

Papers and Presentations

**Imbedding Information Literacy
into the Religious Studies Curriculum
(Models for Information Literacy panel)**

**by
Saundra Lipton, University of Calgary**

History of RELS 377

For many years my **colleagues** at the University of Calgary Library and I have been **working** towards the goal of **integrating** information literacy into the curriculum. In 2000, **all** departments at the University of Calgary began an undergraduate curriculum review process. A key aspect of the review was the creation of an explicit syllabus that outlined the **purposes** and objectives of the programme and clearly informed **students** of the skills and knowledge they would achieve from the programme.

The explicit syllabus incorporated seven core **competencies** that would be expected of a graduating **student**, many of which fall **under** the definition of information literacy. The Department of **Religious** Studies decided that it had to take active responsibility for **ensuing** that students acquired these core competencies. It was not enough to **assume** that students would casually absorb these skills or learn them on their own. As a **result**, the curriculum redesign of the Department of Religious Studies included a recommendation that the undergraduate programme be enhanced with a new course that would focus on research and writing skills, **and** RELS 377 was born.

From **the** outset, **I**, as the Religious Studies Librarian, worked with a member of the Department (Dr. Virginia **Tumasz**) in the conception, implementation and instruction of the course. We began meeting in 2000 to put together the **proposal**, it was approved in 2001 and the first course was offered in the **fall** of 2002. In the last **few** years there has been a strong emphasis at the University of Calgary on **inquiry-based learning**, and this course fits well within this mandate.

Course Structure

RELS 377 has three components: information literacy skills, writing skills and an introduction to methodology in religious studies. It is a required **half-year** credit course for Religious Studies majors and is offered once per year. Currently 25 to 30 new students enter the Religious Studies BA programme each year. The fall 2004 course had 31 students registered.

During the first year of this course we attempted to integrate **all** components; the eight (1.5 hour) lectures devoted to information literacy were spread throughout the term. Student feedback indicated that it would be better to group the information literacy sessions together. In the second year of the course we moved the information literacy component to the middle of the term and offered it

ATLA 2005 Proceedings

as one continuous **component** sandwiched between an introduction to methodology and a segment on **writing** skills.

While this did allow more cohesive presentation of the information literacy **content**, we did experience frustration in trying to find the best order **for** presenting the content, as the **writing** skills, research skills and the subject matter of the course are so strongly interrelated. Therefore, in fall 2004 we decided to experiment **with** offering **RELS 377** during Block Week (regular courses are condensed into one week). The class met over an intensive five-day period just prior to the commencement of the regular fall **classes**. This allowed us to present all the content at the beginning of the term, and then the students had the entire term to complete the assignments and to meet with both **instructors** and the teaching assistant to monitor progress and **assist** with the research and writing process. We found that this worked quite **well**, and we **will** be continuing with the Block Week format in the future.

Curriculum

The course consists of lectures, in-class hands-on exercises, reading **assignments**, **exercises** to be completed outside of class, marked assignments and required consultations with the course instructors and the teaching assistant. Prior to the commencement of the course, the students complete a preliminary skills quiz and a self-assessment of **past** research. This **enables** me to gain an **understanding** of the research knowledge of the students and to assess **student** learning at the end of **the** course.

Course presentation style for the information literacy segment has changed dramatically from the first **offering**: from a traditional lecture format to a coordinated series of **lectures** and group exercises supplemented by an online interactive workbook. With the campus implementation of Blackboard in 2003, we enthusiastically incorporated this tool into the management of the course. We **utilize** Blackboard to assign exercises to test student understanding of the concepts and then are able to optimize the **use** of class time to discuss areas of confusion, uncertainty and misunderstanding.

Approximately 40% of the student mark is devoted to **assessment** of students' information literacy skills (research assignment related to their course project, a final quiz and a bibliographic essay attached to the students' final paper).

Course Assessment

Student feedback indicates that they find the course useful. When asked what they **find** most **helpful**, many indicate an understanding of how to effectively locate and use journal articles. Effective search methods for the web are **another** area that is mentioned quite frequently. Preliminary analysis of the pre- and post-tests of information literacy skills from the 2004 Block Week course indicates an average increase of more than 75% in information literacy skills.

Challenges

- 1) As Bill **Badke** has **noted**, a key challenge is the demand on the time of the **instructor**. If the number of Religious **Studies majors** continues to **increase**, we will **need** to offer two sections each year. I am currently juggling many responsibilities and will have to be extremely creative to meet increased demand.
- 2) Many of the majors do not take RELS 377 till their 3rd or 4th year so that **they** miss the opportunity to benefit from this course earlier in their academic career.
- 3) 95% of **students** in introductory Religious Studies courses and 75% in courses at the intermediate level are non-majors, so there is **still** a need to go into other Religious Studies courses and offer some type of information literacy session. We hope that one day each Faculty will have a required information literacy course at the introductory level so that all students are provided with basic information **literacy** skills at an early stage in their university education.

Rewards

- 1) Students are more comfortable approaching me for research assistance for other Religious Studies courses; this past winter term former RELS 377 students **emailed** me for assistance in locating books **reviews**, for help in verifying a citation and for help **in** locating primary sources for an honours thesis.
- 2) MA students who served as teaching assistants in the course found **the** course particularly useful and **subsequently** consulted with me on their thesis research.
- 3) I am significantly enhancing my knowledge of methodology in Religious Studies and am introduced to a wide spectrum of research in **the** field.
- 4) While I have always been embraced by the Department and included in **their** activities, I feel more like a **full-fledged** member and have very much enjoyed the opportunity to work **closely together with** my co-instructor Dr. Virginia **Tumasz** (currently the Department Head).
- 5) This course provided me with an opportunity to develop my instructional skills and to gain a strong understanding of the Blackboard system and its value for enhancement of learning.

The rewards have certainly exceeded the challenges. Co-instructing **this** course has been an invaluable learning experience for **myself** as well as for the **students** and has allowed me the opportunity to develop a close working relationship with the faculty as a teaching **colleague**.

To see **the** workbook for **the** course go to www.ucalgary.ca/library/subjects/RELS/RELS377.