

Angie Cox, Jim Kelly, and Chris Neuhaus

Knowing when to cry uncle

Balancing instructional initiatives

About five years ago, the University of Northern Iowa Rod Library began building a credit-bearing information literacy course from scratch. Envisioned to be something more than simply “how to use the library,” the course was also designed to focus on Google resources and the trends and issues associated with the online world of information. We named the course Beyond Google. From the start, we aimed to teach students how to be more effective and thoughtful Google users, and more skeptical consumers of information.

A significant amount of human capital was invested in developing, teaching, and revising Beyond Google. Substantial time was also required to keep course content up-to-date. Over time, Beyond Google became very popular with students and advisors. However, with only three library instructors, the course never reached more than a small percentage of the student population. The instructors teaching Beyond Google were getting burned out as their one-shot teaching load remained unchanged even with their added Beyond Google assignments.

As a unit, we came to realize that we needed to step back and ask ourselves, “Is this course really working? And, for whom?” In the end, we realized that it took a toll on librarian well-being (physical and mental health) and was preventing us from engaging more deeply with the academic programs and departments across our campus. So we did what the organization hadn’t done in years—we stopped doing something: we stopped offering Beyond Google.

Beyond Google: A credit-course is born

Beyond Google was a one-credit course that met twice a week for seven weeks. The course addressed a different type of information each week (e.g. websites, news, research), and the course was designed to teach information literacy through the lens of Google. Each week students learned about information sources available in the library as well as similar resources freely available on the open web. The course content focused not only on search techniques (e.g., truncation, Boolean Operators, advanced Google commands), but also on issues relating to information (e.g., privacy, open access, filter bubbles).

While the course was open to all undergraduates, the intended target audience was first- and second-year students. Innovative aspects of the course included a student-centered curriculum that offered students a variety of learning options and an array of low-stress evaluation options that allowed students to demonstrate their mastery of concepts. These innovations, though, came at a cost, for the complexity of the curriculum, assignments, and grading were such that it discouraged the enlisting and training of additional librarians to help teach Beyond Google.

Angie Cox is instruction coordinator instruction and liaison librarian, email: angela.cox@uni.edu; Jim Kelly is instruction and liaison librarian – Business, email: jim.kelly@uni.edu; and Chris Neuhaus is instruction and liaison librarian, email: chris.neuhaus@uni.edu,

© 2020 Angie Cox, Jim Kelly, and Chris Neuhaus

Initially, the course did not use the university learning management system, Blackboard. This decision was made in part because there was a steep learning curve for understanding and implementing the nuances of such a complex class in Blackboard. We opted instead for a low-tech approach using paper and pencil tests and exercises recorded in an Excel spreadsheet grade book.

The amount of effort it took to plan, create materials, and grade student work monopolized our time, leaving little time to do anything other than teach a couple of sections of the course each semester. Eventually, we converted the class into Blackboard, building it from scratch. We hoped that this change would eventually save time on grading and corresponding with students. This conversion project itself took an enormous amount of time and was only completed because we hired a temporary librarian whose sole purpose was to assist with this project.

The reality of Beyond Google

To ensure adequate enrollment, the course was opened up to all undergraduate students. However, the fact that the course was a one-credit offering with sections commencing at both the beginning and middle of the semester meant that Beyond Google came to attract not only first-year students but seniors in need of credit to graduate and undergraduates facing academic challenges and needing an additional academic credit to maintain their financial aid. The result was that most sections of Beyond Google had a mix of students with a wide range of motives, experiences, and abilities. Preparing for such diverse classes proved to be another challenge that required additional time and effort.

Creating a new course proposal, getting the course approved, and coordinating with other curricula on campus proved a significant time sink. Unfortunately, the administrative burden of registering course information in the school catalog and managing school evaluations and grades proved an ongoing commitment.

Asking the tough questions

In fall 2017, our library formed a committee to meet with all library staff to discuss and

consider a future realignment of services. The committee's discussions with library staff uncovered a paradox: nearly all staff felt their work was vital and that they wanted to continue doing it, but that they were terribly overworked and wanted additional help. This posed a problem as, like most libraries, our library has very few chances of adding additional staff, and certainly not additional staff to every unit in the library.

However, within a year, retirements allowed us to add a new associate university librarian and consider changes to our reference and instruction program. The reference and instruction unit collectively talked about the pain points in the existing instruction program, including the credit course and all of the other work that we were doing. Among those of us who had been teaching the credit course, there was a general feeling of exhaustion coupled with a sense that we were not reaching as many students as we would like.

We began to ask ourselves the following questions: How could we reach more students with meaningful experiences with so few librarians? How could a small group of librarians incorporate information literacy throughout the curriculum effectively and efficiently? As the group came to realize, Beyond Google was not sustainable and was not the answer to these questions.

Given our collective desire to impact more students and faculty, Beyond Google needed to be dramatically changed or discontinued. This was not a decision we took lightly. Though students and academic advisors found great value in Beyond Google, we simply did not have the time or energy to grow the reach of our instruction program and to continue teaching Beyond Google. The situation demanded that we be more strategic with our time and energy.

New directions

Going forward, we knew no single initiative would solve our problems. We knew that we would need a variety of resources and approaches to incorporate informa-

tion literacy throughout the campus curriculum. The users we serve have very different needs, and what may work for one department, may not work for another. We realized, at last, that sustainability was just as important as innovation. With so few librarians, the instructional materials we intend to create need to be easy to build and modify and should be broadly applicable. We now seek out tools and resources that can scale easily to meet campus demand. We also intentionally avoid labor-intensive homegrown options such as video tutorials that pose production, quality, and accessibility challenges and require frequent updates.

These considerations led us to acquire Credo InfoLit Modules. These modules can be used by librarians and teaching faculty alike. Credo can also be used for training both the library's student workers and the academic learning center student tutors. These modules also allow for data collection, so that librarians and faculty can track the progress of their students.

With the elimination of Beyond Google, we now have time to try other initiatives that incorporate information literacy into the curriculum. We are now coordinating our communication with campus by creating a communication calendar. Twice a year, librarians are encouraged to contact their departments about information literacy instruction and include a library syllabus statement about the services we provide. Often in these emails, librarians also mention LibGuides that have been or can be created for departments. We also have begun to standardize the look and feel of our LibGuides to align with best practices for mobile use.

Conclusion

In the current higher education environment, it is imperative that libraries remain innovative and nimble. Yet, to remain innovative, a library must be ready to discontinue some existing services to make new initiatives sustainable. A system that keeps

adding new initiatives without routine program assessment and services realignment can have a negative impact on employee well-being, morale, and productivity. A successful organization finds a balance between risk-taking and program management that allows for sustainable innovation.

In the end, though the pain and disappointment of walking away from Beyond Google were significant for some, the risk was low. The greater risk was to continue working at the same pace. A sober assessment of the situation made it clear to us all that we needed to make changes in how we approach information literacy and library instruction. Expending too much effort on our credit class, to the detriment of our other instruction efforts, was neither sensible nor sustainable.

Once we had decided to cancel Beyond Google, communicating this change to campus partners and supporters of Beyond Google was an important next step. We did our best to explain the logic and rationale behind our decision. In addition, we shared our excitement to begin offering Credo information literacy modules and underscored the fact that the Beyond Google instructional resources were still available online via a LibGuide.

Going forward, it may seem that our library has "gone back to the basics." In many ways, we have. However, our approach to information literacy instruction is now very different. With everything we develop and maintain, we are mindful of balancing our efforts, avoiding silos, and bringing in partners to collaborate and "share the burden." Our experience teaching the credit course has led us to seek targeted, quality instruction opportunities with more students in classes taught by teaching faculty rather than devoting a significant amount of time and intense focus to working with a comparatively small number of students. At the core of what our instruction program offers, we strive to provide sustainable quality service whether it be through our teaching, LibGuides, or modules. *~*