

# Using Zines in Research: An Instruction Module for Greenfield Public Library

Jesse Cole

## Abstract

This paper presents an instruction module design as collaboration between Greenfield Public Library (GPL) and Greenfield Community College (GCC) in Greenfield, Massachusetts. The module, titled “Using Zines in Research,” is intended to assist incoming GCC students in evaluating zines as a medium and source for academic work. Utilizing GPL’s zine collection, the instruction module will give students an opportunity to actively engage with zines, think critically about their usage in research, and work collaboratively to create their own zine. This paper explores the development of the module, based on existing literature on teaching with zines and community-based library instruction. This paper also includes feedback and reflective practice from a module conducted with a group of students in December 2023.

**Article Type:** Case study

Zines, defined as a “self-published work created for passion rather than profit” (McElroy, 2011, p. 3), offer students opportunities to tangibly engage with their institution’s collections. Librarians with access to zine collections may find success in utilizing the medium to instruct their students on research values through an informal and unique lens. This case study explores the creation and trial session of such an instruction module, titled “Using Zines in Research,” intended for incoming Greenfield Community College (GCC) students in Greenfield, Massachusetts, in partnership with the city’s local library, Greenfield Public Library (GPL). Utilizing GPL’s zine collection, the instruction module gives students an opportunity to engage with zines, think critically about their usage in research, and collaborate to create their own zine. The lesson plan in this case study offers insights into the value of teaching with

zines, as well as recommendations and reflections for any practitioners seeking to utilize zines within their own institutions.

This instruction module is designed as a partnership between GCC and GPL. Both GCC and GPL are centrally located in Greenfield, Massachusetts, a small town with a population of approximately 17,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). As the largest town in Franklin County, Greenfield has become a cultural hub for art, restaurants, shopping, and festivals, which gives the area a more urban feel despite its large farming and rural communities. In July of 2023, GPL supported the town’s cultural development by developing and replacing their old building with a new library. This library was outfitted with significantly more square footage, improved technology, and dedicated craft and study spaces. GPL also announced its new zine

collection upon opening the new library, with a focus on zines created by artists local to Franklin County.

Newly enrolled community college students at GCC are the target audience for this instruction session. As a group, this audience is diverse and represents multiple aspects of Greenfield's community. According to GCC's demographic information for the Fall 2023 semester, 55% of students are a non-traditional age of over 25 years, and 27% are students of color ("Fast Facts," 2023). Incoming GCC students will also have variable levels of comfort in a library setting, as new community college students frequently enter as career changers with a wealth of pre-existing work experiences (Peet, 2019, p. 22). These additional skills can be supported by instructing librarians through recognition of their students' lives and commitments outside of the classroom, and by approaching education holistically.

The "Using Zines in Research" instruction module was developed to encourage new GCC students to take full advantage of their GCC library cards, better integrate them into Greenfield's community, and offer an accessible, easy-to-read resource for those who struggle with traditional information sources. The module makes use of GPL's new zine collection by having students choose and evaluate a zine of their choice as a research source. Students may complete the module in GPL's makerspace for its access to technology and craft supplies for the collaborative zine-making activity. This instruction module also offers students a space outside of the GCC library for them to utilize. This module introduces more resources for GCC students to take advantage of beyond their college campus by demonstrating the value of the town's public library. Both GCC and GPL are part of the Central and Western Massachusetts Automated Resources (CW MARS) network, a Massachusetts-based library consortium of over 100 libraries in the Central and Western part of the state (CW MARS, "About," n.d.). GCC library cards work at any library within this network, and visiting GPL gives students an overview of the

other unique libraries and resources they can access while attending GCC.

This instruction module was inspired by the lesson plans in Kelly McElroy's 2011 zine *Teaching Info Lit with Zines*. McElroy (2011) notes that zines are a great information literacy tool as their unconventional format is both enticing and approachable for students, and their frequent focus on subcultures creates an opportunity for students "to critically discuss authenticity, reliability, and context of information" (p. 4). Zines' unconventional characteristics complement the varied needs and experience associated with incoming community college students and offer them a way to engage in library collections that feels approachable and hands-on. While this instruction module incorporates several information literacy frameworks, it places particular emphasis on the concept of authority as constructed and contextual (ACRL Board, 2016). McElroy (2011) notes that traditional lessons on authority teach students that accurate and authoritative sources come from "formal elements of documents" (p. 6). However, given that zines often lack these formal authority markers, they offer students a great exercise in issues of authority and the ways in which formal sources of information prioritize certain voices. This central question of authority also intersects with the information literacy frameworks of scholarship as conversation and information has value (ACRL Board, 2016), because the unique nature of zines fosters discussion on ways different information is valued, and what that means critically.

The teaching approach and strategy for this module are adapted from authorities on both instruction and zines, including Cook et. al's 2015 article, "How Do Our Students Learn?" and Kathleen Aragon's 2018 zine, *Teaching with Zines*. Cook et. al's (2015) principles of "Do Less" and "Active Learning is Practice of Deep Structure" (pp. 3, 6) significantly shaped the module's design, which emphasizes activities and discussions to prompt students to actively consider source authority. These principles also echo Aragon's recommendation of keeping zine-

related instruction student-focused, as the personal, informal nature of zines opens possibilities to share diverse stories and build community within the classroom. Keeping the instruction module student-centered also serves to extend GCC library's teaching philosophy to GPL by utilizing student "prior knowledge and lived experiences" and "active learning techniques" (Dolan et. al, 2018).

The instruction module begins with the question "What is a zine?" to assess how familiar students are with the medium and address any potential misconceptions. Rigid definitions of zines are discouraged due to the variety of formats and styles they can appear in, so this section is brief and emphasizes the flexibility in defining zines. Students also have the opportunity to read and interact with zines from the GPL collection to assist in explaining the medium. Actively engaging with the collection assists with student understanding of zines and application of the critical thinking skills needed in college courses. After discussing the definition of zines, the instructor gives a brief, two- to three-minute lecture covering the GPL zine collection and the potential benefits and drawbacks of using zines in academic research. This section of the module is intended to be short and straightforward to keep focus on active, hands-on learning. The lecture portion also introduces students to GPL's zine collection and gives them a glimpse at some of the resources available to assist with their learning outside GCC, making sure to highlight that students can place zines on hold and have them sent for pickup to their home library if needed. The lecture points to the pros and cons of zines in research and is meant to introduce students to thinking critically about zines and give them an overview of qualities to look for when completing the evaluation activity. This part of the lecture is also intended to tie in universal design by offering additional guidance on the activity for students who may not be familiar with zines or with what to look for in academic sources.

A zine evaluation activity is the core of this instruction module. The evaluation activity was adapted from McElroy (2011) and from Potter

and Sellie's 2016 article, "Zines in the Classroom: Critical Librarianship and Participatory Collections." Students begin by selecting a zine from a sampling of the GPL collection to evaluate as an information resource. Scholars on zine instruction recommend allowing students to choose their own zine to better connect the medium with their own interests or potential research topics (Aragon, 2018, p. 3). The selection of zines should also demonstrate variety in art style, topic, and genre, so as to best reflect the diversity inherent in the medium. The evaluation questions for students are open, discussion-based, and considerate of authorship. Evaluation questions revolve around tenants of authority and value as a tie-in to the information literacy framework of authority as constructed and contextual (ACRL Board, 2016). The evaluation activity is individualized to allow students to have a more personalized choice of zine to evaluate and to create built-in safety. Aragon (2016) encourages sensitivity in planning zine-related activities; while the personal nature of zines means there are better opportunities to connect with students, "done carelessly, there's potential to hurt students, too" (p. 2). An individual activity also allows for personalized instruction if needed and the opportunity for students to ask direct questions during check-ins.

Upon completion of the zine evaluation activity, students are invited to discuss their zines and share any questions or observations they have. In addition to making use of the information literacy principle of scholarship as conversation (ACRL Board, 2016), this discussion functions as a built-in assessment tool on student ability to evaluate zines. Best practice when teaching with zines suggests an informal assessment based on student participation and engagement so as to complement the medium's approachable and independent nature. If students are able to answer all evaluation questions and demonstrate engagement with the activity, they have successfully met the learning outcome of the zine assessment. The instruction module closes with a more formalized, but creative assessment activity in the form of collaborative zine making: students are invited to contribute one page to a

class zine. The page should include something they learned about zines as a research tool or a takeaway from the lesson. This assessment achieves the information literacy framework of information creation as a process (ACRL Board, 2016), and highlights the joy and creativity in making zines. The collaborative zine activity also encourages students to further engage with the GPL zine collection by empowering them to make their own zine. The final zine may also be added to the GPL or GCC zine collection, with permission from students, so that there is a tangible contribution as a result of the lesson.

This instruction module is far more successful as an in-person lesson than a virtual one as giving students the opportunity to engage tactilely with zines allows for a better understanding of the medium. However, adaptations can be made to teach the module online. The instructor could utilize digital zine archives and have students select a freely available digital zine from a curated list, or use select zines from GPL's collection that are available in a digital or PDF format. The collaborative zine activity would also need to be adjusted and could take several forms. The simplest option would be to have students type their takeaways from class into a chat or to the instructor, and have the instructor then compile these statements into a zine to be shared digitally with students.

A longer but more engaging option for virtual, collaborative zine making comes from Silberstein and Thomas' 2022 article, "Zine-making Pedagogy During a Pandemic: Reflections and Implications." Silberstein and Thomas (2022) note that "zines are about finding opportunities in limitations while expanding the parameters of what is possible," and found that students in their digital zine workshops were able to creatively adapt to the constraints of a virtual classroom (p. 7). Rather than provide students with materials in person, students instead had the opportunity to choose their own materials and express themselves creatively, using found items from their homes and neighborhoods. Silberstein and Thomas found that the virtual setting for zine making gave students more freedom to develop concepts and experiment with the medium. The

collaborative zine-making activity could take cues from this case study by encouraging students to make their one-page assessment with any materials they have with them at home and leave the options open. Students could then post a photo of their work into the Zoom chat for the instructor to later compile. This activity also allows students to see each other's creativity and different responses to the prompt, further engaging in the information literacy framework information creation as process (ACRL Board, 2016) and zines as a formless format.

A session of this instruction module was completed on December 9, 2023. The participatory group of eight students represented diverse ages, work experience, and familiarity with zines as a medium. The module began by asking if students had heard of zines before, and how they would define a zine. This question proved to be a strong introduction to zines as a flexible format, as students offered several different definitions of a zine, including "a variation on a magazine," "an independent press," and "a digital magazine," all of which had some level of truth. After briefly sharing an overview of the GPL zine collection and reasons to use zines in research, students were invited to choose from a selection of 15 zines to individually evaluate. The selection of 15 zines intentionally represented diversity in subject matter, format, length, and content, with a loose focus on social-political and cultural issues. Students evaluated their zines by answering the following questions:

1. What topics or issues does your zine address?
2. How does the material in your zine differ from traditional information sources?
3. Does your zine have an identifiable author? How does authorship affect the zine's value?
4. Could you use this zine for an academic paper or project? Why or why not?

After spending 10 minutes on the evaluation activity, students were invited to share their findings and discuss their zines. Each student shared their evaluation, many with enthusiasm or unique observations for the specific format of

their chosen zine. After sharing evaluations, the instructor offered resources for learning more about zines and using GCC and GPL collections. These resources were reviewed as the eight-page collaborative “assessment” zine was circulated, in which all students contributed one page reflecting on their experience of the module. Sample responses from three students in the collaborative zine included:

1. What the student learned from the content of their evaluated zine: “facts about rainforest cafe”
2. Takeaways from the lessons: “authority is contextual”
3. Accompanying art to go with their informal assessment: A drawing of the student saying “zines can be anything”

In a post-instruction feedback session, seven of the eight students indicated their appreciation for the opportunity to pick their own zine to evaluate and noted this made engagement easier. These students were able to find a zine that connected to their interests and demonstrated an ability to discuss it with authority and a critical lens. Four students demonstrated interest in continuing to explore zines by inquiring about where to purchase them, how to check them out from GPL, or where to find more from the authors of their chosen evaluation zines. It is important to note that the enthusiasm and interest for zines present in this session may be difficult to replicate with a group of learners who do not see themselves represented in the selection of zines available, or with a group that is less familiar with the medium. These factors are important to consider when choosing zines for students to evaluate as offering more variety in choice is best to represent as many perspectives as possible.

The assessment activity reflected student interest in lesson material. Three students wrote about the zine they evaluated as their main takeaway from the lesson, sharing their favorite fact or piece of writing from the zine. The initial intent of the collaborative zine was to gather feedback on the lesson itself, so this could potentially be reworked in the future to ask students for their thoughts on the lesson, and not

the zine. However, keeping the format of the assessment loose is more consistent with the lack of rigid definitions for zines as a medium. All students still participated in the collaborative zine and were able to identify takeaways from the lesson, so the assessment was still effective, if different than originally intended.

Future iterations of this lesson would benefit from the option for students to work collaboratively on their zine evaluation if desired. Two students noted that they found it difficult to work on the assignment individually and would have preferred a discussion, as their learning style was more conducive to collaborative projects. This issue could also be resolved by creating a less formal, “presentation” style discussion after the evaluation activity. Rather than share their evaluation with the entire class, students could instead “pair and share” with each other to discuss their zines, with the instructor circulating as needed. Another alternative option to accommodate more learning styles is to pre-assess students on a preference between individual and group activities, either through a survey or informal discussion at the top of the lesson. Future instructors may adapt the lesson plan to have a more loosely defined evaluation activity and discussion, so that it can be more easily adapted to different configurations of groups.

Execution of the “Using Zines in Research” instruction module revealed an eagerness from students to engage in zines as both readers and creators. Ideally, this lesson plan will be adapted by other instructing librarians and educators for use alongside their institution’s zine collection. However, zines’ flexible format means that there are far more teaching tools at hand than the ones outlined by this case study. This instruction module could be expanded into a larger or more advanced series of courses. In addition to evaluating zines as a potential research tool, what would it look like for students to actively cite and utilize zines in an academic paper? Other variations on zine instruction that best complement multiple learning styles, as suggested by the students who participated in the instruction session, should be explored.

Perhaps a focus on the collaborative and creative nature of zines, rather than their values of exploring authority and information literacy, would be more successful in engaging extroverted or discussion-oriented learners. Above all, future iterations of zine instruction should hold the core value of “having fun!” (Aragon, 2016, p. 6) when approaching the medium and engaging with students.

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## Appendix

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>LESSON PLAN: USING ZINES IN RESEARCH</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Instructor: Jesse Cole</b></p>		
Target Audience	Designed for incoming Greenfield Community College students using Greenfield Public Library	
Learning Outcomes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Apply lesson material in order to define a “zine”</li> <li>2. Evaluate a zine in order to assess the value of zines in an academic setting</li> <li>3. Use lesson exercise and discussion in order to create collaborative work on using zines in research</li> </ol>	
Information Literacy Frameworks	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Authority Is Constructed and Contextual</li> <li>2. Information Creation as a Process</li> <li>3. Information Has Value</li> <li>4. Scholarship as Conversation</li> </ol>	
<b>Intro</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce self</li> <li>• Introduce learning objectives</li> </ul>	<b>Time</b> 1 min
<b>What is a Zine?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre-Assessment               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Who has heard of zines?</li> <li>○ Anybody want to define what a zine is?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Zine Definition</li> <li>• About GPL’s Collection</li> <li>• Why should you use zines in research?</li> </ul>	<b>Time</b> 3 min

<b>Zine Activity Intro</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Introduce evaluation activity: Invite students to pick out a zine of their choice to evaluate for research value</li><li>• Will have ~10 min to flip through zine (don't need to read the whole thing, just get an idea of content) and answer questions on slide deck</li><li>• Afterwards share what we've learned about our sources</li></ul>	<b>Time</b> 1 min
<b>Activity: Zine Evaluation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Give students 8-10 minutes to work on evals, wander around class and answer questions/concerns as needed</li><li>• 5-7 min: Invite people to share their zine evaluations and to compare issues they may have run into</li></ul>	<b>Time</b> 20 min
<b>Closing Assessment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pass out collaborative zine: Each student uses one page to write a sentence/draw a picture/whatever they like on either a pro or con of using zines in research</li><li>• Put up further references and reading for students</li></ul>	<b>Time</b> 5 min