

Annotations:  
They Aren't Just for Your Professor Anymore

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University of Michigan  
Instructional Design for Information Skills  
December 2003

## the concept: background and rationale for the project

- “I keep reading and reading and I still don’t know what I am going to write.”
- “I seem to keep finding the same kind of information over and over again.”
- “I have 20 sources and I don’t know how to fit all the information together in my paper.”
- “I have been reading for weeks, am I done with my research?”

How many times have I said those same things to myself? Information, either in abundance or in dearth is difficult to manage and can be overwhelming to the most talented student. So what is the answer, you ask? Why, **organization**, of course.

Staying organized can help a researcher relate separate ideas to each other and to the larger research question. Organization can help a researcher know where there are holes in their research or where she might have too much information. Organization can help the researcher pick up themes or concepts that thread throughout all the resources, ultimately helping her formulate and write an argument. Finally, organization can help the researcher know when she can quit, knowing when she has enough to write a convincing argument.

It was this idea of research organization and bibliographic skill that motivated Maria Serapiglia and my teaching unit on Bibliographic Skills for International Students – Creating an Annotated Bibliography. We felt that there was an immediate need for students to learn the *skill* of writing an annotated bibliography, but we also felt, at least on some intuitive level, that writing annotations had the potential to aid a student in her research and information sense-making process. In essence, we felt the annotated bibliography was more than a pesky assignment to please a professor – that, indeed, it had the promise of being a *useful organizational tool*.

### **Why International Students?**

We chose to target international students and offered the class to the School of Information Global Network (SIGN). We felt it was an appropriate audience for several reasons. First, it would provide us with some homogeneity in our audience. Secondly, international students often

struggle with how to research and write a U.S. academic paper. Finally, SIGN has been open to and appreciative of educational programming in the past.

### **Recruitment**

Unlike teaching in a school setting, we had to recruit our own students. Our first challenge, then, was to make the concept of annotated bibliographies exciting and compelling enough to get graduate students, during one of the busiest times of the semester, interested in attending an optional (read: totally voluntary) one-hour session. We started by sending an email to SIGN members and eventually extended that to the “si.all” email group. We received several emails from non-international students asking if they could attend, we even had one doctoral student who expressed interest. After some thought we decided to welcome everyone, but with the caveat that the course content had been designed for an international audience and that it was a basic course on annotations and the research process.

The interesting point is that we wanted to recruit students, but equally important was recruiting students that we felt would benefit from the program we had put together. Reflecting back, the process of thinking about alternate audiences forced us to more carefully analyze what exactly we were trying to convey to our audience and how specific we thought that audience was a non-native English speaking one.

After having taught the course three times to a mostly non-international audience, I realize now that our course content truly was applicable and, indeed, useful to any student at the school, even the doctoral student. However, I don't think I understood that at the beginning of the teaching process – through conveying our content I understood the power of our unit, but it was through the *practice of teaching* and not through the process of course development that I came to understand that.

## **goals & objectives: lesson plan development**

### **The Evolution of the Plan**

Maria and I knew generally our goals and objectives for the unit – we wanted to teach a bibliographic skill that would be useful to an international graduate student and that would also

help them in their research projects. Though we did have an idea where we were going, the concept definitely went through an evolutionary process – both during the preparation of the lesson plan as well as during the teaching experience.

Individually, we did research on adult learning, ESL student characteristics and writing annotated bibliographies. We then went through a collaborative process of talking about our research, bouncing ideas off colleagues and finally sitting down to sketch out our lesson plan and develop our tools. Personally, I think the most revealing part of this development process was the importance of our collective work and dialogue. The project would have been much different if we had worked individually. By critiquing each other, challenging each other, and struggling through a creative process we came up with rich content and an interesting and original teaching unit. We were developing an idea that was different than simply “writing an annotated bibliography”; we were developing a unit that used the annotated bibliography as a research organization and sense-making tool. I don’t think we would have had as interesting or valuable of a unit if we had worked alone.

### **Tailoring the Plan to Our Audience: Adult Learning and ESL Student Characteristics**

We knew from our research on adult learning theory, especially the work by Knowles, Kolb and others, that there were several characteristics of adult learners that we needed to think about when we were developing the lesson. We incorporated the following learning concepts into our curriculum development.

- **What’s My Motivation? The importance of context**

We had to sell the lesson as an important skill that would be immediately relevant to the student. We needed to let them know that they would walk out of the session with the skill of writing an annotated bibliography and with some tools to help them organize and make sense of their research. Furthermore, we had to explain why we thought the process of writing annotations was such a valuable tool for the research process.

- **Sequence and Reinforcement**

Working with adults forced us to think carefully about how we were going to break down the process of writing an annotated bibliography into smaller steps and provide a tool (or

“scaffold”) to assist in the process. Furthermore, we knew that we needed to give our students an opportunity to apply the skills we were teaching to a “real-life” situation.

- **Needs Assessment**

Our reading and experience convinced us that adult students would be coming to the class for a variety of reasons. These students certainly didn't have to be in our session so we wanted to make sure we understood why they were there and what they hoped to gain from the experience.

- **Self-Directed Learning**

We knew that adult students tended to be self-directed learners and that they wanted to understand a context for why they were learning what they were learning. So we decided that our students would need resources to take away so they could later reactivate or remember what we had taught them, or so they could do their own exploration on the topic.

### **Constraints**

We were also working with numerous constraints. Our timeline was to teach our course during November, which is an incredibly busy time in the life of a graduate student. Therefore, we knew that we could only ask people to be with us for one hour and that it was a one-shot deal, we didn't think we could get a commitment from students to attend multiple sessions of a progressive workshop. Furthermore, this was entirely voluntary – no one was forcing these students to attend our sessions so we knew that the lesson had to be useful and practical in order to get students in the door.

Finally, we had our own constraints. We didn't know exactly how many people to expect nor did we know what kind of students we would get or the types of skills they had. It was this last set of constraints--being unsure of the audience--that had more influence on our teaching than I had originally expected. Based on the size and type of audience we had to adapt our teaching style on the fly. When we taught to a small group, we took on a more collegial or mentoring style. However, when we had a larger group, it felt more like a presentation-type teaching style.

**the teaching experience: no, really, annotations aren't just for your professor anymore**

Based on what we had learned from our research and conversations with colleagues, we developed a lesson plan that would teach the student how to write a good annotated bibliography but also made a case that the process of writing annotations is a tool, not simply an end product for a professor. Our lesson mapped to the learning theories that had influenced our curriculum development.

### **Lesson Plan**

### **Learning Theory**

#### **Part One: Why did you come here today?**

We went around the room asking people to introduce themselves and tell us why they came to the class. This served as a way to get people talking and was a way for us to conduct a needs assessment on the audience. We went back to that list at the end of the unit to make sure we had covered people's needs.

—————▶ **Needs Assessment**

#### **Part Two: The Importance of Organization**

In the second part of the lesson we tried to portray the context of the lesson and explained why organization was so important to the research process and the specific advantages of the annotated bibliography to that organizational process.

—————▶ **Context**

#### **Part Three: Annotated Bibliographies**

The bulk of the lesson concentrated on the concept of the annotated bibliography – what it is and our suggested process of how to go about writing an annotation. It was in this section that we created a tool to assist the student, breaking down the writing process into its component parts. Our worksheet tool (attached) guided the student through the citation and the annotation. We explained that there were three parts to an annotation: a summary, evaluation and connection. For each of those components, we gave students suggested questions to think about and answer while reading a source.

—————▶ **Sequence & Scaffolding**

#### **Part Four: Exercise**

Because we were teaching adult students, many of whom were non-native English speaking students, we wanted to make sure the students had a chance to practice what we had taught conceptually. We gave students an “SI-type” journal article, asked them to read it and fill out our worksheet tool. We then came back together and talked about what people had written and a suggestion on how to write the final annotation.

→ **Knowledge  
Application &  
Practice**

#### **Part Five: Take Home Materials**

Finally, we wanted to make sure the students had something to take away and refer back to when they needed to remember or reactivate what we had taught. Further, we also thought that the students might want to follow up on some resources themselves. Therefore, we put together some examples of too long, too short and just right annotations; a list of additional resources, including software programs; and our notes and lesson plan.

→ **Self-Direction**

### **the continuing evolution: assessment and feedback**

Although we didn’t employ a formal evaluation or assessment instrument, we did directly ask for feedback from students after each of our teaching sessions. In addition, we talked to each other after each session – discussing what went well and what needed some improvement or adjustment.

Each time we taught, we adapted the lesson based on our observations and student feedback. After the first session we decided to add the introduction, framing and needs assessment exercise in order to provide some personal connections as well as get a sense of what the audience was expecting. We also decided to take out one of our handouts because it seemed awkward and unhelpful to the students. Finally, based on some feedback from a student, we spent more time emphasizing certain reasons for writing an annotated bibliography, i.e. why a student should take the time to do so.

Not only did we make adjustments between sessions, we made adjustments during the session based primarily on the size of the audience. Our first and last sessions were very small and we adjusted our teaching style to be more collegial and mentoring. Our second session was a larger group and so we spent more time in a presentation mode.

Overall the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. We were told that the concept and the tools were useful and were asked to provide more of our worksheets and notes. One student suggested that we offer the workshop to all students, especially if we could do so at the beginning of the semester.

Finally, we had decided early on that we weren't going to use computer technology in our presentation. Although there are many bibliographic management tools available – End Note, ProCite, Reference Manager – we made a conscious choice to concentrate on the *process* of writing an annotation and our sequencing worksheet tool. In the end, it was absolutely the right choice. Adding a software application would have been distracting and overwhelming. We used the dry erase board and markers as our technology, writing people's thoughts about the summary, evaluation and connection points on our worksheet. That crude technology, combined with a content-rich and original teaching unit made this, from my perspective, a successful information skills instructional unit.