

2014

# The Flow of Learning: It's Not Just in the Classroom

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## Recommended Citation

Schoofs, Bob, "The Flow of Learning: It's Not Just in the Classroom" (2014). *Articles*. Paper 50.  
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## The Flow of Learning: It's Not Just in the Classroom

Bob Schoofs, Grand Valley State University

It was a beautiful morning. I rode my bike to the bus stop and put it on the rack at the front of the bus when it pulled up a few minutes later. As I got on the bus, I took an empty seat next to someone who teaches in one of my liaison departments. I had worked with her and her students a few times in previous semesters. She immediately began asking me questions she and her students had about using Wikipedia as part of the research process for assigned papers. She wanted to know if students used sources from a Wikipedia bibliography, was this a valid strategy and would they need to cite Wikipedia? In addition to answering her questions and explaining alternative strategies, I reminded her that I am available to come to her classes to work with her students to help them deal with just these kind of issues and to help them move to the next level. She said she would plan to contact me to schedule time to work with her students in the future.

As I thought about that encounter, I realized that it was part of a larger pattern of change in my work as an academic librarian over the last several years.

There has indeed been a great deal of change in academic libraries over recent years, just as change has been pervasive in the academy itself during these years. No longer are librarians spending multiple hours each day on just one assignment, like working at the reference desk or doing cataloging. Instead, academic librarians are involved in a variety of activities that all contribute to the mission of the academic library and the education goals of the university as a whole.

In reflecting on these changes for the academic librarian, the image that makes the most sense is flow: there is a flow now present in the ways students learn and the ways librarians are part of that learning. Some of the ways that this is happening for me are (see Figure 1):

- Planning appropriate research assignments with classroom faculty
- Teaching research concepts and strategies to students in the classroom
- Working one-on-one with students on research strategies in my office during a consultation session.
  - ⇒ This kind of consultation often flows out of time spent previously in the classroom. But an alternative that is proving increasingly successful is working with classroom faculty to require every student in the capstone class for that discipline to meet with me individually to discuss their capstone project.

Many students come to these sessions thinking they already know how to research. After discussing what they have done so far, I am able to help them move beyond how they've always done things and discover that there are many more options to broaden and strengthen their research.

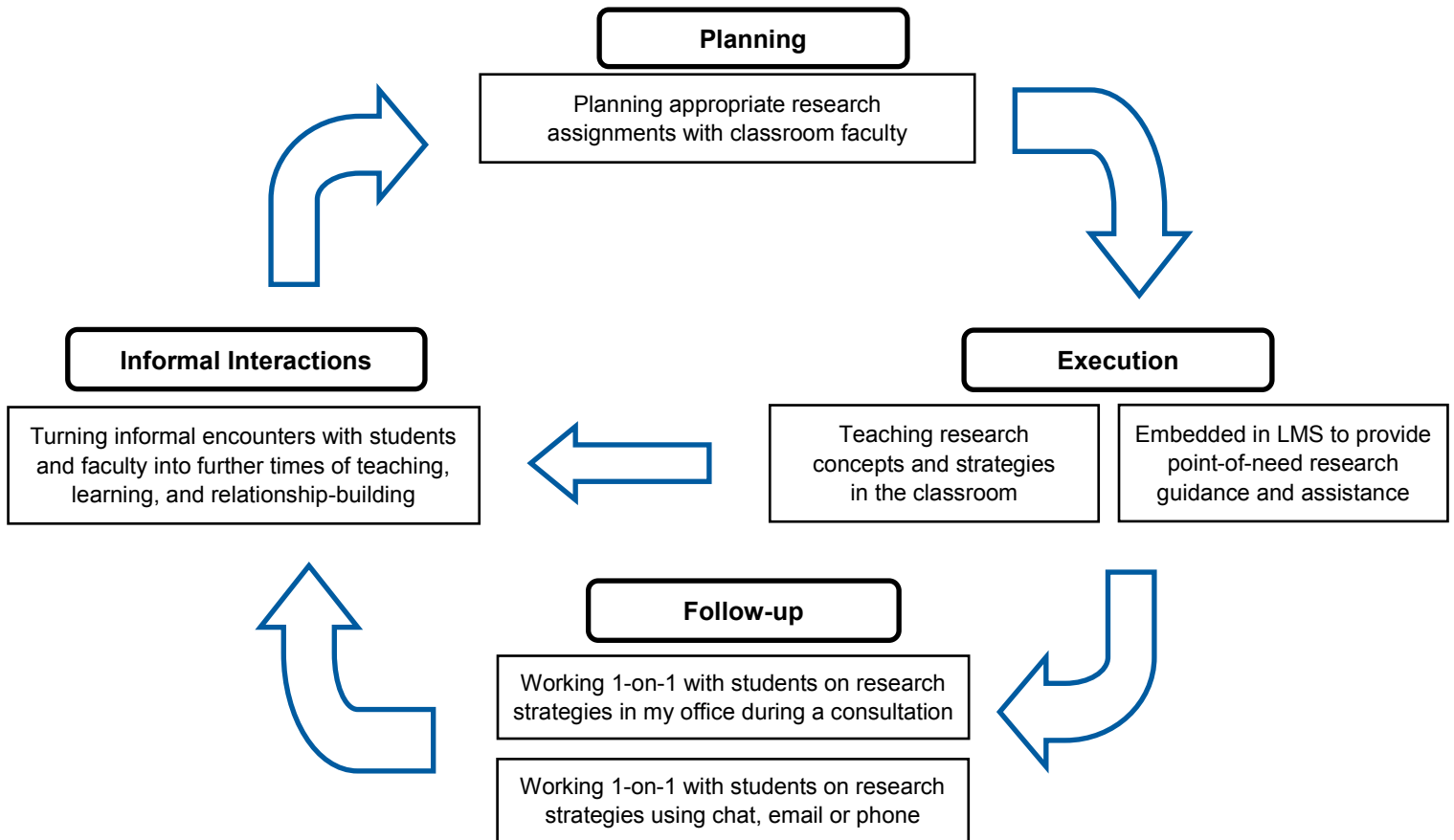
- Working one-on-one with students on research strategies using the chat service I provide via online subject guides
- Providing research instruction and advice to students via email or phone, often via links from my online subject guides
- Collaborating with classroom faculty and students by being embedded in the class's course management site in order to provide point-of-need research guidance and assistance
- Turning informal encounters with students and faculty—on campus or on the bus—into further times of teaching and learning, as well as building relationships which enhance that learning
- Working with faculty members in building collections in their disciplines

In all these activities there is a synergy and flow that enhances overall learning. This natural flow from one to another results in something greater than the parts. It is founded on growing relationships of respect and trust that enhance the students' ability to move beyond modes of inquiry they have practiced in the past to new ways of learning. It is also founded on creative, intentional strategies that result in learning opportunities that are not merely the result of serendipitous or chance events.

For the academic librarian, this kind of involvement in the learning enterprise is more challenging in many ways, but also more fulfilling. It's more challenging because there is much less of a sense of prescribed activities to engage in than was formerly true. No longer can the academic librarian rely on a specific list of activities in a job description. A higher level of involvement is necessary based on a creative response to the mission statement of the university as a whole as well as to the mission of the library itself. This can be exciting, but also involves more risk.

Sometimes our attempts to extend learning fail. For example, during Open Access Week we featured a series of information sessions on scholarly communications which, while high in quality, had very low attendance by students

**Figure 1: One Example of the Ongoing “Flow” of Teaching/Learning Activities**



and faculty members. This low attendance was likely due to our paying too much attention, when scheduling these sessions, to ensuring they were synchronized with the International Open Access Week, which takes place at the same time when GVSU holds mid-term exams. We failed to account for the flow of academic life on our campus and thus our sessions had little effect because they were outside of that flow. So, upon further review, the poor attendance was not surprising.

For the student, extending learning beyond the classroom in these ways is part of the flow of campus life in the twenty-first century. In the new Mary Idema Pew Library at Grand Valley State University we have been intentional about increasing opportunities for learning to happen outside the classroom. One way has been through the “learning alcove.” This space is located in a high traffic area that students pass as they come in and through the building. It’s meant to capture students’ interest as they go by so that they stop for a few minutes to check it out and become engaged in learning something new. A range of intellectual and provocative pieces are shown on the screen. It also provides an opportunity for students to extend the impact of their research by producing a video to be featured in the learning alcove.

Another way in which opportunities for learning flows is through interaction in groups. Learning theory posits that students often learn more when working together. In our old library, we inhibited this flow by providing mostly stationary furniture fixed to the floor, and only a few choices of furniture configuration. In our new library, we were intentional in providing easily moveable furniture so that students can quickly reposition it into groupings that best meet their needs for interaction and collaboration. Students have responded enthusiastically to this change and are appreciative of the increased opportunities to learn together.

So how did the encounter begun on the bus end? The classroom faculty member did subsequently contact me about teaching a couple of classes for her. We dialoged about what her students were studying and what they needed to know to successfully complete their research. After I taught those classes, she told me that the students found my time with them very valuable, and that she also learned a lot.

But this is actually not the end. Subsequent encounters with this professor and those students in various campus contexts will continue the flow of learning.