EDUCATION TRAINING FOR INSTRUCTION LIBRARIANS

A shared perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of recent literature illustrating a troubling disconnect between (a) the importance of teaching and information literacy instruction for the future of libraries and (b) the apparent lack of education training many librarians receive during library school. We argue that it is essential for the future success of academic libraries that library schools pay greater attention to instructional pedagogy for training library leaders of the future. We then outline several practical strategies drawn from our own experience that library school students and currently practicing professionals can adopt to expand their understanding of instructional pedagogy as a way to improve their practice as teaching librarians.

INTRODUCTION: LIBRARIANS AS EDUCATORS

In a recent issue of *CIL*, Davies-Hoffman et al. draw attention to "the contradiction between the growing importance of information literacy instruction to the Library's core mission and the lack of pedagogical training for new librarians" (2013, p. 9). This lack of preparation is problematic for several reasons. First, as the authors note, incorporating information literacy instruction into the university curriculum is now one of the primary responsibilities for many reference and instructional librarians in academic libraries (cf. Hall 2013, p. 24), yet many of these librarians lack the educational training necessary to excel in these positions. For example, Scott Walter writes that "[t]he rise of interdisciplinary instructional initiatives such as General Education, First-Year Experience, and Writing Across the Curriculum…have not only provided increasing instructional opportunities for academic librarians, but have all but required academic libraries to focus on teaching as a core service" (Walter, 2008, p. 65). A background in pedagogy is particularly important for these librarians, who are increasingly expected to collaborate on equal terms with faculty in teaching information literacy and critical thinking skills. A background in the theory and psychology of learning can situate the librarian as an equal in relationships with other faculty and can allow the librarian to be a major contributor in that relationship.

Second, due to the importance of information literacy instruction to the current mission of libraries, employers of new librarians place a high value on teaching, seeking job candidates with instructional experience and education training (Hall 2013). A recent study by Hall

received responses from 79 supervisors who placed ads for new librarians on the ALA JobLIST website in 2009. These jobs all involved some level of instructional responsibilities which, as Davies-Hoffman et al. note, "is now a standard responsibility of most public service librarians," even if instruction is not a central aspect of their job (p. 10). Hall reports that "the vast majority" of respondents to the survey (87%) reported that instruction is "very important" to their libraries. Seventy-two percent responded that instruction was very important to the position advertised, even if it was not the primary responsibility of the position (p. 28). These results, and others like them (see Hall pp. 25–26 for an overview) highlight the need for pedagogical training for librarians, especially those fresh out of library school (Davies-Hoffman et al., p. 13).

Finally, pedagogical preparation is important for the simple and more fundamental reason that it is difficult to help students learn without a basic grounding in the theory and psychology of *how* students learn. Teachers without such preparation are, to borrow an example from Aristotle, like archers without a target to aim at: destined to be less successful than if they had a clear appreciation of their goal (Aristotle, *N.E.*, I.3). Effective teaching requires us to understand how our students learn and then to tailor our instruction accordingly. To truly become "student-centered" educators, librarians need adequate training that is up-to-date on current best practices in educational theory and its application to the classroom context. For these reasons, the lack of pedagogical training that librarians receive in library school is deeply troubling for the profession (Walter, 2006, p. 10). Research shows that most ALA-accredited library schools do not require students to take courses in

instructional pedagogy or user education. If such classes are offered, they tend to be offered as electives (see Davies-Hoffman et. al, p. 11, for specific details). Compare this to the requirement of most leading library schools that students take a basic class in reference librarianship. Most librarians would find it strange if a colleague, no matter her area of expertise, had never taken a basic reference course (Walter, 2008). The analogy illustrates the incongruity between the importance placed on instruction by the 21st-century library (Davis-Hoffman et. al, 10) and the level of instruction training most librarians receive as part of their library education (Walter, 2008, p. 62).

> TO SUCCEED AS AN INSTRUCTION LIBRARIAN, OR AS ANY LIBRARIAN WITH AN INSTRUCTIONAL ASPECT TO HIS OR HER POSITION IN THE 21ST-CENTURY LIBRARY, AN UNDERSTANDING OF HOW STUDENTS LEARN IS CRITICAL.

This lack of curricular attention leads many students to believe incorrectly that instruction, in the words of one library school student, "must not be a significant priority in the profession right now." Unlike the "oodles of classes on different kinds of reference focuses," there was only "one class specifically on this issue of" library instruction (Walter, 2008, p. 62). This lack of focus on pedagogical training in library school not only leaves many students ill-prepared to enter the profession, but also leaves them with a skewed view of their professional futures. Increasingly, today's employers are seeking librarians with expertise in instruction, not traditional subject expertise in reference (Hall, 2013). Librarians considering a future in reference and instruction will want to take this account when planning their coursework and practicums during library school.

Unfortunately, when future instruction librarians do seek out pedagogical training in their MLS program, it is often outdated and inadequate (Davis-et al., p. 13; Walter 2008, p. 62). This is unsurprising since many such courses will, inevitably, be taught by librarians who may lack formal pedagogical training themselves and rely heavily on their own experience. This is not to downplay the importance of learning from more seasoned library instructors. Indeed, many of the most valuable learning experiences the authors had during library school came from working with experienced instruction librarians at UNC's R. B. House Undergraduate Library. It does, however, further highlight the need for quality pedagogical training for librarians, in order to best prepare new librarians for the profession they are entering, and the actual demands that will be placed on them. For, as Scott Walter rightly notes, "librarianship is a profession in transition," where academic librarians roles have "increasingly been cast within the context of the librarian's role as teacher" (2008, pp. 51–53).

Given these considerations, we believe Davies-Hoffman et al. have accurately diagnosed a fundamental problem within library education. The future of library education must recognize these realities, and provide adequate preparation for teacher-librarians entering the profession. MLS programs must prepare librarians to be effective leaders in their fields, which will require these programs to make current

educational theory and practice a central priority. Traditional training of librarians in areas such as reference, cataloguing, and collection development is, of course, still important and necessary, but it is no longer sufficient. The library leaders of the future must have knowledge of how students learn and adequate training in how to organize information literacy instruction around that aim. They must have knowledge of more than just libraries.

EDUCATION TRAINING: A SHARED PERSPECTIVE

Despite the situation that currently exists within library schools, options do exist for current MLS students to deepen their understanding of instructional pedagogy. One route we took as MLS students was to pursue doctoral work at UNC-Chapel Hill's School of Education concurrent with our studies at UNC's School of Information and Library Science. This coursework, in addition to the excellent on-the-job instructional training we received as graduate assistants at UNC's Undergraduate Library, introduced us to the contemporary psychology of learning and helped us to develop pedagogies incorporating this knowledge into information literacy instruction.

Even a small amount of education coursework proved to be invaluable. The information in these courses was immediately applicable to our instructional work with undergraduates. Rooting our lesson plans in the current literature on learning made our library sessions tighter, more engaging, and outcome-oriented. When it came time to go on the job market as instruction librarians, our education coursework differentiated us from other candidates, and allowed us to speak articulately about the rationale behind how

we structure library instruction sessions. In every job interview, we were questioned extensively about our teaching methods and the philosophies underlying them; training in and exposure to the education literature informed our responses and led to in-depth conversations about the purpose and value of library instruction. It is important to note that our pedagogies were influenced and conversations were initiated by taking just one or two classes in education. Imagine the difference if, say, a quarter of the library school course load for instruction librarians was education-focused. Without a broader exposure to ideas outside the traditional library school curriculum, we likely would not have had the opportunity or the knowledge to engage with important, big-picture conversations about instruction librarianship and to take on leadership roles straight out of library school.

Taking coursework outside of the library school, and advocating for the value of doing so, has opened the door for other library school students at UNC-Chapel Hill to follow a similar path. Several of our peers at the Undergraduate Library have taken courses in the School of Education this past semester. This is a welcome trend; the more MLS students explore this option, the better prepared they will be not just for their first instruction position, but to become leaders in the future direction of information literacy instruction. We therefore recommend that current MLS students explore such opportunities, if available, as an adjunct to their standard library school curriculum.

NEXT STEPS

For those of us who have already left library school, what are we to do? Historically, the answer has been to get another master's degree in a teaching-related area: Education,

instructional technology, instructional design. For many full-time new professionals, however, this is not a reasonable expectation; in many cases, it's not fiscally feasible, a part-time degree will take years to complete, and we need these skills and knowledge *yesterday*. But there are certainly avenues that currently practicing librarians can explore to learn about and engage with the field of education, outside of the more traditional, classroom-based routes.

One low barrier-to-entry way to engage is through the vibrant community of practice surrounding issues of library instruction and education on the blogosphere. Blogs by instruction librarians such as Char Booth's *Info-mational* (http://infomational.wordpress.com/) and Nicole Pagowsky's *Pumped Librarian* (http://pumpedlibrarian.blogspot.com/) frequently discuss issues related to instructional pedagogy. We think it a welcome trend that their views are typically grounded in instructional theory. Additionally, an important feature of these sites is that lively conversations are held and new ideas are traded in the comments sections. The library instruction blog community therefore provides a constant forum for learning and discussion. And, in many cases, this online community of practice extends to real-world interactions at conferences, collaborations across institutions, and the cross-pollination of ideas.

We recently tossed our hats into the ring and started a blog titled Rule Number One (http://www.rulenumberoneblog.com/), the title inspired by a quote about librarians from the author Neil Gaiman. Our blog focuses on library instruction and applications of educational psychology principles to the teaching of information literacy. In addition to sharing our own

ideas about educational theory and its application to librarianship, we have made a concerted effort to link to work from other educators whose research we think may be relevant, in order to create a greater awareness of these materials within the instructional librarian community. It is our hope that our blog will become one of the places where instruction librarians can hash out ideas; to this end, we plan to invite guest posts from instruction librarians across the country, especially those without their own robust blog presence. We also invite interested librarians to contact us if they are interested in making their own contributions to this ongoing conversation.

Education blogs themselves are also useful resources for librarians. One excellent example is University of Virginia Professor Daniel Willingham's Science and Education blog. Willingham's stated goal is to "provide pointers to scientific findings that are applicable to education." Willingham combines his own insights into education with links to news articles about instructional pedagogy and the cognitive science of learning. Most of the materials on this site are explicitly pitched at a level that the lay reader can understand; indeed, Willingham even includes a "Learning Styles FAQ" link where he provides an overview of the reasons why there is no scientific basis for learning styles – a conclusion we suspect might come as a surprise to many library educators!

One way to bring the type of interdisciplinary thinking that is happening online into the broader professional context would be for professional journals and conferences to privilege work that incorporates research from outside of librarianship, such as education, psychology, and developmental science. By rewarding the integration of work based on

disciplines traditionally somewhat divorced from librarianship, teaching librarians could become better informed about diverse and potentially disruptive ideas in familiar professional contexts. On an individual level, publishing and presenting librarians can make an effort to expand their literature reviews to include library-adjacent research. There are also a number of library-focused MOOCs, such as the Metaliteracy MOOC from the University of Albany and Empire State College, which spend significant course time on educational theory. However, librarians need not limit themselves to continuing education that is specifically for libraries (Davies-Hoffman et al). There are also many free online classes and seminars for educators (both K-12 and in higher education) that could be explored. For example, Coursera is currently offering over 60 education-related courses, led by faculty members from a variety of prestigious education programs.

Finally, a large number of "popular" education and educational psychology books have been published for the exact purpose of introducing practitioners to new pedagogical themes, and many of them even provide suggestions for how (and, importantly, why) one might introduce them in a classroom. Even though these books are not specifically targeted at librarians, we can learn as much as any educator from them. For example, we have both found compelling ideas to incorporate into our teaching in Daniel Willingham's *Why Don't Students Like School?* Though the book is targeted at K-12 teachers, the lessons about how people learn are applicable across education. The book was used as a primer in the first two weeks of our educational psychology seminar as a way to introduce students to the field and the scholarly literature that would follow. It provided a useful overview of the contemporary

research on learning and cognition by a well-respected educational psychologist; the book is rigorous in its adherence to scientific principle, yet easy enough for the lay reader to comprehend. As such, the book serves as a model for the kind of book that will be useful for library instructors to seek out in order to incorporate its lessons into their practice.

Similar books focus on motivational and affective components related to student learning. For example, motivational researcher Edward Deci's *Why We Do What We Do* provides an excellent introduction to issues related to human motivation in and out of the classroom; understanding these issues has tremendous implications for library education and practice. More recent work by Carol Dweck in her book *Mindset*, and Paul Tough's *How Children Succeed*, provide further guidance for educators on issues such as beliefs about intelligence, persistence, and the importance of effort for students' success. These books provide current understanding of issues related to both cognitive and motivational aspects of student learning. An interest in, and knowledge of such issues, will be imperative if library instruction is to remain relevant in the future.

CONCLUSION

In today's academic landscape, librarians are educators. While library schools should certainly recognize this and offer avenues for students to build education coursework into their curriculum, there are possibilities for continuing (or beginning) that work post-MLS. To succeed as an instruction librarian, or as any librarian with an instructional aspect to his or her position in the 21st-century library, an understanding of how students learn is critical. This paper is a call for us to professionalize ourselves as

teachers, formally through library school curricula, and through our own concerted efforts. We hope that this is just the beginning of this conversation.

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