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The Role of Freshman Writing in Academic Bibliographic Instruction

by Donald A. Barclay and Darcie Reimann Barclay

The history of freshman writing programs and bibliographic instruction (BI) is reviewed to determine the extent to which freshman writing is used as a vehicle for BI, the perceptions of BI librarians, and the instruction methods used for the delivery of BI. Survey results are analyzed and recommendations made.

Composition as it is taught in American universities today has its roots in 18th- and 19th-century Britain. When such innovative British institutions as the Red Brick Universities, the Dissenting Academies, and the Scottish Universities replaced the traditional Oxbridge curriculum (based on Latin and oral examinations) with curriculums based on English texts, written exams and essays, the teaching of composition entered the university.¹ Bibliographic instruction (BI), an even more recent arrival on the academic scene, has long been closely allied with composition, particularly the freshman writing course. That course has been seen as an appropriate vehicle for BI because it traditionally is taken by all students and is composed of young or new students and often requires students to write a research paper.

At about the same time that BI began to emerge as something more than a library tour, freshman writing pedagogy underwent a series of profound changes that continues today. Around the end of the 1960s, teachers of writing abandoned the grammatical-correctness approach and began moving towards a hands-on, process-oriented approach based on pre-writing, drafting, and revising. In the last 15 years, almost all writing teachers have eliminated British and American literature from the curriculum, subjects that were once standbys of the freshman writing course.² Some teachers of freshman writing have gone so far as to do away with the freshman research paper altogether. Both philosophically and chronologically, this great change in the way writing has been taught has paralleled BI's replacement of the tour and the canned lecture/orientation with hands-on instruction, active learning, and the teaching of critical thinking.

Throughout these years of change, the literature of both freshman writing and BI has included articles on how freshman

writing should (or should not) be used as a vehicle for BI. It is not the primary purpose of this article to join the debate on whether or not BI belongs in the freshman writing course. Instead, what follows is an examination of the current status of freshman writing as a vehicle for BI. The principal topics this study will address include:

- The extent to which freshman writing is used as a vehicle for BI
- BI librarians' perception of freshman writing courses as a vehicle for BI and
- Instruction methods for teaching library research to freshmen

"While the traditional acceptance of freshman writing as the 'natural' ally of BI suggests that freshman writing has a paramount role in BI, the movement toward course-related, across-the-curriculum instruction suggests that freshman writing is not as important today as it was in the past."

While the traditional acceptance of freshman writing as the "natural" ally of BI suggests that freshman writing has a paramount role in BI, the movement toward course-related, across-the-curriculum instruction suggests that freshman writing is not as important today as it was in the past. However, no studies have explored either of these hypotheses. Menschling showed how many students received BI and identified the preferred methods for providing such instruction.

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but she did not examine freshman writing as a separate component in BI.³ Similarly Chadley and Gavryck did not isolate BI provided via the freshman writing course in their study of library instruction in Association of Research Libraries (ARL) libraries.⁴ The present study attempts to show the extent to which freshman writing serves as a vehicle for BI and to identify alternative vehicles for offering BI.

Building on the present study, future investigations will be able to determine the extent to which BI has evolved beyond traditional methods of instruction. This is especially necessary at a time when the downsizing of academic libraries, the spread of global computer networks, and the proliferation of electronic information tools are both changing and expanding the role of academic BI and of academic libraries in general. Also, this study will allow BI librarians to compare the nature of their current programs to national trends and thus make more informed decisions about future directions for BI at their institutions.

“While most of the literature has dwelt on the virtues of using the freshman writing course as a vehicle for BI, some writers have cast doubts on this notion.”

Literature Review

Discussion of the use of freshman writing as a vehicle for BI has roots in both library and composition literature. Block and Mattis report on a BI/freshman-writing cooperative program established in 1938. Their faith in the compatibility of BI with freshman writing, as well as their call for a jointly supervised teaching program designed to provide students with an appreciation of the objectives and methods of research,⁵ have remained staple ideas in the literature. For example, Ford recommends that BI librarians work closely with English department writing programs. Furthermore, freshman writing programs lend themselves to BI because they often require research papers and are taken by most undergraduates.⁶

Many articles describing specific programs of BI and their relationship to freshman writing have appeared in the literature. In 1980, Baron and Hubbard described a BI program that adapted the rhetorical structures of composition to

Table 1
Chi-square Analysis of Response by Carnegie Type of Institution

Size of Institution	Number of Institutions Surveyed	Number of Institutions Responding	Expected	χ^2
1	14	6	7.46	285
2	6	3	3.20	012
3	10	3	5.33	1.018
4	12	5	6.40	306
5	81	46	43.18	184
6	36	23	19.19	756
7	27	13	14.39	134
8	81	44	43.18	015
9	5	2	2.67	168
				$\chi^2 = 2.881$
				$\chi^2 > p .05$

teach freshman writers how to use an academic library.⁷ While that program was not successful, Muehlbauer was able to conclude that a junior-college program for the freshman writing class was successful.⁸ More recently, Skekloff and Birdsall discuss traditional cooperative programs that bring together BI librarians and writing instructors, and Sorensen highlights the pairing of a developmental writing course with a for-credit library skills course.⁹⁻¹¹

While most of the literature has dwelt on the virtues of using the freshman writing course as a vehicle for BI, some writers have cast doubts on this notion. Tiefel suggests that there may be conflicts between the way writing teachers and librarians conceive of library research.¹² In response to the increasingly common practice of not assigning research papers as part of the freshman writing class, Bodi has pointed out the impossibility of trying to teach library research in a freshman writing course which requires no research.¹³ Finally, on many campuses it no longer makes sense, some authors argue, to provide BI only for freshman writing classes when research writing is being taught in many other disciplines.¹⁴ Perhaps in response to such criticism, or to the current emphasis on making BI relevant to subject matter,¹⁵ recent articles have explored the nature of current composition pedagogy to suggest how this pedagogy can compliment BI.¹⁶⁻¹⁸

Procedure

The population was obtained from the 1,360 institutions listed in the Carnegie

Foundation's *A Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*.¹⁹ Using a random number generator, 272 institutions (20%) were identified. (A 20% sample was thought to be sufficient based on an estimated 50% return rate.)

A pilot study was completed in late 1992 to develop and refine a questionnaire for optimal clarity and ease of administration. The revised questionnaire was then mailed to the Head of Bibliographic Instruction at the colleges and universities identified in the sample. If a response was not received within three weeks, a second, identical questionnaire was mailed. The two mailings yielded a total response of 149 completed questionnaires (54%). Of the institutions surveyed, 123 (46%) did not respond or provided unusable data. In all institution size categories, the response rate did not vary with the size of the institution ($\chi^2 = 2.881$, $p > .05$), see Table 1.

Once the questionnaires were obtained, the data were coded. Computer center personnel keyed the coded items into the university mainframe and used SAS to provide basic descriptive statistics and chi-square analysis. The data input worker, the senior author's assistant, and the senior author verified the accuracy of the data input by comparing the computer printouts to the original questionnaires and making needed corrections.

Results

During the 1991-1992 academic year, 236,487 students received BI from the institutions reporting ($n=147$). Of these students, 39% ($n=91,770$) received BIs in

Figure 1
Forms of Instruction

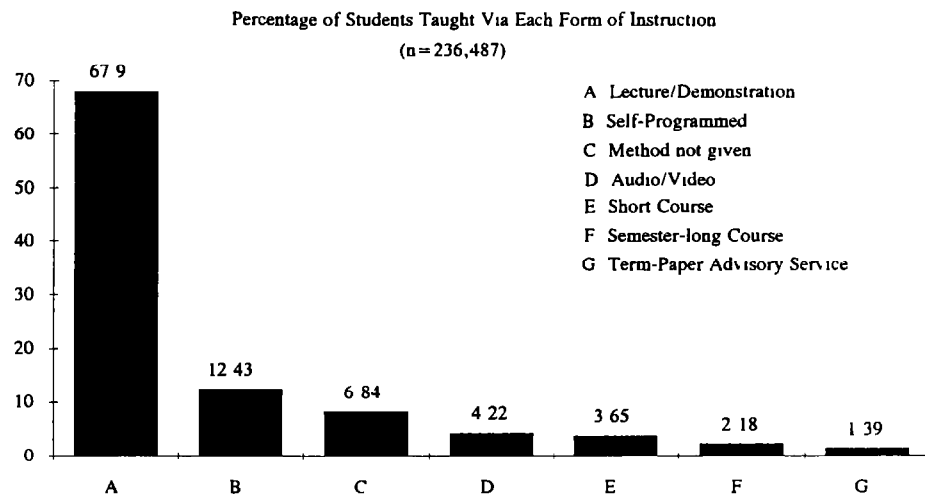
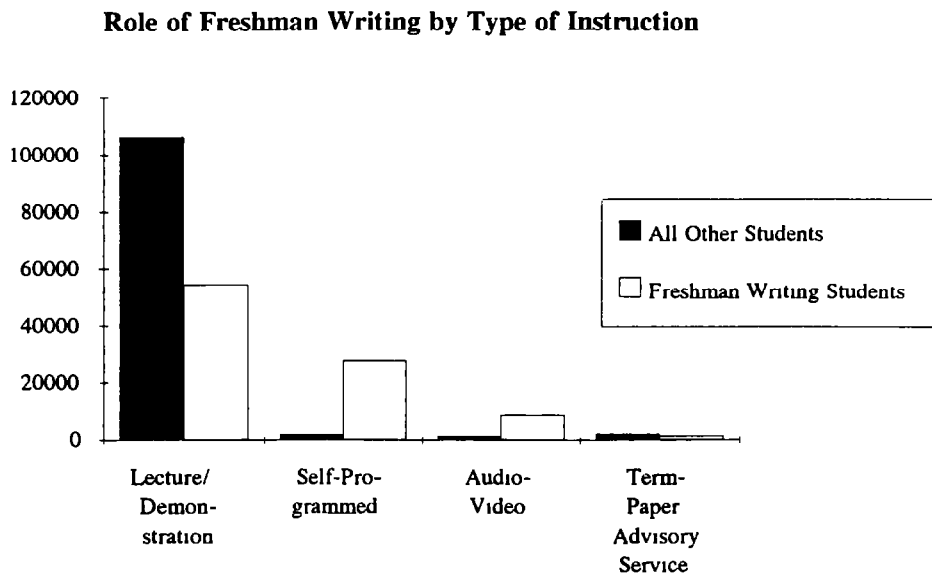


Figure 2
Freshman Writing and Type of Instruction



a freshman writing class. Institutions offering a semester-long BI course totaled 13% (n=19) of which 2% (n=5,146) of the total number of students reported above were enrolled. BI courses lasting more than one week but less than a semester were offered at 14% (n=20) of the institutions and such courses accounted for 4% (n=8,630) of the total number of students receiving BI, see Figure 1.

Self-programmed BI (e.g. computer-aided instruction or workbooks) was offered at 26% (n=37) of the institutions reaching a total of 29,395 students. Of these students, 94% (n=27,491) received

instruction via a freshman writing class, see Figure 2.

A term-paper advisory service allowing students to schedule individual appointments with reference librarians was offered at 17% (n=24) of the institutions. The number of students utilizing such services was reported to be 3,277. Of these students, 38% (n=1,243) were conducting research as part of a freshman writing course, see Figure 2.

Only 7% (n=10) of the institutions offered BI by means of audiotape or videotape. The number of students receiving audiotape or videotape instruction was 4%

(n=9,983) of the total number of students receiving some form of BI. Of the students receiving taped instruction 88% (n=8,738) were freshman-writing students.

Live lecture/demonstration was offered by 89% (n=122) of the institutions reaching a total of 160,563 students. Freshman writing-students accounted for 34% (n=54,370) of these students.

BI coordinators who responded ranked the importance of freshman writing to their BI program using a three point scale, with one being not at all important, two being somewhat important, and three being very important. Total rankings were as follows: 61% (n=84) ranked freshman writing as being very important, 23% (n=31) ranked freshman writing as being somewhat important, and 16% (n=22) reported freshman writing as being not at all important ($\chi^2 = 2.25$).

“The fact that more than a third of the sample was freshman-writing students supports the conclusion that this basic college course is important to BI.”

Discussion

In response to the initial question regarding the extent to which freshman writing serves as a vehicle for BI, 39% of the total sample of 236,487 students received BI via this means. The fact that more than a third of the sample was freshman-writing students supports the conclusion that this basic college course is important to BI.

Lending further support to this conclusion is the fact that 61% of BI librarians ranked freshman writing as very important to their BI program. As one typical respondent commented, “The writing process and information-gathering process have some strong commonalities and complement one another; these natural links have helped us forge a close relationship with the writing-program faculty.” Other respondents made similar comments on the importance of freshman writing for teaching new students how to use an academic library.

Regarding what courses besides freshman writing are important vehicles for BI, several respondents mentioned freshman seminar or freshman-orientation courses and a few reported offering one-shot

library orientations that are not tied to any particular course. Still, no single type of course or subject area was predominant. The prevalence of the freshman-writing course coupled with the finding that 68% of all students receiving BI do so via lecture/demonstration suggest that the practice of BI remains highly traditional.

As for the extended BI course, there is no doubt that such courses have the potential to provide more in-depth instruction than can be given in a one-shot instruction session. The desirability of such courses became evident when a number of respondents commented that they would like to offer a BI course (preferably a required course) but lacked the resources and/or administrative support to do so. All together, BI courses accounted for only 6% of students receiving BI. This suggests that relatively few institutions have both the resources and the desire to offer BI courses regardless of the potential benefits.

Of all students undertaking self-programmed BI, 94% undertook that instruction as part of a freshman-writing class. This may indicate that a traditional method of BI, the workbook, continues to be administered in the traditional place, the freshman-writing class. It may also indicate that self-programmed instruction is perceived as best suited for beginners. One respondent commented that her institution will have self-paced computer-aided-instruction in the near future. It will be important to note the effects of electronic self-programmed instruction as tools along the lines of Ohio State University's Gateway and the various Hypercard® instruction packages become more common in academic libraries.²⁰⁻²¹

Though several respondents listed courses other than freshman writing through which their institutions provided BI, no respondent listed a completely innovative method of instruction. A few respondents listed workshops, which may be assumed to be innovative in that they are (or should be) more hands-on than lecture/demonstrations, and one respondent listed one-on-one instruction as an alternative to the methods covered in the previous items on the questionnaire.

Study Limitations

Two-year colleges were not part of this study even though freshman writing is an important part of the two-year college curriculum. Also, this study does not distinguish the depth of instruction provided to each student. A student receiving 16 hours of instruction in a semester-long BI course

is counted the same as a student who comes in for a 50-minute one-shot lecture.

Implications for Further Research

In addition to measuring how the reliance on freshman writing has changed since the data for this study were collected, future studies can focus on what types of courses are replacing freshman writing as vehicles for library instruction. Studies can also focus on how librarians are presently extending library instruction beyond the freshman-writing course.

“The freshman-writing course remains the most important vehicle for providing BI in the academic library. Nearly 40% of all recipients of BI receive their instruction via a freshman writing class.”

Future studies could also examine not only the use of the freshman-writing course as a vehicle for BI but also how this relationship varies as the pedagogy of freshman-writing programs varies. Questions that might be addressed include: Are BI programs less likely to rely on freshman-writing programs when those programs do not require research papers? Is the reliance on the freshman-writing course less at institutions with writing-across-the-curriculum programs? What role do organizational factors, such as the status of writing coordinators and BI coordinators, play in the reliance on the freshman-writing course? The answers to these questions can suggest whether or not a specific BI program's reliance on freshman writing is a marriage of convenience or a sound educational decision.

Because the term lecture/demonstration is broad, future studies might investigate what this term means at different institutions. Are BI librarians incorporating active learning techniques into their lecture/demonstrations, or do they simply talk for 50 minutes at a stretch? Such a study might reveal whether or not BI librarians are more innovative than the findings of this study suggest. Similarly, self-programmed instruction includes everything from very traditional workbooks to the latest in computer-aided instruction. A more focused study than this one could reveal the variety of self-programmed instruction in academic

libraries and could also show how libraries use self-programmed instruction in conjunction with the freshman-writing course as well as other courses.

The relationship between freshman writing and BI in two-year colleges is another area ripe for further study and such information would be of great interest to two-year colleges as well as to universities and colleges that admit large numbers of two-year-college transfer students.

Conclusion

The freshman writing course remains the most important vehicle for providing BI in the academic library. Nearly 40% of all recipients of BI receive their instruction via a freshman writing class. This illustrates the heavy reliance of BI librarians on this traditional point of contact. Other traditional methods of providing BI remain very much in place in the academic library. Of all the students receiving BI, 68% received their instruction in the form of a lecture/demonstration, the most traditional of all library-instruction methods.

Taken together, the reliance on the freshman-writing course and the favoring of the traditional lecture/demonstration suggest that in practice, BI librarians continue to follow the traditional paths of library instruction. This stands in contrast to the literature of BI, which currently emphasizes such innovations as active learning, instruction across the curriculum, and alternatives to both the traditional term paper and the traditional one-shot lecture.

Two paths emerge for librarians to follow if they wish for the practice of BI to progress. One path would be to de-emphasize the role of the freshman-writing course in BI. This could be achieved by purposely shifting an institution's BI program away from the freshman-writing course and focusing instead on required general-education or subject-major courses, an undertaking that would require the cooperation of faculty across the disciplines. Though taking such a path would be especially beneficial in institutions where the freshman-writing course has eliminated or de-emphasized research, breaking with the past is not easy. One respondent reported little success in *desperately* trying to reverse the link between freshman writing and BI even though the English department in question cares nothing about BI.

The second possible path would be for BI librarians to accept freshman writing as a valuable and logical ally to library

instruction and work to make the instruction provided to freshman writers as effective and long-lasting as possible. Providing effective BI to freshman writers would require BI librarians to learn as much as possible about the nature of the freshman-writing course at their institutions. BI librarians could best achieve this by studying of the pedagogy of composition by conducting extensive liaison work with composition instructors, and by learning the needs, interests and abilities of freshman writing students.²² Just as librarian subject-specialists must keep up with their respective fields and must know the needs of the students and faculty in their fields, so BI librarians who want to work effectively with freshman writing students must keep up with that subject the faculty, and students.

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- 19 Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. A Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (Lawrenceville, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987). Institutions included in the study fell into one of the following Carnegie categories: Research Universities I & II; Doctorate-Granting Colleges and Universities I & II; Comprehensive Colleges I & II; Liberal Arts Colleges I & II; Schools of Engineering; Schools of Business and Management; Schools of Art, Music, and Design; Teachers Colleges; and Other Specialized Institution (e.g. service academies). On the grounds that they were entirely unlikely to offer freshman-writing courses, the following Carnegie categories of specialized institutions were entirely excluded from the population: Specialized Institutions: Religion and Theology; Specialized Institutions: Medical Schools; Specialized Institutions: Other Health Professions; Specialized Institutions: Law Schools; and Specialized Institutions: Corporate Colleges. Even with this attempt to screen out institutions which do not offer freshman writing courses, five of the institutions surveyed reported that they did not offer freshman courses of any sort. Institutions from the Carnegie category Two Year Junior and Technical Colleges were excluded for reasons of focus and to limit the study to a manageable size.
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