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Assessment of a One-Credit Course for Humanities Graduate Students:

A Phenomenological Approach to Identify Thresholds and Impacts

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In the fall of 2016, three librarians from the Humanities and Social Sciences Library at the University of Alberta (UofA) took on the challenge of teaching a one-credit scholarly communication course to new graduate students in the department of Modern Languages and Cultural Studies (MLCS). Three librarians delivered the five two-hour MLCS795 weekly classes from late October through November. The University of Alberta is a large Canadian University with five campuses and an enrollment of more than 38,000 students. The Faculty of Arts has more than 5,000 undergraduates and 800 graduate students. The University of Alberta Libraries is mandated to be a teaching library.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) movement provides the context and impetus for analyzing the effectiveness of the course through the lens of student learning and evaluation. Student feedback obtained in early spring 2017 through a survey and interviews has provided an understanding of student opinion of scholarly communication and how the course met their expectations. Findings have provided the authors with plans for improving the course for fall 2017.

Literature Review

Few articles in the literature focus on graduate student information literacy credit courses. Many articles focus on understanding how students find information but very few investigate

student perceptions or pedagogical approaches. Bruce's study,[1] with methodology and results closely resembling those for MLCS795, shows that students' perceptions of their information literacy course were favorable. Students who participated in interviews identified ways in which the coursework assisted the research process, including improved searching skills, better understanding of research intentions, and improved awareness of resources.

A more recent article by Madden[2] found that a humanities PhD information literacy course had clear benefits. The students ranked research resource discovery and evaluating information as the two most important topics covered during the module. All of the students in Madden's study indicated that the first year of the PhD is an appropriate time to take the module, as did the students in the MLCS795 study.

The literature did not provide a lot of guidance for the research team on how to structure the MLCS795 course. Cohen's 2016 survey[3] of librarians who taught credit courses at all levels of study revealed no consensus on the content or format of courses. Fisher's article[4] focuses on using the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* to guide a credit-bearing course. She outlines eight weeks' worth of course content, which fosters the kinds of scholarly communication discussions that MLCS795 elicits.

Background

For many years at the start of fall term, the MLCS department partnered with UofA Libraries to offer a ninety-minute one-shot seminar for new MLCS graduate students. It took years of advocacy and prototyping with MLCS faculty to convince them that graduate students deserved more than a one-shot session. The main catalyst for change stemmed from the re-envisioning process that the MLCS department began in 2012. This resulted in a completely different approach: a portfolio model where students are encouraged to innovate and go beyond "the traditional thesis/dissertation as the only format for major capping project in graduate schools."[5] This model involves students taking three portfolio modules, two of which are mandatory: grant writing and information literacy.[6]

In March 2015, a Future of the PhD Conference, held at the University of Alberta, recommended some new directions for the humanities PhD, including digital humanities; the recommendations stated that "archival digitization, data compression for storage, and the importance of search indices"[7] in every discipline, should become part of a humanities PhD because "this digital revolution is as important as libraries."[8] Digital tools are "the library and printing press of our age."[9] In a similar vein, a recent Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council funded *White Paper on the Future of the PhD in the Humanities* says students should be given the opportunity to develop their "dialogical capacities"[10] and "discursive practices"[11] in the world of academia with a special emphasis on scholarly communication.

When MLCS795 was first conceived, its main focus was to be information literacy; however, the instructors felt that graduate students would benefit from learning information

literacy concepts and skills within the wider context of scholarly communication. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning asks, "What will my students need to grapple with?"[12] The MLCS795 course description responds that the course will "provide students with a practical understanding of the nature of professional conversations in their field and how to participate."[13] Information literacy is only one tool that contributes to the main objective of preparing students to engage ethically and effectively in the scholarly discourse of their chosen discipline. The majority of MLCS795 classes were devoted to scholarly communication objectives (see Appendix 14A). Only one class section focused on traditional library tools and search strategies. Information-seeking and finding were reinforced throughout the class sessions, but insofar as they helped achieve the greater goal of acculturating students to scholarly communication.

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) Methodology

Following the completion of the MLCS795 Information Literacy & Scholarly Communication Module, the course instructors implemented a SoTL study of the course's effectiveness with a phenomenological approach in order to answer O'Brien's Scholarship of Teaching and Learning question, "How do I know if my teaching and my students' learning have been effective?"[14] In other words, what impact does this scholarly communication course have on the research of incoming humanities graduate students? The study consisted of four participants, one MA and three PhDs (there were only four new MLCS graduate students in 2016). The students had a combination of Canadian and international degrees. They came with a range of previous information literacy training—from a mandatory course as an MA requirement to none at all. All were registered in comparative literature; however, the departmental focus is very interdisciplinary. All four students responded to an initial short survey, which was approved by the institution's research ethics board (see Appendix 14C). The three students who participated in interviews, chose the pseudonyms Fern, Robin, and Pat (see Appendix 14B).

Findings

The research project involved obtaining student perceptions regarding course expectations, content and outcomes, and readings and assignments. The key student perception findings are summarized below.

STUDENT COURSE EXPECTATIONS

The interviews began by asking students what they expected from the course (see Appendix 14B). While they had low expectations, they all ended up finding the course much more helpful than anticipated. Robin said she thought, "Ok, here we go with another MLA writing

style course…. I really didn't expect anything from you guys." However, by the end, she could see how it fit into her development as a researcher: "So, I think this is a major course … how to find sources, how to become a researcher—very important. And I think this is a principle in the mentality of MLCS—they are trying to raise independent researchers, intellectual minds."

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF COURSE CONTENT AND OUTCOMES

The first survey question asked students to what extent the course met the U of A Faculty of Arts Vision and Mission statements.[15] All students agreed or strongly agreed that the course met three of the statements:

1. Opens unexpected doors of opportunity
2. Instills students with adaptable, critical skills sought after by top employers
3. Prepares students to undertake ground-breaking research

Three survey participants also agreed that the course prepared them "to undertake creative activity," which was the fifth vision statement.

During the interviews, Fern linked these concepts to the ability to search more broadly and dig up a comprehensive set of resources on interdisciplinary topics. Similarly, Pat explained that the course helped her to hone her research skills and focus on asking the right questions, so she is better prepared to undertake her research. Robin referred to a digital humanities project presented in class and talked about how she found it inspiring as it led her to consider novel forms of creation and dissemination of research results from multiple disciplines.

The survey asked: "In terms of your studies and research, please rate each of the concepts included in the course from least important to most important" (see Appendix 14C, question 2). The four concepts that were rated with the highest importance by the participants were:

*   discovering information using information seeking tools;
*   citation;
*   scholarly communication in the humanities; and
*   evaluate information.

All ten course concepts were ranked as "most important" by at least one participant. None were ranked "not very" or "least important." The final six concepts that were ranked as most important or important by two or three respondents were:

*   research data management;
*   source types: scholarly/popular, primary/secondary;
*   research methodologies/critical approaches;
*   copyright;
*   open access; and
*   research metrics.

Open-ended responses to the following question shed a bit more light on the students' choices. The survey asked: "Please explain why the course concept(s) ranked as most important had the greatest impact in your scholarly activities." As one student

explained, [the instruction] "gave me research skills after a long absence from Academia and a complete restructuring of research." The complete restructuring of research might refer not only to the comprehensive information databases now available to students but also to the contextualizing of this information in terms of scholarly communication, which becomes intricately intertwined for the student. Another student expressed how difficult it was to pinpoint a single course concept and referred to a number of concepts as being most impactful: "The materials on information seeking tools, citation and research metrics helped me to expand my bibliography and re-formulate some of my research questions; they were also helpful for evaluation of the sources. The training session on copyright helped me plan the preparatory stages of my project."

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ON READINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS

During the interviews, student participants were asked about the readings from the UNESCO series "Open Access Curricula for Researchers and Library Schools."[16] As humanities researchers, students found the documents too technical. They consulted the readings for relevant sections as reference resources when working on assignments, but they found them too long to read in full. One student explained that a quick reference sheet on metrics to provide definitions and summarize uses would have been more useful.

The overall perception of the students on class assignments was favorable, but there was some disagreement. The students liked the creativity involved in the initial active learning exercise that required them to create a visual representation of their research, then explain their research focus to the class. Pat valued the first citation assignment; it introduced her to MLA style and to bibliographic citation after years away from academia. The other two students said they already knew how to cite, so it wasn't useful. However, they all made mistakes in their citations! In the next iteration of this course, the instructors plan to collect students' SSHRC application bibliographies and approach citation on an individual level with each student.

For the second class, the students had to identify an article and then analyze it using the usual criteria—purpose, audience, bias, etc.—plus the type of research method used. Fern didn't see the point to this assignment because the students' research questions and critical-thinking skills were already well-formed, though she did appreciate the focus on methods. Robin valued the assignment; she said it was the first time she had been introduced to these concepts and that learning to "ask the right questions" helped a lot in learning to evaluate what she reads.

Students struggled with the metrics assignment because metrics were new to them. Most of them saw the value in metrics but did not like the repetitive nature of finding different types of metrics for ten articles for their assignment. Publication metrics require more thought than what was required in class. In the next iteration, the instructors will try to design an assignment that asks students to choose a journal to publish in and explain how and why they have made that choice.

For the final assignment, students had to create a citation map and a 100-word data management summary. Pat said that the final assignment "brought out all the connections between the authors and the sources. And it was very illustrative in the way that it demonstrated how complex those connections were." She said that the final assignment highlighted that "the most important sources used for that picture were the least important for her actual project. Because they connected all the dots, but still they lacked that perspective that I need for doing my research." Robin initially felt that the mapping concept did not suit her way of thinking, but in the end, she said that it helped her to put parameters around her research, focus on her research question, and not be diverted by all of the peripherally related great ideas she comes across.

Threshold Concepts

Student comments in class and during the interviews revealed that there are concepts that proved troublesome, yet transformative, which researchers indicate as characteristics of threshold concepts.[17] Many of the troublesome concepts, if not all, became transformative once the students grasped them and understood their significance in their research. In general, scholarly communication (SC) was enlightening for students but difficult to grasp because of the innovative, creative, flexible, and sometimes nebulous concepts that make up SC. The concept map assignment, publication metrics, and research data management were SC concepts that were particularly noteworthy. These SC concepts were new to the students. They found them troublesome initially, but the more they engaged with them, the more they saw their importance in their scholarly work.

Citation styles had a love/hate effect on students. Some were glad and thankful they were covered in class and others found them too basic for a graduate-level course. However, students did say that MLCS795 enabled them to use citation style knowledge in working as research assistants and consulting with faculty.

The concept map assignment was also troublesome because it forced students to consider scholarly communication in a creative and perhaps unconventional way. It also appealed to some learning styles more than others. However, even those who are not visually inclined learners recognized the value of the astounding maps created by their classmates (see Appendix 14D). The map allowed one student to realize that the authors she considered most authoritative in her field had a very general approach, while the authors she actually needed to communicate with were lesser known and had more focused approaches.

Publication metrics are troublesome in their own right because of their multiplicity and the various tools used to produce them. Students are looking for easy solutions and quick evaluation methods and one-page cheat sheets. Unfortunately, evaluating a publication or a researcher is not usually straightforward. Students told us that they have used metrics since the course ended to select a journal to publish in and to track their own influence as authors. One student, who was looking through Researchgate or Academia.edu, noticed that a co-author had uploaded a paper without her knowledge and without permission. Another student explained that she had always dismissed numbers in the past, but the

ability to apply metrics now gives her a bigger picture view of the discipline and individual researchers' place in it. Learning about metrics also made her realize that researchers can become too introverted, but metrics help researchers "look at their work from other people's eyes."

Research data management (RDM) is particularly troublesome for humanities scholars. As emerging academics, MLCS795 graduate students struggled to understand how "data" applied to them. Most understood at least theoretically how RDM may have some implications on their research, but practically it will take time for the theory to sink in. In class, students were given examples from real life U of A RDM humanities projects (e.g., Dr. Natalie Kononenko's Sanctuary Project[18]), which seemed overwhelming to students at first. When they took time to consider their work and research outputs from a RDM perspective, they recognized that even managing citations—so fundamental to the work of humanities researchers—requires time and planning.

The copyright guest lecture led one student to change her thesis proposal in light of copyright issues. Another student was a published fiction writer, who had quite a different take from the instructors' on access to information, copyright, and publishing. As academic librarians, the course instructors assumed that open access was a public good, which may be true for scholarly works but is not necessarily a shared value when considering works of fiction or art.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence from the student surveys, the students were very satisfied with the course. They appreciated the broader scholarly communication focus of MLCS795 and receiving a librarian's perspective on what academia is all about. By the time students were interviewed, they had accepted that librarians would force them out of their comfort zones. Creating the citation map, for example, scared them, but in the end, they mostly found it to be very useful for their research.

Humanities graduate students, however, had limits. A flipped classroom approach is a pedagogical approach that is at odds with the culture of the humanities discipline. Active learning is challenging with humanities graduate students; they are used to working independently, reflecting, investigating, and carrying out assignments and research on their own. They resisted the instructors' attempts to carry out in-class assignments and preferred to take them home and finish them. When asked in the interviews, none of the students responded favorably to the idea of a flipped classroom. They already felt overwhelmed by readings for their other courses and by the pressure of meeting grant application deadlines. They said things like they prefer to watch short videos in context in class and that they don't have time for more readings.

Students valued the course and its broader focus on scholarly communication. The instructors will revise it to improve concept retention and to include a stronger focus on digital humanities as well as the importance of communicating research to the wider community.[19] MLCS graduate students, because of their academic background and learning

styles, challenged our understanding of effective pedagogies in regards to active learning and flipped classroom approaches. The effectiveness of the course became apparent in the benefits students identified, which include a better understanding of research intentions, new knowledge of metrics and their applications, and an improved awareness of resources that enhance students' ability to face the challenge of interdisciplinarity.

Appendix 14A: MLCS795 Course Guide and Description

MLCS 795 Information Literacy & Scholarly Communication

Class 1: Overview, Discover, Cite

Class 2: Method to the Madness ▾

Class 3: Continue the Conversation: Metrics

Class 4: Open Access

Class 5: Data Management & Copyright

Class 6: Presentations and final assignment workshop

Writing & Citing ▾

Citation Map

Syllabus

- Course Syllabus 2017

Readings, Handouts and Presentations

- 📄 Presentation Slides
- 📄 Class 1 - Summary

Preparing for MLCS 795

To prepare for the first class, please complete the following:

1. Information Literacy Tutorials:

- Where Do You Find Information (Tutorial)
- Putting a Search Together (Tutorial)
- Where to Start Searching (Tutorial)

2. Reading: UNESCO Scholarly Communications 1 - essential background for class content

3. Please provide Denis and Lindsay with a copy of the bibliography from your grant application. Email: Denis.Lacroix@ualberta.ca, Lindsay.Johnston@ualberta.ca (we have homework too!)

Assignments

- "What is your research?" Activity...
- 📄 Keywording Excercise (Due on October 31st 2017)
  1. complete Keywording exercise for your own research topic
  2. go to your worksheet where you identified 5 databases relevant to your topic & select 2 relevant databases that you have not used before to search
  3. use your completed Keywording sheet to search to search the new databases and export citations into RefWorks (minimum 5 citations from each database)
  4. in RefWorks, create a folder for your research topic, then add your citations there. Bring your completed Keywording sheet with the titles of the two databases and the list of references entered into RefWorks to class on October 31st 2017.

Appendix 14B: MLCS795 Study Interview Script

1. What were you expecting when you started the class?
   - Were there specific things that you thought you would learn?
2. What are your biggest challenges as a researcher? Can you comment on whether the course has helped in any way with those challenges?
   - Follow-up questions regarding specific topics covered during the course
3. Considering your most recent 3 months of course and research work, are there any parts of the course that stand out to you as particularly important? Please give some examples.

Please tell us what happened in a recent situation when you needed to
   - find information
   - evaluate information
   - create a citation
   - identify a source type
   - identify or select a research method
   - use metrics
   - publish or disseminate your research (scholarly communication)
   - manage your data
   - deal with a copyright issue
   - other

4. Please tell us what happened in a recent situation in your work as a researcher which was troublesome to you. Please explain how you tried to solve it.
5. Do you think you would have benefitted from a flipped classroom approach that would involve more readings and videos at home and more time for assignments and hands-on practice during class? We structured the course with 5 2-hour class sessions. We cut out a possible 6th class in recognition of the amount of work we required for the final assignment. Did this work for you or would you have benefitted from more class hours? [Possible follow-ups: Should there have been more guidance, hands-on time during class for assignments?]
6. Reflecting on the final assignment involving mapping out at least 10 bibliographic citations according to your research's concepts and outlining the scholarly conversations taking place among the cited scholars, how has this changed your outlook on your research? What impact has the assignment had on your literature review or your understanding of the area? If you could change the assignment, what would you modify to make it more relevant or useful?
7. What does digital humanities mean to you?
   - Follow-up questions: Did the course help you with your understanding? Should it have greater focus on digital humanities?

Appendix 14C: MLCS795 Survey Questions

Please find the survey questions here: https://goo.gl/Lqaiva

MLCS 795 Course Survey
Consent

Thank you for your interest in this study. By responding to this survey you are giving your consent to participate in this portion of the research study, *Engaging with Grad Students, Expanding our Role, Exploring Outcomes*, and affirming that you agree to the following:
• I have received and read the information letter on the study that was provided in the email invitation.
• I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time prior to submitting my answers to the current survey, after which it will no longer be possible to identify my answers nor withdraw them.
• My participation in the study is voluntary and anonymous.
• My answers to the survey will be securely stored on password-protected servers at the University of Alberta for a minimum of 5 years.
• Only the two researchers mentioned in the information letter will have access to my answers.
• I understand that study results may be presented at conferences, published in professional journals, and/or presented in class lectures.
• I understand that there are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study nor are there any direct benefits.

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the course met the following elements of the Faculty of Arts Vision and Mission:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
opens unexpected doors of opportunity	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
instills students with adaptable, critical skills are sought after by top employers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
develops a passion for lifelong learning which forms a foundation for a lifetime of career success	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
prepares students to undertake groundbreaking research	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
prepares students to undertake creative activity	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
instills the foundational skills that lead to change in a complex world	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. In terms of your studies and research, please rank each of the concepts included in the course from lowest importance (1) to greatest importance (10)

	Discovering information using information seeking tools
	Source types: scholarly/popular, primary/secondary sources, BEAM
	Citation
	Research methodoligies/critical approaches
	Research Metrics
	Open Access
	Scholarly Communication in the Humanities
	Copyright
	Research data management
	Evaluate information

3. Please explain why the unit you ranked highest (10) in question 2 above has had the greatest impact on your scholarly activities.

4. Please explain why the unit you ranked lowest (1) in question 2 above has had the lowest impact on your scholarly activities.

5. Is there any content that was missing that you would have liked the course to cover? Please explain.

Appendix 14D: Sample Student Citation Concept Map
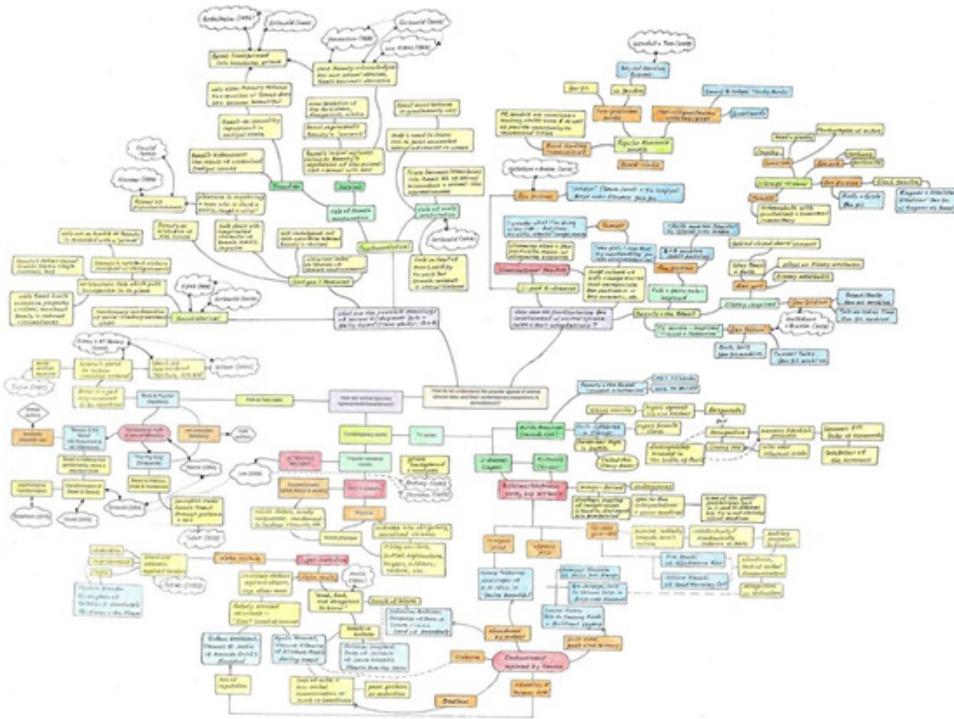
Gulcev, Liljana. Citation Concept Map for MLCS795, 2016. Reproduced with permission.

ENDNOTES

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