

Library as Thesis Laboratory

A Workshop-Based Approach to How Librarians Can Support Writing and Research

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ABSTRACT Historically, librarians have supported instruction and curricular development primarily through information literacy sessions and individual consultation. But having identified a gap in the curriculum and academic experience between faculty expectations and student writing ability in the Divinity School at Vanderbilt, as well as a dearth of support for students through the thesis writing process, the library has set out to offer our skills and expertise to guide students through the research and writing of their final theses. This contribution provides an assessment of the inaugural class that took place in the spring semester of 2018, and covers the formation of the course, from conversations with students and planning with administrators to outlining the syllabus. We discuss the actual practice of the program, its successes and pitfalls, and our assessments of the results of this initial effort, as well as our plans for moving forward with the course. By reviewing and evaluating the course, our goal is to stoke conversation about how divinity libraries can identify gaps where their expertise and experience can be leveraged, and design novel ways for librarians to complement and augment existing curricular needs around writing and research.

I. IDENTIFYING THE NEED

Given that students at theological schools and seminaries arrive with a variety of professional backgrounds and education, among

other differences, having a baseline for assessing writing ability and evaluating student work is a difficult enterprise. Like their counterparts elsewhere in higher education, institutions for religious training now offer designated writing tutors, and, in growing numbers, discrete writing centers to work with students who need assistance with adapting to (or even learning) the plural genres and conventions of academic writing.

Even for students already familiar with the protocols of academic writing, drafting a research-based thesis is a more complex and involved process. Historically, at Vanderbilt Divinity School, support given to students writing a thesis-based research project for their MTS degree has relied on the availability of the faculty member supervising the thesis to oversee the student's progress. However, when faculty are confronted with demands on their own limited research time (whether by teaching or service), their ability to coach students through the writing and research process is often markedly diminished.

Additionally, for the uninitiated, the thesis research and writing process can be an isolating experience, in contrast to the cohort feeling attending coursework. That there is usually no regularly scheduled communal activity or obligations (i.e., course) related to the thesis project can amplify that loneliness, and complicate (or even hinder altogether) writing and research.

Identifying a gap in a comprehensive way to provide writing and research assistance for students working on a masters-length thesis project (10,000 to 30,000 words), we reached out to all the stakeholders who have been or will be engaged in this process. After several conversations with students, recent graduates, and faculty, we started to notice three common themes in every discussion of the thesis writing process.

- a. *Lack of support when writing:* Students signed up for three credit hours, and had little to no actual guidance in the course of research and writing. They were virtually on their own, especially if their readers/advisers were especially busy or disinterested.
- b. *Lack of quality in student writing/research:* The other side of that coin is that the quality of students' work suffered because they were not getting the help they needed. They were simply

expected to know how to research or write, but no effort was made to actually teach them these skills. And further, by the time students were writing their thesis, they also felt like they “should know better,” and so had a hard time reaching out or knowing where to get help.

- c. *Lack of organization and communication of thesis program:* Students (and their readers!) were unclear about deadlines, rubrics, and requirements. It seemed like the thesis program was very low priority to professors and administrators. There was virtually no structure to the process.

II. PROPOSING A SOLUTION

With our experience in information literacy instruction, scholarly communication, and our own graduate training, we felt we could render research and writing assistance to thesis students in a more formalized way—in this case, a workshop-driven, transcribed non-credit course that would cover principles and practices of thesis-length research and writing and help build community for students engaged in the process.

The Divinity Library at Vanderbilt is fortunate in having a strong working relationship with the Divinity School and its administration. Our conversations with the associate dean for academic affairs yielded many ideas, and much enthusiasm and continued gratitude for proposing to design a course for MTS students (as well as others interested). With her assistance, we were able to be listed in the course schedule as a numbered class (DIV 7996: MTS Thesis Workshop Course) and integrated into the university’s course management system.

As mentioned earlier, writing tutors furnish an indispensable service to students, and therefore we wanted their involvement in the development and instruction of the course. The Divinity School hires one of the Graduate Department of Religion PhD students each year to serve as the school’s designated writing tutor. Students can schedule appointments or utilize the tutor’s office hours to get help developing thesis statements and editing papers. The writing tutor contributed to the course, offering their expertise and also opening their office to help students with their writing at various points in the

process. The relationship built between the students and the writing tutor by having the tutor participate in the class made the students more likely to utilize the tutor's skills, not only for their thesis but for their writing in other classes as well.

III. COURSE STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

The syllabus for the course was designed around the already-established deadlines from the program schedule. While it may seem an obvious (and necessary) way to schedule class meetings and determine content, it also furnished the ancillary benefit of reminding students of deadlines that they may or may not have recalled.

One of the guiding principles of the course was to (re)acquaint students with the conventions of academic writing and research, as well as help expose practices related to student work presupposed by faculty. While second nature for faculty, how to structure an argument, cite a source, read texts critically and quickly, organize research, etc. are skills students are not usually taught but rather expected to just know.

In addition to excerpts from *The Craft of Research*, the key texts we used were Andrew Abbott's *Digital Paper* and Wendy Belcher's *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks*. Belcher's workbook-type guide is great for editing and organizing, and Abbott's book outlines his own research process, which offers helpful methods to envision how to approach a master's thesis-length (or longer) project.

We started the course with lectures, discussions, and activities centered on designing a research question and thesis (even though most students had already done some manner of this before the semester began) and then continued on to literature reviews and project proposals. The in-classroom content worked toward helping students to submit a preliminary bibliography and proposal outline by the first deadline. The class then worked on developing arguments, structure, and outlines so that they would be prepared to write their first draft over spring break and submit it to their first reader by the following week's due date. Finally, the last few weeks were about tightening the arguments, hitting the major points, and finishing up the writing and edits.

IV. THE STUDENTS AND SEMESTER

Initially, the assistant dean for academic affairs enrolled all MTS students working on a thesis. But inasmuch as the class was not credit-bearing, and other schedule conflicts arose, our central core of students was much smaller.

For most of the semester, we typically had six students, including one who was putting together a museum/exhibit project, as well as two non-thesis students who wanted to get a head start and learn whatever tips and tricks we could teach them before they had to actually get started on their thesis projects. Owing to being a zero-credit course, however, our attendance was inconsistent enough to entirely eliminate one course feature, the use of writing buddies. We had designed sessions and in-class workshoping around writing pairs and quickly discovered that this approach is impossible if students are not required to attend.

The first half of the semester, before the first full draft was due upon return from spring break, was spent with some lecture each class as well as check-ins of where students were in their research, bibliography development, thesis statements, outlines, and the like.

However, we discovered in the second half of the semester that the course served almost as a pastoral and at times therapeutic space for students working through the thesis writing and research process (accompanied by the existential concerns of their impending graduation). Indeed, the original idea of building community by writing was supplemented (and eclipsed) by building community *because* of the writing. While often unacknowledged, attention to student well-being proved in this context to be an additional (and necessary) benefit of the course.

Surveying students after the course's conclusion, we found their responses were more or less as expected. Students appreciated having a community to hold them accountable (and commiserate with) in the writing process, to bounce ideas off of, and to provide feedback. They did not feel like they had time or motivation to complete the readings for each class, though they found the content we covered from those readings helpful. It helped them "keep on top of deadlines" and "feel less alone."

V. GOING FORWARD

Based on student feedback and faculty/administration enthusiasm, we feel confident that future iterations of this course will continue to assist students throughout the thesis writing and research process. At Vanderbilt, this need will be more exigent with the introduction of curricular changes in Fall 2018 that will require more students in the MTS program to write a thesis.

Our discussions with the associate dean for academic affairs have stoked an interest in making the course a requirement for MTS thesis writers and therefore either credit bearing or baked into the thesis credits. Moreover, we have discussed extending something similar to non-thesis students, as well as others—whether MTS or MDiv candidates—interested in working on longer writing. Feedback from students solicited both formally and informally emphasized how something like the research and writing “tips and tricks” would have served them even better if introduced earlier in their degree program—helping them to pull back the curtain of knowledge about scholarly practices presumed by the faculty. Ultimately, what our experience with the course emphasized was that in identifying gaps and leveraging our own experience and expertise, there are manifold opportunities to reimagine outreach through instruction in novel ways; in so doing, we helped further highlight how a receptive faculty and student community can understand what the library can offer in an expanded field.