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Stepping Back from the Line: How We Stopped Teaching and Built a Stronger Program

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STEPPING BACK FROM THE LINE: HOW WE STOPPED TEACHING AND BUILT A STRONGER PROGRAM

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INTRODUCTION

As instruction librarians, we regularly live the cycle of our students' work—papers, speeches, citation problems. There are times in the semester when we teach so many classes it feels overwhelming, which makes assessing, innovating, creating, and trying new things challenging. Yet, these activities are important as we strive toward intentional, relevant, and impactful information literacy instruction. After several years of department growth and institutional change, the library teaching and learning department at Penn State University decided it was time to take stock and determine how best we can employ the talents and expertise we hold. We did something drastic and stopped teaching for the institution's first-year rhetoric and composition class, for one full semester, during Spring 2019. During this time, we undertook an effort to align our teaching activities with our stated objectives and to take stock of the many instructional activities and modes we employ, as well as our expertise, in order to carry forward with an instruction program that makes meaningful differences for our students. This paper provides an overview of the Library Instruction Reboot project, discusses methods for evaluating teaching partnerships and commitments in order to choose meaningful integrations (and say goodbye to partnerships that don't make sense), and shares tactics for integrating new methods and modes of teaching into what is already a full plate.

BACKGROUND

Penn State is a large research institution with over 100,000 students situated at over 20 different campuses throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, including the flagship campus at University Park and the virtual World Campus. All campuses engage in teaching and learning, but our approaches at each campus are unique and flexible, in order to honor the differences of each campus and its learners. Even so, instruction librarians at Penn State continue to work toward a cohesive, coordinated instruction program. As part of these efforts, the Library Learning Services (LLS) team—the instructional strategy and leadership team at PSU Libraries located at the University Park campus—has existed for the past 20 years. However, over the past five years, the team has grown in size and in scope.

In 2015, a team member described the LLS team as the "junk drawer of the library," explaining that any initiative or service without a home was thrown into the department. Since 2015, the team has worked hard to be strategic about the scope of the department's work and individuals' roles within the department. Our first step toward this was identifying specific categories of work for the team: incubating teaching and learning expertise, coordinating foundational-level information literacy instruction, coordinating outreach and student engagement, and providing strategy and guidance for learning environments (Penn State University Libraries, 2020).

As soon as the department identified these four major priorities and areas of work, we were able to better scope individuals' roles in order to support these areas of work. Further, we were able to work with administration in order to develop several new roles to meet areas of growth for the department, including student engagement, open education, online learning, and equity and inclusion. Prior to 2015, the department consisted of two reference and instruction librarians, three information literacy librarians, and one outreach coordinator. Between 2015 and 2019, the department was able to add a student engagement coordinator, student

engagement and equity librarian, student engagement librarian, learning design and open education engagement librarian, instructional designer, and online learning librarian.

Similarly, the team worked to identify foundational information literacy learning objectives for the work that we do in each of our four areas of work and in each of our individual roles. We think of these objectives as being like boundaries that define where, how, when, and with whom we do our work (Appendix A).

With our defined scope of work, individual roles, and learning outcomes to guide us, we were able to take a critical look at our portfolio of work and be intentional about our teaching, our partnerships, our resources, and our targeted learners. It became clear to us that we couldn't simply continue to add new things to our portfolio of work and would need to stop doing some things in order to do other things identified as new and important priorities. In other words, we recognized that we couldn't do everything we've always done and grow in the directions that we know our campus and our learners need. But how could we negotiate these difficult decisions and conversations while simultaneously keeping up with our already overwhelming workload? In short: we couldn't.

Figure 1: The Library Learning Services Teaching Portfolio

As a department, our conversations began to focus around being intentional about who we teach, what we teach, how we teach, and where we teach. We recognized, though, that these intentions were still constrained by a number of factors, including limited time, personnel, and resources. We knew that we must make strategic, and often difficult, decisions about where and how we invest our time, energy, resources, and expertise so that our work is meaningful and relevant to as many students, faculty, and community members as possible. In order to do this, we needed to set aside time to better understand our context, make these decisions, and have these conversations.

TIME FOR A REBOOT

Inspired by a LOEX 2014 presentation, we made the decision to take our foundational library instruction program, with the exception of our teaching for ESL classes, offline for an entire semester in an endeavor we named the Library Instruction Reboot (Carbery & Cottrell, 2014).

One semester prior to engaging in the Reboot, we identified clear goals for the Library Instruction Reboot, which was scheduled for Spring 2019. The primary goal was to develop an articulated teaching program. The components that emerged as most important to address included curriculum scope, our portfolio of teaching activities across multiple modes of instruction, and the plan for assessment. Within the curriculum scope, it was particularly important to have a clearly defined list of current and potential curricular partners. In assessing these partnerships, we identified the best opportunities for intentional and relevant integrations of information literacy instruction. Similarly, as our portfolio of teaching activities expanded over the years to include an increasing number of online learning objects, digital badges, face-to-face classroom instruction, and library orientation activities, we wanted to be certain that each format was being honored as equally important in order to support new initiatives while balancing the teaching portfolio load. Finally, we planned assessment of our teaching in all modalities to demonstrate the impact of the teaching we do in all forms.

A second important goal for the team was engaging in professional development and enrichment activities. This practice began in Summer 2018, when the LLS team read *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less,* by Greg McKeown (2014). This text prepared the team to critically examine our workload and priorities. Additionally, the team held monthly conversations about *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* from the National Research Council (2000). This reading fed the effort to mindfully design learning experiences for our students. Finally, we committed to gather as a group for relevant webinars, inviting our colleagues from the library to join us in participating in and discussing these learning opportunities.

Reboot Teams

With goals set, we divided the work and established teams for three priority areas: foundational learners, distinctive populations, and badges. Each team was empowered to write its own charge and set its own goals; the leaders of each team met frequently to ensure communication among the groups. We also began *The Library Instruction Reboot* blog, where we could share progress with our colleagues (2019).

The Foundational Learners Team's objective was to establish a vision for library support for foundational learners for 2019 and beyond. To do this, the team undertook the following:

- evaluation of current curricular partnerships, with a special focus on first year composition (70% of our pre-Reboot teaching load);
- analysis of the many teaching modes we employed, with an eye to the size and scale of the student body at Penn State University Park;
- analysis of instruction statistics, assignments, and assessment/evaluation methods;
- learning about student challenges with library research, through focus groups; and
- assessment of our librarians' use of the foundational learning objectives.

LLS identified teaching for students from distinctive populations as a growth area and the second main focus of the Reboot, led by the Distinctive Populations Team. We already had several relationships with university support units for these populations, and we recognized opportunities to build deeper library experiences for these students. Distinctive student populations, a term introduced in the ARL Research Library Impact Framework, refers to students from one or more diverse backgrounds (ARL, 2018). Populations considered during the Reboot included first-generation students, students of color, transfer students, veterans, adult learners, and international students. These populations are documented to have additional challenges in higher education, and an understanding of library research can be an important component in supporting student success. The Distinctive Populations Team's work consisted of:

- Scanning the Penn State programs for students from distinctive populations to identify, programs that included an academic requirement or course.
- Reviewing the literature to identify existing strategies for reaching and teaching these students.

Finally, LLS determined that the Reboot should strategically address our digital badges program as a legitimate form of teaching and charged a Digital Badges Team to analyze this program (Rimland & Raish, 2014). The digital badges program began as an experiment with just a few classes participating, and over several years gained traction and popularity as a delivery method for foundational information literacy. The Digital Badges Team established the objective to build a framework around the program, answering questions like: How many courses could we handle per semester? How many badge evaluators were needed? How would we decide what classes were good candidates for the badges? The team's work included:

- Running a pilot using digital badges in a small group of ENGL 015 residential classes.
- Logging time required to evaluate badges.
- Gathering feedback from students and instructors about the effectiveness of badges as a mode of information literacy instruction.

IMMEDIATE RESULTS

Several key findings from the Reboot informed the direction of our teaching program. First, survey results showed we were only teaching using two of the seven foundational learning objectives, thus spending unnecessary time on pre-class consultation and lesson plan development. This makes sense considering that the ENGL 015 course uses a common syllabus; similarly, we decided to standardize our approach to ENGL 015 by developing two common lesson plans.

We learned that students have the most difficulty with integrating the information they find into their work, and as a result we worked with the ENGL 015 instructors to incorporate corresponding Credo information literacy modules into their course. We also learned that the existence of several programs designed to make the transition to college easier for students from distinctive populations, such as the Penn State Equity Scholars Program, Comprehensive Studies Program (through the Multicultural Resource Center), and the Veterans Program. We are moving forward to integrate instruction into these programs.

Finally, we came away with a much better sense of our capacity for supporting the digital badges program. The Digital Badges Team established an articulated scale and parameters for participation, as well as an expert team to drive further development of the program.

The Reboot also transformed the way the Library Learning Services department works. The team structure we used for the Reboot remains, the teams having evolved slightly to encompass our other areas of work. Current teams are: Teaching Innovation and Online Learning, Student Engagement and Outreach, Instruction and Pedagogy, and a Leadership team comprised of the team leaders from each of the others. Each team serves as an engine to keep that portion of the Library Learning Service portfolio running. We are able to be more agile, and team members are empowered to take ownership over their work.

The Reboot experience also informed a defined set of criteria for the ingredients that make a successful teaching partnership:

- All parties involved share a student-centered philosophy.
- The collaborators share the goals of the library, department, and/or university strategic plan.
- There is administrative support in all units.
- The collaborator is knowledgeable about how the library can help or is willing to learn.
- The impact of partnership can be assessed.

We stopped supporting one course because it did not meet these criteria. Through the Reboot, we laid the foundation to be intentional in our work, and to place instruction where it means the most for our students.

MAKING SPACE

None of this work would have been possible without the proper space in our schedules, minds, and regular routines. Impactful, intentional work can't happen when every day is packed full of teaching, meetings, and other work. It's far too easy to fall into the habit of always saying yes, committing to partnerships, and investing time and other resources, which can mean that you're always busy and may feel pulled in many different directions. When your days and weeks feel like this, it's next to impossible to be intentional and purposeful about your work. Making space and time to figure out what's worth doing and what's worth doing well ensures that team members share a collaborative vision of work and that work is meaningful, intentional, and relevant.

It's not always possible or desirable to set aside an entire semester to focus on strategic work. Here are some suggestions for "rebooting" an instruction program, regardless of the context.

Figure 2: Strategies and Suggestions for Rebooting an Instruction Program

A LASTING IMPACT

At the time of the writing of this article (June 2020) we are, in the midst of an actual pandemic. Like many, we were thrust into online remote teaching on March 16, 2020. That just happened to be at the height of our instruction season. Suddenly, all classes were happening synchronously through Zoom, and most of our collaborators decided to keep their library instruction sessions on the books. BUT. We were ready. We had standard lesson plans with prepared resources. The only difference was the mode, thankfully a format we were at least familiar with. The Teaching Innovation and Online Learning Team took the lead on equipping all of us to teach effectively via Zoom. The transition wasn't painless, but it was made much simpler by having all of these elements already in place. Throughout the remote work period, which continues at least through May, our teams have continued to meet and strategize, carrying initiatives forward in our new reality. The regular communication among the teams enabled us to keep student engagement events running, offer an online destress fest, and plan for summer online. A saying we've often heard in the media and elsewhere during the pandemic is "We're all in this together," and this is true for Library Learning Services, and is supported by our mindful, intentional program plan.

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APPENDIX A

PSU LIBRARY LEARNING SERVICES FOUNDATIONAL INFORMATION LITERACY LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- recognize that there are a variety of resources available to assist in their research needs, including the Libraries' home page, the ENGL:015 or CAS:100 course guide, and the Ask a Librarian service.
- determine the most appropriate information source or search tool (e.g. LionSearch, Google, or other database) for their information need.
- distinguish between different information formats (scholarly article, newspaper article, blog, etc.) and determine the appropriate format for their research needs.
- identify keywords based on their topics or research questions and revise their search terms as needed in order to conduct an effective search.
- use information resources in order to gain an understanding of a research topic and generate research questions.
- refine search results using built-in database features and/or search term refinement in order to locate resources that meet their specific information needs.
- critically evaluate different sources of information and identify key criteria needed in an authoritative source.

Images for Tables and Figures (Editor will put in body of the text later)

Figure 1. The Library Learning Services Teaching Portfolio

Figure 2: Strategies and Suggestions for Rebooting an Instruction Program

Strategy	Suggestions
Establish accountability	Work with a partner or team to develop goals and a plan
Identify collaborators	Find on-campus collaborators who will help you gather information and communicate
Find time	Stop doing something that you're feeling unexcited or unsure about
Communicate with administration	Work with library and campus administrators to align your work with strategic plans and priorities
Develop clarity around goals	Be specific about what you want to accomplish