

## **A Classroom Approach to Embedded Librarianship: Arab Spring and the Embedded Librarian**

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### **Introduction**

As librarians we spend much of our time figuring out how to get students engaged with the library and our resources. Often that leads us to expect students to come to us and our building. I wanted to flip this model to bring the library to the students and show them how the library can be critical throughout the semester, even if they never enter the building.

In the fall of 2012, I approached Dr. Nancy Reynolds, a professor of History focusing on modern Egypt, to work with me to bring the library to the classroom. I proposed becoming an embedded librarian in her Arab Spring seminar. After some discussion, Dr. Reynolds agreed wholeheartedly. As the embedded librarian in Dr. Reynolds' Arab Spring seminar, I attended every class, read every class reading, engaged in classroom discussion, taught about resources and information literacy, and created connections with students.

In this article, I will discuss how we developed a plan to integrate library resources across a semester, the resources we used to engage students, required student meetings with the librarian, and student reception of having a librarian in the classroom in the spring 2013 class, Arab Spring Seminar.

### **Planning for the Semester**

Plans for the semester actually began in the Fall of 2012. While attending a faculty meeting, I discovered Dr. Reynolds' plan to teach the Arab Spring seminar. I immediately began buying any related books and videos I could find. In October 2012, Dr. Reynolds and I met and I outlined my proposal for an embedded librarian.

In November and December Dr. Reynolds and I met, in person and over email, to discuss the syllabus and to plan out the semester in terms of where it would be best to insert different library resources

and other technologies into the classroom. Although Dr. Reynolds had much of the semester fleshed out, she had left some openings in the class schedule and that is where we slotted in library and other technology resources.

In addition to a traditional instruction session, I taught two other times during the semester. The starting point of each session I taught was the course guide I built in our LibGuides system<sup>1</sup>. As the students would be writing a research paper, Dr. Reynolds wanted them to have one-on-one consultations with me about their papers. We agreed to make this meeting a class requirement and weighted it 2% points of their grade, not enough to damage a grade permanently but enough to show that the meeting has merit.

In addition to traditional resources like books, journals, and films, I also reached out to Laila Sakr of R-Shief<sup>2</sup>. She had presented at the 2012 MELA Conference in Denver. R-Shief is a twitter dataminer that allows users to search on topics and hashtags during a given time period to see what tweets would emerge. As Twitter's history only went back about a week at that time, R-Shief was a useful tool for people wanting to do research on the "history from below."<sup>3</sup> I approached her, via email, to propose being a tester for R-Shief and to ask for permission to demo R-Shief in the classroom. Laila was excited about this idea and allowed me to become a tester for her beta system. At the time, I was greatly interested in how social media shaped the Arab uprisings and felt the students might benefit from seeing early technologies that would gather and parse tweets.

### **In and Out of the Classroom**

From day one of the class, Dr. Reynolds made it clear to the students that I was thought of as a co-instructor. I found that my being in the class, especially in the first two weeks, was extremely valuable to Dr. Reynolds. Issues relating to class reserves or the general availability of class resources, like books and films, were easily resolved by having a librarian in the classroom. I was able to quickly respond to make sure everything the students needed was available to them.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://libguides.wustl.edu/arabspring>

<sup>2</sup> <http://r-shief.org/>

<sup>3</sup> "History from below" is the concept in historical studies that concentrates on the lives of ordinary people as a contrast to history that focuses on world leaders or the stereotypical history one finds in most history textbooks.

Additionally, I hold a master's degree in history. I was able to relay to the students that I had done many projects similar in nature to what they were undertaking. I was there to help them through the process and to be an additional sounding board.

I had my first in-class session during week three. Our topic was finding books in the catalog and analyzing primary sources. I performed a demo of the catalog and linked on the course guide potential subject headings students might use in search. I also brought to class six possible primary source books, some in English and some in Arabic, for the class to assess. Using the previous week's reading of "What does it mean to think historically" by Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, I broke the students up into six groups. I grouped those who could read Arabic together with the Arabic titles. Those who could not read Arabic analyzed the English titles. Each group was to look at the text and answer some of these questions: Who created this? When was it created? Where was it created? How is it written? What evidence could this contribute to a research topic? Why was it made? Who is the intended audience? What questions does this source raise? What don't we know about this source? The students resoundingly tore apart the titles I brought into class. They would never use such books in a paper because the books were flawed in some way, generally either because the source was problematic in the questions it raised or because the content was not up to their standards. I was not deterred by their vehemence, but rather Dr. Reynolds and I discussed how every source has these problems and yet historians must still use them.

Between weeks three and six, all of the students in class were required to meet with me in a one-on-one session for 20 minutes. Each student set up a meeting with me and came to my office to discuss their research topic. The one-on-one meetings went very well and helped me to better understand the needs of each student. At the time my office was next to the Islamic and Near East Collection and it made it very easy to find and pull books with the students who were able to use Arabic texts for their papers. Several students came for multiple one-on-one sessions throughout the semester as their topics progressed and they hit walls in the research process. The one-on-one sessions were very time consuming but, ultimately, very worthwhile.

My second teaching session was a traditional library instruction session in week six. By this point the students had determined their research topic. I highlighted resources, especially primary sources,

and made them all find one article or book citation that they showed me before leaving the session.

My third teaching session was on R-Shief. I think it is fair to say this is the session that went the most poorly for me. Due to a delay in R-Shief's product rollout, I was unable to hold a hands-on session for the students. Ultimately, I described the system and its power and potential. I also performed searches on the fly based on student research topics that I had the students shout out in class. Although the demonstration did not go as planned, the discussion was lively. The students had many questions on how R-Shief was built, how many tweets it actually held, were the major players in the Arab uprising in the database, and so on. I answered what I could in class and followed up with Laila Sakr to get answers to questions I could not answer in class. Ultimately, one student approached me after class and together we searched the system to find tweets she could use in her paper. Most importantly, many of the students in class sought to downplay the importance of social media in the Arab Spring. In fact, none of the students in the class researched a project on social media and the Arab Spring. I found this to be interesting and surprising, but one can often not predict what will interest students.

The seminar was a mixture of graduate and undergraduate students, all of whom seemed keenly interested in the Arab Spring. Although they were all interested, they also came from many different majors. Their final projects ranged from historical implications of trash collectors and the space of Tahrir Square, to financial underpinnings of uprisings, to makeshift hospitals during the initial 18 days of the uprisings, to the graffiti art that emerged in Cairo and Alexandria, to the treatment of Coptic Christians, to the way the Arab Spring was portrayed in Egyptian soap operas. The class' interests were varied and it was very enjoyable helping them track down the resources they might need to make their individual projects excellent.

We used one class time for all the students to tell each other what their research topic was, how they felt their paper was coming along, and where they were hitting roadblocks. This was wonderful for several reasons. First, the students enjoyed hearing what the others were working on for the class. Many of the students had either contracted or expanded their topics from our initial meeting. Second, and more important to my role in class, I was able to suggest resources to students who had not come back for a second one-on-one session.

As the semester was coming to an end, students were required to do a peer evaluation of another student's paper. A few graduate

students in class asked me to read their papers and fill out the peer review form for them. We found this to be a valuable exercise. First, it was interesting to read the students' papers and to see what they had been able to pull together after a semester and multiple meetings with me. More importantly, the papers I read were very light on primary resources. I was then able to perform some searches on their behalf, with a much fuller knowledge of their topic than I had previously had. I suggested several additional sources that they could use to strengthen their paper's argument. This was met with much joy and gratefulness from the students.

### **Building Relationships**

One of my goals when beginning the embedded librarian endeavor was to build relationships with students. My relationship with Dr. Reynolds was already strong but I admit that it too was strengthened by our more regular interactions. At the beginning of the semester, I believe the students were unsure why I was so involved in the class, as none of them had had a librarian be so entrenched into a course. By the end of the semester, it was clear to them why I was involved and several students asked if Dr. Reynolds and I would be doing this same format for all of her seminar courses.

I believe I achieved my goal of strengthening student relationships and I saw the tangible results of that. First, many of the students would just stop by my office to chat, not necessarily about an assignment. Often these stop-ins were not about class at all but an attempt to just chat with me about life or seek my advice about a class or professor. Additionally, the following fall five students from the class set up meetings with me to help with their senior research projects. Several of these students also recommended me to their friends and I had many cold calls from students I'd never met before seeking out my help. As for the graduate students, prior to this class I had already established relationships with them but this class helped strengthen those ties.

This showed itself too in the course evaluations. Dr. Reynolds gave the students an opportunity to comment on my role in the class. Roughly half the class filled out course evaluations. Those who filled out the evaluations felt that I was well prepared, helpful, gave clear instructions, and that I used class time well. In the comments field, students said I was friendly, patient, and willing to help them with their research.

**Conclusion**

Dr. Reynolds and I considered this course to be a success. At the end of the semester we met to discuss what we might change for our next partnership. Some of the things we would have changed were: incorporating more primary sources, including fictional depictions of Egypt for students to read, and spending more time giving students a historical context for Egypt in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Dr. Reynolds and I partnered again in the spring of 2014 for her historical methods seminar on Law and Revolution in Egypt.

It takes a great deal of time and planning but being embedded into a seminar-style class can be extremely rewarding to the faculty, students, and librarian involved. I recommend finding a professor with whom you already have a good working relationship and a course that interests you as a way to start the process of being an in-classroom embedded librarian. Not only will you teach students that the library and its resources are of worth but you will also learn a great deal from them and from the process of being in the classroom for a full semester. The goodwill that a successful embedded relationship can yield will play out for semesters to come.