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# Adult Learners in the Library–Are they Being Served?

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# Adult Learners in the Library–Are they Being Served? | Peer to Peer Review

By Makiba Foster and Kris Helbling on        May 21, 2015        Leave a Comment

Like many academic librarians, after completing the marathon of the traditional school year, we often use the summer semester to reflect, revise, and plan for the upcoming fall. In the summer of 2012, during a casual conversation in which we shared stories about rewarding reference interactions, we stumbled upon an "a-ha moment," discovering an opportunity to connect targeted library outreach with an underserved user group. During this exchange, we realized how much we both enjoy working with adult learners and how they always seem genuinely interested in gaining skills to make themselves better library users, and therefore better students. This conversation became the catalyst for an idea of a library course designed specifically for adult learners returning to the classroom.

Makiba Foster, left, and Kris Helbling, right

Teaching was nothing new to us, but creating a semester-long course presented a new set of challenges. First, how could we convince university administrators of the course's value? Second, how would we incorporate the standards of our profession regarding teaching and learning? Third, how would we create a course that values the life experiences and perspectives of adult learners?

## GETTING ESTABLISHED

The first step was to conduct a quick environmental scan of the course offerings for our university's evening degree program. We found General Studies one-credit courses targeting areas like career development or writing and study skills. For us, it seemed logical that a course helping students develop high-level information literacy skills could be a part of the evening college's stable of foundational course offerings. We petitioned the evening college administrators and presented our idea of a for-credit General Studies course aimed at improving students' information literacy and research skills. We were surprised at how receptive they were to the idea; however, we still had major hurdles to overcome to get our course on the books. For example, besides creating the syllabus for the course, we had to research "peer" institutions' approaches to information literacy in their evening programs. After rounds of reviews and revisions, by early fall we learned we were successful: Mastering Research in Today's Academic Library, as a one-credit hour pass/fail course, would appear in the Spring 2013 catalog!

## COURSE DESIGN

No longer faced with the dilemma of one-shot instruction or the common "if only I had more time" librarian lament, we had a full, luxurious semester, which was simultaneously exciting and daunting. We thought it imperative that our lectures incorporate established information literacy standards and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)'s threshold concepts. Aligned with the guidelines, the stated mission of our course is to help students "participate in a scholarly community" and to equip them with skills to handle "any information-seeking situation." We designed our lectures to boost students' practical library skills while also incorporating activities to help them see themselves as a part of a community where research goes beyond mere reporting of information, but is something we collect, create, and even contest.

Our observations of this specific student population's needs and our training and knowledge provided the framework for our syllabus. Because adult learners' needs and expectations differ from those of the typical undergraduate, we realized that we needed to tailor our approach to course design and teaching. Evening students—generally working adults—know enough to know they don't know enough. They want to know more, but they don't have much time. This confluence creates a motivated learner. In our research into higher-education practices for teaching nontraditional students, we encountered some useful principles of Adult Learning Theory, including that adult learning is filtered through the lens of their established knowledge and life experiences, and that adult learners are highly practical and goal-oriented. Throughout the semester, we tried to be deliberate and intentional in practicing these principles, which guided our course scheduling, lecture style, and assignments. Thus, we emphasized that this course would not only help towards their ultimate goal of a college degree but also help them gain transferable skills useful in the workplace. We offered the course at a time that does not compete with degree-required courses, designed it as a companion to research and writing-intensive courses, and encouraged students to use research and writing assignments from their other courses for in-class exercises.

## FEEDBACK AND DISCOVERY

The response to this course has been overwhelmingly positive from students and administration alike. An unanticipated discovery we were able to share with the program administrators was that some students would also benefit from a general computer literacy course. Mastering Research in Today's Academic Library has allowed us to grow in our instruction skills, and more importantly it has opened additional learning opportunities at our university for adult learners who are trying to navigate the new world of college research and the academic library.

## REPLICABLE

Like any good experiment, ours can and should be repeatable. Here are some tips for starting a for-credit course at your school:

**Know your audience:** Who are the adult learners on your campus? How is your library serving them?

**Check for competition or repetition:** Check the course catalog to make sure your class is a unique offering.

**Quicker than an elevator:** Be prepared with concise, jargon-free explanations—both written and verbal—about the needs the course meets and its relevance for student success.

**Allow lead-time:** Course catalogs are in the works long before the semester itself begins. A new course proposal usually needs to pass through several layers of committees before final approval is granted.

**Be flexible:** Be willing to revise and adjust to accommodate requests as your proposal goes through the approval process.
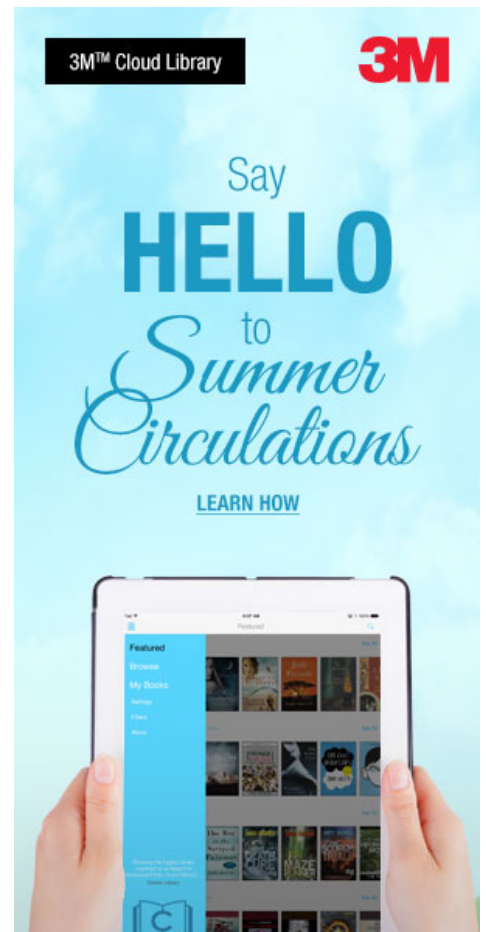
**Timing is everything:** Our inaugural schedule was one 2½ hour class, once a week, for half of the semester. This time-slot was not conducive to enrolling the typical evening student. Try to schedule your course at a time that does not compete with degree required classes.

**Marketing, marketing, marketing:** Both new and established courses need publicity—optional, one-credit classes especially. Consider all avenues for advertisement: academic advisors; campus email lists; and well-placed, eye-catching flyers to name a few.

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