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# Alternative Methods and Assignments for Teaching Business Information Resources in an SLIS Course

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# **ALTERNATIVE METHODS AND ASSIGNMENTS FOR TEACHING BUSINESS INFORMATION RESOURCES IN AN SLIS COURSE**

*The author discusses alternative methods of instruction, which focus on interactive lecturing and concept maps, in the context of a graduate-level business information course in an SLIS program.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

■ In the fall of 1998 I had the opportunity to teach a session of L629 Business Information Sources at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI). The class is part of Indiana University's School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) program and was offered at IUPUI on Friday afternoons as part of their "Friday Option" program, which supports MLS candidates who must travel or work full-time jobs. Thus, for 16 weeks every Friday, I taught business information to a group of 13 students.

The class description was as follows: "Introduction to basic business materials. Includes resources, research methods, current developments, automated systems, and databases." Clearly, the goal was to learn enough on the subject area so that one felt comfortable with the

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subject matter and gained some experience with the resources. Once this foundation is created, learning can continue on the job.

This was my first semester-long, graduate-level class. I therefore decided to experiment with some variations in teaching business information. I attempted several different methods and used several different concepts. Interactivity and applicability were stressed as much as possible, as well as critical thinking and a broader depth of understanding in business information.

These alternative assignments and methods leaned toward the critical thinking aspects rather than the tool-based option. There has been discussion on the merits of teaching critical thinking skills versus tool-based instruction<sup>1</sup>. "[C]ritical thinking is the art of making intelligent, calculated choices"<sup>2</sup>. Reference librarians must make numerous choices between resources and databases when assisting a patron. I attempted to integrate critical thinking into the course to support this reality of reference service.

I decided to manipulate the structure of the class, the in-class teaching method, and several of the assignments. Overall, these variations were well received by the students. A survey was distributed mid-semester and at the end of the semester. This feedback was used to determine students' perceptions of the course and instruction methods.

## **BUSINESS INFORMATION COURSES**

A review of other business information courses was an enlightening and informative task. As preparation for this course, I searched out and looked at the syllabi or websites for 10 SLIS or school of business classes on business information. There was no selective criteria used in choosing these classes. These were classes I found or for which I obtained the syllabi within the time available before the start of my class. (See Appendix A.)

It is interesting to note the variety as well as the similarities in topic areas within these courses. Investments, company research, industry research, and demographics are consistent categories within these classes, while product information, patents and trademarks, insurance, real estate, and taxation information are less

consistently covered. Another area of discrepancy between these classes was the selection of a business information textbook. The most popular choices for business information textbooks were Diane Strauss' *Handbook of Business Information*, Michael Lavin's *Business Information: How to Find it, How to Use it*, and Lorna Daniells' *Business Information Sources*. Several courses had no textbook whatsoever. Interesting to note is that these books were all published prior to 1992 and thus prior to the World Wide Web.

There were several recurring assignments found throughout the reviewed classes. These included a public company/investment analysis, a private company report, an industry pathfinder, and reference questions or scavenger hunt-type assignments. Only a small portion of the classes included a presentation of any kind.

## **METHODS AND TECHNIQUES**

The course taught, as mentioned above, is a Friday Option class in the Indiana University SLIS program. Therefore, I had 16 sessions of two hours, 40 minutes per week. Many of the students were driving in from towns some distance from Indianapolis. I created a website for the class that contained as much information and documentation as possible to facilitate these students in distant locations.

In class I focused on the primary issues, in my experience, affecting business libraries and librarians. These issues include informed selection, evaluation and organization of the growing variety of resources, making contact and dealing with vendors, and seeking alternative sources of information.

An objective was to make the course interesting and informative. This was attempted by using concept mapping and interactive lecturing. I attempted to avoid information overload by using a select group of resources for each topic area. I did not differentiate based on the medium of the resources (print, electronic, microfiche); the focus was only on the content of the resource.

## **STRUCTURE**

The course began with a focus on the evaluation, comparison, and recognition of business information resources. These three areas are

intertwined when selecting resources and when selecting a resource to use with a patron. “The knowledge domain of the librarian is the acquisition and evaluation of information resources”<sup>3</sup>. The evaluation of a resource should be on the merits of the resource itself and in comparison to related items. Business information consists of raw statistics, opinions, and interpretations of data. Therefore, it is crucial to learn to evaluate a source and to compare it to similar sources. This is especially true for business information found on the web.

In L629 I attempted this by using a series of examples from a variety of sources. Specifically, I began with the question, “How does a reference librarian determine the validity and quality of a print resource?” Common criteria are authority, audience, currency, publisher, and content. These same criteria transfer to web resources as well. The purpose of this instruction was to point out to the students that they must be critically evaluating every source they are exposed to, not only the web resources. Thus, the general comparisons I used were of print versus electronic resources, web resources by domain name, free versus fee, brand names, commercial versus spoof sites, and a selection of business publications.

Concepts of evaluation and critical thinking were introduced during a single class session; students interacted with each other as well as with the instructor. Many different views and opinions were presented within a very short time. The variety of resources was found to be useful as comparisons were made to other categories. This early session was the foundation for the remaining sections of the class. Evaluation and critical thinking were looked at again and again as we reviewed business information sources.

This exercise was followed with an assignment that critiqued other business library websites. This was the organization component of the class. Each student was assigned an academic or public business library website and was asked to evaluate and critique the organization and design of the site. They were to answer the following questions:

- *Does the site provide access to information about the library and its services?*

- *Is information on print resources available in any way?*
- *Are there links to and information on the library’s electronic database offerings?*
- *Is the site easy to navigate? Is there a coherent organization to the site?*
- *Are there links to external Internet resources? Are there annotations for these links?*
- *Are these varied formats of resources organized together or separately?*
- *Is there any use of standard library organization schemes on the site? Anything else of note?*

The second piece of this assignment was a presentation to the class. Two objectives were accomplished by assigning this as a presentation. First, it provided necessary public-speaking exposure to the students<sup>4</sup>. Second, it provided an excellent comparison of the variety of ways information and resources can be organized within a website. The good, the bad, and the chaotic were all visible in such a comparison.

The result was extremely favorable. The students were indirectly exposed to a large number of business resources. They were presented with a variety of business sources in a real-world context. The comparison also showed that there was no one right way to handle these resources, and that everyone has the same issues to overcome when selecting and providing access to the wide variety of resources. The discussion after the presentations made it clear that new learning had taken place. Students were consistently noticing and comparing variations in organization and structure. They also were beginning to develop their own preferences and expectations of what they expected from a site and what they would implement on a site.

## CLASSROOM

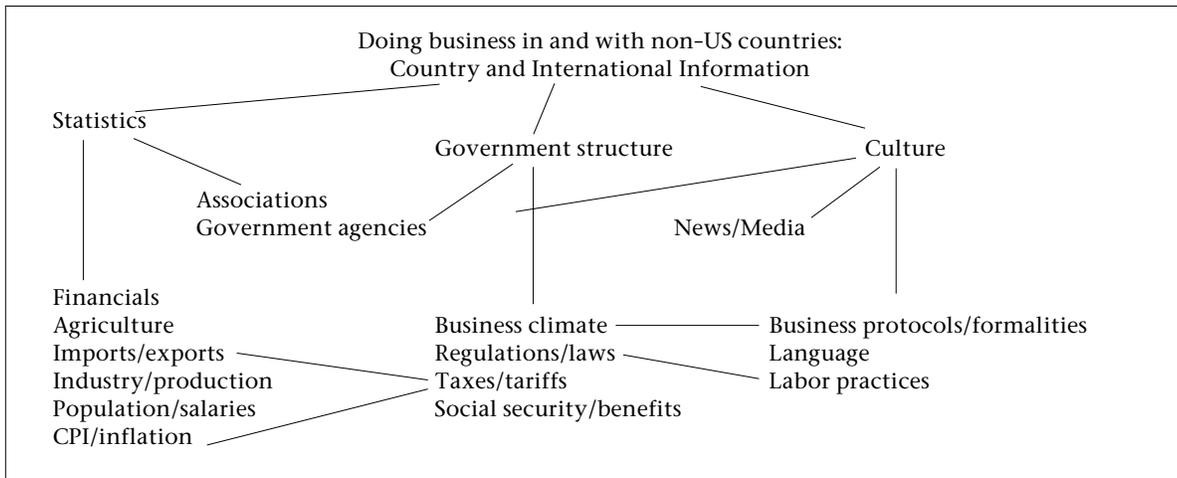
I did not want to spend the entire class lecturing on the topic of business information. I have found that it does not match my personality or teaching behavior. I wanted to empower the students in developing a stronger mental model of the realm of business information. This was accomplished in two ways. The first was by beginning most classes with time spent on concept mapping. A concept map is a diagram “structured around nodes which identify concepts, with these nodes being connected by

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lines labeled to indicate the relationship between the adjacent concepts”<sup>5</sup>. Specifically, we began each topic discussing the broader picture of that topic. Questions to stimulate discussion were: “What does public company information consist of?” “What do we mean when we say international business?”

“Where does this type of information originate from and who might be collecting it?” During the discussion, I attempted to draw a schematic diagram on the classroom’s whiteboard to show how the information interrelates on this topic. An example:



This is just a rough example of the type of mapping we attempted in the class. Through leading questions, specific examples, and the students’ own knowledge and experience, the map would grow and mutate. Once the map was “complete,” it was used to place specific resources into the overall scheme. Thus, when the actual resources were discussed it became easily apparent where they fell into the greater scheme of that topic’s information world.

Second, I used a form of the Gagne-Briggs Model of instructional design. This consists of a series of activities for effective instruction. Specifically, the nine points of this model are:

- 1 *gain attention,*
- 2 *inform the learner of the lesson objective,*
- 3 *stimulate recall of prior learning,*
- 4 *present stimulus material,*
- 5 *provide learning guidance,*
- 6 *elicit performance,*
- 7 *provide feedback,*
- 8 *assess performance,*
- 9 *enhance retention and transfer*<sup>6</sup>.

This model facilitates interactivity between the students and instructor. It also allows for a steady pattern to follow through the daily course.

Admittedly, I was inconsistent in implementing the Gagne-Briggs model; however, in discussion and feedback from the students, it did create a more interactive, more interesting, and more informative learning environment. The students responded in the surveys that they were more interested in the material, that they felt involved in the class, and that the method of instruction had been a major factor in this increased interest.

They already had experience with general library sources due to the prerequisites for the class. However, I wanted to strengthen their perception and knowledge of business information by enticing them to participate in the discussion. I attempted to draw out the knowledge that was already there on information sources and, specifically, business information. I would ask leading questions and watch for students who would appear to have something to say but would perhaps be apprehensive to say it. Reacting positively to every comment is crucial even if it may be slightly off-target. It was often possible to steer the students back onto the topic or concept. This was accomplished by helping them talk out the ideas that had already been presented or by another student joining in to give a different perspective.

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There was at first some tentativeness in the students to participate in this interactive learning style. However, after they saw that it was not something to be fearful of, and that there were a multitude of perceptions and variations that were correct, they became much more involved. The students perceived the graphic representation of the ideas, concepts, and terms that were pulled out of the discussion as very useful. It significantly strengthened the students' foundation on each topic area. They admitted in the mid-semester and final survey of the class that they had gained a deeper understanding through the discussions and interactions that had taken place.

A benefit to this method of teaching was that it deeply involved the students in the learning process. They were active participants. This interactivity kept the class interested and alert, and also forced each student to listen and pay attention to everyone in the class.

## RESOURCES

The primary objective of this course was to learn specific resources on business information. Sources were chosen to be representative of the type of information found on a given subject area. I made a concerted effort to include a variety of print and electronic resources. A select group of resources was chosen with anywhere from five to 15 resources for a given topic. Each item was either discussed or used in an assignment. The emphasis here was on learning at least a solid core list of materials so that some familiarity was created within that topic area. Sources were consistently and deliberately taught in relation to other sources; for example, in the public company class, *Compact D*, the SEC's EDGAR website, *Value Line*, and a company's annual report were all reviewed together. This comparison illuminated how the same data could be presented, searched, and used in a variety of different ways, creating a deeper understanding of public company information.

Resources were selected for each topic area based on their relevance and depth of content. No limitation was placed on the format of the resource. Thus, every class session may have contained a mixture of print, CD-ROM, and web-based resources. This integration of resources strengthened the students' understanding of the information available on a topic and

removed any arbitrary barriers based on format. Seldom is there a day in a business library where only print or only web-based resources are used to assist patrons. The budding reference librarian must learn to use the most appropriate source for the desired information need. Learning print resources separately from web-based resources does not accomplish this objective.

This approach was very successful in displaying the different pieces of information that could be garnered from the different sources, as well as the wide variety of formats in which the same information could be presented. The students were better able to understand the advantages and disadvantages of the print and electronic resources. The focus on the topic and the content took precedence over the format.

## ASSIGNMENTS

In addition to the recurring assignments in a business information class—reference-type questions, public and private company profiles, and an industry webliography—I assigned three unique projects: the library website critique discussed earlier, a business database assignment, and a country information assignment.

The continuously growing number of electronic databases made teaching them all an impossible task for this course. Instead, I chose to assign each student an electronic database to review and demonstrate to the entire class. They were expected to contact the vendor to obtain information and a trial password if possible. They were also expected to provide a one-page summary of their demonstration, the database's content, and cost structure, if possible. This summary was to be handed out to every student in the class. The demonstration was to provide an overview of the database and their experience with the vendor. Questions they were expected to answer included:

- *Were you able to acquire a free demo?*
- *Were sample files or screenshots available?*
- *Was the customer service helpful/informative?*
- *What is the content of this database? Articles? Financial data? Other?*
- *What other sources can it be compared to? Print and electronic?*
- *What subject areas would it be most useful in? More specific than just "business"?*

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- *What kinds of questions will it answer?*
- *What user-level is it at?*  
*Beginner, advanced, etc.?*

The presentation was to include screenshots or copied HTML pages from the database. The students were allowed to choose the database that they would demonstrate early in the semester. This allowed them enough time to contact the vendor and to discuss the database with them. This also provided time to obtain and use any trial passwords that could be obtained.

The following demonstrations were given in these groupings:

*Dow Jones Interactive*  
*ABI/Inform*  
*Standard & Poor's Compustat*  
*Zacks Investment Research*

•  
*Company Data Direct*  
*RIA OnPoint*  
*Tablebase*  
*Profound*  
*One Source Business Browser*

•  
*Investext Research Bank*  
*Global Access*  
*ISI Emerging Markets*  
*Stat-USA*

The students learned how to evaluate and critique one database very well while being exposed to a variety of other databases. It was interesting to watch the later presentations as the students would compare their database to a database that they had just been exposed to in a previous demonstration. The database project not only gave them a more in-depth exposure to a single database, it also strengthened their ability to review and critique any database. Responses in the surveys were very positive towards this assignment and its learning objectives.

This assignment kept me from conducting a tedious show-and-tell on each of these databases. It again provided an opportunity to present in front of an audience. It also exposed students to the wide variations in customer support and sales available from each vendor. This was a significant learning point for the class. A lengthy discussion ensued comparing the amount of customer support available across the different vendors.

This assignment did have a downside. Several of the students "lucked out" and were able to have full access to their database because IUPUI Library had acquired it. This allowed a few of them to avoid contacting the vendor. There were some complaints that it was overly time-consuming to wrestle with the vendors to obtain information and trial passwords. However, I had anticipated this, and allowed for some flexibility in their demonstrations. I wanted the class to learn some basic skills in dealing with vendors.

The third unique assignment was the country information project. Each student chose a country from a select list and was required to contact that country's embassy, trade organization, or chamber of commerce, and request information on doing business in and with that country. The objective of this assignment was to provide students with some experience in requesting information from an organization. It would also provide some insight into the variety of information available from these types of organizations.

This assignment, unfortunately, was a resounding failure. The countries were allocated very early in the semester to allow for slow response time from the organizations. The actual discussion of the materials received was set for very late in the semester. Unfortunately, this was not enough time to accomplish the task. The response time from the organizations was much slower than I had anticipated, and only two to three students received anything. Thus, this assignment was dropped from the grading.

In the future, if I decide to try this assignment again, I would contact the organizations myself months ahead of when the course was to start. I would then be able to supply these unique resources and publications to each student. This would hopefully avoid the time lag that caused it to fail this time.

## CONCLUSION

Teaching this course was a thoroughly enjoyable experience. I was fortunate to have a group of very interested and involved students. I believe we challenged each other equally, and that we learned a great deal about business information. The feedback I received in the surveys, in private discussions after class, and in e-mail messages that I continue to receive from the students supports this belief.

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Superior instruction involves the students with each other and with the course. It also involves creating “assignments that relate theory to practice-the abstract to the workplace” (7). This is especially true of resource-focused classes. My goal in this course was to provide the students with a strong foundation in business information and business information resources. Judging from the feedback I received from the students, I succeeded in this goal.

In the end, the alternative assignments and methods of instruction were a success. They clearly increased the interest level of the students and aided in learning the material. They also enhanced the structure of the class by providing a different perspective on certain business topics. A representative comment from a student was that the instructor managed “to interest me in a subject matter that has always confused or bored me in the past.”

Were these assignments and techniques innovative? Perhaps. They were different from most other business resource class assignments that I found in my review. Would I do them again? Most certainly. Would I try other variations for some of the assignments? Yes. Many of the “standard” assignments are very effective in teaching important concepts and sources. I believe, however, and the experience in this course supports, that it is useful to rethink the way business information courses have always been taught and to be willing to gamble on alternative and innovative solutions.

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## APPENDIX A

### List of Business Information Courses

- University of Albany. RISP 648: *Information Sources in Business*
- Dalhousie University. LIBS 7340 *Sources for Business Intelligence*
- University of Iowa. 6B:050: *Information Retrieval for Business*
- Louisiana State University. LIS 7205: *Business Information Resources*
- University of Maryland. LBSC 766: *Business Information Sources*
- Queens College. GSLIS 786: *Business Information Sources and Services*
- San José State University. LIBR 220-03: *Resources & Information Services in Business & Economics*
- University of South Carolina. CLIS 748: *Business Information Sources and Services*
- University of Texas-Austin. LIS 382L.19: *Information Resources in Business*
- Wayne State University. LIS 813: *Business & Industry Information Resources*

## FOOTNOTES

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- 4 Buttlar, Lois and Rosemary Du Mont. “Library and Information Science Competencies Revisited.” *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, v35, n1, 1996, p44-62.
- 5 Santhanam, Elizabeth, and Carolyn Leach and Chris Dawson. “Concept Mapping: How Should it Be Introduced, and Is There Evidence for Long Term Benefit.” *Higher Education*, v35, 1998, p 317-328. Also Jonassen, David H, and Thomas C. Reeves and others. “Concept Mapping as Cognitive Learning and Assessment Tools.” *Journal of Interactive Learning Research*, v8, n3-4, 1997, p289-308.
- 6 Walster, Dian. “Using Instructional Design Theories in Library and Information Science Education.” *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, v36, n3, 1995, p239-248.
- 7 Curran, Charles. “What Sixty-one Superior LIS Teachers Say About Superior LIS Teaching, Plus Comments from Six Knowledgeable Observers.” *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, v39, n3, 1998, p183-193.