Connection at the Crossroads between Libraries and Writing Skills

Creative Ways to Meet Students' Needs

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ABSTRACT Concerns (complaints) about the quality of writing exhibited among seminary students are not new. Nor is the fact that many students come to seminary as a second career, or with backgrounds in disciplines that do not emphasize extensive scholarly writing. However, in an era of reduced enrollment, when recruitment and retention are of existential significance for seminaries, the traditional "sink or swim" approach that presumes students will "learn as they go" (or not) seems increasingly inadequate. Given the centrality of writing to academic success in seminary, helping students develop as writers is an essential component of providing academic support, thereby ensuring that students are prepared to pursue their vocations. As seminaries face budgetary challenges that may preclude offering writing support, and as the role of librarians is changing, we have an opportunity to expand our traditional role of supporting students. Join presenters David Schmersal, Jane Elder and Melody Diehl Detar as they share some of their experiences in extending writing support to seminary students at Perkins School of Theology and Regent University.

INTRODUCTION: WHY THIS IS A CHALLENGE

Concerns (complaints) about the quality of writing exhibited among seminary students are not new. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that seminary students face many challenges pertaining to writing,

especially those who come to seminary as a second (or third) career and/or come from disciplines that do not require as much writing.

Theology requires a lot of writing.

Moreover, unlike graduate programs in other disciplines, seminary requires students to master several different types of writing: historical papers, exegetical papers, reflection papers, sermons, liturgical writings (prayers, litanies, responsive readings, etc.), journal entries. These factors all contribute to the challenge seminary and theology school students face when it comes to writing.

I. WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

In an era of reduced enrollment, when recruitment and retention are of existential significance for seminaries, the "sink or swim" approach that presumes students will "learn to write as they go" (or not) seems increasingly inadequate.

Given the centrality of writing to academic success in seminary, helping students develop as writers is an essential component of providing academic support, thereby ensuring that students are prepared to pursue their vocations.

II. BUT WHY BOTHER? IT'S NOT REALLY OUR JOB

First, offering writing assistance is simply a part of exceptional public services. Moreover, one never knows what effect offering such service may have—it's an angels unaware thing.

Second, **writing support is a natural continuation of excellent reference service**, drawing upon our Skills, Availability, Trust(worthiness), and the Logical connection between writing support and services we offer already.

Baseline Skill Set of Theological Librarians

- Masters of Library Science
- *Minimum* of a Masters in Theology or related subject
- Proficiency in English, and usually in one or more non-English languages
- Are usually writers of some sort ourselves

- Familiarity with:
  - Faculty
  - Curriculum
  - Theological vocabulary
  - Assignments
  - Academic and church publishing
  - Scholarly citation styles and writing guides (i.e. Turabian, etc.)

Availability

- Of librarians:
  - Somebody is always at the desk
  - Email
  - Phone
  - Text
  - Facebook or other social media
  - Drop-ins always welcome
- Of writing tutors (esp. part-time):
  - By appointment only
  - Sometimes unfamiliar with theology and/or faculty
  - Demands of their own schedules, since they are often students themselves

Who doesn't TRUST a librarian? Students trust us because we are:

- Familiar
- Part of the institution
- Safe (i.e., not their professor)
- Known to be helpful
- Known to be knowledgeable
- Non-judgmental

Logic (we're already blurring the lines)

- **Footnotes**
  Once students learn to read footnotes to track down resources, which we teach already, then they know what elements they need to include when they write one.

- **Research Question → Thesis**
  Coming up with a research question, or a working thesis, involves preliminary thought about what students want to include and exclude in their projects. Evaluation of this sort sets the parameters for their writing and starts to suggest structure, which can lead to outlining.
- **Sources**
  The process of thinking critically about the sources one uses in a project invites the kind of questions it is necessary to address in a paper. As we teach students how and why to evaluate sources, we are teaching them the ways in which they will need to engage with their topics in writing.
- **Taking Notes and Paraphrasing**
  - Big block quotations are one hallmark of poor student papers.
  - Effective note-taking involves selecting the perfect pithy quotation and paraphrasing the rest. Good summaries can be considered first drafts and incorporated into the papers themselves.

Institutional support for student writing—from a tutor or a writing center, or by librarians—demonstrates at a minimum commitment to student success. More than that, however, it demonstrates that the institution's theological message is one worth taking care with, one worth communicating clearly and well, and one worth conveying as far afield as possible. Theological librarians are in a unique position to support this, and I argue that they should.

III. *HOW* LIBRARIANS CAN HELP

- *Before* students begin to write, we can offer instruction, in the form of guides and handouts—for example, a guide on the 9000-word Credo assignment in Systematic Theology (https://bridwellguides.smu.edu/credo). We can also offer instruction sessions on topics such as formulating a thesis, finding and using different kinds of sources—primary, secondary, tertiary—and source citations.
- *While* students are in the midst of research and writing, we can help them build bridges from research to writing, emphasizing

the iterative nature of the research process in that one does not fully know what he/she needs to research apart from writing, which reveals what one needs to know. Our primary task here is not only helping students find sources, but also helping them see what they might do with them, how they might take the information they have gleaned from primary, secondary, and tertiary sources and use it in their writing. An essential component of this is helping students find a central question, based on their research, that they can then turn into a thesis statement. This process can entail meeting with the student one-on-one and brainstorming, identifying themes, and of course directing students to good sources. This can also include encouraging students to make lists of observations gleaned from sources and then grouping items to help form structure. Structure is much more directly related to writing, but at the same time it has a clear connection with research in that the structure is built around themes and evidence that a student has discovered through research.

- What about *after* students have written? Assisting students with "macro-structure" leads fairly naturally into helping students clarify other aspects of their structure, which in turn leads to a more detailed analysis of overall argument, sentence structure, wording, grammar, syntax—in other words: proofreading.
  - Guidelines
    - We only look at take-home exams with explicit permission from the professor, and usually this is a means of "reasonable accommodation" for students who are English language learners.
    - We look at structure, grammar, syntax, wording, and argument, but avoid correcting content (if a student is a Gnostic heretic, it is not our place to correct them, though I will include a comment pointing out the implications of their argument, just to be sure they are committing heresy knowingly).
    - We see this as a means of teaching, not as doing their work for them. Over the course of working with students consistently over a few years, we see drastic improvement.

- Tools
  - One option is using the Markup tools in Microsoft Word—the "Track Changes" function allows you to insert, delete, and move text (when the correction is fairly obvious) and to offer suggestions in comments when there is ambiguity.
  - Pencil and paper can be just as, if not more, effective, and ensures students do not accept suggested changes uncritically.
  - Some students prefer to come hash things out in person, either in lieu of or in addition to other options.
- Examples
  - Many of the suggestions/corrections we offer have to do with inculcating students into the "culture" of scholarly writing in the humanities:
    - Using active voice
    - Avoiding first-person pronouns
    - Crafting a clear thesis statement and following an outline to support one's overall argument
  - Other corrections have more to do with mechanics
    - Using formal, correct grammar
    - Using punctuation correctly
  - When working with students who speak and write in English as a second (or fifth) language, we make many suggestions pertaining to verb use, subject-verb agreement, punctuation, and prepositions.
  - Perhaps more than anything else, students ask us to help them with citations.

As the points outlined above suggest, most of the corrections we suggest are based on more-or-less objective factors such as proper grammar and citations. While some of the suggestions may be more subjective, such as suggesting ways to clarify a point or improve overall structure, our goal is less to improve student writing than to help students become better writers.

IV. COLLABORATING WITH A WRITING CENTER

Theological librarians are in a unique position to provide writing support to students who do not have access to a writing center. For

librarians at institutions that do have writing support available, opportunities exist for librarians to develop strategic collaborations with writing coaches. These collaborations make sense because librarians and writing coaches naturally have much in common with each other, and because many benefits exist with a meaningful collaboration between these entities. By breaking down the separation between research and writing, students will better understand "research and writing . . . as a single, holistic practice."[1]

Librarians and writing coaches have many similarities. The way in which their services are offered has shifted with new technologies, such as moving library catalogs online, developing new search methods for resources, and engaging new tools for editing work and managing citations. They can appreciate the benefits and challenges associated with the new technologies.

Both librarians and writing coaches also navigate a space between students and faculty. Research and writing assistance often involves understanding professors' prompts and understanding learning objectives associated with assignments. They must also work with students who have strict deadlines, and who may not plan a work strategy in advance. Ultimately, librarians and writing coaches are a part of the effort to help students to help themselves. Learning to conduct effective research and express ideas well is a key part of their educational experience.

A meaningful collaboration between librarians and writing coaches can bring many benefits. It reinforces the idea that research and writing go hand-in-hand, and that both are engaged throughout the entire process of developing and expressing ideas. A collaboration of the two entities enables each to promote and leverage the benefits of the other, and is an opportunity for one to learn from the other. When working together, librarians and writing coaches can develop a clear idea of what each other does, and communicate with patrons more effectively.

Case Study: Conquer the Blank Page

The librarians at the Regent University Library recognized a need to actively reach out to students at their point of need in the research process, with support for research and writing. Although the event was inspired by the Long Night Against Procrastination, an all-night

event to encourage diving into research assignments early in the semester, it was adapted to fit within normal library hours and focused on the challenge of starting a research paper. The event at Regent University was aptly called Conquering the Blank Page, and included instructional sessions and full research support at a point in the semester that most students would be able to get a head start on large research projects. The event included instruction, one-on-one consultations, de-stressing resources, and a writing environment.

From the beginning, it was clear that the librarians would need a full collaboration with the writing coaches in order to make the event a success. Representatives from the writing center were involved at each step of the process, from the initial planning meetings through the debriefing. Together, they worked to develop a marketing strategy that capitalized on the strengths of how each entity marketed events individually. Together, they presented a full marketing strategy to promote a robust event.

The result was an event that presented research and writing support as a holistic concept. Six ten-minute instructions sessions, three by librarians and three by writing coaches, were delivered several times apiece over the course of the day. The librarians introduced key resources for starting research, and the writing center presented on how to form a thesis and avoid plagiarism. Librarians and writing coaches were available for one-on-one consultations, and students were encouraged to work on their assignments with study foods and beverages, as well as de-stressing materials, such as coloring pencils and massage chairs.

Feedback from the event was very positive, and the event impacted more than just the students. Through the collaboration, the librarians and the writing coaches formed a solid relationship. By working side-by-side, they were able to learn about each other personally, about the work they do, and the services they offer. This collaboration opened the door for librarians and writing coaches to work more effectively, with a fuller understanding of how the two pieces of support provide a complete support system for students.

V. CONCLUSION

Theological librarians have opportunities to creatively serve students beyond traditional library services. In particular, librarians can step

up when writing support services are limited or unavailable, or actively seek to build connections that will create a holistic research and writing experience for students.

NOTES

1 James K. Elmborg and Sheril Hook, *Centers for learning: Writing centers and libraries in collaboration* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2005).