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Changing a Teaching Culture in an International University Context

Introducing English and Research Competencies for the Price of a Cup of Coffee

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Introduction

This paper outlines how John Cabot University's composition program and library staff are collaborating in the 2018–19 academic year to prioritize writing and research skills across the majors. This collaboration is ongoing and has been a joint effort to establish a broad level of key research and writing competencies throughout the university's 100-, 200-, 300-, and 400-level courses. These competencies should build incrementally toward an advanced level of writing and research that culminates in the final courses for each major. Our aim was not just to update competencies in these areas, but also to revitalize the academic culture of the university by encouraging departments to prioritize writing and research skills across media.

As composition instructors and library staff met in spring 2018 to discuss how best to formulate recommendations around English and research skills in the curriculum, we realized that one department was already embarking on curriculum revision and

the time was right to set up meetings with that department to introduce the idea and solidify a revision plan. We decided that setting up a working group between department representatives, the composition program, and the library was the best way to structure this collaboration.

At the same time that this was happening, the faculty-at-large set up a task force on English, which provided another avenue to communicate our ideas and generate buy-in among faculty. This task force also brings the administration into the process, as task forces were set up with its explicit endorsement. This task force was charged by the faculty-at-large with assessing our spoken and written support for English at the university and making recommendations for future directions. At the same time as the English task force was formed, a teaching and learning task force was also formed to assess institutional support for teaching and make recommendations regarding how best to develop this support. This teaching and learning task force would become an essential pillar of support for our proposal, which would be communicated through the English task force findings and recommendations. Of course, the administration would retain the final say on the academic direction of the university, but we see this project at a good way to get the discussion started.

The Project

With this ongoing project, we are seeking to bring English language, writing, and research to the center of all majors at the university through voluntary departmental curriculum revision. This project calls for working groups composed of a member of the department revising curriculum, a composition instructor, and a reference librarian. Because departmental participation is voluntary and the recommendations put forth by the librarians and composition program are not binding, this project has not attracted controversy. We are hoping that once an example is set with one department, others will follow suit. Once the department fixes on a course progression structure, the librarian and composition instructor can consult to help articulate key competencies in the area of English and research skills. The success of this project requires a change in teaching and learning culture that prioritizes writing and research skills. This will require a new vision of including instructional technology and assessment support for non-native English speaking professors. We argue that when seeking to change a culture in an international university context, we need to engage faculty on all available fronts to triangulate resources that will help clarify the university's commitment to English and research as well as empower our multilingual colleagues to do the same.

Setting and Context

John Cabot University was founded in 1972 in Rome, Italy, as an international American liberal arts college, and through the years, it has grown into a university that attracts Italian, international, and American degree-seeking students, as well as visiting students from across the United States, whose presence plays a vital role in maintaining the university's American character advocated in the mission of the institution.¹ In pursuit of the university's mission to provide a liberal arts experience in an international setting, its

academic programs are designed to capitalize on its location, its multicultural faculty, and its diverse student body (one-third from the United States, one-third from Italy, and one-third international students). The university now offers thirteen undergraduate bachelor of arts degrees, and it recently began to offer a master of arts degree in art history.

Two of the key elements of a liberal arts education are to prompt students to connect information across disciplines and to cultivate their capacity to think critically. Both the composition program and the library at John Cabot work on developing students' critical use of disciplinary information in writing and research. Their scopes of action, meanwhile, extend across the campus and departmental boundaries. All of this makes the composition department and the library crucial partners for departments aiming to provide the interdisciplinary liberal arts education promoted at John Cabot.

One of the challenges and opportunities in embedding cross-discipline learning outcomes in the realm of writing, research, and digital literacy arises from the multilingual background of the entire library staff, including our three full-time reference librarians, as well as a significant portion of the faculty. For example, all of the librarians are Italian and went through the Italian system to earn their credentials. Within Italian academic libraries, there is hardly any kind of instructional service, whereas the attention on other services such as reference, circulation, and interlibrary loan is much stronger. Instruction is not part of Italy's library service tradition, and therefore, it does not figure in the training of Italian library professionals.² The faculty, while being an international body of instructors, is expected to have a familiarity with the American educational practices and standards that promote discussion over lecture-style courses and continuous assessment over high-stakes examinations. This may or may not mean that they are familiar with what it means to be a reference librarian in the American system, an issue that requires significant outreach on the part of the librarians. We are hoping that this project will help plant the seeds that will facilitate future collaboration between departments, the composition program, and the library. This would certainly benefit the institution and lead to the kind of cross-disciplinary critical thinking so central to the liberal arts, but most importantly, it would benefit the students, who may also be acclimatizing into the American educational system. In addition to educational background, English may be the second language of all of the people involved in the research process (save the composition instructors). While this certainly can present challenges, we find that a diverse linguistic and educational background creates quite a fertile opportunity for a deeper understanding of scholarly inquiry.

John Cabot's international faculty, almost half of whom are nonnative speakers,³ help define the character of the university, providing a richness of perspective that gives students a comprehensive and comparative perspective on their major fields of study. When combined with the very international background of the student body, this diversity is the strength of the university. This diversity means that very little can be taken for granted in curriculum design, coursework, and classroom management; students and faculty in many cases bring different educational cultures to the table, which enhances the learning culture for all involved. However, a special university-wide drive to establish levels and key competencies across courses in the fields of English and research skills ensures that regardless of the weave of the tapestry within the classroom, the key threads must anchor the piece.

How the Project Began

This project began as a collective desire among many strata of John Cabot educators and administrators that we coordinate our efforts to cultivate a culture of English writing and speaking excellence. Over time this notion began to bubble to the fore among faculty across the curriculum and administrators at the same time as the English composition program was collaborating with library staff to strengthen research skills through giving workshops, having librarians sit in on composition courses, and requiring students to do one-on-one research sessions for their major research paper in the composition sequence.

English at John Cabot University

In an effort to help our students achieve the most advanced levels of English, John Cabot runs a pre-university English program for those who need language remediation before they enter the university. We also have a writing center aimed at supporting undergraduates in their writing through tutorials and workshops, and we run a small English for Success program, which works with some upper division business courses to prescreen papers for grammar and structure. Through a strong collaboration with the John Cabot reference librarians, the composition instructors have developed a core curriculum that integrates research skills into the foundations of the Advanced Composition curriculum.

Research, Digital Literacy, Information Literacy

In order to coordinate our work across majors and link English to research skills and information literacy, we need a solid, transferable working definition of what we mean by research skills and how we can implement key competencies across disciplines. To this end, we came up with the graphic in figure 4.1 to facilitate discussion among project participants.

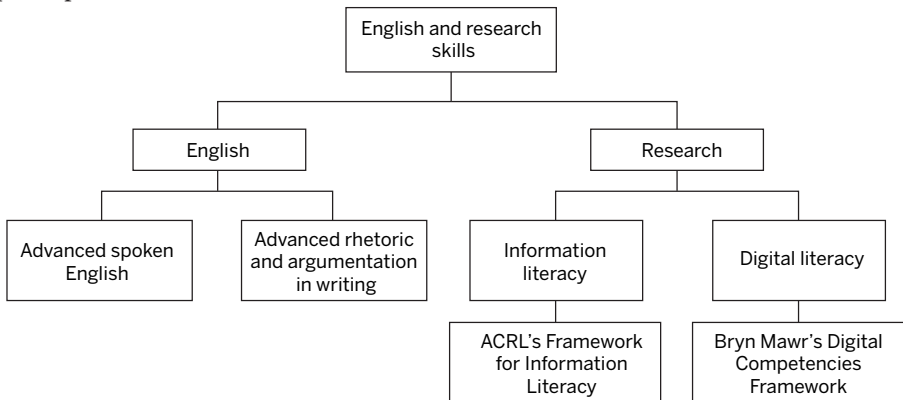


Figure 4.1

Chart we use to explain English writing and research standards to the wider faculty

This graphic helps us explain to curriculum revision faculty our terminology as well as giving faculty an idea of the current research on the promotion of information and digital literacy in their fields. While the concept of spoken and written English skills is quite straightforward to grasp, there can be confusion about the meaning of information and digital literacy. We found the most efficient definitions to be the Association of College and Research Librarians' (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy* and Bryn Mawr's "Digital Competencies Framework."⁴

The ACRL broadly defines information literacy as being founded on six frames:

- Authority Is Constructed and Contextual
- Information Creation as a Process
- Information Has Value
- Research as Inquiry
- Scholarship as Conversation
- Searching as Strategic Exploration

This framework is particularly effective because it can be implemented across disciplines as starting points for course design and inquiry. This framework speaks well to the critical-thinking skills that we at John Cabot are already teaching in our coursework, and it allows us a touchstone to coordinate our efforts.

Bryn Mawr's "Digital Competencies Framework," on the other hand, focuses on

- Digital Survival Skills
- Digital Communication
- Data Management and Preservation
- Data Analysis and Presentation
- Critical Making, Design, and Development

When pairing ACRL's *Framework* with Bryn Mawr's, we can begin to see how each discipline would come up with coordinated and discipline-specific key competencies in each area.

Our project focuses on linking English, information literacy, and digital literacy through the formulation of working groups populated by department faculty, reference librarians, and composition faculty. The working groups will consult with departments that are looking to revise curriculum to articulate key competencies that are discipline-specific and focused on English and research skills.

Challenge and Opportunity

The first challenge every university faces is the temptation to try to standardize, benchmark, and count all the beans. Insisting on one specific version of English, one specific citation style to use, one specific computer application to learn, is surely folly; just as exposure to a diverse student body and faculty enhances learning, so does a breadth of knowledge. Gail Okawa reminded us that "our pedagogy must reflect... the multiplicity of language varieties in our communities. Becoming part of a global society makes our individual worlds more, not less, complex, more, not less, rich."⁵ In the case of John Cabot, introducing rigid structures to standardize would rob the university of its essence and strength.

This linguistic and cultural strength of diversity also contributes to the reasoning behind an institutional reluctance to introduce a Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) program. Anne Ellen Geller documented this reluctance well in her study on the use of English among multilingual professors at St. John's University.⁶ Aside from a significant population of non-native English speaking faculty who express a reluctance to accept rigid English assessment standardization, various Italian educational policies protect the concept of academic freedom,⁷ which can make it difficult to standardize at the syllabus level, even if that were the desired method of bringing English and research skills to the fore of learning culture at the university. In light of this, it became clear to our working group that the shift our project proposes would have to be designed at the department level and supported well through faculty development.

Being the Change

We decided that prioritizing English and research skills needed to be more of a cultural shift rather than a top-down pronouncement, though an endorsement from the administration is helpful to put the issue on everyone's radar. To do this, we embarked on a multipronged diplomatic initiative aimed to collect feedback for curriculum revision and the repositioning of English and research skills at the heart of university life at John Cabot. This brought together the various stakeholders to create a dialogue about our new goals.

The project saw members of the composition program and librarians meet with the Department of Political Science and International Affairs, which was embarking on curriculum revision, to consult with it about including key English and research competencies as it revised course descriptions. This is an ongoing project, but we believe the composition program and librarians can be quite useful in collaborating to highlight critical English and research skills for each course level. We think that once one department makes it through a successful curriculum revision with the composition program and library consulting, it will help convince others to do the same in the future when their revision processes begin.

Department of Political Science and International Affairs

With the influx of new faculty to the Department of Political Science and International Affairs, the rapid growth of majors in recent years, and preliminary strategic discussions about a possible MA program, the department recently initiated a series of discussions about a revision of its curriculum. The principal aim is to unify the curriculum and to build skills programmatically across the 100-, 200-, 300-, and 400-level course offerings, with a particular emphasis on students' ability to communicate effectively in English, consistent with John Cabot's central mission. Since the department has many contributing adjunct faculty—some longstanding, some more occasional—a standardization of the curriculum, particularly at the introductory level, including learning outcomes, was identified as especially desirable.

Additionally, John Cabot's profoundly multicultural student body, where English is often a second (or, indeed, third) language, poses distinctive pedagogic challenges, though they often nourish valuable dynamic classroom exchanges, given the varied backgrounds of the students. During faculty discussions about the department's course offerings, required and elective, there was a strong consensus about the importance of using John Cabot's writing center and library resources more effectively. Given the importance of John Cabot's capstone courses for evaluating the department's achievement of its own learning outcomes, discussion about the required skill sets that students should have *before* arriving at the capstone experience has proven a particularly illuminating exercise.

The department's ongoing collaboration with John Cabot's Frohring Library and Writing Center not only furnishes students with valuable resources for developing their own communication skills, but also helps socialize contributing adjuncts to the mission of the department. Efforts are underway to identify better the use of library resources by majors in this department so as to reflect on how to improve students' digital literacy and also to identify those resources the department should advocate that the library acquire. The overall collaboration has been invaluable in reflecting upon how best to give a diverse group of students a shared foundation for moving through an integrated sequence of classes in both the political science and international affairs majors.

English Task Force Coffee Meetings

As part of its work, the English task force has articulated some program priorities that it will be presenting to the faculty and administration. Among the initiatives are these voluntary curriculum revision working groups populated by the department's representatives, the composition program, and the library. One way the English task force has sought to collaborate across departments has been to meet first informally with department chairs and get their feedback before we roll out the proposal to get endorsement for a curriculum-wide initiative based on our project between political science and international affairs, composition, and the library. A key to creating an interesting collaboration across departments has been to pair English task force members with non-allied department chairs for their first exploratory meeting to present the idea. Early feedback indicates a broad support for the idea in theory, but there has been skepticism about adding to the already significant workload of the department chairs. This feedback indicates that we will need to present the project proposal by highlighting how these working groups can help shoulder the burden by issuing recommended guidelines or best practices that departments can seek to work into proposed syllabi as new courses are added and curricula revised, rather than add to the burden that department chairs face.

We anticipate that the main concern some departments will express is the issue of asking non-native English speakers to assess English skills. This is where the other faculty-established task force on teaching and learning can be helpful. This task force shared its recommendations with the faculty and administration in September 2018. Its main recommendation was the formation of a support program for teaching and learning that would help professors design syllabi, hold training sessions on instructional technology, consult with departments on course management, and so on. While it is not anticipated that a physical center for learning and teaching innovation will be established, the task force's

ideas regarding various discrete educational support programs do seem viable. Some of the program proposals currently under consideration are the creation of a fund for faculty teaching development and the establishment of a summer institute to promote learning and teaching. These programs would be a natural home for any faculty member who wanted to hone his or her skills in the above-described areas, including English and research skills.

Strategic Reasons for Collaboration

Since there is relatively little time and support for long-term collaborations, we have found that the best way to gain traction for the project has been a strategy of coffee diplomacy, starting small with one department and pulling together task force priorities to demonstrate how this project can best be supported.

Our composition program and librarians decided to start small with this project by focusing on a department that was currently undergoing curriculum revision. A successful collaboration here, which requires a minimal outlay of time by the department but allows the library and composition program to consult on course description, would form an exemplar of collaboration that the rest of the university could emulate when entering into curriculum revision. Another interesting aspect of this type of collaboration is how we can use the complementarity of our roles and backgrounds to best effect. With our varied professional capacities and linguistic backgrounds as subject specialists, writing instructors, native English speakers, and non-native English speaking librarians, we can appeal to different aspects of the project and personalities and maximize our collaborative roles.

This is a long-term project with no administrative structural support as yet. We see the project being activated as various departments endeavor to revise their curricula. We envision this to be a beginning of shifting a culture at the university to English and research, focusing specifically on identifying English, information, and digital literacy in course descriptions. The key to the success of this project with non-intrinsically motivated departments will be the success of the Department of Political Science and International Affairs, as it is the first department and will provide an aspirational model. Another key is the establishment of a support program for faculty and course development. A strong sense of collaboration now and a strong support structure will empower faculty to prioritize these areas of course development and assessment. Right now we are looking to put those structures in place, but we need the success of one department to convince the university community to back the project.

Implications for John Cabot University

John Cabot is in a period of growth in terms of student numbers, new facilities, and new campuses, and it has now become a priority to solidify our focus on the two fundamental skills we develop in our students: English and scholarly research-based inquiry. Both of these surface in the mission and vision statement of the university. That inquiry, when set within a context of digital and information literacy, is becoming a cornerstone of academic life everywhere. What makes John Cabot unique in Italy is its international makeup and its focus on English. This project seeks to support faculty to better prepare

students to be digitally literate global citizens with the power to communicate, scrutinize, and aggregate across the digital and academic landscapes. The successful implementation of this project will allow the university to maximize coordination throughout the disciplines; articulate English, research, and digital and information literacy goals that build on one another through course level; and collaborate to best serve our students. At a minimum, this project starts the discussion about the importance of these interconnected skills throughout the disciplines. It creates bridges between departments, the composition program, and the library as well as interdepartmental bridges that might not have been as strong they could have been. It makes use of the library staff and the composition faculty members as complementary consultants who, rather than add to the burden, seek to lessen the burden on departments during the revision process.

Conclusions

For other institutions to set up a similar project, consider what faculty subcommittees already exist, consider the good will the price of a coffee can buy you, and start small. Look to what you have already established at your university—a teaching and learning center, a writing center, faculty development funding, faculty task forces, instructional technologists, reference and teaching librarians—and form coalitions. Let the coalitions branch out and work from many vantage points. You will not be able to predict how much this catches on, and you may have buy-in only from the usual suspects. But if you get them on board and end up with a solid curriculum revision project, you are much more likely to swing the undecideds to your camp and begin the process of changing the academic culture of the university into one that prioritizes English, information literacy, digital literacy, and research skills. The next coffee's on us.

Notes

1. For a more comprehensive description of the setting and context of John Cabot University, see chapter 2, Livia Piotto's "Researching Rome: The Librarian as Research Mediator."
2. See Associazione Italiana Biblioteche-Commissione Nazionale Università e Ricerca, "Rilanciare le Biblioteche Universitarie e di Ricerca italiane," AIB-WEB, accessed May 15, 2018, <https://www.aib.it/struttura/commissioni-e-gruppi/2013/36257-rilanciare-le-biblioteche-universitarie-e-di-ricerca-italiane>. This document, issued by the Italian Library Association in 2013 and whose title can be translated as "Revamping Italian University and Research Libraries," makes no mention of instructional activities by library staff.
3. John Cabot University, "Faculty," accessed October 5, 2018, http://www.johncabot.edu/directory/Faculty_Form.aspx (page discontinued).
4. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016), <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>; Bryn Mawr College, "Bryn Mawr Digital Competencies Framework," *Blended Learning and Open Educational Resources 3* (2016), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/oer/3/>.
5. Gail Y. Okawa, "'Resurfacing Roots': Developing a Pedagogy of Language Awareness from Two Views," in *Language Diversity in the Classroom: From Diversity to Practice*, ed. Geneva Smitherman and Victor Villanueva (Carbondale: SWR and Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 128.
6. Anne Ellen Geller, "Teaching and Learning with Multilingual Faculty," *Across the Disciplines 8*, no. 4 (2011), <https://wac.colostate.edu/atd/ell/geller.cfm>.

7. “Nel rispetto delle norme costituzionali e degli ordinamenti della scuola stabiliti dal presente testo unico, ai docenti è garantita la libertà di insegnamento intesa come autonomia didattica e come libera espressione culturale del docente.” (“In the respect of Italian constitution, this law protects the freedom to teach, understood as teaching autonomy and as free cultural expression of the teacher.”) Decreto Legislativo, April 16, 1994, n. 297, art. 1, <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1994/05/19/094G0291/sg>.

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