


“Systematic Review(ish) Assignments” Workshop for Faculty: Building Effective Evidence Synthesis Researchers through Targeted Learning Objectives and Assignments

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Abstract

Faculty use research projects as classroom assignments to develop students' skills as researchers, but for systematic review project assignments, this often results in substantial workloads for librarians beyond the classroom. We sought to answer how librarians can help students gain classroom experience in evidence synthesis without compromising research integrity by developing a librarian-led workshop for faculty on aligning their student learning goals to scaffolded, “systematic review-ish” assignments. Our goal is to proactively improve the learning experience for students while encouraging more accurate recognition of the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for evidence synthesis. This brief report explains the development of the “SR-ish” assignments workshop and how to locate and contribute to the project to support both faculty instruction and student success at your institution. All project materials, including the workshop slides, activities and assessments, sharable assignment templates, and a wiki, are available on Open Science Framework^{1,2} for others to adapt or adopt to their own institutional contexts.

Background

Faculty sometimes use systematic reviews (SRs) as classroom assignments to develop students' skills as researchers. Since a systematic review depends on development of a systematic and comprehensive search design for a research question, these assignments frequently result in substantial time, effort, and support from librarians beyond the classroom, often without prior discussion or collaboration from said instructors. We sought to answer how students can gain classroom experience in evidence synthesis methods without compromising research integrity by developing a workshop for faculty. The principal aim of this workshop is to first encourage instructors and program coordinators to recognize the limitations and challenges of classroom SR production, such as timeline, team composition, and appropriate question scope, and then to identify scaffolded, "systematic review-ish" assignments that mitigate these challenges while meeting course or program learning outcomes. Additionally, with this workshop we seek to proactively improve the learning experience for students and encourage more accurate recognition of the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for evidence synthesis.

Experience

A workshop aimed at faculty instructors was developed in the 2023-2024 academic year with three learning objectives for attendees: 1) recognize the essential components and processes of an SR and the challenges these create in the classroom environment, 2) unpack and prioritize the student learning goals that are being addressed via an SR assignment, and 3) select between various alternative assignments to meet said classroom learning goals without compromising the quality of the methods necessary to produce an SR. The workshop design incorporates discussion prompts and formative assessment to both enhance reflective learning and facilitate dialogue between instructors and librarians.

This workshop was offered at two Carnegie Classification Research I universities in March 2024, one with a medical school and the other with a school of veterinary medicine. A post-workshop survey asked attendees to assess the workshop design, the appropriateness of the seven potential student learning goals for SR assignments presented, and the feasibility of alternative assignment options provided. Both workshops received low attendance with even less feedback, so the authors have elected not to share the responses received to protect respondent privacy. Low attendance was likely due to challenges with advertising and scheduling during the academic year, as indicated by one author receiving multiple direct emails regarding conflicting schedules and asking if the session could be offered again in the future. This issue can be mitigated by offering additional workshop offerings in the future. A primary workshop discussion point was the challenge of advising and mentoring graduate students on SR projects at the individual or thesis/dissertation level, a pain point which the authors are further exploring how to address.

Takeaways

This workshop was designed to be flexible and shared under a CC-BY license, allowing other librarians to adopt and adapt all toolkit materials. The Open Science Framework (OSF) project includes the workshop slides, activities and assessments, sharable assignment templates, and a wiki that can be referenced for further information or shared directly with

faculty attendees. It is available on OSF^{1,2}. Librarians or instructors who would like to contribute additional student learning goals and/or corresponding assignment ideas are invited to do so at the form linked on the OSF Wiki page under "4. Contributed Learning Goals Corresponding Assignments²."

Offering this workshop has also proven beneficial for the authors in helping them clarify and strengthen their own capacity to speak with faculty about alternative options and the challenges inherent in classroom SR assignments. Next steps include gathering feedback from librarians who use the materials and/or teach the workshop at their institutions to improve the workshop and toolkit content, and to develop additional resources to address faculty concerns around advising and mentoring graduate students on SR projects.

CRediT Statement

Term	Author Initials
Conceptualization	AF, JM
Investigation	AF, JM
Resources	AF, JM
Writing - Original Draft	AF, JM
Writing - Review & Editing	AF, JM

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