

Looping: How It Can Work in Higher Education

James D. Hooks and Frank Corbett, Jr.

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

About the Authors

James D. Hooks is a professor in the Library and Media Resources Department at the Armstrong Campus of Indiana University of Pennsylvania where he specializes in bibliographic instruction for graduate students in education. He has co-authored a book about managing state-wide periodical holdings: *Implementing Online Union Lists of Serials: The Pennsylvania Union List of Serials Experience*. In addition, he has published articles on serials publications and computer-assisted bibliographic instruction.

Frank Corbett, Jr. is an associate professor in the department of Professional Studies in Education at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He is Co-coordinator of the doctoral program in Curriculum and Instruction, and Coordinator of the Masters in Education Program. He has authored a number of doctoral and masters courses as well as made major contributions to each program's major revision. He serves on the Board of Directors for the New England Educational Research Organization and has made many research presentations.

Abstract

University librarians possess specialized knowledge and have the potential to positively affect how students, especially graduate students, can better understand the research process. “NEERO’s primary objectives are to improve educational programs and supervisory practices; provide a stimulating, supportive and friendly forum for scholarly presentations; identify and disseminate successful educational practices; and foster skill development in research and evaluation methodologies.” This paper describes a unique form of collaboration at the graduate education level in a medium-size university.

Looping, or multi-year teaching, is a practice of allowing students and teachers to remain together for two or more years. Looping is generally associated with elementary education, but in this project, the authors describe how the looping concept has been applied to a graduate education cohort. The university librarian rather than the professors of record move with the graduate cohort over a two-year course of study. Improved information literacy concerns and benefits to graduate students are presented.

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Looping: How It Can Work in Higher Education

“Looping is a practice in which a teacher stays with the same class for more than one year; it is a multiyear placement for both the students and the teacher” (Franklin & Holm, 2003, p. 1520). Burke (1997) and other authors in the field of education generally attribute its origins to Waldorf education, which originated in Europe more than 70 years ago and was brought to the United States in 1928 (para. 2).

Looping as a learning style is grounded in elementary education and sometimes is extended into middle school grades. At least “one school system has reported having two-year teaching assignments in grades one through eight, and is looking into the possibility of applying the concept to high school in some way” (East Lyme Middle School). Once students enter high school, they no longer stay together as a group. Students select different curricula and may only have one or two classes that are the same. The scheduling situation is even more diffused in higher education.

While educators and politicians continue to debate the academic benefits of educational standards, and increased testing in public education, there is little to no debate about the academic and social benefits of looping. Bogart (2002) found that students in looping classrooms benefited academically by remaining with the same teacher and classmates for two successive years. Burke’s 1997 study concluded that the potential social benefits for students include more time to establish positive peer relationships and increased opportunities for shy students to develop self-confidence. The librarian’s role of looping with graduate cohorts is to teach students how to effectively and efficiently use library resources.

A cursory review of the literature reveals several recurring benefits of looping. Kerr (2002) found that 80% of the participants in a looping study reported positive results, especially with regard to an “enhanced sense of knowing about the students’ needs, better accountability [and] more sustained peer and teacher-student relationships” (para 1). Little & Dacus (1999), Chapman (1999) and McClellan (1997) found similar advantages of improved student confidence, more stability, stronger student-teacher relationships and a stronger sense of belonging. In addition, Forsten, Grant & Richardson (1999) along with Gaustad (1998) reported that looping supports continuous learning, helps to keep repetition to a minimum, and avoids having to start from scratch each year.

Franklin and Holm (2003) believe that although looping has gained popularity, it is a practice that can be considered innovative. However, looping is neither a panacea nor does it work in every educational situation, and the research about it is mixed. Difficulties in looping can and do occur. Students could be placed with an ineffective teacher, and highly effective teachers could be assigned a troublesome group of students. Sometimes, students are together for too much of the time and peer interactions can become wearisome. Even so, there is strong evidence to support that looping can be a highly effective strategy for teaching and learning.

From our perspective, using looping in graduate cohorts was a logical application from what had been reported in public education. In graduate cohorts, students advance from one unit to the next in the same way that students in elementary schools advance from one grade to the next. And since looping has had positive results in public education environments, looping should be equally successful in graduate cohorts.

Until the recent adoption of educational cohorts, especially in graduate education, few college students progressed in cohorts with the same schedule each semester. In that context, it is doubtful if looping was ever considered as a viable option in higher education. Subject searches in ERIC, Dissertation Abstracts, and other related databases have not produced articles or documents containing information about the use of looping in higher education.

Cohorts have become more widespread in graduate programs for several reasons. Academic departments are able to reduce operational costs because some courses do not need to be taught every semester. Once a graduate cohort is formed, that group of students advances through a set curriculum with the same schedule each semester in a two-year cycle. All students in the cohort are, in a sense, automatically enrolled in each subsequent graduate course. Understandably, there are advantages and disadvantages of cohort programs.

Cohort programs are well-suited to multi-campus institutions that are willing to support graduate programs at off-campus sites. Since most graduate students work during the day, they often find it inconvenient to travel long distances to a central campus for graduate study. Our university is located in a rural area, and it is more difficult to attract graduate students than a university in an urban setting. Prospective graduate students are more likely to be living and working in an urban area, and convenience is a major consideration. Since our graduate cohorts are mostly offered at a branch campus in the suburban area of a major city, academic departments are better able to attract students because the location is more convenient and the travel time is shorter.

When the first course ends and new faculty begin the next course, it is generally assumed that students already have acquired adequate research skills. The instructors of our graduate programs at off-campus sites have high expectations for scholarly research. Students need to be able to identify and access peer reviewed journal articles and other scholarly resources in their respective disciplines. They need to develop critical analysis skills necessary to interpret those resources and synthesize them in order to adequately prepare class assignments and actively participate in collaborative research projects. Students need to develop solid research skills and continue to improve and expand on that foundation as course requirements tend to increase in the second year of graduate study.

Students beginning in a graduate cohort program are deeply concerned about the research requirements. They often feel that their research skills will be inadequate for them to be successful at the graduate level, and they worry that the lack of access to both print and electronic library resources will severely hamper their academic performance. Students tend to have considerable anxiety over academic issues such as financial aid, and they have an immediate need to know how to use and how to navigate the online library databases.

In order to better address both faculty and student concerns with graduate education at an off-campus site, our university decided to implement a model of information literacy where the librarian would follow each graduate cohort on not only a weekly basis but also from semester to semester. The librarian would become the common element in each course throughout the two-year cycle. Faculty members generally have areas of specialization as well as preferences for certain subjects over

others. However, librarians tend to be generalists and have been educated and formally prepared to function in a multi-disciplinary environment.

The instructors, often with input from the librarian, develop the course syllabi and establish the research objectives. The instructors have the primary responsibility for establishing the class schedule, delivering class lectures, organizing collaborative projects, completing student evaluations, and tending to classroom management routines. The instructors are responsible for being certain that all department guidelines have been met and that the course content reflects the overall objectives of the graduate program.

Our experience has demonstrated that students perform best when a skill can be taught and there is a real need to use and develop that skill. Teaching information literacy in smaller segments gives students time to practice one or two skills at a time and be able to incorporate those skills into the classroom experience. Beginning graduate students often do not have a clear picture of what research is. For most, their research experience is limited to what might have been required in their undergraduate programs. As practicing teachers, they simply use Google or some other search engine exclusively to access information and consider the information to be quality research. Sometimes that might be the case; however, for most students, peer-reviewed and scholarly journals are new concepts. In addition, their experience with educational journals is limited to what teacher-related magazines might be available in their school and professional libraries. While these publications may be well-written and serve a purpose, they are not necessarily true research journals. This is evident in the students' writing and class discussions. They tend to use impressions to reinforce or support their positions rather

than making reference to research findings in the literature. They tend not to be aware of notable authors in the field.

Our primary goal is to introduce students to both scholarly research journals and mid-range professional journals, discuss how they are different from other professional publications, and instill in students the value of examining what the research has to say about educational issues. Information from scholarly and professional journals can be especially valuable for practicing teachers who might be serving on curriculum committees and other school-related committees that are responsible for making recommendations and implementing changes. Mid-range professional journals often carry the weight of scholarly journals but may be based more on action research and reflective practice than on statistical measurements or data collection.

In order to accomplish our primary goal, it is essential to help students develop confidence in their abilities to perform graduate research and to help them develop research strategies to grow in the profession. Research is something that should not stop when students complete all of the degree requirements. Scholarly research should become a part of their professional careers as teachers, educators, and administrators.

Librarians must energize the research process. One way to accomplish this is to take the library into the classroom and for the librarian to become visible. Librarians of tomorrow will need to become involved in the classroom learning process and will need to become active partners in the classroom environment. Librarians still are primarily involved in information access; however, the environment has changed dramatically. In a non-digital age, students had to come to the library to do research. There was an opportunity for librarians to help students develop search strategies and direct students to

the best resource tools. Today, students have the ability to browse both the Internet and library databases from their homes or residence halls; therefore, the opportunity for individual library instruction may not present itself.

The librarian teaches students about information literacy and helps them to be able to recognize when there is a need for research information, how to locate and evaluate information, and how to effectively use information for the issue or problem at hand. Sometimes the librarian can even become a teaching partner. Librarians can and do teach, but all too often they are perceived as introverted staff employees. It has long been demonstrated that pre-service teachers learn how to teach by observing and emulating their professors and cohort teachers. In a looping situation, the librarian should be willing to lead research discussions, be a facilitator for book talks, and even participate in class projects and collaborative groups. The level of participation will depend upon the teaching styles of each teaching team. A looping librarian needs to be a transformational leader and not merely an observer. Obviously, the librarian must stay with the cohort for its full duration and attend all class sessions if possible. The looping librarian becomes the constant factor that provides continuity as the cohort moves from one course to the next.

This unusual application of librarianship to graduate study has generated more enthusiasm and appreciation for life-long learning than either the typical library lecture or having students learn the research process on their own. Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that students will learn how to conduct quality research in a similar manner. When students are gradually introduced to research, they do not feel nearly as overwhelmed. Subsequently, student feedback to this approach to information literacy has been positive.

Librarians need to think outside of the box and be willing to consider better ways of incorporating library research into graduate study. In the style of Herbert Kohl (1994), we need to become ‘creatively maladjusted’ and be willing to investigate more interesting and effective ways to introduce students to library resources and investigative research techniques. Looping has been a significant factor in improving information literacy in our graduate cohort programs and in enhancing a high level, research-based program of study.

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