

The Quarterly Interview: Beth Woodard

Staff Development and Training Coordinator, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Beth Woodard is the most recent recipient of the Miriam Dudley Instruction Award. (<http://bit.ly/gdyzbc>). She has worked at Illinois for 27 years, and is a longtime faculty member of ACRL's Institute for Information Literacy Immersion Program.

-Edited transcript-

LOEX: What is your current job title at Illinois? How long have you been in the position and what do you do?

Woodard: I've been staff development and training coordinator for about seven years. I do two-thirds staff training, the other one-third reference and instruction. Up until then, my title was Central Information and Desk Coordinator - hire grad assistants and train them to work at the information desk.

(This current role) grew out of my previous one; over time, each department (gov docs, ILL, newspaper library, education, engineering, etc) asked me if I could train their graduate assistants and I began to do training library wide.

When did you first do instruction? How has it changed over the years?

I was at the University of South Carolina for three and a half years at start of my career in a reference/instruction position. The first instruction class I did, you took the class down to an instruction room, on a lower level...it was kind of a maze to get them there. Then we did a slide show as an orientation, and followed by some more in-depth instruction. I remember practicing in front of the mirror before that first session and being scared to death! That was the first month I was on the job.

How has library instruction changed over the years?

People are much more aware of learning styles and the need to incorporate active learning. Obviously computer classrooms make a big difference too. It was rare in those days because no one had a classroom; most people today have classrooms, maybe even several different kinds of classrooms that they can use—I can't tell you how many years it took me before I got a classroom in the main building. Before, just pulled two tables together in reference room and gathered everybody around.

What would you say is your teaching philosophy?

As a teacher, I have to be very aware not everyone learns the way I do. Historically, I learned best by myself, but as I've grown older, I've learned there are many situations when the best learning environment is a team or a group. So I try to be aware of those nuances: In some situations, individual learning is a good idea; in others, group learning is good idea. Be open

to exploring new opportunities. Sometimes I purposely choose something that is not (a student's) preferred learning style, because I feel that they need to expand their own repertoire. It comes down to that I don't want people to see me as the person with the answers; I want this to be an environment in which the students or participants are finding their own answers and own approaches, and that often, there is more than one right answer.

Editor's note: we then discussed Dr. Brian Coppola, the keynote at LOEX 2010 (which Beth did not attend), who had similar thoughts about teaching with more than one right answer.

What is your "favorite mistake", e.g., a goof you learned a lot from, in retrospect?

The biggest mistake I used to make was not liking silence. I'd ask a question and I would not pause long enough – I'd get nervous about the blank spots and rush in and answer the question myself; I particularly found I was doing this with ESL students. Unintentionally, I was putting my needs before theirs. What I realized is that I can't fix it by talking – I have to fix it some other way. How else can I ask questions – different phrasing? Can I set up the situation and expectations better?

(For example) many ESL students come from 'lecture-style' cultures, so discussion is not something they are entirely comfortable with. Thus, to effectively work with them, I found it was best to get them talking right when they got in the room, to let them know it was an expectation from the very beginning that it was a conversation – involve them early, such as by putting the questions earlier in the session.

What book or articles are you most proud of?

The work I did (from 2002-2009) with Lori Arp on editing the information literacy and instruction column (*Reference and User Services Quarterly*). It wasn't my writing, but it was probably the thing I was most proud of because we tried to reach a broad range of topics, to include senior people and also young people (like library school students) - a range of voices.

I did write "Technology and the Constructivist Learning Environment" (*Research Strategies*, 19 (3/4), 2005) and it was a highlight b/c I felt a lot of people at the time were adopting technology for technology's sake, and weren't really looking at how we could use technology at its fullest. We (needed to) take a learning approach in helping people build their own knowledge.

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Mark Emmons: For me, the study was enlightening and led to several changes. To begin, our findings have become part of the training we conduct each year with the English instructors, changing the way they approach the library visit. While most instructors continue to bring their classes to the library after their students have developed a research question and are prepared for the research stage that Carol C. Kuhlthau (2004) describes as *information collection*, many now bring their classes to the library during the earlier exploratory stages of research that Kuhlthau describes as *topic selection*, *prefocus exploration*, and *focus formulation*. Students conduct preliminary research that helps them focus upon a topic, find background information, and help shape a question. Because most instructors do not take advantage of a second optional library visit, we have increased the emphasis on asking questions and gathering background information in all classes. In addition, instead of focusing exclusively on scholarly resources, we now explore the different purposes various types of sources serve by demonstrating how popular and scholarly sources answer different types of questions. Finally, as with our first study (Emmons & Martin, 2002), our

engaging conversations as we conducted the research strengthened the working relationship between the library and the writing program.

Works Cited

- Emmons, M., & Martin, W. (2002). Engaging conversation: Evaluating the contribution of library instruction to the quality of student research. *College & Research Libraries*, 63(6), 545-560.
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What books or articles influenced you?

Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher by Stephen D. Brookfield (1995, Jossey-Bass). He talks about looking at yourself as teacher from four different viewpoints: your own, your students, colleagues, and literature-lense (ground what you do in research, not just what seems to 'work' in the classroom).

How to Get Ideas by Jack Foster [Author] and Larry Corby [Illustrator] (2007, Berrett-Koehler Publishers). It (focuses) on being creative in your thinking, looking at things from different viewpoint and angles. It has a whole bunch of different exercises you can do.

Creative Whack Pack by Roger VonOech (1989, U.S. Games Systems). It is an illustrated deck of cards. It helps you look at things in different ways. For example, one of the cards is – if you look at a door, and you think of it as just a door, you will be bound in certain ways. But if you think of it is a portal, it changes things and challenges you. Or, how is your instruction program like an orchestra – do the strings practice more than the brass or does percussion not follow the director? Sometimes in teaching you get stuck in a rut – 'this is the way I have to present this information' – and it is really helpful to think about it in a different way and its different aspects.

What technology, if any do use? Is there any you dislike because it does not add sufficiently to the learning process?

I think we rely on PowerPoint too much, and it's good to see people get away from that and being more interactive in the way they approach their teaching. It makes things too linear, inflexible for the particular needs of learners and classes.

I like chat – we do a lot of chat reference. I still find it challenging to do instruction through chat, such as doing videos on the fly, and we've got a long way to go to get everyone at the same comfort level, but it is where the students are and it is certainly here stay.

You've mentored dozens of LIS grads – are there 1 or 2 best pieces of advice, particularly in instruction, that you typically share with new librarians?

No, because with each person, the best advice I give them is not what I tell them, but the experiences I provide them with so they come to those 'a-ha' moments on their own. The people I feel have been the most successful didn't really ask my advice, but came and talked to me about a situation and I asked them questions so they come up with answers themselves.

It goes with the throughline of what we discussed earlier-try and recognize everyone's individuality and different needs, so you let that manifest in different learning situations you put together. That makes people realize what their style is, what they're good at/need to work at- by letting them bring to you their individual challenges, that's how you mentor them.