SCAFFOLDING A SEQUENCE OF ASSIGNMENTS FOR A RESEARCH PAPER/PROJECT

Scaffolding a research assignment can answer most/all of the questions that worry students. How many pages (or how long, if a presentation)? How many outside sources? What kinds of sources are acceptable—scholarly/popular, dates of publication, articles/books/web? Are there any limitations on the topics I may choose? What topics may I choose? This is especially important for lower division students who are often new to research or have very little practice with it.

In Engaging Ideas (2011) John Bean identifies subskills of the research process that are difficult for students:

• How to ask discipline-appropriate research questions.
• How to establish a rhetorical context.
• How/why to find sources.
• How to take thoughtful notes.
• How to integrate sources into paper.
• How to cite and document sources.

What does scaffolding your research assignments accomplish?

• Explicitly identifies everything students should do to complete the assignment.
• Allows for more intervention at the point where it’s most useful.
• Creates assignments that build on one another.
• Ensures that students include all the steps you want to see.
• Increases consistency in grading since students will be less likely to take the assignment in different directions based on their individual interpretations of what they are supposed to do.

Here’s an example of a series of scaffolded assignments for a research process:

1. Write a preliminary research proposal outlining the question and your current thinking on the argument. Identify any scholarship (articles, books) you already know that is relevant (from class readings and discussion, prior knowledge, preliminary research, etc.).

2. Develop an annotated bibliography of 5 sources. At least 3 of the sources must be scholarly articles. For each entry the annotation should state the author’s argument and 2-4 examples of the author’s supporting evidence.

3. In a 2-3 page paper, revise your preliminary research proposal. State the revised question and the direction of the argument, and outline the support from 2 scholarly sources important for your argument.

4. Revise the annotated bibliography, removing irrelevant sources; adding new, relevant ones.

5. Write a first draft of your paper. Integrate your own ideas and those of the scholars whose work you have used. Attribute sources appropriately. Be consistent in using [MLA/APA/etc.] style for notes and bibliography.

   Note: Students often contribute brilliantly to class discussions, integrating the ideas of scholars and peers very effectively to provide support for their own ideas or to serve as a point of disagreement to argue. Moving from talking/discussion to writing can be challenging. Pointing out during class discussions when someone has effectively integrated another’s ideas to make their own point can raise awareness of how it’s done and may make the transition to writing easier.

6. For the final draft of your paper, consider comments from your professor, your peers, and the librarian(s) you have consulted to revise the first draft.

Questions for you: In which places in the above sequence might librarians most effectively support student research? What types of librarian support (class workshop, individual appointment, response to a proposal or bibliography, etc.) would be most valuable in each section?