

Undergraduate Students' Writing, Research and Learning Skills: Academic Literacy Research and Practice at York University

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TRY Conference



Agenda

- Student and instructor tacit assumptions about academic skills
 - Literature review
 - Focus groups with instructors at York (Summer 2012)
- Implementing what we have learned
 - Collaborative programming models (Learning Commons/ Teaching Commons)
 - Course Design @ York
 - SPARK (Student Papers and Academic Research Kit)
<http://www.yorku.ca/spark>

Entering the academic culture



Our research: AIF project

(2012)

- Literature Review
- Focus Groups

Literacy studies: Highlights

- Academic world as discourse community
 - “ways of being in the world,” Gee
 - language shaped by social context, Bakhtin
- Developing a questioning disposition
 - affinity with liberal education goals
- Vygotsky’s notion of internalization of observed/enacted social practice
- Apprenticeship model
 - observing, doing, simulating *actual work* of academics
- Content area literacy & disciplinary literacy

Library literature

Faculty conceptions/culture

Expert vs. Novice Researcher

Faculty members often operate in “expert researcher” mode when designing assignments, giving instructions, and setting expectations etc.

Leckie (1996)

Higher education literature (Haggis, 2007)

Problems in current practice:

- Academic literacy usually fostered through “supports” by academic services
- Supplementary (extra-curricular) not embedded
- Cause of “problem” located within individual students
- Deficit Model (remedial)

Higher education literature (Haggis, 2007)

Suggested basis for innovation:

- Sociocultural ideas of learning (apprenticeship, intent participation)
- Developmental and systemic
- Academic literacy *embedded* within curriculum
- Academic literacy taught within *disciplinary contexts*
 - - Discourse communities
- Process-oriented
 - Metacognition, Reflection

Coonan and Secker's Literacy Curriculum – Ten strands

1. **Transition** – expectations in higher education
2. **Independence** – developing strategies for learning
3. **Academic literacies** – reading, writing, critical analysis
4. **Evaluating information sources** – experts, material
5. **Finding resources in your discipline** – databases, people
6. **Management skills** – time, notes, storage
7. **Ethics of information** – Citation, attribution, plagiarism
8. **Communication** – presentations, writing styles, digital media
9. **Synthesis** – formulating research questions, framing problems
10. **Lifelong learning** – growth through reading, writing, critical analysis

Source: [Coonan, E. and Secker, J. \(2011\)](#).

Library literature

Project Information Literacy – Assignments research

- Quotations from Head A. J. and Eisenberg, M. B. (2010):

“Few of the handouts in our sample peeled back the layers of the knowledge production process and what it meant in the academic environment,... (p26)”

Library literature

Project Information Literacy – The tacit in assignments

- Most assignments ask for a standard research paper (83%)
- 54% expect students to choose their own topic
- 43% mention use of library databases generally but lack more detail (only 14% recommend/suggest specific databases)
- Only one in four handouts explains how and why to evaluate the authority of a research source
- Few handouts give guidance with respect to use of freely accessible Internet sources
- Plagiarism addressed in cursory fashion (86%) - emphasis on consequences of academic dishonesty

Source: [Head, A.J. and Eisenberg, J.B. \(2010\)](#).

Faculty members' conceptions of academic literacy instruction

Faculty focus groups at York University

- Four groups with a total of 18 participants
- Summer 2012

Included Faculty of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences, Faculty of Health, Faculty of Science & Engineering

Department Chairs nominated participants from General Education courses or core first/second year courses

Facilitated by Rebecca Katz

- Outside literacy studies scholar



Plagiarism often identified as being connected to students' lack of academic literacy skills, and a great deal of concern expressed about this issue

"The fire that we had to put out was plagiarism... What was discovered was...they think writing a paper is copying stuff and editing it. So we spend the 12 weeks [dealing with questions like] Why are we at university? What is writing a paper all about?...What is academia?"

Health Studies Professor

But, participants speak about research as a recursive, iterative process and see role for selves in scaffolding the process

“And I used to think my job was to deliver content. It’s not about content...[It’s about] process, process and psychological support. I teach them to learn how to learn.”

English Professor

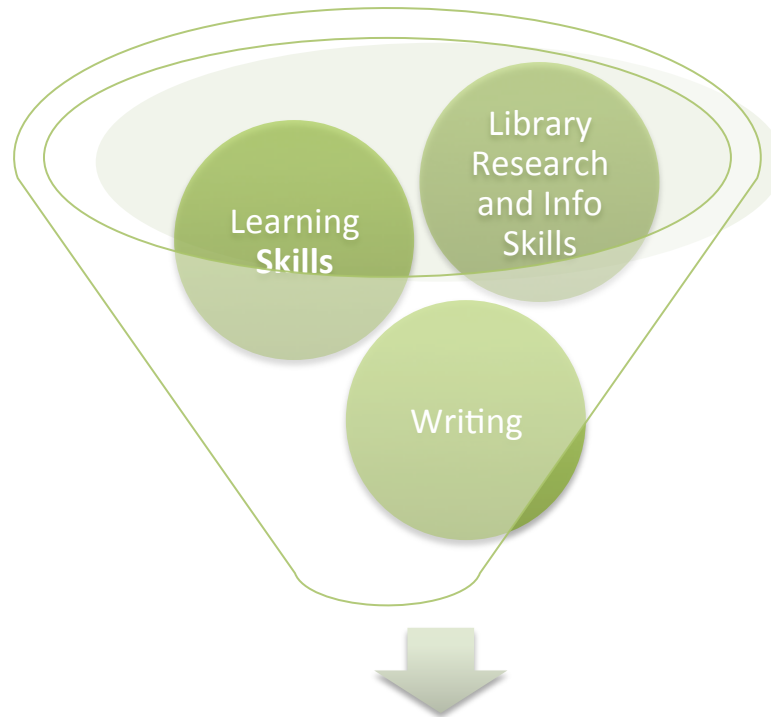
Define very specific narrow role for librarians around search and retrieval

“The seminar with the librarian. That’s the one I’ve used the most....So then we go to the library...he gears his little thing to the topics of the course and then really helps them...It becomes a three hour thing...They come out working on their own topic... He goes through all the steps with explaining the databases and the different types of databases and how to access them.”

Literature and Language Professor

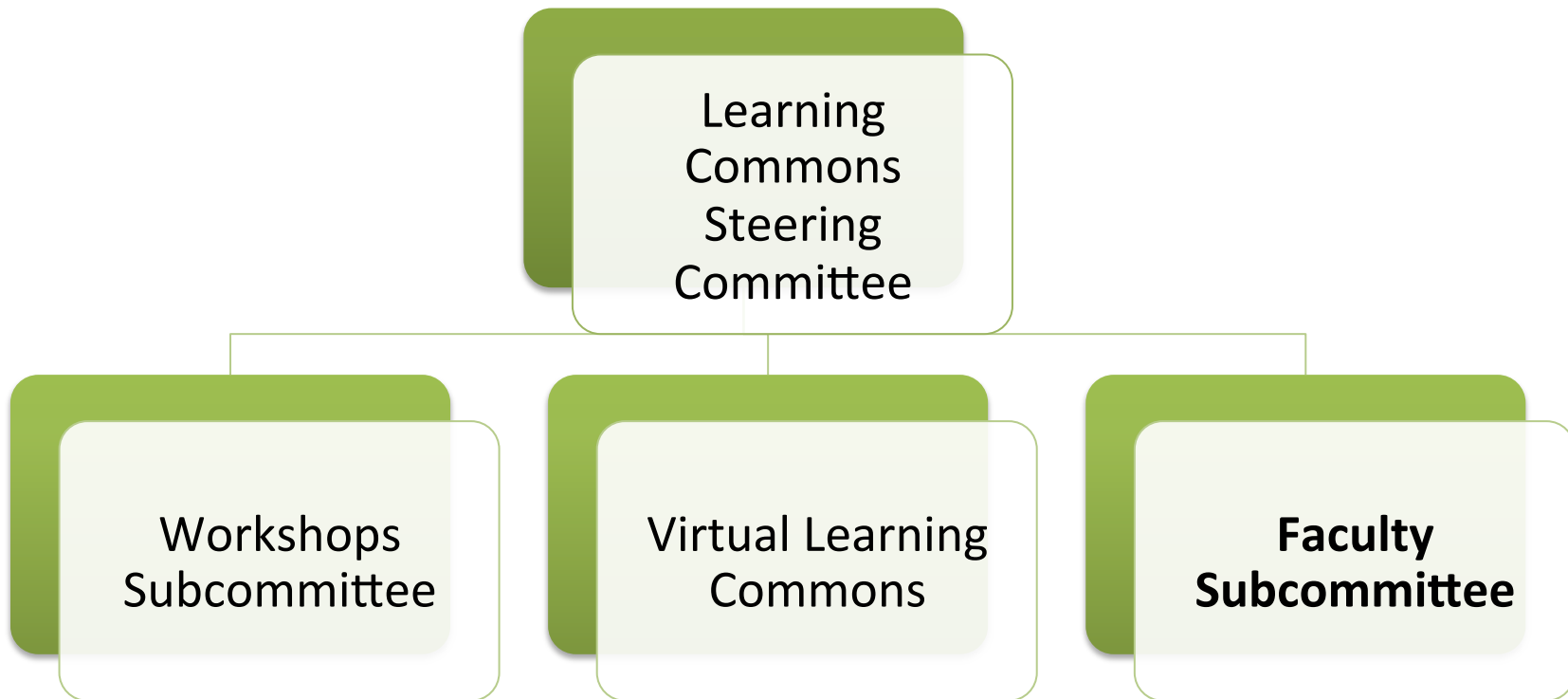
Implementing what we learned:

- Collaborative programming models (Learning Commons/Teaching Commons)
 - Organizational structure
 - Course Design @ York
Academic Literacies for Course Design forms half a day in a two day event
 - SPARK (Student Papers and Academic Research Kit) <http://www.yorku.ca/spark>



LC Partners: Libraries, Career Centre,
Learning Skills, and Writing Department





Course Design For Academic Literacies at York: Program elements

Describe academic literacy

Describe tacit processes in research, reading and writing

Unpack the “taken-for-granted” with detailed examples of what we may be assuming in terms of skills required for a research assignment

- Reading
- Writing
- Library Research

Course Design For Academic Literacies at York: Program elements

Model best practices grounded in issue or area faculty care about, e.g. critical reading, plagiarism

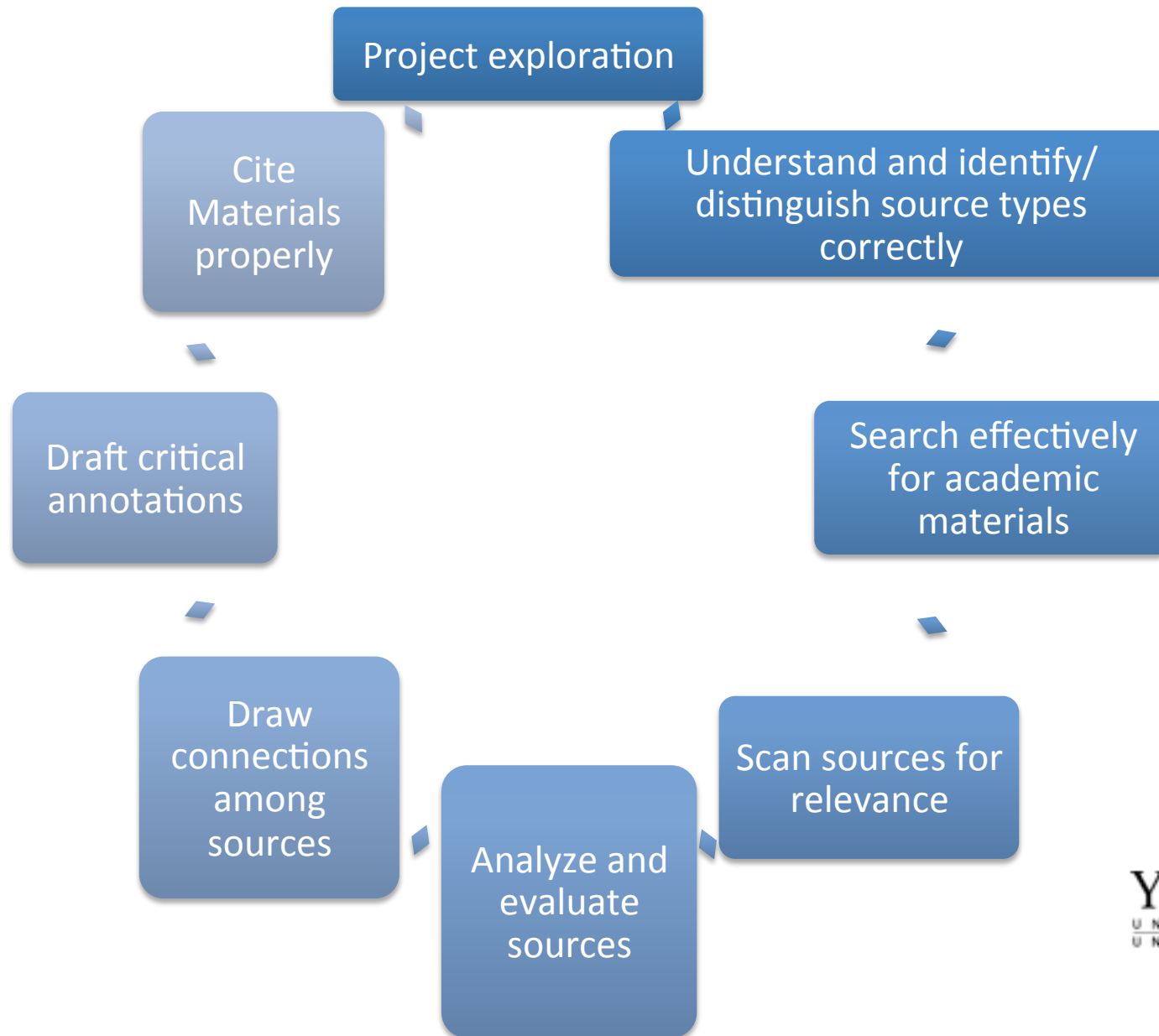
Model principles of good assignment design scaffolding/staging

Share sample templates, activities and worksheets

- Annotated bibliography example
- SPARK faculty module resources

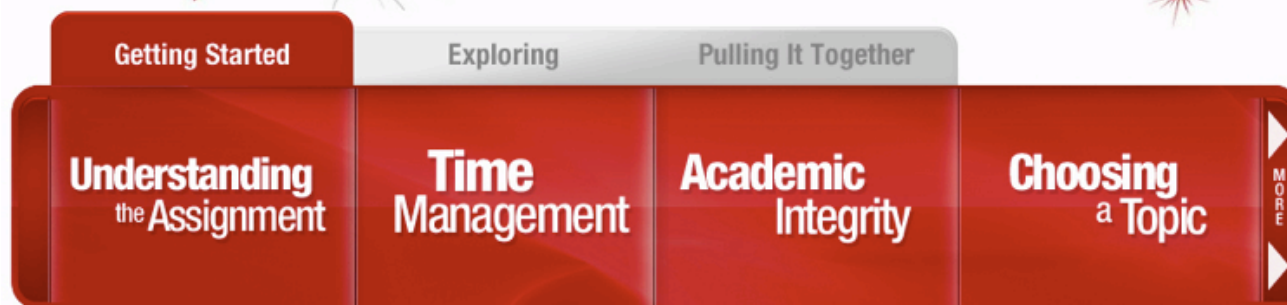
Encourage them to share and remodel own course goals and assignments

Annotated bibliography: Multiple skills addressed



Introducing SPARK

SPARK Student Papers & Academic Research Kit



SPARK is your guide to successful [academic](#) papers.

SPARK modules are:

- 8-10 minutes each
- Focus on research, writing and [learning](#)
- Include examples, templates, videos and more

SPARK can help at any point in the preparation of your paper.

To [begin](#), select a module title from either the Getting Started, Exploring or Pulling It Together tabs above. Click to open.



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SPARK: Faculty Module

Coming soon!

Faculty:

Teaching with SPARK

1. What is SPARK?
2. Why use SPARK?
3. Making the Implicit Explicit
4. SPARK & Assignment Design
 - Getting Started
 - Exploring
 - Pulling It Together
5. Module Usage Guidelines
 - Getting Started
 - Exploring
 - Pulling It Together
6. Resource Usage Guidelines

SPARK

Student Papers & Academic Research Kit

» SPARK Home » Faculty » Teaching with SPARK

What is SPARK?

SPARK (Student Papers and Academic Research Kit) is a modular, online tool which helps students to identify and develop the skills required to write academic essays. SPARK is divided into thirteen modules, each taking 8-10 minutes to complete, and describes strategies for such skills as time management, library research, academic reading, and revising draft essays.

While SPARK can be used by students working independently, instructors can enhance its effectiveness by incorporating it into their courses. For example, directing your students to specific SPARK modules at appropriate points in a course can assist them to recognize and use the skills required for successful completion of your writing assignments. The modular form makes it easy to select and sequence the specific SPARK content that aligns best with your course goals and assignments.

Each SPARK module contains resources that can be assigned to students to help them develop the skills most relevant to your particular course. This Faculty Module describes each of the modules and their associated resources, indicates the skills they are designed to facilitate, and provides tips on how the modules and resources might be used in a course.

The resources made available in SPARK take the form of worksheets or activities/mini-assignments, and these may be selected, sequenced, or adapted to align with specific course goals and disciplinary contexts. See the Instructor's Guides in Resources for a description of each resource along with suggestions for its use.

Resources

- Instructor's Guides
- Student Help

Back | Next

Annotated bibliography and critical library and information research skills

Develops ability to:

- Understand and distinguish different source types correctly
- Search effectively for academic materials
- Analyze and evaluate sources found
- Cite materials properly

All of this addressed in SPARK through content, including videos and mini quizzes, and through resources (checklists, guides, worksheets etc.)

Introducing SPARK

<http://www.yorku.ca/spark>



SPARK Student Papers & Academic Research Kit

Getting Started | Exploring | Pulling It Together

Understanding the Assignment | Time Management | Academic Integrity | Choosing a Topic

SPARK is your guide to successful [academic](#) papers.

SPARK modules are:

- 8-10 minutes each
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Annotated bibliography and critical reading and writing skills

Develops ability to:

- Quickly scan reading material, looking for relevance to the research question, main argument and conclusion
- Recognize arguments and evidence within resources
- Integrate ideas from multiple resources

Annotated bibliography and critical reading and writing skills

Reading

SPARK example: SQ4R in “Effective Reading Strategies” module

Writing

SPARK example: Peer Review Guide in “Revising Your Arguments” module

<http://www.yorku.ca/spark>

Key sources that informed our presentation

Coonan, E., & Secker, J. (2011). *A new curriculum for information literacy: Reports and outputs*. Retrieved from <http://newcurriculum.wordpress.com/project-reports-and-outputs/>

Haggis, T. (2006). Pedagogies for diversity: Retaining critical challenge amidst fears of 'dumbing down'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(5), 521-535.

Head, A. J., & Eisenberg, M. B. (2010). *Assigning inquiry: How handouts for research assignments guide today's college students*. Project Information Literacy. Retrieved from http://projectinfolit.org/pdfs/PIL_Handout_Study_finalvJuly_2010.pdf

Leckie, G. J. (1996). Desperately seeking citations: Uncovering faculty assumptions about the undergraduate research process. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 22(3), 201-208.

Questions or Comments?

