unca.edu/~sinclair/fye/jazzandblues.html, provided a vehicle for students to research African American blues musicians from the Southeast region and showcase their research on a collaborative course Website featuring sound files and other media (see http://www.unca.edu/~sinclair/piedmontblues). In addition to learning basic library research skills (how to find books, articles, and media), how to identify quality Web-based information, and how to format a bibliography, students received basic instruction in Web design and how to present their findings visually. Because this class project involved the use of MP3 audio files, images, and other materials borrowed (with permission) from other sources, a significant portion of the project and course focused on intellectual property and copyright issues. In conclusion, the presenter emphasizes the need for more creative and engaging approaches to teaching information literacy.

The Course Setting

A "first-year experience" seminar for new freshman designed to offer an introduction to the intellectual life of the University. All sections are governed by the following central activities:

- Building a sense of **community** with classmates and faculty

- Identifying **individual abilities**, strengths and weaknesses while developing a style of interacting with others

and are to include the following core components:

- Developing the best possible **information literacy skills** to access data and library resources

- Developing an understanding of and appreciation for **diverse cultures**

- Cultivating a broad sense of **career possibilities**

- Refining a personal approach to **time management** and **stress management**.

Instructors are encouraged to develop a unique theme for their section. The theme for my section in Fall 2003 was "**Jazz and Blues in American Culture**" http://www.unca.edu/~sinclair/fye/jazzandblues.html

Information Literacy Objectives

According to the **ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education** (http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/standardsguidelines.htm), an information literate individual is able to:

- Determine the extent of information needed
- Access the needed information effectively and efficiently
- Evaluate information and its sources critically
- Incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base
- Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose
- Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally

Personal Pedagogical Objectives

In addition, it was my hope that students would be able to:

- Create something **unique** and **meaningful**
- **Take ownership** both individually and collaboratively in a group project
- Develop a sense of what I call "**research responsibility**"
- Understand something about **intellectual property** and **copyright**
- **Design a basic Web page** to present information visually

The Inspiration

Mississippi Writers & Musicians by Starkville High School Students, Starkville, MS
http://shs.starkville.k12.ms.us/mswm/MSWritersAndMusicians/

A Web project coordinated by Nancy N. Jacobs, an English Teacher at Starkville High School in Starkville, MS, in which students research Mississippi writers and musicians and post their research to a Website "where it will be available for other students and interested persons." See the project's instructions and objectives at: http://shs.starkville.k12.ms.us/mswm/MSWritersAndMusicians/ studentmusiciansinstr.html

See Student Researcher Anton Duck's profile of bluesman Big Bill Broonzy.

Our Class Web Project

East Coast Piedmont Blues by First Year Experience Students, UNC Asheville
http://www.unca.edu/~sinclair/piedmontblues/

A Web project in which students researched African American musicians from North Carolina and surrounding states who represent the East Coast or Piedmont style of blues playing.

Each student was assigned a musician, with whom they were to become intimate with over the course of the semester through reading and listening outside of class. They were then to develop a bio-bibliography/profile of the musician including each of the following sections:

- Musician's full name, names recorded under, and/or nicknames
- Brief biographical sketch, incl. birth and death dates
- Books on this person
- Articles on the person
- Key recordings on CD
- Other media (videos, DVDs, etc.)
- Web sites
- Image or photograph **(permission required)**
- MP3 file **(permission required)**

Detailed instructions were provided on the syllabus:
http://www.unca.edu/~sinclair/fye/jazzandblues.html

Students were supplied with the following Web template:
http://www.unca.edu/~sinclair/piedmontblues/jordan.html
In this case, I created a brief profile of Virginia bluesman Luke Jordan to show them the sort of thing I was after. Each student was then given a floppy disc with this template and some **basic instruction using FrontPage**, including how to:

- Insert an image from a file
- Create a hyperlink
- use tables and nested tables for layout purposes
- add a line break
 (Shift-Enter) as opposed to a new paragraph.

Instructional Challenges

1. Although students love searching the Web, it was like pulling eyeteeth to get them to consult traditional library print resources (books, biographical dictionaries, bibliographies, etc.). *Not surprising.*

2. Intellectual property issues seemed to be of little concern to them. At the beginning of the course, they had little or no concept of the ethical and legal implications of taking music files, images, and other content from the Web.

Copyright Challenges

1. Securing permissions, esp. the use of the MP3 sound files

2. Public domain questions - The majority of the sound files we used were originally released in the 1920s and 30s on 78 rpm records, but sound recordings in the U.S. are treated differently than books and printed materials. A sound recording can be covered under **two or more copyrights**, including the performance, the song itself (melody and lyrics), and sometimes the arrangement.

3. Having students secure the permissions was a bad idea (examples)

4. Ownership concerns - Just because someone gives you permission to use a music clip or image, doesn't necessarily mean that they own it (examples)

In Conclusion

More creative, engaging and practical approaches to teaching information literacy to undergraduate students are needed. *However*, this particular model was very time consuming and required a great deal of work on the part of the instructor/project coordinator.

Although this model was used in a introductory course for freshman, it might have more effective application in a smaller, more focused upper-level course that is research intensive or information literacy intensive.

In the new general education model at UNC Asheville (http://www.unca.edu/genedrev/), students will be required to take two courses that are designated as "Information Literacy Intensive" (credit hours may vary). The first course will be in the student's first year; the second course will occur generally within the major.

Areas for further collaboration between teaching faculty and librarians need to be addressed, both at the freshman and upper levels.

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