Teaching Me to Teach

A New Librarian's Experience With a Structured Training Program for Information Literacy Instruction

by Katelyn R. Tucker

Do you remember the first time you ever taught a class in the library? Who taught you how to teach? According to a survey administered by Julien and Genuis, 86.2% of librarians prepared themselves for instructional work informally while on the job.[1] Westbrock and Fabian found that librarians learn the ACRL Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators through self-teaching or on-the-job training, not through library school courses.[2] It seems like we are choosing to employ the sink-or-swim method of instructional training: throw new librarians into the classroom and hope that they manage to stay afloat. This method is detrimental to the instruction program, the librarian, and the students.

Julien and Genuis found that librarians who received formal instruction training "were more likely to feel completely prepared for this work role" while those without formal training "were more likely to feel only partly or minimally prepared."[3] Feeling unprepared to teach is a great source of stress to new librarians, especially considering the emphasis being placed on instruction in entry-level library jobs. According to a study conducted by Detmering and Sproles, 97% of entry-level job advertisements listed information literacy and library instruction

responsibilities.[4] Based on this high percentage, the researchers conclude that job candidates should expect that "teaching will be mandatory in any position he or she obtains, and in most cases,

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defined as a central component of the position."[5]

If teaching is a significant part of a new librarian's job description, librarians should be adequately prepared to enter the classroom for the first time. One way to ensure that new librarians receive sufficient training is to implement a formal on-the-job training program at your library.

In 2009, Radford University implemented a new CORE curriculum with a strong information literacy component. As a result of integration of information literacy into the curriculum, library instruction requests increased dramatically. Librarians at Radford University now teach approximately 400 instruction sessions each year. To prepare new hires for this heavy teaching load, Candice Benjes-Small, the library's Head of Information

Literacy and Outreach, created a structured instruction librarian training program. As a "graduate" of this training program, I felt confident and fully prepared to teach information literacy.

I will never forget my first day at McConnell Library at Radford University. To say I was terrified is a complete understatement. Before I began my new job, I could count the number of classes I had taught on one hand and had no idea what the word "pedagogy" meant. When I sat down with Candice that first day, I didn't know what to expect. In our first meeting, she outlined the training program I would be completing and I felt a weight lift off of my shoulders.

The most important tenet of Radford's training program for new librarians is its emphasis on the individual librarian's needs. Because I was fresh out of library school with no professional experience, I was allowed to slowly move through the full program at my own pace. I never felt pressured to

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finish my training so I could teach on my own. I knew that I wouldn't be thrown into the classroom before I was ready, so my fear of teaching slowly melted away until I became excited about my instructional role.

I began my training with an extensive reading list of books and articles that focused on pedagogy and gave me an overview of instructional models and effective design. I learned about the concepts of constructivism, active learning, and Char Booth's USER method, which are vital components of Radford's information literacy instruction program. I was able to understand why we teach the way we do by reading the research behind our methods. As I was working my way through the reading list, I met with Candice each week to discuss what I was reading and how it related to our instruction program and what I was observing in the classroom.

Observation is the second major component of Radford's instruction training program. From my first week on, I was expected to observe as many library instruction sessions as possible. After our weekly instruction team meeting when classes were assigned, I emailed the librarians and received copies of their lesson plans, LibGuide URLs, and any handouts they had prepared for class. I was required to observe all of my fellow instruction librarians at least once and take notes on what I saw in their classes. After my observation, I met with each librarian to discuss what I had observed and to ask questions about how they developed the lesson. I feel extremely lucky to have gotten the opportunity to observe so many classes, since I learned so much about instruction by watching other teachers.

After observing my fellow instruction librarians, I began co-teaching with them. I typically worked closely with them to develop a lesson plan and teach one part of the lesson on my own. Having the other librarian present was extremely reassuring, as I knew they would step in if I needed them. After each class I co-taught, I met with my fellow instructor to talk about what had gone well during the session and any areas I needed to improve. During our weekly meetings, Candice and I discussed how I could continue to grow and become a better teacher.

After several months of co-teaching, I began teaching on my own as Candice observed. After each class, Candice and I sat down and talked about what was successful and what didn't work so well in the classroom. She encouraged me to try out new active learning exercises and tech tools in the classroom, but also ensured that my lesson plans met the course and program objectives. She observed the students as I taught and gave me valuable insight about when their attention waned or when they didn't seem to grasp a concept I was teaching. Having an extra set of eyes in the classroom helped me make valuable adjustments to my lessons.

Now that I am teaching on my own, I look back at my training program with gratitude. Having such a positive training experience led me to seek out opportunities to continue my own education through workshops and conferences. I even worked up the nerve to present with Candice at the 2012 VLA Annual Conference! I continue to read current literature in the information literacy instruction field on my own, and my instruction teammates and I often discuss interesting articles in our weekly meeting. By implementing a structured training program, Candice created a culture of learning in our instruction team that continues well beyond the first few months of formal training.

If you are interested in creating a formal training program for new librarians, I recommend that you make the program flexible enough that it can be tailored to each individual librarian. Because I had no professional experience, I needed an entire semester of training before teaching on my own. Let the training be self-paced, and allow the librarian to tell you when they feel ready to teach on their own. Rather than telling a new librarian how you want them to teach, give them a reading list that explains why they should want to teach that way. Encourage observation and reflection so that new librarians can develop their own teaching style. Don't stifle a new librarian's creativity, but allow them to try out new technology and activities in the classroom as long as they are meeting your objectives. Most of all, emphasize that learning should be self-motivated and lifelong, and that an instruction librarian's training is never truly complete.

Notes

1. Julien, Heidi and Geinuis, Shelagh K. "Librarians' Experiences of the Teaching Role: A National Survey of Librarians." *Library & Information Science Research* 33, no. 2 (2011): 103–11.

2. Westbrock, Theresa and Fabian, Sarah. "Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians: Is There Still a Disconnect Between Professional Education and Professional Responsibilities?" *College & Research Libraries* 71, no. 6 (2010): 569–90.

3. Julien and Genuis, 106.

4. Detmering, Robert and Sproles, Claudene. "Forget the Desk Job: Current Roles and Responsibilities in Entry-Level Reference Job Advertisements." *College & Research Libraries* 73, no. 6 (2012): 543–55.

5. Ibid, 549. VL