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The Accidental Librarian Instructor: Teaching a Graduate Research Course

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CHAPTER 4

THE ACCIDENTAL LIBRARIAN INSTRUCTOR

Teaching a Graduate Research Course

Anne Shelley

For two different semesters, the author—an academic library liaison for a large school of music—had the opportunity to teach a graduate-level course in the school as an instructor of record. This chapter will detail the librarian’s experiences in teaching a required research methods course for graduate music students. More specifically, the chapter will cover the author’s approach to course development, assessment, and instructional methods, as well as time management strategies and comparing and contrasting the two semesters.

Introduction

For two different semesters, I taught a graduate-level music research course as an instructor of record. I was first offered the opportunity to teach the course prior to fall semester 2015, when the musicology faculty member who had taught it most recently went on sabbatical. I taught the course again in fall 2016. While I had never taught a semester-long course, I was able to draw on previous experiences as an academic librarian to help me develop course materials. At the

request of previous instructors of the course, I had provided library instruction sessions for students enrolled in Music Research in past semesters, so I was familiar with the course textbook and objectives. I had taken a similar course as a graduate student, and I incorporated several assignments from that experience. I was also familiar with a larger context that helped me prepare for this new role. Prior to teaching the course the first time, I had been the liaison to my university's School of Music for about three years. My core "day job" responsibilities included reference services, collection development, and instruction for music classes, and I was also involved in more infrequent tasks such as writing the library's portion of program reviews and documentation for accreditation visits. So I was already familiar with the graduate program tracks offered by the school, and I knew the general expectations of graduate faculty in musicology and other areas in the School of Music. For librarians who are offered a similar opportunity and are unsure of their ability to step into the role of a disciplinary course instructor, as I was, I encourage them to consider any previous experiences that might inform their approach and increase their confidence. Teaching graduate students as an instructor of record was one of the most challenging and rewarding charges I have held as an academic librarian, one that greatly informed my librarianship. I would like to share some of my experiences, strategies, and lessons learned in this chapter, with the hope that others might decide to take advantage of the same opportunity when presented with it.

Course Development

The course, called Music Research: Sources and Methods, is required for graduate students pursuing degrees in performance, conducting, collaborative piano, or composition. A separate applied research course is offered for graduate students in music therapy and music education. The course enrollment is capped at twenty-five students, and it is offered only every fall semester. The course description in the syllabus is as follows: "In this course, graduate music students critically examine music resources, develop research skills in music applicable both for graduate-level music research and also for professional careers, and improve skills in writing about music."

In developing the course the first time I taught it, I was fortunate to have access to a previous instructor's course materials. I used a different textbook, however, so I made extensive modifications to the syllabus, particularly the readings and course calendar. And while I used many of my predecessor's ideas and handouts for in-class activities, I developed mostly new lesson plans.*

* Many thanks to Dr. Joseph Matson for sharing his course materials with me, and to Dr. Marian Wilson Kimber for sharing the assignments and handouts she developed for a similar course.

Preparing the course involved more time than I had anticipated. I began by creating the syllabus, which included several sections. The first section, About the Class, contained basic information about class meeting locations, my contact information, and a description, goals, and objectives of the course. The Resources section covered the required textbook, supplemental readings and other materials available through the course management site, basic information about library resources, and links to our university writing center, disability concerns office, and mental health services. Class Policies covered my expectations for attendance, my turnaround time for responding to questions, use of mobile devices in class, late work, and academic integrity. The Assignments section described the types and numbers of assignments in the course, expectations for class participation, the number of points available for each assignment, and instructions for formatting assignments (we used *Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th ed.). The final and most challenging component of the syllabus to develop was the Course Schedule. The schedule covered the entire semester and included information on what would be covered in class each day, what students were expected to read for each class meeting, the location of each class (depending on resources needed for a lesson, we either met in the assigned general classroom or in the library), and when assignments were due. Though it was time-consuming, I found that preparing a thorough syllabus had many benefits. It helped me envision the semester as a whole, guided me in tying course assignments and activities to the overall course objectives, and hopefully it provided students with clarity about my expectations and their responsibilities for the course.

I decided to use my university's course management system, Sakai, as much as possible for providing students with information about the course and feedback on their progress. Documents that I uploaded to the system included the course syllabus, assignments, course reserve readings, PowerPoint lessons (posted after the class meeting had occurred), and handouts. I also provided links to web-based resources, such as the library's subscription to the *Chicago Manual of Style* and the subject LibGuide for music.

Course Goals

The overall goal of the course was that “students [would] perform research and write about music at a professional level.” To help them achieve this goal, students were asked to meet the following objectives: find information on musical topics using a variety of search strategies; learn to use standard research materials in music; critically evaluate sources; develop skills in the research process; document sources in correct bibliographic format; use information ethically; and write clearly and persuasively about music for different audiences.

Textbook

The primary textbook used for the course both semesters was *Music Research: A Handbook*, 2nd ed., by Laurie Sampsel. Each chapter focuses on a tool or topic relevant to music research and includes an annotated bibliography of must-know and supplementary resources. While the course did not necessarily explore topics in the same order as the book's chapters, each chapter's topic was covered, and students therefore were asked to read the entire book. The book includes several appendices that were useful for both the students and the instructor, most notably the citation examples provided for music resources in *Chicago Manual* (the style guide used in this class and in musicology), APA, and MLA. Students were typically assigned to read one or two book chapters per week, along with supplemental readings to help provide more context for a particular topic.

Instructional Methods and Strategies

The First Day of Class

A small but critical difference between teaching a semester-long course and a one-shot library session is the need to plan the first day of class. What were some effective activities, housekeeping points, introductions, and discussions that I should incorporate in our first class meeting to start the semester well for my students and myself? This first class meeting was an ideal opportunity for us to learn a little about each other as people (particularly our musical backgrounds), for students to ask questions about the course, and for me to convey my expectations of them. For example, I had asked the students to read the syllabus before coming to class the first day; I thought it would be a waste of class time to go over every point in the syllabus together, and as graduate students I expected them to assume that responsibility and come prepared with any questions. I began class by asking the students to participate in a few icebreakers. One example of an icebreaker I used was to ask each student to pick the greatest year in the history of music and arrange themselves in a line in chronological order, and after they had done so, I asked each student to share the year he or she had picked and why. I thought this icebreaker was effective for several reasons: the students had to talk to each other in order to form the order of their line, the prompt required them to consider an event in music history that was important to them, and I got an idea on the first day of class what genre or composer each student was interested in. I also used class time to ask them to complete two questionnaires, one anonymous and one signed. The students' answers on the anonymous questionnaire gave me an idea of their experience and comfort levels with writing and researching, and I made an effort to address any patterns in their responses—weaknesses

and strengths—in lessons throughout the semester. In the signed questionnaire, students answered questions about their musical background, their favorite musical artists and works, what their personal goals were for taking the course, and if there was anything they wanted me to know about their learning style. The signed questionnaire not only allowed me to get to know each student better, I hope it also expressed to them that I was interested in supporting their success in the course and their development as musicians and researchers.

Lessons

When possible, I balanced lecturing with small-group activities in each lesson. I used PowerPoint for each lesson and posted the slides in Sakai afterward. Because attendance counted as part of their overall grade, I did not want to tempt students to skip class if they could access the slides beforehand. The choice to use PowerPoint was strategic, in hopes of benefiting both myself and my students: the slides helped me plan lesson content in the order I wanted to present it and kept me on task during class, and they supported different learning styles by providing students with textual and visual information along with class discussions and lectures. While of course the content of the slides varied from lesson to lesson, there were predictable elements that I included in each lesson. The first slide showed the date of class and a photograph (displayed while students were entering the classroom), and the following slide included an agenda for that day's class. I reiterated the agenda slide throughout the lesson when we would begin a new topic. The final slide of the lesson gave topics that would be covered the next class period, along with reminders about readings assigned for the next class and upcoming assignment due dates. I have since used this formula in one-shot library instruction sessions and have found it especially helpful for planning the right amount of content for, say, a fifty-minute class period.

I used activities in class to provide a variety of learning experiences for the students and to help prepare them for future assignments they would complete for the class. Most of the activities involved them working with a partner or small group, though an example of an individual activity was an exercise in topic development. After a lecture on strategies and resources that one might use to develop a topic, I provided each student with a worksheet containing prompts from *The Craft of Research*: “I am studying _____ because I want to find out what/why/how _____ in order to help my reader understand _____.”¹ The task and purpose of generating research questions and thesis statements was new to many of them, so it was important that I dedicated class time to this exercise; both times I taught the class, several students had questions about it, and since the activity was designed to prepare

them for a paper topic proposal assignment, I wanted to err on the side of providing extra support.

Some activities were simple and required little preparation on my part, such as “Turn to your neighbor. Talk about today’s assigned readings and come up with three questions that you think will be on the exam later this semester. Take three minutes and be prepared to share with the class.” A goal of this exercise was to help students realize both that there was a purpose to the readings I assigned and that there was potential for them to be assessed on content covered in the readings. I used another partner activity to introduce students to print encyclopedias and dictionaries. Each group was assigned two different encyclopedias (*Grove Dictionary of American Music* and *Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*) and an article (Aaron Copland) to look up in each resource. Students completed a worksheet for the activity, which basically asked them to compare and contrast the articles and the publications overall, and then reported their findings to the class. Many students had not used a print encyclopedia before, so this assignment helped them prepare for an upcoming research assignment that asked them to use these resources.

Finally, I sometimes used activities that involved larger groups. To prepare students for an assignment in which they would write original program notes for two musical pieces, I wanted them to consider different styles of writing. I asked students to work in groups of four to address a unique assigned prompt, for example “Congratulations! You clicked on the uniform title for *The Rite of Spring* and discovered a recording titled *Ritus des Frühlings*, an arrangement for German polka band. Tell the world about your finding in 1.) A tweet, 2.) A conversation with your best friend from high school, and 3.) A scholarly journal article.” Each group shared their prompt and what they composed with the rest of the class, and we discussed elements of each writing style and which one would be most appropriate to use for their upcoming assignment. I also tried to tie previously covered course content into the prompts when possible (students had learned about uniform titles the week before).

Throughout the semester, the class met in various locations around campus depending on the content that would be covered in any given lesson and any needed resources or technology. We had an assigned room in a general classroom building located about a five-minute walk from the library, and we met there slightly more than half of our classes. For the remaining class periods, especially in the first half of the semester, we met in a library computer classroom so students could easily access the library catalog and databases, as well as print research materials explored in the class like bibliographies and thematic catalogs.

Assessment

Student development in the course was assessed using a variety of methods, most notably research assignments, writing assignments (most of which scaffolded to a term paper), an exam, and an oral presentation. I chose this approach on purpose for more than one reason, the first of which being to mirror the expectations of one who practices music scholarship. Music research requires one to navigate libraries and the resources they provide with skill and some degree of efficiency. It is also expected that a music scholar be able to develop research questions and a thesis statement and to explore a topic through clear, well-organized, and purposeful writing. This person should also have enough knowledge on the topic to deliver a well-prepared and engaging presentation for his or her peers. Most students studying music at the graduate level have had many hours of experience showcasing their craft in front of audiences: performing on instruments or singing in solo or ensemble settings, conducting a group of musicians, or teaching lessons to one or more students at a time. Preparing and delivering an academic presentation requires a different skill set.

The second reason I decided to use a variety of assessment methods was to respect the different learning strengths and challenges of the students in the class. For example, some students found the research assignments difficult and overly time-consuming, while they felt more comfortable with their writing skills and enjoyed engaging with their paper topic that they explored throughout the semester. Others gave excellent presentations but were disappointed with their score on the exam. My goal was to have students exit the course feeling like they improved in all the areas in which they were assessed—content knowledge, using library systems and tools, writing, and presenting. Providing the students with many and different types of assessment opportunities was one strategy in helping them feel some immediate success in at least one of these areas during the course.

Students completed four research assignments for the class. Each assignment was designed to help them become familiar with and more comfortable using different types of resources used in music research and to help them connect the relevance of those resources to their paper topic: (1) music dictionaries and encyclopedias; (2) periodicals and periodical indexes; (3) other types of reference sources such as discographies, thematic catalogs, and bibliographies; and (4) score sources. Each research assignment had two sections, Part 1 and Part 2. For Part 1, students were given a list of potential resources they could consult in order to answer specific research questions. In addition to answering each question correctly, students were also asked to format their answers (if citations) correctly according to the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Part 2 asked the students to identify and cite specific examples of resources they explored in Part 1 that would be relevant to their paper topic.

Students also completed seven writing assignments, five of which related to their term paper for the class. Their first writing assignment was a short artist biography, which gave me an impression of their writing styles early in the semester, and hopefully served as a practical exercise for the students, who would likely be asked to submit a biography for concert programs and young artist competitions. The other writing assignment that was unrelated to the term paper was program notes; students wrote original notes about two pieces of music, and my hope was that they might include these notes on an upcoming program, such as their graduate recital. The assignments that scaffolded to the term paper were a topic proposal, annotated bibliography, detailed outline, a draft term paper, and a final term paper that incorporated feedback they received on their draft.

I also made an effort to assess the course and my performance as an instructor throughout the semester. In addition to the requisite teaching evaluation that is administered at the end of the semester, I asked students to anonymously complete prompts about the course after four weeks and after eight weeks into the semester. Examples of these prompts are, “In five years, one thing I will remember from this course is...”; “One thing we covered in class that I still don’t understand very well is...”; and “One thing I would like the instructor to do differently is...”. Asking for feedback from the students in the middle of the semester had several advantages: it gave me the opportunity to adjust my teaching based on their feedback, it allowed us to review any material about which there was confusion, and at the very least, it was a small way for me to communicate to the students that I cared about their experience and progress in the class.

I offered students multiple opportunities to earn extra credit points. Each research assignment included challenge questions that they could complete and gain extra points for correct answers. They could receive extra credit for attending a selected lecture recital or scholarly talk and writing a summary of the event.

All course assignments were posted in Sakai, and most were made available to students on the first day of class. Students downloaded the assignments and completed them electronically, then uploaded their completed assignments to the course site. I gave them feedback within each document using MS Word’s Track Changes function, and I uploaded the graded copy to the course site. Students could view their grades for each assignment, quiz, attendance day, the exam, the final presentation, and their overall course grade through the gradebook in Sakai.

Time Management

Balancing my instructor responsibilities with my regular librarian responsibilities was certainly a challenge. I was given extra pay to teach the course as an adjunct instructor, so any time I spent developing the course, planning lessons,

and grading assignments occurred during evening hours and on weekends. The class meeting time fell within regular business hours, so I arrived at work early, stayed late, or worked through lunch to make up those 150 minutes of “lost” work time each week. I held regular office hours and met with students during scheduled appointments, so I had to account for any substantial amount of time spent assisting Music Research students during business hours.

Contrast between Semesters

One of the most gratifying aspects of teaching this course was being able to teach it a second time. Naturally, I was pleased that my investment of time and energy in developing my version of the course would stretch beyond just that first semester. Equally rewarding, however, was the opportunity to repeat things that went well and adjust things that could have gone better.

The first semester I taught the course, I had twenty-four students, the second semester I had sixteen, and the difference in student numbers was noticeable in several ways. With an assignment, presentation, or quiz occurring at least once each week of the semester, the lower student number made grading far more manageable; I was able to provide students with more thoughtful feedback than the previous year because I had more time. With the larger class, we would often run out of time when groups shared their results after activities, or class discussion would take up so much time that an entire topic on that lesson’s agenda had to be shifted to the next lesson.

Between the two semesters, I took different approaches for assessing the students’ knowledge of content covered in the course. The first year, I gave students a short quiz at the beginning of each class, usually about whatever they were asked to read for that day. We would go over the answers to the questions immediately, and that usually led us nicely into discussion of the readings, though my primary reasoning for giving daily quizzes was to incentivize students to read the assigned material. The second year, I did not give daily quizzes because I found they took up too much class time (as much as ten minutes some days) and the fact that I typically gave the quizzes at the beginning of class was problematic if students arrived late. Instead, I gave an exam, which I did not do the first year. I found that the pressure of the exam was more effective in motivating students to study and retain key points and course content.

I also slightly modified the writing assignments between the two semesters. The first time I taught the course, I had students turn in term paper outline assignments in two stages: a simple outline (only including the major levels and ideas they would explore in their paper) with a bibliography, and an advanced outline (that included evidence used to support the ideas they mentioned in

the previous outline assignment) plus annotations for their bibliography. Several students simply turned in a full outline for the first assignment, and I believe breaking down the outline-writing process in the way I had intended was generally not helpful for them. The second time I taught the course, I created separate assignments for an annotated bibliography and a full outline, an arrangement that seemed much more straightforward and sensible to the students.

Conclusion

It is not uncommon for a music librarian to teach a research class for graduate music students. Even though my role as a course instructor was officially different from my day job, there was a strong tie to skills I used to help students learn material and produce quality work, the resources we explored, and the topics we covered. Teaching this class, especially the first time, was one of the biggest professional stretches I have experienced in my nine years as a librarian. I am better off for the experience and I hope that my students learned as much from me as I did from them.

Note

1. Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 45–48.

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