

FROM GUEST LECTURER TO ASSIGNMENT CONSULTANT: EXPLORING A NEW ROLE FOR THE TEACHING LIBRARIAN

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ABSTRACT

For many academic libraries, the library instruction session, whether taught on demand or integrated into targeted courses, is still the cornerstone of our information literacy programs. Within these programs the instructional role of the librarian often remains limited to that of guest lecturer. By rethinking this role and repositioning ourselves as consultants in assignment design, librarians can contribute to an array of deliverables that are more closely aligned with course goals and sharply honed to improve student learning of research processes and the information landscape.

After suggesting a theoretical basis for the consultancy role and describing the local context in which the model was explored—UC Berkeley’s Mellon funded project, the “Library/Faculty Fellows for Undergraduate Research”—this paper outlines the practice of assignment consultancy through an examination of processes and deliverables from a multi-disciplinary selection of undergraduate courses. It concludes with thoughts on the future of consultancy as a service model.

LIBRARIAN AS ASSIGNMENT CONSULTANT: A FOUNDATION

It is not unprecedented to frame the role of librarians in academe as “information consultants,” or to promote librarians’ adoption of consultancy practices. Frank, Raschke, Wood & Yang (2000) argue that doing so is essential to the future viability of academic libraries currently “at risk”—presumably

of invisibility and irrelevance. However, in this conception, the emphasis in the consultancy role is on information, not pedagogy. In the scheme proposed by Frank et al., “*the consultant* learns what is needed for the curriculum,” and informs “*the scholar*... what information resources are available for students.” It is “*the scholar*,” then, unaided by the librarian-consultant, who “designs assignments that make best use of the resources at hand” (p. 93, emphasis added).

In the model suggested here, the librarian’s knowledge of information resources—not to mention search expertise—is still assumed, but so, too, is a much wider knowledge base built on interactions with students *as learners*. At the reference desk, librarians have long been uniquely positioned as “participant observers” in the field where student learning about important aspects of research is taking place. As early adopters of “classroom assessment techniques,” many have used the one-shot classroom, in spite of all its pedagogical limitations, as “laboratories for the study of learning” (Angelo and Cross, 1993). “Field” and “laboratory” have mutually enriched the librarian’s understanding of students engaged in research, revealing the most common and the most tenacious conceptual gaps that impede them at different stages in their academic careers, and illuminating the implicit, intuitively-derived strategies that often serve them well.

Given the different contexts in which their work with students takes place, librarians’ observations of students as learners are distinct from, but still complementary to, those of classroom faculty. The latter see up close student problems related to evaluation of information and its sources, since evaluation-related shortcomings are manifest not only in the sources students include in their bibliographies, but also in the depth and quality of analysis of those sources evident in their written assignments. Librarians, on the other hand, have more

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firsthand exposure to the challenges students face with respect to navigation and finding; to the gaps in student awareness of disciplinary literatures, and in their mental maps of the larger information landscape; and finally—though not exhaustively—to students’ false expectations of quasi-mechanical linearity in a research process that is, in reality, complex, recursive, and informed throughout by critical thinking and imagination.

This deeper understanding of learners—reinforced by study of learning theory, instructional design, and disciplinary modes of inquiry—is what allows the librarian-consultant in the present model to offer the course instructor more than just information about collections and use of discovery tools relevant to a course. It confers insight into relevant audience- and environment-sensitive learning objectives, instructional approaches, and assignment implementation practices, all core considerations in the design of any assignment. In the present model of consultancy, the pedagogical nature of the librarian’s contribution to the assignment is central.

A CONSULTANCY FRAMEWORK: UC BERKELEY’S UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH INITIATIVE

The University of California, Berkeley, which offers 108 bachelor degree programs to nearly 24,000 undergraduate students, is among the 2.2 percent of institutions of higher education in the U.S. classified by the Carnegie Foundation in the category of “highest level of research activity,” as measured in part by expenditures on research and development and doctoral conferrals. Indeed, Berkeley shares with other research universities a group of distinctive attributes: a commitment to the creation of new knowledge through research; a preponderance of outstanding researchers on the faculty; a graduate student body that makes a significant contribution to undergraduate instruction; and an infrastructure of world class library collections and laboratory and computing facilities that makes high level research possible (Boyer Commission, 1998).

In 1998, the Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University identified these very attributes as the research university’s leverage in reinventing its curricula, and argued for a new standard of research- or inquiry-based learning that would provide undergraduates at these institutions with a distinctive educational experience. Like a number of its peers, Berkeley heeded the recommendations of the Commission’s influential report, and set goals of strengthening student preparation, and multiplying student opportunities, for research- and inquiry-based learning in the undergraduate curriculum. One of Berkeley’s seminal initiatives in this effort, the Library/Faculty Fellowship for Undergraduate Research, was funded by a four-year grant (2003-2007) from the Andrew Mellon Foundation.¹ Each year of the grant brought together a cohort of up to 14 faculty members, matching each member with a team of academic staff to support the redesign of his or her course. Courses specifically targeted by the initiative were large enrollment lecture courses (enrollment > 100)—a common feature of the undergraduate curriculum in large research universities.

A partnership of multiple campus units—including the University Library, the Office of Educational Development, Educational Technology Services, and the Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) Teaching and Resource Center—formed the underlying structure of Berkeley’s initiative. The collaborative framework itself represented a new, more integrated approach to course support on the Berkeley campus,² while reflecting Barr and Tagg’s (1995) notion that in learner-centered (or “Learning Paradigm”) institutions “interdisciplinary (or nondisciplinary) task groups and design teams,” rather than isolated faculty, would “become a major operating mode” in the production of learning (p. 24).

At the project level, senior members of each of the partner units co-developed a curriculum for the project’s summer Institute, a short “course” providing faculty participants with a framework for reflecting on students and research, for redesigning their syllabi to incorporate research-based modes of learning, and for anticipating the kind of support they could expect from their assigned teams. At the course level, Implementation Teams (or I-Teams) included a librarian, an educational technologist, a staff person from the GSI Center, and for a subset of courses, an assessment specialist. During the summer Institute, I-Team members were invited to track the progression of faculty members’ assignment ideas and syllabi, though planning meetings between individual faculty members and their teams did not begin in earnest until the Institute’s conclusion. In most cases, team meetings would then continue throughout the semester in which the course was taught.

In the 2005-2006 academic year, the author was selected to serve as Mellon Library Fellow for Teaching and Learning, a role in which she worked with faculty and fellow I-Team members on courses spanning the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. The experience provided a rich opportunity to both explore and reflect upon the evolving role of the teaching librarian and to see the beginnings of a consultancy model take shape.

BUT FIRST, THE CHALLENGE OF COMFORTABLE ASSUMPTIONS

The librarian’s place on faculty Implementation Teams provided the kind of opening many an instruction librarian has long imagined: a space to provide input on a research assignment while it is still in the gestational period. This is the optimal period for librarians to articulate the needs of student researchers who arrive in the library at the eleventh hour, and are jolted by sudden awareness of the complex expectations underlying deceptively simple assignment instructions. Making the most of the opportunity once it arrived, however, was not without its challenges, as long held assumptions about roles and expertise and—in Barr and Tagg’s (1995) formulation—“teaching and learning structures” proved persistent obstacles to change.

For their part, Berkeley’s Mellon faculty were eager to solicit the librarian’s collections and search expertise, to tap into knowledge of library materials and discovery tools relevant to the assignments they were beginning to imagine during

the weeks of the Institute. Faculty proved largely unaware, however, of the nature of the librarian's work in reference and instruction, of how interactions with students in these contexts inform librarians' understanding of students as learners, and of what this understanding might contribute to the development of better assignment models. In short, faculty had little reason to expect deeper, more pedagogically-informed support from their librarians.

Just as faculty ideas concerning the nature of librarian expertise were engrained, so too, were many of their assumptions regarding the vehicle best suited for "transmitting" expertise. As Barr (1998) has noted, most faculty continue to think of "teaching as telling," to equate teaching with lecturing, so it is hardly surprising that they would expect librarians to convey their own expertise to students, much as they themselves do, through lecture. The assumption that the I-Team librarian would deliver a guest lecture came so automatically to faculty that many wanted to schedule the date of the librarian's classroom visit before discussions of the assignment had even begun. The signs, in other words, were clear: Even with librarians involved early in course and assignment discussions, there was no guarantee that the process would not merely reproduce the pedagogy of the one-shot. Progress would depend on the librarian's ability not only to re-shape faculty expectations of librarian contributions, but also to articulate alternatives to the lecture and to the 50-minute, classroom-based "package" in which it is delivered.

TOWARDS A CONSULTANCY PRACTICE: LESSONS ON PARTNERING, PROCESS, AND FACILITATION TOOLS

Fortunately, librarians were not alone in this challenge. With both classroom teaching experience and a strong pedagogical focus, I-Team members from the GSI Teaching and Resource Center proved to be particularly important allies. Between their eagerness to explore more effective uses of GSI-led course sections and the librarian's interest in promoting assignments that give more thought to staging and support of the research process, a key synergy emerged. And for a faculty member wary of new approaches, an I-Team in unison could make a more persuasive case than the lone voice of any one of the team's members.

In any group process, however, reaching mutual understanding and agreement—finding unison—is anything but automatic. Faculty and I-Team members came to the process not only with distinct professional backgrounds and frames of reference, but also as individuals with divergent ways of communicating and approaching problems; with time always a finite resource, it became clear early on that success within a consultancy framework would require new facilitation tools. The librarian-developed *Assignment Design Proposal* (ADP) and *Implementation Plan* (IP) evolved as solutions to the process challenge, and proved effective enough to suggest the first tools for an assignment consultant's toolkit.

As written documents, both the Assignment Design Proposal and Implementation Plan could be shared in advance of team meetings, allowing everyone time to reflect on the

instructional issues at hand, pinpoint strengths and weaknesses in the proposed design and delivery solutions, and formulate their own alternatives. In this way, even where initial proposals might be dismantled and reassembled, they still served the critical function of generating productive discussion around concrete options, making progress toward shared understanding and expectations more likely.

Aside from its facilitative function, the Assignment Design Proposal also gave the librarian an opportunity to paint a clearer picture—for course instructors and non-librarian team members alike—of the pedagogical nature of the support librarians are prepared to deliver. Experience showed that the most effective proposals were those that: 1) demonstrated a grasp of the draft assignment the faculty member had begun developing during the summer Institute, and a clear understanding of learning goals; 2) identified the specific benefits to student learning that would result from the proposal's implementation; and 3) pointed to established principles of good practice (Chickering and Gamson, 1987) that the proposal had taken into account.

[*Sample ADP for Introduction to Environmental Science Course distributed to session attendees:* http://webfiles.berkeley.edu/~kglib/mellon/ES10_adp.pdf]

Whereas the Proposal addressed substantive components of the assignment, the Implementation Plan outlined the practical details of instructional delivery, including the sequence and timetable. For the large enrollment courses targeted by Berkeley's undergraduate research initiative, course sections and the GSI support role were often central to the assignment's success, so the Implementation Plan also delineated roles and responsibilities of all persons involved. In any assignment where the instructional support not only diverges from traditional methods, but might also be a shared responsibility, clarity in these details is critical to the quality of the student experience.

[*Sample IP for Political Science Course distributed to session attendees:* http://webfiles.berkeley.edu/~kglib/mellon/PS120_ipplan.pdf]

A LOOK AT DELIVERABLES: EXAMPLES FROM THREE MELLON COURSES

Too often, college-level research assignments provide students with little more than a set of instructions focused on an end product (e.g., a 5-10 page paper on a designated topic using a required number of sources). A learner-centered reconceptualization of assignments foregrounds, not the end result, but the whole learning experience—the people, resources, and structures-created or deployed to support the process. In a consultancy role, librarians are better positioned to assist faculty in mapping learning goals to a manageable part of the research process or feature of the information landscape, and to affect a learner-centered shift in the design of the assignment. As part of a team focused on course support, librarians can count on team members' expertise to lend greater

authority to the idea of enlisting graduate student instructors, course sections, and technology in the effort to liberate learning from the constraints of the lecture hall.

The three assignments described on the attached handout, from large enrollment courses in Ancient Egypt, Environmental Science, and Political Science,³ not only illustrate such shifts toward more learner-centered design, but also hint at a broader array of library “deliverables”—beyond the guest lecture—that become possible as faculty and librarians begin to embrace the librarian’s consulting role. To some degree, each assignment employs an “inverted classroom” strategy (Lage, Platt, & Treglia, 2000), whereby students’ first exposure to content, in this case research-related content, happens outside of the classroom through a carefully designed activity. The strategy has distinct benefits over traditional practice in the large enrollment course, in which the expert (course instructor, librarian) introduces new content to an unprepared, largely passive audience. “Inversion” strategies give students more responsibility for their own learning;⁴ permit a higher degree of active engagement with the material than is possible within the constraints of a large lecture hall; allow students to check their own understanding, heightening their preparedness for and engagement in subsequent class discussion; and provide more opportunities for students to receive feedback—whether from their course instructor, section leader, or librarian.

The implementation details provided for each assignment on the handout show the degree to which the assignments are “shared” by course instructor, GSIs, and librarian—an effort aimed simultaneously at erasing the counterproductive boundary between “library piece” and course work more typical in the one-shot instruction model, and at broadening ownership of “information literacy” beyond the library.

[*Assignment Design Examples Handout distributed to session attendees*: <http://webfiles.berkeley.edu/~kglib/mellon/3assignments.pdf>]

CONCLUSION

The practice of consulting on assignment design, as explored by the author in the context of her experience with UC Berkeley’s Mellon-funded undergraduate research initiative, represents not only a new role for teaching librarians—or perhaps an extension of their typical role—but also points toward a different service model for library instructional programs. While the consultancy model has implications for both the professional training of teaching librarians and the allocation of finite organizational resources (the exploration of which goes beyond the scope of this paper), there is no reason to imagine it being a wholesale replacement for traditional instruction. For all its shortcomings, the traditional instruction model, it seems, owes no small part of its popularity on our campuses to the minimal requirements it makes of busy course instructors—minimal planning, minimal advance notice, and minimal time outside the 50 minutes they “give up” to their classroom guest. For librarians, accommodation will continue to be an important

strategy for achieving our aims, but it is undeniable that for the course instructor, the consultancy model changes the nature of their investment.

Much like the services offered by centers for teaching improvement on many of our campuses—perhaps even most effective when partnered with these services—selective opt-in by faculty will be a given. It is reasonable to predict that consultations will be fewer in number than library instruction sessions. Assignment consultancy, though, allows librarians to model learner-centered approaches that course instructors can make their own, and to create reusable and adaptable materials—both of which reduce the need for librarians to teach the same course-related sessions semester-in and semester-out. If we value impact at least as much as we do numbers, the model holds promise, making an exploration of its place in a diversified portfolio of strategies aimed at multiplying the library’s impact on learning worthy of further exploration.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The campus context in which the Library/Faculty Fellowship for Undergraduate Research was created is described in greater detail elsewhere. See, especially: Dupuis, E. A., Maslach, C., Schragar, C. D., & McDaniel, S. (2006). Information literacy and undergraduate research at the University of California, Berkeley. In T. Jacobsen and T. Mackey (Eds.), *Information literacy collaborations that work* (pp. 5-18). New York: Neal Schuman. See also the project website at <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/mellon/index.html>.
- ² UC Berkeley's Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, Christina Maslach, and former Associate University Librarian Patricia Iannuzzi have described the collaborative model of course support behind the project in more depth in presentations at the Association of Research Libraries and the POD Network annual meetings.
- ³ Focusing on principles for working with large enrollment courses, Mahoney, McDaniel, & McKenzie (2005) describe their collaboration on an assignment for a lower-division Chemistry course, as part of the same Berkeley initiative. See "Scaling up: Planning and implementing a research assignment in a large-enrollment course," in *Discover, connect, engage: Creative integration of information literacy, Proceedings of the Thirty-Third National LOEX Library Instruction Conference*.
- ⁴ See Weimer's *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five key changes to practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), for a discussion of the importance of student responsibility for learning.
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