Grey Literature : A Pilot Course constructed and implemented via Distance Education

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Abstract

Over the past years, training courses, guest lectures, seminars and workshops have been organized by information professionals on the topic of grey literature. Most of these endeavours have undoubtedly had some impact on this field of information, however difficult it would be to measure. Many of these course lectures were given within existing programs and may have only been one-time offerings. At the Eighth International Conference on Grey Literature (New Orleans, 2006), two of the authors in this pilot study participated in a roundtable on curriculum development and grey literature. For their part, it was more important to find a proper structure within which to further construct an accredited course than to simply provide an inventory of *ad hoc* training courses or workshops, which deal/dealt with grey literature. The intended structure would have to incorporate the expertise of a number of stakeholders in order to guarantee potential students course credit, access to courseware and resources, qualified instruction, etc. Early on, it became evident that these stakeholders need not be physically present within one particular academic institution, but could rather be brought together in a joint venture by way of distance education. This paper will focus on the stakeholders in the pilot program and the specialization of each, as well as the students who are profiled and the knowledge and skills from which they would benefit. Built into the pilot is the maintenance of an ongoing log that would capture the pilot courses' development and progress, facilitate a SWOT analysis, enable comparison with other distance education courses in the LIS (Library and Information Studies) sector, and ultimately substantiate this course offering beyond a pilot phase to academic institutions with degree programs in information and other related fields on undergraduate and graduate levels.

Background

At the Fourth International Conference on Grey Literature (Washington D.C., 1999), Julia Gelfand presented a paper dealing with grey literature and distance education[1]. At the Sixth International Conference on Grey Literature (New York, 2004), the results of an online survey in which 102 respondents participated not

only indicated that an increasing number information professionals involved in grey literature were also involved in teaching and instruction but also they were in agreement with the statement (one of the 22 items on the questionnaire) that grey literature warrants a special field in information studies[2]. More recently, at the Eighth International Conference on Grey Literature (New Orleans, 2006) during a Roundtable on Curriculum Development and Grey Literature[3] in which two of the co-authors in this study participated - both the content and its subsequent groupings for a proposed course on grey literature was drafted. This study seeks to harness the results of the above mentioned conferences incorporating them in a proposal for a pilot course on grey literature that would be offered for full academic credit.

Premise and Goal

If Grey Literature constitutes a field in Library and Information Studies,
then it must be offered to LIS students as an accredited college course.
Given the state of the art in grey literature, Distance Education now offers
a viable means of implementing an accredited course on Grey Literature

Method of Approach

In order to proceed further based on the premise and goal set forth in this paper, it was necessary to establish the status quo found in teaching grey literature to students, to confirm the authors' position that there was no course for credit entitled 'grey literature' or where 'grey literature' was the primary topic, and finally to construct and implement a pilot course on grey literature that would be offered at an accredited academic institution via distance education. The steps or phases in our approach were not in strict sequential order but were rather carried out by the team of authors/researchers simultaneously and monitored throughout the study. In order to establish what we refer to as the status quo, a survey was devised and carried out via an online, bilingual questionnaire. The eight item questionnaire in English and French was made available on GreyNet's website and was further distributed via channels belonging to INIST and GreyNet. The choice of these channels was based on the organizational affiliations of the authors. The duration of the online questionnaire was one month (September 10th - October 10th 2007) after which the responses were processed in Excel. The eight item questionnaire can be found as an *appendix* to this paper. The literature search carried out in this study was not intended to be exhaustive nor comprehensive. The authors were less interested in providing an inventory of courses that had been offered dealing with grey literature than confirming their premise that no

course for credit entitled grey literature was part of an existing academic program. Examples from the literature search linked to findings from our own questionnaire were to offer a control for our study. Finally, a pilot course for credit entitled 'grey literature' was constructed and submitted in the spring of 2007, and was later approved by the University of New Orleans Distance Education Department for the fall 2007 semester.

Results of the Survey

A total of 19 online questionnaires were completed and returned, 18 of which were valid and one of which was determined invalid. Based on the domain name in the email address, the respondents were from 10 countries in North America and Europe. Fourteen of the respondents were from universities, two from LIS colleges, and two from research institutes. Thirteen of the respondents held the status of an instructor, two were former students, and three did not respond to the item. Five of the respondents held a doctorate, thirteen a master's degree, eight a bachelor's degree and one did not respond to the item. Six of the 18 respondents had completed a thesis or research project on grey literature. Nine of the respondents participated in one or more of the conferences in the GL-Series, while the other nine had not. Examining further the results of the survey, it became clear that another item should have been added to the questionnaire dealing with the duration of the course and the percentage of which that dealt with grey literature?

Looking at the course titles (item 5), only one explicitly refers to the production of a document. However, when we examine the content of the courses (item 6), we find that others do mention aspects dealing with the production side of grey literature. Nevertheless, these were far outnumbered by aspects involved in the search, access, and distribution of grey literature. We also find that the content of the courses (item 6) were either very specific to one aspect of grey literature *e.g.* collection development or searching for grey literature; while other courses treated a number of aspects of grey literature - ranging from its history and definition to problems and challenges it faces.

It became apparent that the production and publishing side of grey literature was significantly less a part of the content taught than the processing, distribution, and access to grey literature. This seems to ignore the accepted definition of grey literature known as the Luxembourg convention (1997) "that which is produced on all levels of government, academics, business and industry in print and electronic formats not controlled by commercial publishers"[4]… "*i.e.* where publishing is not the primary activity of the producing body"[5]. This clarification

was added after the Sixth International Conference on Grey Literature in New York (2004) and was based on findings from two research projects in which GreyNet participated. One was an online survey, where 77% of the respondents agreed that the Luxembourg definition on grey literature still holds with or without modification[6]. And, the other a citation analysis in which the authors "… find that the term 'commercial' in the Luxembourg definition of grey literature needs to be further elaborated in order to better serve its purpose"[7]. From the current authors' perspective, a course on grey literature should pay equal attention to the production side of grey literature: how is it produced, who are the producers and publishers, the review process, rights issues, marketing and distribution strategies, as well as economic models available for grey publishers. And, in so doing, the misnomer that grey literature is 'unpublished' or 'non-published' would be countered and adequately contested.

We also find that instructors use intermittently less defined terms such as 'fugitive literature', 'ephemera', or 'non-conventional literature', when they are actually referring grey literature. It is almost as if LIS instructors are unaware of research that has been carried out over the past 15 years by hundreds of researchers and authors in the field of grey literature. Results that have been published in a variety of document types: conference papers, proceedings, journal articles, reports, etc. in both print and electronic formats. This might even lead us to suggest that a course on grey literature may not only be worthwhile for LIS students but also would have a place for LIS instructors via continuing education and teacher accreditation programs. However, this would take us well beyond the scope of our present study – the construction and implementation of a pilot course on grey literature via distance education.

Pilot Course for Credit on Grey Literature

During the first quarter of 2007, GreyNet established contact with the Provost at the University of New Orleans (UNO) and EBSCO Publishing. Together, these three organizations would comprise the major stakeholders in the pilot course on grey literature. UNO would provide an established distance education program, registration for potential students, and subsequent accreditation. EBSCO would provide online access to the full-text journal articles comprising the required readings for the course, and GreyNet in cooperation with INIST, one of its Associate Members, would carry out the selection and development of resources and courseware required for the pilot and the instruction of students. In the spring of 2007, the pilot course entitled 'Grey Literature' was submitted to the

UNO Director of Distance Education; and it was later approved as a course offering for the fall 2007 semester.

System Software and Courseware

UNO provided access to Blackboard (Bb)[8], the system software that enabled email connectivity, a dedicated announcement board, document archive, up-to-date information on student enrolment, the grade book, and other useful functions. GreyNet then in turn used Bb to post and archive the instructor's CV, the Syllabus including the course title and description, information about the course assignments and assessment, a weekly outline of the semester, and due dates for student assignments. The required reading list (e-Reader) was also posted. The e-Reader was divided into five sections, each section dealing with a particular aspect of grey literature. Each section contained four assigned articles. The full-text of all 20 journal articles was available via EBSCO's LISTA-FT (Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts) full-text database[9]. This resource was available to all UNO students both on and off campus. And, an Appendix to the e-Reader provided links to other resources in grey literature.

The test on the assigned readings was made available to the students 24 hours prior to its due date. Information sheets pertaining to the other two assignments – the case study and the design of research proposal on grey literature - were likewise posted and archived in Bb. The results of the test on the assigned readings and the results of the other two course assignments weighed equally for a third of the semester grade. Each of which covered a five week period in the semester. By the 16th week, the last assignment had to already have been submitted to the instructor for assessment, grading, and final posting of the grades.

Student Results

During the initial period of enrolment, 14 students registered for the course on grey literature (EDLS 4990) in the fall 2007 semester. They came primarily from the departments of general education and library science. Nine of the students completed the course, while the remaining six dropped within the grace period. Six of the students who completed the course were senior undergraduates, one junior, and two sophomores. It was originally the understanding that only upper-level undergraduates *i.e.* juniors and seniors would be admitted to this course. Interesting to note that the two sophomores received the lowest grades averaging (72.5%) compared with the overall grade average of 76.9%. On the assigned readings test, the students had a 76.4% grade average, on the Case

Study an 81.3% grade average, and on the Design of a Research Proposal, a 73.1% grade average. The highest student grade for the semester was 95% and the lowest was 71.7%.

Course Results

The Syllabus and 16 week planner, which was posted to Bb in August, remained unchanged throughout the semester. Three credit hours were given to the nine students who completed the course. The withdrawal rate for this course was 35.7% compared with an average of 20% for distance education courses. All students who registered for this course were already previously enrolled at UNO. Three students outside UNO inquired about possible enrolment, but their registrations were never recorded. The course instructor had ca. 125 email communications with students during the course and ca. 80 email communications with UNO administrators. The instructor posted 14 messages to Bb during the course of the semester – nine of which were permanent postings and five of which were temporary ones. The instructor personally met once during the semester with the Director of the UNO Distance Education program in New Orleans and once with the co-authors in the pilot study. Both meetings were used to discuss the progress of the course and the approach that would be used to evaluate the course and its findings.

Some Closing Remarks

Our survey and literature search affirm that no prior course-for-credit had been either given or taken on grey literature. Based on the results that are available, the pilot course met with measurable success for all of the stakeholders. While the results from the student evaluation forms and the post-semester assessment by UNO faculty are still forthcoming, we hope they will provide answers to those questions that arose during the course of the semester and which are still unanswered: Should the course be available to General Education as well as LIS students? Should a student who completes the course be allowed to carry out his/her research proposal for further academic credit? Can this course be marketed to other LIS Colleges and Schools? Is the content and structure of the course viable beyond a Distance Education Program?

Based on the limited results of our pilot, Distance Education does provide an adequate structure for a college level course on Grey Literature. Emphasis should be placed on securing investments that have already been made. And finally, the results from this pilot will no doubt contribute to the development of course content as well as course instruction on grey literature.

Appendix:

BILINGUAL SURVEY ON GREY LITERATURE IN EDUCATION

This survey seeks to evaluate the place grey literature holds today in courses offered in Library and Information Science. It is carried out in advance of the Panel Session on Education that will be held during the Ninth International Conference on Grey Literature this December in Antwerp, Belgium. The survey is carried out via the distribution channels of INIST and GreyNet and should take no more than 5 minutes to complete. Respondents will have until October 10, 2007 to complete the online questionnaire, below.

L'enquête suivante cherche à évaluer la place de la littérature grise dans l'enseignement des sciences de l'information. Elle est menée par l'INIST et Greynet dans le contexte d'une session sur l'éducation lors de la 9ème Conférence internationale sur la littérature grise à Anvers/Belgique en décembre 2007. 5 Minutes devraient suffire pour remplir le questionnaire.

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1. Your email address?
   Votre adresse mél?

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2. Are you a Student/former Student or an Instructor?
   Etes-vous un étudiant, un ancien étudiant ou un enseignant en IST?

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3. On what level(s) of education are/were you engaged (e.g. BA, MA, PhD, etc.)?
   Quel est le niveau d'études suivis / enseignés (licence, mastère, thèse)?

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4. What is the name of your academic institution?
   Quel est le nom de votre université?

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5. What is the title of the course in which grey literature is covered?
   Quel est le titre du cours qui parle de la littérature grise?

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6. Can you briefly describe the content dealt with on grey literature?
   Décrivez-nous brièvement le contenu de l'enseignement sur la littérature grise?

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7. Did you complete a thesis or research project on a subject dealing with GL?
   Votre mémoire/thèse ou projet d'étude porte-t-il sur un sujet touchant/incluant la littérature grise ?

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8. Other Comments?
   Autres commentaires?

Thank You / *Merci*   10/SEPT/07

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