

Fostering Collaborations to Support Adult Learners in Research and Writing

By Latrice Booker

Abstract

Many adult learners at Indiana University Northwest were unsuccessful in writing research papers. After a general discussion about this problem between the coordinator of library instruction and the coordinator of academic advising and tutoring of TRIO Student Support Services, a collaboration was born. The two departments decided to combine their expertise to help students succeed in writing research papers. Initially, each department offered workshops separately and attendance was low. After combining skills and expertise into one session, not only did students attend, but they continued to seek help from the library and Student Support Services on future assignments. This paper will discuss the collaboration between the library and Student Support Services in addressing the needs of adult learners in writing research papers and the evolution of that collaboration.

Keywords: adult learners, collaboration, information literacy, andragogy, higher education

Adult learners are continually making a comeback onto the academic scene. Adult learners attending college are now a significant demographic that cannot be ignored (Cooke, 2010, p. 209). Adult learners are also referred to as nontraditional students, and typically are over the age of 25 (American Council on Education, 2014). However, due to the steady increase in adult learner enrollment, the definitions of traditional and nontraditional students will soon have to be revised. Between 1997 and 2011, colleges in the United States had an enrollment increase by 50% among students between the ages of 25-34. This number is expected to increase an additional 20% between 2011 and 2022. In addition, students over the age of 35 are also returning to college with their population expected to increase 23% from 2011 to 2022 (Hussar & Bailey, 2013, p. 21). The admittance of adult learners into college demands an alternative approach to providing students with the necessary resources to succeed academically. The specific needs of this population are regularly overlooked and the library is one point of service that can help with their transition into college (Cooke, 2010, p. 209).

Adults are self-directed learners, meaning they are independent goal-setters and determine for themselves what is necessary to learn. According to Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2012), one of the six assumptions from the Andragogical Model assumes that adult learners must know why they are

learning something. Similarly, Tough found that adults “will invest considerable energy in probing into the benefits they will gain from learning it and the negative consequences of not learning it” (as cited in Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2012, p. 63). Once students have assessed what is needed to learn, they hold themselves to a higher level of scholarship than their younger peers (Kasworm, 2010, p. 150). When adult learners do not understand an assignment or a learning concept, they take an active approach to learning and seek help (Cannady, King, & Blendinger, 2012; Kasworm, 2010). Due to this inherent sense of responsibility for their own learning, nontraditional students will take advantage of multiple resources in order to achieve a higher academic standard. Adult learners are known to have multiple responsibilities and try to find a balance with juggling various duties. The stresses of work, school, family and personal life can be very daunting for these students. Giancola, Grawitch, and Borchet (2009) studied 159 adult learners at St. Louis University and found that the students’ workplace caused the greatest amount of stress and that personal life also provided more stress than school. With the variety of stressors in adult students’ lives, it is essential for educators to take a direct approach and to make the learning environment open, active, and free from ambiguity.

Background

Indiana University Northwest (IUN) is a mid-sized commuter campus located in the Chicago Metropolitan Area and serves a sizable population of adult learners. Adult learners are often perceived to feel the added pressure of succeeding in school that of their younger counterparts (Kasworm, 2010, p. 155). The anxiety adult students displayed at IUN, especially about the processes of research and writing, was noticed by two departments: the library and TRIO Student Support Services. At IUN the coordinator of library instruction and coordinator of academic advising and tutoring of TRIO Student Support Services discussed this issue. The coordinators noticed that there was a problem with students’ writing, the resources cited, sentence structure, and the overall organization of their research papers.

The IUN Library and Student Support Services are both service-oriented and focus on student success. Student Support Services (SSS) is one of eight Federal TRIO programs designed to help college students with retention by offering

tutoring assistance in “reading, writing, study skills” etc. (United States Department of Education, n.d.). The program is funded through a competitive grant to help students from “disadvantaged backgrounds.” Many of the students participating in the SSS program are first-generation college students, low-income students, or students with disabilities. Many of these disadvantaged students enter college and are overwhelmed, not only with personal life, but with the entire college experience.

The IUN Library Instruction Program consists of three instruction librarians who cumulatively teach over 2,000 students each year. Typical instruction sessions are one-shot sessions related to specific courses. The Library Instruction Program is able to reach most students through the introductory English composition course, which is required of all students with the exception of transfer and returning students. Though these library instruction sessions are for the introductory English courses, instruction librarians teach the information literacy skills students need to help them through the research and writing process. Even after taking this course, however, many adult learners still feel overwhelmed and uncomfortable with the using the library’s resources and writing research papers.

The library is the main hub on campus for students to collaborate and work on projects and assignments. When in the library, students approach librarians for help on many issues, including their research papers. Many of these students are adult learners and are very anxious, especially with writing assignments. Adult learners are faced with various barriers that contribute to their anxiety. Holmes states that “excessive life obligations, . . . fear of inadequate study and cognitive skills, fear of achieving poor grades, or perceived competition with younger traditional undergraduate students” add to the anxiety of adult learners (as cited in Cooke, 2010, p. 213). IUN has various resources for students to receive help with writing, such as private tutors from SSS and the Writing Lab. Even though these resources are available, multiple students were not taking advantage of their services. The collaboration between SSS and the library presented such an opportunity for students to get help from experienced professionals.

The collaboration between SSS and the library began with a general conversation about students’ performance on writing research papers. Both coordinators noticed that there were problems faced by adult learners when attempting to write research papers. The SSS coordinator felt that many of the TRIO students would come to their department when they needed help with finding sources for their research papers. The same issue was being found in the library with many students approaching librarians to help them with writing a research paper and wanting editing advice. Since finding research and writing papers are connected, it was evident that collaboration between the two departments needed to exist (Cannady, King, & Blending, 2012).

It took time to find the best way to properly form the partnership. First, scheduled days and times were marketed before final exams for students to receive personalized assistance if they needed help with finding resources or writing their paper. The coordinator of library instruction was located in a computer lab ready to help students narrow their topics and find resources. At the same time, the coordinator of academic advising and tutoring was in his office, ready for students to stop by with their writing questions. Unfortunately, this approach was unsuccessful; only one student took advantage of the times scheduled and visited the librarian. The student considered herself a research expert and needed the librarian to help with writing business letters and memos, so it was clear that the librarian’s support role had not been well communicated. In addition, SSS did not receive any students during that time.

A theory formed on why this attempt was unsuccessful. Both the library and SSS coordinators knew that students needed help in both finding research and writing papers, but the scheduled times to assist students did not appeal to them. Students were not able to understand exactly what they would gain by consulting with a librarian or an academic tutor, which is important for motivating adult learners. Together, the librarian and the SSS staff realized that a better approach would be to teach students what they needed to know and inform them on exactly what they will learn. Cooke (2010) talks about students having a certain level of library anxiety and may be afraid to ask questions. These students may “not want to appear unknowledgeable” and would be intimidated by scheduled times to seek specific help (p. 210). Resources such as reference and the SSS program were already available to students if they wanted to ask for help. A more proactive solution was needed to provide students with a low-risk setting where they could learn what they needed and ask questions only if they desired.

Instead of having individual scheduled sessions, the two program coordinators decided to combine the two sessions into one compact workshop where they would each teach students how to write a research paper from start to finish. The first workshop, “How to Write a Research Paper,” was scheduled for the 2012 fall semester. The advertisement, highlighted topics of: how to conduct research; organizing research papers; and MLA and APA citation styles coverage. This approach appealed to students as they knew exactly what they would learn in the workshop (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2012). Since adult learners must know what they are learning and the benefits of learning it, outlining the various segments of the workshop contributed to the widespread appeal of the session.

Implementation of Workshop

The first workshop had about 18 adult learners in attendance. The goal of the session was to take them step-by-step through the entire research process, from deciding on a topic, to writing the paper and citing sources.

Since many adult learners are already overwhelmed and anxious, the coordinators decided to limit the workshop to one hour. As we learn from Cooke (2010), “Immediacy provides the crucial spirit necessary to produce positive and effective teaching and learning interactions,” so we attempted to design the workshop to be as relevant to students’ learning needs as possible. The workshop gave students brief tools to help them with research and writing and was not meant to provide extensive information on any particular topic. Some desired learning outcomes for the workshop were:

- Students will know how to find credible information by using the library’s resources and the web
- Students will be able to form a thesis statement
- Students will know how to organize a research paper
- Students will know how to cite using APA and MLA styles guides

Students were shown the very first step to writing a research paper, which is to find and narrow a topic. The coordinators’ intention was to meet these students where they were and to teach them their most immediate needs. Since most of the students were comfortable with using Google and Wikipedia, they were shown how to use them appropriately. Proper use of these familiar sources sparked conversations on the origin of the information they find and how it is created. For the workshop to be relevant to students, it made sense to build it based upon their prior knowledge by incorporating the sources these students were using and teach them how to use them differently and more effectively.

Multidisciplinary library resources were demonstrated briefly, with the librarian teaching students how to find articles and books and when to use them. Students were also taught how to properly use Google Scholar. Many of the students already knew about Google Scholar but assumed that every source found within it was a peer-reviewed article. They were shown how to confirm if an article was peer-reviewed and how to acquire sources from Google Scholar via the IUN Library’s licensed resources. When discussing their issues with writing research papers, many did not realize the importance of credible sources. The next section showed them how to organize the research paper. The coordinator of academic advising and tutoring taught students how to create an outline and discussed parts to a research paper. The importance of constructing an outline was stressed, as it helps with the initial flow of a paper and limiting the possibility of writer’s block. Students learned the three different parts of the paper: introduction, body and conclusion, with the majority of the time being spent on the body and the thesis statement. Students were told to have at least three supporting arguments/points to support their thesis statements, which raised the question, is only one source needed per argument. The coordinators addressed this question together, stating that multiple sources should be gathered per supporting argument.

Research projects are often assigned as a course capstone experience or as a summary of learning that constitutes a large

percentage of a course grade. Because of these high-stakes, students, especially adult learners, are anxious about using sources correctly and plagiarizing unintentionally. In order to address this, the workshop provided a brief overview of APA and MLA, the most commonly used citation style guides at IUN. Participants in the workshop learned how to create a bibliography and include in-text citations. Students learned about the importance of recognizing authorship and giving credit when necessary. Plagiarism and citing sources were the most common problems noticed by both the library instruction and SSS coordinators among student research papers. Sentence structure and overall writing style has been a problem, but is minor compared to unintentional plagiarism.

Outcomes of Workshop

After the workshops, verbal feedback from students, faculty and staff confirmed that the workshop was helpful. This success led to another collaboration that involved teaching at-risk students in the all-male Brother2Brother College Success Program during their summer orientation. In addition, the “How to Write a Research Paper” workshop is taught in conjunction with the end of semester *study tables*. Because the workshop is taught in the vicinity of the study tables, students are able to attend the workshop and receive extra help on their research papers and other assignments from the study tables. Students who attended the workshop during the study tables were given evaluation forms to fill out. Most of the attendees thought the session was “informative.” The decision to provide quick and relevant information proved successful overall, even though a few may have preferred a more thorough presentation. Faculty are now requesting similar sessions for their classes that incorporate lessons on the entire continuum of research and writing. With the success of the workshop and many students struggling to write research papers, library instruction has evolved to incorporate how to properly organize and write research papers for a few select courses. All SSS students are required to take the workshop in order to receive academic support services from the department.

Another outcome of the workshop was a strengthened personal relationship between the students and the coordinators. Students who attended the workshop sought out additional help from the library instruction and SSS coordinators. Young and Jacobs (2013) reported that graduate students who attended a library skills workshop were more comfortable and likely to “seek additional help from a librarian” (p. 186). The intimate atmosphere of the workshop gave students confidence to seek additional help when needed. There is no evidence that these students are using the library more or seeking additional help from other library or SSS staff, but the possible correlation of “academic intimacy” as a result of the workshops to student retention would be an opportunity for further study.

Conclusion

Overall, the collaboration was a success and our work is being becoming known throughout campus. Having established the workshop design and content collaboratively, the workshop is now taught solely by the library instruction coordinator. As a result, students are referred to the library instruction coordinator when they need help finding information and when they have a question about writing their research paper. This is an example of how the roles of libraries and librarians are evolving to include unexpected responsibilities. One unexpected result of incorporating a more diverse set of learning outcomes into the workshop is that the library instruction coordinator's role solely of an "information expert" has diminished. Instead, students contact the librarian for information assistance, writing assistance, and citation questions; thereby broadening the opportunity for the librarian to support student learning and making the act of asking for help on the research and writing process more seamless for students.

Making contact with adult learners and alleviating their anxiety has strengthened the relationship between students, the library and SSS. The workshop not only gives students what they need to write a research paper, it provides them with personal, informal connections to consultants when needed. Collaboration allowed the library and SSS to reach more students at the point-of-need in an efficient way. Adult learners have unique needs and this collaboration was formed to successfully meet those needs. As the needs of adult learners change, so will the role of the information specialist. We must remain open to the possibilities of future collaborations and where those can lead us in order to support these learners in their journey to becoming life-long learners.

References

- American Council on Education. (2014). *Adult Learners*. Retrieved June 5, 2014, from <http://www.acenet.edu/higher-education/topics/Pages/Adult-Learners.aspx>
- Cannady, R. E., King, S. B., & Blendinger, J. G. (2012). Proactive outreach to adult students: A department and library collaborative effort. *The Reference Librarian*, 53(2), 156-169.
- Cooke, N. A. (2010). Becoming an andragogical librarian: Using library instruction as a tool to combat library anxiety and empower adult learners. *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, 16(2), 208-227.
- Giancola, J., Grawitch, M. J., & Borchert, D. (2009). Dealing with the stress of college: A model for adult students. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 59(3), 246-263.
- Hussar, W.J., and Bailey, T.M. (2013). *Projections of education statistics to 2022 (NCES 2014-051)*. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014051.pdf>
- Kasworm, C. E. (2010). Adult learners in a research university: Negotiating undergraduate student identity. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 60(2), 143-160.
- Knowles, M. Shepherd, Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2012). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development*. 7th ed. New York: Routledge.
- United States Department of Education. (n.d.). *Student Support Services Program*. Retrieved June 5, 2014, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/triostudsupp/index.html>
- Young, S., & Jacobs, W. (2013). Graduate student needs in relation to library research skills. *Journal of Modern Education Review* 3(3), 181-191.