

# Collaboration with Librarian in Online Social Work Research Course

## Reflective Narrative

Tae Kyung Park<sup>1</sup> and David Arredondo<sup>2</sup>

1 Assistant Professor, Social Work, University of Colorado Colorado Springs <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4942-2573>

2 Assistant Professor, Collection Services Librarian, University of Nebraska at Kearney <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6554-1850>

---

Corresponding author: **Tae Kyung Park**

Email: [tpark4@uccs.edu](mailto:tpark4@uccs.edu)

---

## Abstract

Teaching literature review skills in social work research course often utilises a one-shot instruction session such as a guest speaker from the library or a visit to the library. However, this model is not practical for students in asynchronous online courses. While it has become common for research courses to include assistance from libraries through one-shot instruction sessions, the effectiveness of such assistance, whether in the one-shot model or through embedded librarianship, has not been studied or shared in the social work education literature. This teaching note shares our experiences and lessons learned from an online undergraduate social work research course that adopted embedded librarianship. The collaboration with the librarian through the embedded librarianship had a noticeable impact on the quality of student assignments in the research course. As online education continues to grow rapidly in social work, embedded librarianship through technology presents a promising tool to help social work students become familiar with literature search and library resources through learning by doing.

**Keywords:** *Embedded librarianship; Social work research course; Online social work education; Literature review skills*

## Introduction

Many disciplines in the social sciences, such as sociology, psychology, criminal justice, and social work, offer research courses (across the entirety of this paper, the term research course is adopted, encompassing not only the research subject but also other pertinent terms integral to the pedagogical delivery of research instruction within the realm of higher education) in their undergraduate programs. However, students in these disciplines often come to research courses with negative feelings such as anxiety or lack of confidence due to the perception that research is solely about statistics or mathematics (Lalayants, 2012; Maschi et al., 2013; Vinjamuri et al., 2017). Internationally, social work education and the professional bodies include the competency to understand research evidence from multiple sources and to translate it into practice to improve outcomes (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2020; Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015; Joubert et al., 2017; Social Work England, 2021). To achieve this goal, social work programs typically offer separate research courses, but also infuse components of competency in evidence-based practice into their curriculum. However, given students' reluctance to research courses, social work education scholars have developed strategies to engage students through experiential learning, team-based learning, and adult-learning principles (Macke & Tapp, 2012; MacIntyre & Paul, 2013; Steinberg & Vinjamuri, 2014; Vinjamuri et al., 2017).

As literature review skills are foundational to evidence-based practice, research courses often include library information sessions in their curriculum to enhance students' proficiency in literature search (Hoffman et al., 2017; MacIntyre & Paul, 2013). These sessions may take the form of a guest lecture or visit to the school's library in a one-shot instruction session. However, this one-shot model is often not enough to cover the broad topics of literature review, such as introducing databases, distinguishing peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles, and identifying empirical research articles (Kesselman & Watstein, 2009; Spievak & Hayes-Bohanan, 2013; Strasz, 2021). In addition, students in asynchronous online courses may not benefit from this one-shot guest lecture. To address this, embedded librarianship was developed as a new approach to library information sessions (Drewes & Hoffman, 2010; Hoffman et al., 2017). This model involves providing librarian assistance throughout the semester, either physically or through technology, and adopts a learning-by-doing approach, allowing students to meet librarians and practise literature search. The type of embedded librarianship used depends on the needs of students and the curriculum (Hoffman et al., 2017). Because it is flexible and accommodates students' schedules, this embedded model can be particularly beneficial for online students. This teaching note aims to share our experiences and lessons learned from an online undergraduate social work research course that adopted embedded librarianship.

## Description of collaboration and embedded librarianship

### *Course description*

The course required students to write a research proposal with a comprehensive literature review as their final paper. Additionally, the instructor designed the course to incorporate literature review exercises throughout the semester. These exercises required students to search for empirical research articles based on the topics covered each week and analyse them to reinforce what they learned in online class activities during the week. Thus, literature search skills, particularly searching for peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles, were essential in this course. However, the instructor noticed that many students had struggled to find suitable research articles for their assignments and write literature reviews in a scholarly fashion across the preceding classes during the three-year span of teaching research courses.

The assignment guidelines required students to cite only peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles and empirical research articles, with a minimum of 10 articles published within the last 10 years. Students were advised to avoid citing dissertations, government reports, and conceptual papers. Despite the assignment being a group project for two to three members, most groups cited dissertations or government reports that were openly available. The instructor suspected that this was because students continued to use Google Scholar as their primary search engine, despite being advised not to. Additionally, the one or two weeks of lectures on literature review seemed inadequate for students to narrow down their research proposal topics. As educators might recognise, the advantages, individual consulting sessions could be beneficial for students to better understand the research process, including writing literature reviews. However, many of educators who teach research courses lack the resources for one-on-one consulting time to guide students from literature search to identifying knowledge gaps, and forming research questions, and hypotheses.

### **Development and design of collaboration and embedded librarianship**

The collaborative work introduced in this teaching note was produced within the context of an online undergraduate social work research course. The instructor had been teaching the course, both online and in-person, since 2018 and had invited a librarian to give a one-hour library information session on literature search using databases through the institution's library during week three of each semester. The face-to-face session was recorded and shared with online students. When this collaboration was adopted, the video of the library information session recorded from face-to-face sessions continued to be shared in the online class.

The previous three years of teaching research courses provided valuable guidance for the collaboration between the instructor and the librarian. The librarian's active participation in the course played a significant role in developing this collaborative initiative. Each semester, the instructor and librarian met to discuss the one-shot library session, using insights gained from previous semesters to make improvements. During one of these meetings, the instructor learned that the librarian had assisted a student from another major in narrowing down their research topic. This led the instructor to request that the librarian provide consulting sessions with each project group for the research course, specifically focusing on literature search and how to narrow down research topics.

To ensure that students received this support, the instructor required them to attend a consulting session with the librarian. Failure to attend a session resulted in a deduction of points on their literature review paper. The librarian kept records of which groups received consultations and reported this information to the instructor.

Before meeting with the librarian, students were required to watch a library information session video, which was recorded during an in-person research course and shared with online class. To accommodate online students, the librarian offered flexible meeting times outside of office hours, including weekends, and conducted all sessions via Zoom. Although these were group projects, not all members had to attend the consulting sessions. The librarian was flexible in providing these sessions, and group members who did attend were expected to share information with those who did not attend the session. When necessary, sessions were recorded and shared with missing members, with the permission of the students. The length of each consultation varied, ranging from 30 minutes to one hour, depending on the needs of each group. The librarian tailored the session to the specific topic and needs of each group. For example, specific search terms were used for each group's topic, and technical skills were covered, such as distinguishing peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles from non-scholarly articles, identifying empirical and non-empirical research articles, and introducing the citation management software Zotero. The consulting sessions also covered topics such as how to identify knowledge gaps in research topics, and groups were allowed to request follow-up sessions if needed.

## Outcomes

The collaboration with the librarian had a noticeable impact on the quality of student assignments in the research course. The number of references listed increased, with more than half of the groups listing more than the required 10 peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles. Importantly, there was a notable reduction in the use of non-empirical research articles, which was a common issue in previous semesters. This improvement in quality was a result of the librarian's assistance, which allowed the instructor to spend more class time on demonstrating how to review and synthesise research articles rather than teaching basic literature search skills.

The impact of the collaboration was also evident in the weekly exercises, where students were required to find empirical research articles related to each session's topics. All groups who received a library consulting session were able to locate appropriate articles without difficulty, and there was no need for the instructor's additional assistance. This contrasted with previous semesters, where more than 80% of groups struggled to find suitable articles, often relying on dissertations or government reports. Moreover, students' familiarity with the use of the library and databases increased significantly after the consulting sessions. For example, students corresponded with the professor, articulating numerous inquiries, particularly regarding Zotero; the professor would direct students to contact the librarian with these questions, and the librarian confirmed with the professor when students reached out for additional help. Students also apprised the professor of their interaction with the librarian, affirming resolution to their inquiry regarding Zotero.

Another illustration pertains to students' proficiency in locating pertinent articles, in contrast to an inclination toward dissertations or government reports. The predilection of online students for dissertations and government reports stemmed from a lack of awareness of how to use library resources from off-campus to search for and retrieve research articles, which are often paywalled to unaffiliated users, unlike dissertations and government reports which are easier to find in an open web search using Google. After engaging with the librarian, students habituated themselves to the exploration of scholarly journals through the library's database. Some students even mentioned their follow-up meetings with the librarian in their weekly exercises. Overall, the collaboration with the librarian had a positive impact on student performance in the research course, improving their literature search skills and the quality of their assignments.

## Conclusion

While it has become common for research courses to include assistance from libraries through one-shot instruction sessions, the effectiveness of such assistance, whether in the one-shot model or through embedded librarianship, has not been studied or shared in the social work education literature. As education in the field of social work is experiencing rapid global growth (CSWE, 2021; Goldingay, 2020), embedded librarianship through technology presents a promising tool to help social work students become familiar with literature search and library resources through learning by doing. We recommend that social work educators who are unfamiliar with embedded librarianship reach out to their institution's library and inquire about the extent to which embedded librarianship is available.

As this case study was retrospectively documented, the author presents their experiences as outcomes of adopting embedded librarianship in an online social work research course. The author recognizes that one of the biggest contributing factors to the positive outcomes was the librarian's commitment to helping students with a flexible schedule for online students. We recommend social work educators engage in regular meetings and sustained communication with librarians, facilitating the exchange of information pertaining to course assignments and student groups.

Another pivotal element involves integrating the consulting session into the assignment structure and assigning grades accordingly. Despite students being apprised of the availability of librarians and encouraged to seek their assistance, proactive utilisation of resources tends to be contingent upon academic requirements. Consequently, when transitioning from a one-shot model to embedded librarianship, it is also recommended for social work educators to incorporate the consulting session into the grading process, ensuring that students actively engage with librarians and derive maximum benefit from the consultation. Finally, this paper suggests that collaboration between librarians and social work educators can improve students' comfort level with research courses, with constant discussion on how to improve being a key component of collaboration success.

Considering the diverse contexts of social work education across countries, it is imperative to acknowledge that the findings of this case study may not universally apply and may be applicable only to the United States. Considering the diverse contexts of social work education across countries, it is imperative to acknowledge that the findings of this case study may not universally apply. Consequently, we suggest social work educators contemplate the exploration of the embedded librarianship model and, subsequently, endeavour to formulate a customised framework for its integration into their specific educational milieu.

## References

- Australian Association of Social Work. (2020). *Code of ethics*. <https://aasw-prod.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/AASW-Code-of-Ethics-2020.pdf>
- Council on Social Work Education. (2015). *Findings from the 2015 State of Field Education Survey: A Survey of Directors of Field Education on Administrative Models, Staffing, and Resources*. Alexandria, VA. <https://cswc.org/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=cabf3e01-6800-4c2a-b14f-aaac4f84cdb5>
- Council on Social Work Education. (2021). *2020 statistics on social work education in the United States*. Alexandria, VA. <file:///C:/Users/parkt2/Downloads/2022-EPAS-Draft-2.pdf>
- Drewes, K., & Hoffman, N. (2010). Academic embedded librarianship: An introduction. *Public Services Quarterly*, 6(2-3), 75–82.
- Goldingay, S., Hodgson, D., Boddy, J., Nipperess, S., & Watts, L. (2020). Online and blended social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia: Negotiating the tensions. *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education*, 21(2), 62–74.
- Hoffman, N., Beatty, S., Feng, P., & Lee, J. (2017). Teaching research skills through embedded librarianship. *Reference Services Review*, 45(2), 211–226.
- Joubert, L., Hebel, L., McNeill, A., Firth, S., McFadden, E., & Hocking, A. (2017). Teaching research in social work through academic practitioner partnerships: Knowledge, competency and confidence. *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education*, 19(1), 37–47.
- Kesselman, M. A., & Watstein, S. B. (2009). Creating opportunities: Embedded librarians. *Journal of Library Administration*, 49(4), 383–400. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930820902832538>
- Lalayants, M. (2012). Overcoming graduate students' negative perceptions of statistics. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 32(4), 356–375.
- MacIntyre, G., & Paul, S. (2013). Teaching research in social work: Capacity and challenge. *British Journal of Social Work*, 43(4), 685–702.
- Macke, C., & Tapp, K. (2012). Teaching research to MSW students: Effectiveness of the team-based learning pedagogy. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 32(2), 148–160.
- Maschi, T., Wells, M., Yoder Slater, G., MacMillan, T., & Ristow, J. (2013). Social work students' research-related anxiety and self-efficacy: Research instructors' perceptions and teaching innovations. *Social Work Education*, 32(6), 800–817.
- Social Work England. (2019). *Qualifying education and training standards guidance*. <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/qualifying-education-and-training-standards-guidance-2021/>
- Spievak, E. R., & Hayes-Bohanan, P. (2013). Just enough of a good thing: Indications of long-term efficacy in one-shot library instruction. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 39(6), 488–499.
- Steinberg, D. M., & Vinjamuri, M. K. (2014). Activating adult-learning principles through small groups in preparing social work students to achieve CSWE research competencies. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 34(4), 363–383.
- Strasz, M. (2021). Best practices for embedded librarian service: Connecting with students online. *College & Research Libraries News*, 82(2), 85. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.82.2.85>
- Vinjamuri, M., Warde, B., & Kolb, P. (2017). The reflective diary: An experiential tool for enhancing social work students' research learning. *Social Work Education*, 36(8), 933–945.