Chapter 38

Scaling Up:
Asynchronous Information Literacy Instruction for First-Year Business Students

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Introduction

In recent years, the duties and responsibilities of liaison librarians have seen enormous changes both in terms of increased workload and a broadening range of duties. Many of these changes are fueled by seismic shifts brought on by a combination of factors, including advances in technology, increased usage of library services and expertise, and the increasingly diverse backgrounds of library users. As a result, liaisons are expected to find creative and innovative ways to manage these changes, which often stretch them beyond their training and capacity.

One of the most common topics discussed by liaison librarians at conferences, on listservs, and in discussion forums centers around workload management as it relates to information literacy (IL) instruction and outreach to an ever-increasing student population. Many teaching librarians view asynchronous IL instruction as a great workload management solution because of its scalability. From the students’ perspective, asynchronous IL provides a more equitable and accessible format for students with disabilities and those with extenuating circumstances. A well-structured, interactive asynchronous course can increase cognitive engagement because students get to decide when it is most convenient for them to engage with and explore the course materials.

In this chapter, the author outlines the process used to create an asynchronous information literacy instruction workshop (or “course”) used to educate about 2,300 first-year business students annually. The course consists of individual lessons that address various topics about business research. Students learn how to conduct company research by exploring the connections between companies, industries, and markets. They also learn how to develop and break down research topics, to use relevant subject-specific resources to conduct iterative searching, and to evaluate information prior to incorporating it into their research paper, presentation, or pitch.

The chapter will also outline some of the benefits and challenges of creating and managing an asynchronous IL workshop. The author will discuss some early successes that may
have been amplified by the unique format of the first-year business class at his institution and the timing of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As we have been thrust into this online-only environment, albeit temporarily, many of us have been forced to think about and explore innovative ways to reach students, faculty, and other stakeholders. In the spirit of information sharing, the author ends this chapter by highlighting some of the unique asynchronous information literacy instruction programs created by business librarians nationwide so that others may find inspiration.

Background and Planning

The first-year business class (BUSI 3302) at the University of Houston, like many, is designed as a laboratory for professional development and to introduce students to business careers and job search skills. The class is also designed to provide students with maximum flexibility and control over their grades; as a result, students are given multiple opportunities to earn 567+ points but only need 450 to earn an A in the class. Students can earn points by completing assignments and participating in activities such as career fairs, résumé boot camps, and the library research workshop.

Until spring 2020, the library research workshop was delivered in-person to about 30 percent of first-year business students per semester. The enrollment for BUSI 3302 is roughly 700 students in the spring and 1,600 in the fall semesters. Enrollment numbers were slightly different in 2020 when the spring semester jumped to 856 while the fall semester dropped to 1,263 students. The challenges of delivering information literacy to this many students were further compounded by two factors. First, we had two business librarians, and second, our largest instructional classroom in the library could comfortably seat a maximum of 60 students. Consequently, we needed to think critically about ways to sustainably scale information literacy instruction.

In spring 2019, the leadership team in the liaison services department developed and introduced a foundation of a professional practice framework that inspired liaisons to rethink the way we created and delivered information literacy. Subsequently, my colleagues and I began to have conversations about developing critical, learner-centered educational experiences that could be delivered asynchronously. We also recognized that an effective transition from an in-person course to an interactive online experience required a deliberate strategy and detailed planning.

Our Liaison Services Department was very collaborative and had a lot of expertise, so my fellow business librarian, Lisa Martin, and I partnered with the instruction team to review the existing lesson plan for BUSI 3302. That collaboration was fruitful because we ultimately decided to embrace a backward design approach to lesson planning as a result. We focused on the learning outcomes then drafted learning activities that could accomplish them. Since the lessons were being designed for a self-paced virtual environment, we thought that the lessons should be accompanied by authentic assessments where students could demonstrate their learning in meaningful ways. Partnering with the instruction team was an important step to ensure that the course remained engaging and interactive online. With that in mind, we began to discuss and audit potential asynchronous learning tools with the aim of finding and adopting one that was economical and learner-centered.
Preparation and Resources

In April 2019, I sent an email to the BUSLIB-L listserv, asking colleagues to share links and descriptions of existing asynchronous information literacy instruction programs that they created or knew of. The purpose of this enquiry was to identify sources of inspiration to inform the asynchronous lessons I was creating. The intent was to create comprehensive lessons for first-year business students on a platform that was interactive, mobile-optimized, economical, ADA compliant, and provided built-in assessment capabilities.

The listserv generated several leads to some excellent asynchronous lessons/modules developed by business librarians for their first-year business students. Interestingly, a number of other business librarians were interested in the responses I received as they were also looking for ideas to implement at their institutions. After carefully evaluating several e-learning platforms, the instruction team and I decided that Articulate Rise 360 provided most of the features and functionalities needed to create the critical, learner-centered educational experiences that we envisioned.

Articulate Rise 360 is an e-learning platform that lets instructors build highly interactive courses that are accessible from any device. This tool allowed us to radically scale up our delivery of the workshop to students, reaching 82 percent of first-year business students compared to 30 percent prior to the adoption of Rise 360. Rise 360 is now a staple in the Liaison Services Department; it is used by the instruction team, functional specialists, and other liaisons to create interactive asynchronous lessons. In addition to class-specific courses like BUSI 3302, Rise 360 was used to create several short information literacy lessons covering topics from research question development to finding, accessing, and citing data to evaluating information sources.

Articulate Rise 360 has its limitations, but one of the major downsides is that it can be cost-prohibitive. However, it is also user-friendly, from both the instructor/content designer and the learner perspectives. It integrates with Blackboard and other learning management systems via SCORM (Sharable Content Objective Reference Model). This allows librarians and instructors to track the progress of students as they make their way through the lessons. In addition to the built-in knowledge checks, librarians may also incorporate survey tools like Qualtrics into lessons to enhance activity completion tracking and assessment.

Description of Lessons/Activities

First-year business students enrolled in BUSI 3302 must complete one of two group projects, each with a research component. One project requires that students research and report on an unethical corporate practice or scandal. The other project pairs students with a local business to meet a real need, such as conducting market research or competitive analysis. Therefore, the learning outcomes for the asynchronous IL lessons align with the class assignments as well as the competencies outlined in the BRASS Business Information Literacy Research Competency Standards. The lessons address specific competencies from the BRASS Standards, such as business research strategies, and techniques, including source evaluation and company and organization research. Business students who complete the lessons should be able to identify and determine the relevant data that meets their research needs. They should also be able to investigate any entity, whether for-profit or non-profit, that provides goods and/or services to meet market or societal needs.
The course consists of four lessons that take about 40–60 minutes in total to complete. The first lesson provides students with the opportunity to explore and engage with the library’s website, research guides, and databases and to learn about the benefits of scheduling one-on-one research consults with librarians. The second lesson focuses on research strategies where students engage with a series of videos and interactive exercises to increase their ability to apply fundamental research techniques to business information sources. This includes the ability to modify or refine the research strategy in response to encountering irrelevant or insufficient content and the ability to search for a topic with effective keywords. Lesson three teaches students to recognize that an entity’s structure, private versus public, can affect the availability of information due to disclosure laws and regulations. Students also learn how to identify companies by industry codes and geographic location in order to conduct competitive analysis. The final lesson helps students understand the importance of the ability to evaluate and compare the quality of the information found in academic and non-academic resources in order to make accurate and compelling pitches, presentations, and engage in informed decision-making.

The lessons and activities were designed to create a learner-centered virtual classroom experience. The lessons also incorporated knowledge checks and assessment so that students could reflect and find meaning in the work. For example, one of the scenarios asked students to imagine that they were hired as investment consultants by a group of investors and were expected to provide advice and guidance in a particular area (for example, renewable energy). The students were asked to examine the US Government’s Energy Information Administration website and share in detail whether they would use data from that source to inform their recommendations to the client. The task in this scenario is similar to the real-world problems and other assignments that students have to resolve throughout their academic careers and, in many cases, their professional careers. In my experience, real or relatable assessment activities are more likely to inspire and motivate students to demonstrate meaningful application of knowledge and skills they have learned.

**Transferability**

The course was designed specifically for BUSI 3302 and, therefore, cannot be used in its original state in an unrelated class. However, since the course is made up of shorter lessons that include videos and exercises that explore key concepts, the component materials in the course can be repurposed for other courses. For example, the tutorials on company research were repurposed for other introductory business courses. Also, two videos used in BUSI 3302 were repackaged and embedded in the Blackboard course content of an introductory marketing class.

Articulate Rise 360 is very flexible and has an extensive knowledge base where instructors/designers can seek inspiration or borrow from shared content (similar to LibGuides). The platform allows users to collaborate simultaneously with team members or send independent copies of the course to other subscribers. One downside is that all collaborators must be Articulate 360 subscribers, which can be cost-prohibitive.
Benefits and challenges of creating and managing an asynchronous IL program

There are many benefits—and many challenges—associated with asynchronous teaching and learning. The biggest advantage for the University of Houston was that asynchronous instruction significantly increased reach and impact. The first-year introductory business class at UH is unique compared to other introductory classes like English or engineering, where classes are divided into multiple sections and attendance is a crucial part of their final grade. In BUSI 3302, students have the option to take library IL instruction as extra credit. Over 70 percent of students usually opt out of taking library instruction when it was in-person because there were other extra-credit options that provided more credits and were perhaps more convenient.

Since the introduction of the asynchronous IL instruction course for BUSI 3302, instruction numbers have risen significantly. The number of students who completed the information literacy course has risen by approximately 50 percentage points, from an average of 30 percent of first-year business students between 2016 and 2019 to 80 percent in 2020. Asynchronous learning helped to remove some of the impediments caused by in-person instruction: students had to select instruction time slots weeks in advance and risk being penalized for not attending, then walk across campus to sit in the library for seventy-five minutes with insufficient information from their instructors about the session. Instead, the asynchronous course was uploaded to Blackboard where students could review the course description, learning outcomes, and then have the option to work on the course incrementally at their own pace. The advantages for librarians included the elimination of time-consuming administrative tasks, such as scheduling sessions, reserving classrooms, instruction prep time, and the disappointment of not having full attendance after all the preparation.

Other asynchronous business IL programs

There are several business librarians working to create online learning objects that others can look to for inspiration. This is certainly not a comprehensive list of asynchronous lessons; however, these are the results of my 2019 enquiry, along with a few other programs I’m aware of. I am not aware of any comprehensive list or directory of asynchronous IL business courses, but there are resources and networks in the library community that are dedicated to addressing issues relating to business information. Celia Ross’ Making Sense of Business Reference outlines a number of people, resources, and networks that can most likely get the answers you need. For example, on pages 107–110, she mentioned a number of blogs, email groups, and other business reference resources and tips to help you stay informed. There are resources for getting ideas and inspiration to create meaningful, user-centered asynchronous IL courses for your business students.

- Naomi Schemm, University of Wisconsin, Whitewater Libraries. The library has an extensive YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/user/uwwlibrary/videos) with transferable content that can easily be embedded in courses. They also use LibWizard to create forms, surveys, quizzes, and tutorials to teach various IL concepts (https://uww.libwizard.com/f/industrycodes).
- Kara Van Abel, University of Alabama, Birmingham (UAB) Libraries. They created a rigorous seven-week business certification program (https://guides.library.uab.edu/businesscertificate) open to students, faculty, and staff. The program teaches
research strategies and provides hands-on research experience with company research, industry research, news searching, demographics and business statistics, international business research, career research, investment research, and academic integrity.

- Celia Ross, University of Michigan, Kresge Library. In addition to her extremely resourceful book, *Making Sense of Business Reference*, Celia created an online workshop that is embedded in Michigan’s Canvas course management system. The workshop is class- or course-specific (https://kresgeguides.bus.umich.edu/ba200) and designed to walk sophomores through a course guide that specifically supported a set of projects relating to company and industry research. The workshop is incentivized by points toward the final grade.

- Wendy Pothier and Benjamin Peck, University of New Hampshire Library. This is an interesting, unique, and collaborative badging program (https://www.unh.edu/fire/). The business and first-year experience librarians co-created a gamified (http://libraryguides.unh.edu/fire) library experience using badging to engage over 600 first-year students. Integrated into Canvas, students earn points for completing each module, which in turn earns a digital badge and more points.

- Annette Buckley, University of California, Irvine; Kara Van Abel, UAB; Orolando Duffus, UH. Business Librarians Exchanging Instructional Materials (BLExIM) is a newly created registry of shareable instructional materials (IM). It is an informal co-op of business librarians collegially sharing their personal materials for everyone’s benefit. Anyone practicing business librarianship can share/upload and receive/download content.

**Bibliography**