



Good Practices from Mellon Library Partners, 2003-2004

Staging Library Instruction Activities around Topic Definition

Environment:

Engineering 190E: Technical Communication (Spring 2004). Mellon Fellow: Will Seng. The course was developed to teach technical communication skills to engineering students in all disciplines. This section was created for students who test out of the non-native speakers course, but without sufficient fluency for the regular sections. The class consisted of approximately 20 students, mostly seniors. Students completed several written and oral assignments, including a literature review on a topic of their choice. Two classes per week were held in an engineering computing lab, with a third in a traditional classroom. The first library session was conducted in 350C Moffitt, with the second in the engineering computing lab.

Impact:

Students successfully narrowed their topics in preparation for the more complex searching of the second library session.

Description:

Professor Seng instructed his students to choose a "content focus" (or broad topic area) before attending the first library session. However, with only broad topics in mind, students would be overwhelmed by results in the core engineering indexes. Therefore, in the first session, we decided to cover Applied Science & Technology (AS&T). Because it indexes only some of the core journals and trade magazines in engineering, AS&T can provide a quick "snapshot" of the research in an area. Students can perform searches on broad topic areas, then easily skim their results to identify the interesting aspects of their topics. This approach allowed us to discuss the surface web, deep web and basic search techniques with the students, at a level appropriate to this stage of their research. With ten days between library sessions, students had time to use these techniques to narrow their topics in preparation for the second session. In the second session, we decided to cover the more complex searching possible in the core engineering indexes. With narrower topics in mind, students found this complex searching much more meaningful than they would have in the first session.

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