

**A One Credit Prerequisite Model
for Theological Information Literacy
(Models for Information Literacy panel)**

by
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History of the Course—RES 500 (Research Strategies)

When I graduated from library school in 1985 and took up full-time librarian status at the small seminary from which I had obtained my theological degrees, I assumed that, while undergraduates were generally hopeless in a library, seminary students had developed on their own the necessary skills to complete research papers. I soon discovered that I was wrong. The average seminary student, even if a recent graduate from a university, was almost as hopeless as an undergraduate. In fact, in the twenty years since that time, I have found only a handful of students with competent research skills. The rest have all required training.

Assuming, somewhat naively, that students could be taught how to use a library better, I approached my academic dean with a proposal to institute a one-credit research course, both at seminary level and in a parallel undergraduate Bible college. To my amazement, he agreed that our students needed better skills and a one-credit course would do the trick. Thus the model that I am presenting today was something I more or less fell into. I had given little thought to why it should be taught for credit except for my assumption that students would take it more seriously if it were compulsory and they got grades for it.

The course has remained one credit, though students insist they are doing two to three credits of work. When my seminary became one of the founding institutions of Associated Canadian Theological Schools (ACTS) in 1988, the course migrated over and became a compulsory prerequisite for all ACTS programs. The case to be made for the course was surprisingly easy. Having by this time thought through my rationale, I expressed it something like this:

- 1) Our incoming students do not know how to do research adequately. The evidence is in their research papers. Many of our students have been out of school for some time and have lost many of the skills they once had.
- 2) Ability to do research is not something merely required for the preparation of research papers in seminary. It is a life skill, made evident by the fact that we tell our students that they need to engage in lifelong learning. In our information society, a seminary graduate who does not know how to acquire and handle information effectively and efficiently is an undereducated graduate. (I use the term “skill” not in the sense of mechanical ability to search databases but in the biblical sense defined by the Hebrew term for “wisdom” [to have a skill]. Within information literacy, this involves a complex of mechanical and evaluative abilities that derive meaning from information).

- 3) If research is a life skill, it should be taught for credit, just like we teach homiletics or biblical interpretation. In a credit course, students can be required to do assignments that reinforce their developing skills, and their motivation is the grade at the end.
- 4) The average student will not take a research course if it is optional. If we truly believe that every student needs research skills, then the research course needs to be part of the student's compulsory core in every program. If it will not fit into curricular hours, then make it a prerequisite that a student can take just prior to beginning a program of study or during the first semester in a program.

More recently, a fifth argument has emerged:

- 5) Our rapidly growing information technologies demand that students be up to date on optimizing the various catalogs and databases we offer.

ACTS' academic administration bought into my proposal with minimal argument and made Research Strategies a compulsory prerequisite for everyone. In the years that have followed, ACTS has grown from 25 students to a pool of about 500, now requiring that 130 people per year go through the Research Strategies course. In order to accommodate that number, I developed an online version of the course (www.acts.twu.ca/LBR/research500.htm), which operates parallel to the live course (syllabus at www.acts.twu.ca/lbr/actssyll.htm). The growth in number of students has demanded that I reorganize my librarian duties, with more responsibilities contracted to the university library staff (our collection is integrated with that of Trinity Western University). It has also required that I teach some of the online sections as overload.

Characteristics of the Course

As I began developing the course, I was faced with essentially three options—the architectural model, the bibliographic model, and the strategies model:

- **Architectural Model**—Basically a how-to-use-the-library approach that goes through the various search tools and resources available to the student, without reference to an overall research plan.
- **Bibliographic Model**—An introduction to reference sources and other subject resources relevant to a particular discipline.
- **Strategies Model**—A training method that walks the student through the entire research process from topic selection, to development of research questions, to acquisition of materials of many types, to effective and ethical use of those materials, to production of a final research project.

I chose the Strategies Model for several reasons: Research is much more than use of a library, actual library resources change over time, research is only relevant

when it is part of the student's narrative, and a strategic approach allows the student to transfer skills from topic to topic.

Here are the elements of the model:

- 1) The student chooses a topic (or two topics in the online version) that forms the basis for most assignments. By agreement with seminary professors, students are encouraged to choose topics for actual research papers that they are doing in another course, thus enhancing relevance.
- 2) The student takes instruction (either live or online), but every piece of instruction is reinforced by extensive assignments that enable the student to strategize research on the chosen topic. The assignments themselves form part of the instruction, because grading involves extensive analysis of the strategies used, with suggestions for improvement. Grading is thus very labor-intensive.
- 3) The course follows the chronological path a student would take in carrying out a research project—use of reference material to develop a working knowledge, creation of a viable research question and preliminary outline, resource acquisition (library catalog, various databases, Internet, etc.), use of various methods for compiling information, final outline production, and tips for writing research projects. The course does not cover the basic details of how to use a library, nor does it teach bibliographic styles.
- 4) Working within a seminary with a fairly tight grouping of subject areas, I am not particularly concerned with the issues of subject specialization in research. I include examples and databases from all the major subject areas, and the students' own topics allow them subject specificity.

A New Twist for the D.Min. Program

Our entering Doctor of Ministry students have taken an online version of the one-credit course until this year. The course is now embedded in a three-credit introduction to the program and is taught for two afternoons in three days of classroom interaction. Students then go online for assignments that are to be completed over the next few months (www.acts.twu.ca/lbr/research900.htm). The other elements of the three-credit course are an introduction to the D.Min. dissertation, an orientation to learning technologies, discussions of the church and leadership today, and a one-credit offering in the skills of theological reflection.

Challenges and Rewards

The course does not need to be defended in our institution. Its results are so obvious that no professor in ACTS opposes it. There are, however, several challenges:

- 1) As our institution grows, more of my time is spent in teaching the various sections of Research Strategies. I am currently on a schedule of at least two

sections in Fall and Spring semesters, one section in Summer as well as a summer one-credit half-live and half-online version of the course for D.Min. students. A good part of this is taught as overload, which improves my income but speaks of a looming breaking point, after which I will need to involve at least one other teacher. Our academic administration has warned me that this is a precarious position to be in—if something happens to me, I have no successor, and there is always a risk of burnout. I have not been able to find an alternate person with up-to-date skills.

- 2) Research in our modern technological environment is becoming more complex all the time. Simply deciding what to cover and what to leave out is a challenge.
- 3) We have not developed a lot of through-the-curriculum emphasis. While students seem to be able to transfer their initial skills from subject to subject, it would be good to reinforce the learning in this prerequisite course with other offerings further along in their programs. I am involved in vetting all proposals for graduating essays in our largest program, and students doing theses take an advanced research course taught by faculty, but more is needed to help students mature in their research skills.
- 4) Our international students struggle with the research course. While we offer a library skills seminar and a research paper seminar to them prior to entry in the research course, they find it extremely challenging to learn Western ways of posing research questions and carrying out research in a linear fashion.

But there are rewards:

- 1) The research course has become a retention tool. I have had any number of students come to see me even up to a year after the course ended and tell me that if they hadn't taken it they doubt they would have been able to handle the requirements of seminary. Several have stated categorically that they likely would have dropped out by the end of their first semester. One student recently, with tears in his eyes, said to me, "You tell those incoming students that they need this course. I'm so grateful that you taught it."
- 2) Student research in general is of good quality. Faculty are happy, and students continue to express appreciation for the course.
- 3) I am able to see my personal mission fulfilled—to provide our students with resources and the ability to locate and use those resources effectively. I believe that the course does a good job of equipping students with information skills that they will use in their ongoing vocations.

References

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