What They Didn't Tell Me (or what I didn't hear) in Library School

Perspectives from New Library Instruction Professionals

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The transition from library school to the professional library instruction environment is fraught with challenges and ripe with opportunities. Each new teaching librarian has to find his or her own style and establish a toolkit of teaching techniques. However, much can be learned from the experiences of others who have gone through the same process. The narratives that follow were written by former students in the School of Library & Information Science at the University of Kentucky. Each new librarian focuses on a different aspect of instruction planning and implementation. Their goal in sharing their stories is to assist other new librarians in their own professional transitions and to help existing library professionals develop a greater awareness of ways in which they can mentor the next generation.—*Editor*

WHAT THEY DIDN'T TELL ME IN LIBRARY SCHOOL IS THAT STUDENTS DON'T CARE ABOUT LEARNING TO USE THE LIBRARY

By Julie VanHoose

While working as a graduate assistant in the reference department at the University of Kentucky's (UK) William T. Young Library, one of my responsibilities was library instruction. I was fortunate to be able to work with the instruction team there to learn through observation, participation, and training. During my time at UK, I also took a class dedicated to library instruction and a couple of cognate courses in the curriculum and instruction department. All of these educational opportunities gave me a solid grounding in the theory of education, but I have learned that there is nothing quite like getting out there and actually teaching.

When I first began teaching, I quickly learned that just because I was enamored with libraries, it certainly did not mean that the average freshman was. Sure, many students view the library as an integral part of the campus experience, but for most of them it is more about the space itself than the abundant informational resources that it contains. And I knew going in that I had a limited amount of time to teach those students how to use our resources and, ultimately, how to be information literate. Those are lofty goals, and the personal pressure to reach them was occasionally a bit overwhelming. I knew the theory, but I didn't really know how to use it in application. And that is the first lesson that really sank in for me—that I could have a rich, deep knowledge of educational theory, but without actual time spent in the classroom, I could never really understand it.

Understanding scaffolding, the zone of proximal development, constructivism, and the countless other theories and methods of instruction is certainly helpful. But it is not enough. You have to have direct experience before you can skillfully design classes that utilize those foundational principles. But don't worry—I am by no means saying the education is not necessary, because it definitely is. I am simply saying that new library instructors should be encouraged to just get out there and get to know the classroom. Assuring new instructors that they are not expected to be perfect right out of the gate is integral to giving them the confidence to experiment and find their own teaching style. And once they are comfortable in the classroom, they will get better and better at developing solid instruction.

In our college instructional classes there is a lot of talk about engaging students in active learning, teaching to different learning styles, and crafting meaningful assessments. We spend significant time learning these, and rightly so. But there is a significant difference between practicing those skills on our classmates and actually practicing them in a library instruction session. Our fellow library students are just as enamored with libraries as we are, so of course they are engaged. But those non-library lovers are a different ballgame. We have to work to figure out what interests them, and in order to do that we just have to get to know them. In practice, what it all really boils down to is finding activities that keep the students interested and make learning about the library's resources something that is not completely and utterly dull.

As is usually taught, the easiest way to engage the students is to make the class directly related to an assignment that they are currently working on. Seems simple enough, right? But when we actually begin to teach, we learn that even when we have the professor's cooperation with scheduling their library instruction class in tandem with a project, we still aren't guaranteed that the students have actually begun doing that project. I'm sure you all remember your library school days. How many of us received our assignments and promptly developed a plan of attack and began doing our research? I'd venture to guess not many. Certainly not me. Work emergencies, family obligations, social events, and other homework assignments always managed to get in the way. And if graduate students, who have proven themselves to be dedicated and qualified for graduate-level work, aren't always organized and proactive with their assignments, what are the odds that the freshmen are? We have to be realistic about our students. So we are still left with the question of how to get students interested in what we are talking about.

If the drive to learn about library resources is not already there, then we have to create that sense of need. And how do we do that?—By showing the students that if they pay attention, their workload will be significantly lessened. You can't just say it. You have to *convince* them of it. This lesson took a while to settle in for me. Students are bogged down with their day-to-day lives, just like we are. We cannot realistically expect them to hang on our every word and love us for paying for the resources that they use. At first, I thought that maybe I was doing something wrong in the classroom—that my activities weren't active enough, that I wasn't explaining the library tools effectively, that somehow I was just missing the mark. But I eventually realized that the students just didn't feel the need to internalize the information that I was providing to them. And it wasn't because my class was improperly designed. It was simply because the students weren't interested. A seasoned librarian may understand this because they can recognize that creating the perfect library instruction session is the Holy Grail for library instructors. But a new, inexperienced librarian has not been around long enough to see the ongoing discussion amongst her colleagues. So assure your newly graduated colleagues that they should trust their training for the design aspect of the class, but give them guidance for connecting the theory to the application.

So how can you help us lowly graduate students and new librarians? Just remember what it was like when you first started. Remember that we have the theory and knowledge necessary but most likely do not have the hands-on experience. Let us shadow you. Talk us through how and why you created the activities that you did, give us room to make mistakes and tell us about some of your own, encourage us to persevere through student apathy, and, most of all, give us as many opportunities for experience and constructive feedback as possible.

WHAT THEY DIDN'T TELL ME IN LIBRARY SCHOOL IS THAT SITTING DOWN AND TALKING WITH FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATION IS A VITAL STEP IN THE PROCESS OF PREPARING INFORMATION LITERACY CLASSES

By Bridget Farrell

Through the course of my time in library school, many of my classes included discussions on the importance of making patrons aware of library services. However, once I dipped my toes into the murky waters of information literacy instruction, I quickly discovered that getting faculty and administration buy-in is more difficult than simply reading the "tips" page in my library science textbook and applying what I read. The "if you build it (and promote it), they will come" philosophy that was touted in my classes does not even begin to address the complexities of working with departments where the administration and faculty often have different visions for how the library can help them. And it certainly does not express the challenge of instilling the importance of information literacy instruction into the minds of already overworked faculty (whose feelings on the topic range anywhere from indifference to excitement).

I, like many of you, found all of this out first-hand through the course of developing and teaching my first information literacy classes. My introduction to collaborating with faculty for library instruction began when I developed and taught a series of information literacy classes for students

at the Center for English as a Second Language (CESL) at the University of Kentucky. Though I was already familiar with the administration and faculty at CESL, having worked there for a year as a student worker, I still was not conscious of what I would be facing when developing library instruction classes for such a unique program.

To give you a bit of background, CESL is a rapidly growing department at the University of Kentucky that offers both intensive and semi-intensive programs for ESL students who wish to improve their English language skills. The Intensive English program is geared toward preparing students for undergraduate and graduate level education in the United States. Students attend four classes daily: reading, writing, listening-speaking, and grammar, and are broken-up by their level of English fluency, ranked from 1 to 5. In the last few years the Center for English as a Second Language has grown at an incredible pace. The center recently began teaching both morning and afternoon sections of their standard four classes in order to accommodate the increase in the number of students. So, for the last few semesters faculty has been spread very thin, teaching extra classes while simultaneously working toward the accreditation of the program.

With all this in mind, Julie VanHoose, another graduate assistant who worked on the project with me, and I approached the assistant director of CESL with our idea. We explained how our proposed series of classes would teach students basic vocabulary along with library skills like finding books and articles. The assistant director was very receptive to the idea and saw the classes as something that could contribute to the center's quest for accreditation. She offered many suggestions and gave us the contact information for the faculty members who taught the level 5 students we would be working with. She also promised her full support through the whole process and played a big part in helping us develop a schedule for the first series of classes that we taught.

The assistant director's instant acceptance and excitement about our idea led us to follow through with our plan. Assured that faculty would be instructed to allot time for our classes, we sent an exploratory e-mail out to the CESL faculty, explaining the classes we wanted to teach and requesting a meeting before actually starting the series. Immediate reactions were overwhelmingly positive with one exception. One instructor, in addition to having issues with the number and types of classes we wanted to teach, also refused to meet with us. These first reactions to our class were a good yardstick for how the rest of the process would go, with the majority of teachers embracing the classes. Despite the overwhelming support for the classes, there were the standard obstacles that everyone must face when trying to accommodate the schedules and opinions of a large group of people. Class times and topics were adapted to meet the requests of the CESL teachers and there was the ever present problem of slow response time to e-mails.

But how can you, as seasoned veterans of information literacy instruction, help new, untested librarians navigate these treacherous waters? One of the best things you can do is to stress the importance of building relationships with both administration AND faculty before designing any new series of classes. In particular, you should stress the importance of getting the support of faculty before making any plans. I believe that if Julie and I had approached the CESL faculty at an earlier stage in the planning process then we could have been more adaptable to the criticisms of the faculty member that thought our plan was too demanding. Also, new librarians may need to be reminded to keep it simple. Julie and I were guilty of needing this advice. The first time we taught our ESL classes we tried to include every teacher we could, teaching different information literacy classes in different classes. Scheduling was a nightmare. The second time through we simplified our plan, only involving one teacher. With new librarians' tendency to take on projects without considering the time and energy they will require, keeping it simple is an important piece of advice.

WHAT THEY DIDN'T TELL ME IN LIBRARY SCHOOL IS THAT MY COLLEAGUES WOULD BE MY BIGGEST ASSET

By Emily Rae Aldridge

Upon beginning my Masters in Library and Information Science, I accepted a graduate associate position at Eastern Kentucky University. The part-time role was designed to give graduate library science students practical experience, and to provide the professional Reference & Instruction Team at EKU with assistance in covering reference desk hours and the chat reference service. The graduate associate position gave me practical training in many aspects of librarianship, and helped me to put the theories I learned in my classes into practice. After eighteen months in this part-time role I was offered a promotion, a full-time professional position with the Reference & Instruction team.

This new role came with an increased responsibility to teach library instruction sessions. As my first professional library position, there were many adjustments to make, and quickly. I needed to adjust to a new work environment, a new schedule, and new job expectations. As a former part-time reference team member, my duties on the reference desk were rather familiar and comfortable. However, my library instruction duties were much less familiar and much more intimidating.

For our team, each week entails an average of four library instruction sessions per team member. English 102 courses form the bulk of the library instruction workload, as a partnership between the library and the English department ensures that all English 102 students are exposed to our information literacy program. Courses are also offered to the campus at large, from lower level to upper level coursework in every subject area imaginable.

Faced with this daunting new library instruction load, I leaned hard on my library school background, including the principles I learned in my Instructional Services course.

However, I knew I needed guidance, people to help me bridge the gap between learned theories and practical application. Understanding pedagogical principles is one thing, applying them in front of thirty intimidating freshman is quite another.

Here I learned my first survival strategy: find colleagues on your new team and talk with them to get the lay of the land. I needed to know things like process, procedure, expectations, and standardized assessment. While each instruction team member enjoys autonomy, I needed to get my bearings and know how things "usually work." While normal is a matter of degrees in the world of library instruction, every department will have its own set of procedures. Quite frankly, these standards are more likely to be kept in the minds of team members than they are written down and standardized. In addition to sitting down with the team leader and additional team members to ask direct questions about the library's instruction program, I also asked several colleagues if I could shadow or observe their scheduled instruction sessions.

Shadowing and observing became my second survival strategy. The goal here was two-fold: exposure to teaching styles and techniques but also exposure to various subject areas. Shadowing of existing team members proved to be incredibly helpful. Not only did I quickly gain a toolkit of techniques and exercises that my colleagues gladly shared, but I also gained exposure to classroom management, dealing with faculty, and different forms of assessment. On another level, the colleagues that kindly allowed me to shadow their sessions become stronger professional connections. I approached these situations from the perspective of a learner, and they graciously responded by treating me as a colleague. Not only did I learn valuable insight, but I also strengthened these new relationships.

Once I was able to get my bearing in the department, and gain valuable insights through shadowing several colleagues, I embraced the Peer Review of Teaching (PROT) format adopted by our instruction team. Engaging in the PROT process early became my final survival strategy. The PROT method is based on peer evaluation for the sake of objective evaluation and overall betterment of the instructor being observed. Adopted years before my arrival, there is a sense that the PROT method allows for critical evaluation, but in a non-threatening environment. Instructors are encouraged, but not required to participate.

Very early, I set a personal goal of having two colleagues evaluate me using the PROT method during my first semester. The two colleagues I chose came from vastly different backgrounds and specialty areas. In addition, the two sessions they observed me teaching were different – one being an English 102 session and the other an upper-level subject specific African-American Studies course. Offering myself up for evaluation showed my colleagues that I was a willing learner, open to constructive criticism. However, it also allowed them to see the areas in which I was succeeding. Following both PROT sessions, I felt that the evaluation process was productive and beneficial.

As a seasoned and experienced library instructor reading this column, what can you do? First, be mindful of new professionals in your sphere of influence, offering them your guidance and mentorship. There will always be gaps in training as new team members come on board, more so for those of us who are taking our first professional library position. Offer to give them the lay of the land and help prepare them for unspoken team expectations and norms. Offer to let them shadow instruction sessions in order to become more comfortable in the physical spaces, and to begin building a toolkit of teaching techniques and exercises. Lastly, if your organization has not yet adopted a peer review process, strongly consider doing so. Peer review can provide valuable criticism and praise to emerging professionals, as well as bring fresh ideas and energy to seasoned team members.