Building Successful Connections Between the Classroom and the Library

Each year faculty from the MJC Library collaborates with classroom faculty to produce information competent students. Information competency – also called information literacy – is the ability to find, evaluate, use, and communicate information in all its various formats. It combines aspects of library literacy, research methodology, technological literacy, and critical thinking.

According to the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, information competent students can demonstrate the following skills:

- State a research question, problem, or issue
- Determine information requirements in various disciplines
- Use information technology tools to locate and retrieve relevant information
- Organize information
- Analyze and evaluate information
- Communicate using a variety of information technologies
- Understand the ethical and legal issues surrounding information and information technology
- Apply the skills gained in information competency to enable lifelong learning

Unfortunately, many students coming to MJC possess few, if any, of these skills. Most of them have little or no research experience, and those that do often consider research to mean cutting and pasting information from the web onto a word processing document. As an institution we face a huge challenge as we attempt to impart these vital skills in just two years. Meeting this challenge requires a coordinated effort and the multiple opportunities for practice across the curriculum.

Classroom faculty offer the opportunity for active, course-integrated engagement in the research process and the crucial opportunity to practice this process. Library faculty, in turn, offer dynamic research instruction and written materials geared specifically to MJC courses and assignments. The Library also offers individual student support throughout the research process. If we effectively coordinate Library/classroom efforts, we can help students acquire the research skills needed to successfully complete coursework and to participate fully and meaningfully in our community and the world-at-large.

The Library has identified the following three steps as being crucial to the development of information competency skills.

- **STEP ONE**: Incorporate meaningful, well-designed research assignments into your curriculum, and clearly communicate all your expectations about the assignment.
- **STEP TWO**: Ensure your students possess the basic research skills to meet your expectations.
- **STEP THREE**: Communicate the value of research skills, and give your students multiple opportunities to practice and apply those skills.
Through the assignments they create to support their curriculum, faculty wield the power to influence students’ development as competent researchers. Meaningful, well-designed research assignments not only enhance a student’s understanding of your course content, but are also the best, most relevant way to build information competency skills.

**Meaningful Assignments**

Tie assignment to course content.
Ensure the assignment supports the course’s learning objectives. Some courses have an obvious research component – English and speech classes, for instance – but you will be surprised at successful your colleagues have been incorporating research projects into math and activity-based courses! Need ideas? See our Great Research Assignments handout and/or talk to your Library Liaison!

**Well Designed Assignments**

Emphasize process over product.
Construct assignments that emphasize the research process, encourage students to develop well-planned research strategies, promote the evaluation of a variety of information formats, and ultimately force them to use information to fulfill a specific purpose.

Avoid scavenger hunts!
Searching for obscure facts frustrates students, can wreak havoc in the library stacks as scores of students look for the same title, and ultimately teaches students little or nothing about the holistic research process. If planning a library-based assignment with the goal of getting your students into the building, talk to your Liaison about designing a relevant one appropriate to your specific curriculum.

Start off on the right foot.
- Avoid giving all students the same topic, as this creates a mob scene in the library when students compete for the limited print resources.
- Students do well with topics that give them both manageable guidelines and the freedom to explore something of genuine interest to them. Some real-life examples include:
  - Write on some topic relating to $x$ (where $x$=mass media, the environment, gender, etc.)
  - Research one of the topics covered by CQ Researcher in the last 2 years.
  - Pick any political figure after 1850 and discuss their contribution to US politics.

Get input from the Library.
A constant and unavoidable stream of additions, deletions, and name-changes makes both the print and online collections a challenge to keep straight. Calling the Library catalog OPUS, or lumping the 36 Gale databases under the name *Infotrac*, makes for a confusing library/student interaction. Your library Liaison can check to guarantee your terminology is current, make certain our collections are sufficient to support your students’ research, and generally ensure the assignment is “do-able.”

Emphasize content over format.
Not all topics lend themselves to all formats. Teaching students to find the *best possible answer* to the research question they posed is more useful than teaching them to find an answer in a particular type of publication, finding an answer codified with the last 2 years, or finding an answer that exists in print format. For more information, see the handout titled *Assignment Pitfalls.*
**Encourage variety.**
Although strict format limitations can stymie research, it is a good idea to encourage examination of a variety of formats so students can increase their exposure to and experience with a wide variety of information formats.

**Communicate early and often.**
Let students know from the beginning what will be expected of them in terms of the research component of your course. Encourage them to view the assignment as a process that will take time, effort, engagement, and reflection throughout the semester. As the semester progresses, check in with their progress; better yet, have them complete the assignment in steps (see Step 3 for more on this!).

**Be clear about your objectives.**
What do you expect students to learn from your assignment and how do these objectives fit in with the course objectives as a whole? Students often feel they are jumping through hoops; it is helpful to tell them explicitly how this research paper will aid in the understanding of the course content, develop essential critical thinking skills, and aids them in their development as writers.

**Put EVERYTHING in writing.**
When asked to describe a research assignment, six students hearing the same set of verbal instructions will often come up with six different versions of those instructions! A written list of expectations is not only essential for your students, but invaluable for librarians when approached for individual help at the reference desk. Don’t stop with a basic description of the assignment...make sure you codify all the details, too!

**Be as obsessed with details as your students.**
How many pages do they need to produce? What types of sources do you want them to explore in the course of their research? How many must they ultimately use? What format style do you want them to use? MLA? APA? Some other style? Is their goal to write an informative paper about their topic, or would you like them to make and support an argument? These are the questions MJC Librarians will be asking them as they approach us for help at the reference desk. Will they know the answers?

**Be clear about what you want: define your terms precisely.**
Students take their instructors literally. If you tell them they can’t use the Web, what does that mean? Most of the Library’s periodical collection is now delivered over the Web...can they use CQ Researcher? Gale? Digitized books from EbscoHost’s eBook Collection? Does "library computer" mean the library catalog, electronic databases or the Internet? When you say print resource, do you mean an actual print publication that one can hold in their hand, or do you simply want to exclude Wikipedia? When you say “encyclopedia” are you talking about general resources like World Book, or more scholarly, discipline-specific titles? What do you mean by primary and secondary research? Does scholarly mean peer-reviewed, or just high quality and college-appropriate? Does your student know what you mean? Do librarians?

**Communication includes the library!**
Send a copy of your assignment to your Liaison to ensure that reference librarians are ready to help your students. If you will be sending three sections of a class to research mass media, Library faculty may find it helpful to put select material on reserve or at Ready Reference for easy access. Your assignment may alert the Collection Development Librarian that we need more/updated material on the topic at hand, may prepare our Interlibrary Loan staff for an influx of activity. Perhaps most importantly: having your assignment on hand will always be helpful for librarians fielding questions, as many students show up asking for help without their assignment.
STEP TWO: Ensure your students possess the basic research skills to meet your expectations.

Because students’ experience with the research process varies wildly, it is safest to assume they all have minimal knowledge and will need an introduction to both the general research process and to the specific resources available to MJC students.

Below is a list of core skills MJC Library faculty have deemed crucial in order to successfully complete typical college-level research assignments. This list incorporates skills identified by both the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, the Association of College and Research Libraries, and decades of collective experience at the MJC Reference Desk.

- Choosing a topic appropriate to the task and focusing it into a working thesis.
- Formulating research questions to directly support thesis.
- Identifying appropriate terminology for the information needed.
- Knowing the different types of resources available to answer research questions.
- Finding books and other library materials using online library catalogs.
- Finding magazine, journal, and newspaper articles using a variety of print and online databases.
- Finding scholarly web documents using advanced web search strategies.
- Evaluating information to determine reliability, validity, authority, accuracy, timeliness, and the presence of bias.
- Identifying material that can be used to answer research questions.
- Organizing information for efficient retrieval.
- Distinguishing between one’s own work and the work of others (plagiarism issues).
- Using particular citation styles to format and cite work.
- Knowing terminology such as primary, secondary, scholarly, popular, trade, bibliographies, abstracts, etc.

Which of these skills do you think your students have when they walk into your classroom? If your students DO NOT possess these skills, how can you most efficiently impart them?

Option One: DIY Research Instruction
Some classroom faculty nurture their inner librarian by leading their own workshops on the research process. If this is your style, please consider scheduling an informal one-on-one “library refresher course” with your Liaison at least once per year. This will keep you up-to-date on Library resources and any new services we may have to help your students complete your assignment.

Option Two: Librarian Led Research Instruction
MJC Library faculty lead over 100 research instruction sessions per year and are experienced at efficiently introducing students to the core skills they need to succeed. Our 80-minute presentations are tailored to individual instructor assignments, and allow you to choose from a large menu of skills. Sessions can be as general – or as specific – as you wish them to be. We also lead Ready, Set, Research workshops every semester for instructors who can’t carve out the time for an in-class presentation.

Librarian led instruction enforces the message that information competency skills are a vital component of student success (it’s not just you!) and is a great way to introduce students to a “real live” librarian. This introduction makes it much more likely a student will seek librarian assistance throughout the research process.
STEP THREE: Communicate the value of research skills, and give your students multiple opportunities to practice and apply those skills.

One 80-minute research instruction session does not equate to a great research paper, nor does it produce an information competent student. Like any other skill set, students need time for both guided and independent practice in order to master the skills involved in research. Students also need to feel that the skills they are developing have real value, that they are not just jumping through the proverbial academic hoop.

Below are some ideas on how to communicate the value of information competence and provide opportunities for students to practice skills gleaned in research instruction sessions.

**Communicating Value Before & During Instruction**

**Prepare your students before attending the instruction.**
Let your students know that they will be going to the library. Identify the specific goals you have for this session, and how these goals fit into the larger objectives of the course. Encourage them to ask questions. Students with a topic already selected typically benefit more from the session, as they often leave the session with resources, ready to utilize them in class assignments/projects.

**Participate in the instruction session.**
When you actively participate in the session with your students you send the message that research is important to you, and you value the ideas and skills being presented. Ask questions (because your students rarely will!), point out connections to ideas you’ve communicated in class, share your own experiences with research, etc. Interactive sessions are fun for everyone!

**Give your students a simple library assignment before their research instruction takes place.**
This will not only make them pay attention at the session, but will give them a hands-on opportunity to practice the skills demonstrated to them. A sample assignment is attached (feel free to use it in its present form or adapt it to suit your needs).

**Discussion and follow-up.**
Briefly discuss the instruction session with the class. What did they like? What didn’t they like? Was it what they expected? If you gave them an assignment, go over it with them as a low-stakes, group activity. Actively encourage them to contact the librarian or utilize our LibAnswers service if they have questions or problems finding materials.

**Reserve the Library Research Lab for an additional day to devote to in-class research.**
Be available during the session to answer questions, to give your own invaluable advice about the research process, to look at and discuss the sources your students find, and help them reflect on how the sources they find help them understand (or not!) their chosen topic.

**Help your students understand research as a process.**
Whenever possible, break up the research assignments into segments. Ask the students to turn things in along the way: an annotated bibliography of the sources they plan to use; an outline of their proposed essay. That way you can ensure they are using the types of sources you want them to, can catch citation problems early, and can get an idea whether or not they are able to understanding the usefulness of the information they find, and communicate it effectively. Give credit or grades for each step!