

# **BOLSTERING THE BRIDGE TO INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT: LIBRARIAN SELF-ASSESSMENT AND STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR INFORMATION LITERACY PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT**

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## **INTRODUCTION: ENVISIONING THE BRIDGE TO INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT**

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators (2007) provides useful guidelines for academic librarians who teach and who coordinate information literacy instruction programs. These standards can be adapted to smaller libraries, which have particular needs and resources, and where librarians often have multiple roles, blurring the boundaries between public services and technical or access services. Unlike large libraries, which may have dedicated instruction departments and several librarians whose primary duties relate to instruction, the library at Indiana University (IU) Southeast—a regional campus of Indiana University, located in New Albany, Indiana—has eight librarians, and six of them provide information literacy instruction. I head the program as the coordinator of instruction, and the librarians who teach are not strictly instruction librarians. These are librarians who work in collection development, electronic resources, technical services, and access services. Thus, while they provide instructional services, it is not their primary role.

Since instruction is not the primary role of these other librarians, it is essential to have a strong structure in place to guide assessment and improvement of instructional services. Assessment of an information literacy program is the bridge that links a library instruction program with a reflective culture of instructional improvement. This bridge of assessment requires careful engineering and the use of structural supports. Structural elements such as librarian self-assessment and the identification

of strengths and weaknesses of the instruction program help undergird this bridge of assessment and leads to the development of information literacy instructional improvement.

The ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (2000) is the definitive document upon which most, if not all, library instruction programs base their learning outcomes. The literature is rife with countless articles and books that cite these standards. However, ACRL's recent publication of the Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators (2007) remains relatively unexplored in the professional conversations of the field. One recent article (Sproles, Johnson, & Farison, 2008) discusses the Proficiencies in the context of MLIS programs and the preparation librarians receive in library school. However, this presentation and paper address the Proficiencies by providing a concrete case study on how the Proficiencies might be deployed in a small academic library.

## **THE BLUEPRINTS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT**

Like any good engineer, I needed a detailed plan to begin investigating and implementing changes in my instruction program, and there were multiple sources that helped influence these blueprints. For the most part, my exploration of the Proficiencies was informed by conference sessions I attended in 2009. At LOEX 2009, I attended Courtney Mack's session "Training the Conductor," which detailed Duke University's efforts to develop professional development opportunities for instruction librarians. This session ignited my own thinking on this topic and how I might develop a similar program of instructional improvement in my own much smaller academic library instruction program. Then, in the summer of 2009, I attended a discussion forum at the ALA Annual Conference sponsored by the ACRL Instruction Section (IS). This session,

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titled “Teacher Proficiencies: Applying Proficiency Standards for Instruction Librarians in Your Library,” provided librarians with the opportunity to discuss the standards and how they might be used in a library instruction program. It was this forum that fueled the inspiration ignited at LOEX a few months before that. Finally, as a member of the Class of 2009 of the ALA Emerging Leaders program, I had completed a leadership self-assessment and goal development instrument, and the format of this tool inspired the assessment survey I later developed for librarians in the library instruction program I coordinate.

## ANCHORING THE BRIDGE

Our bridge to instructional assessment is anchored at each end with two important structures. The first structure is SWOT analysis, which helped identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the IU Southeast Instruction Program. SWOT analysis is a component of strategic planning. According to Evans and Ward (2007), the SWOT analysis “can facilitate thinking through the implications of environmental data and the capabilities of your organization” (p. 153). Identifying SWOTs includes “identifying those strengths that are available to implement strategies, identifying those weaknesses that should be corrected, identifying opportunities that are new or have not been adequately exploited, and developing tactics to counter threats” (Lorenzen, 2006, p. 25). Thinking through the various elements, characteristics, and possibilities of the program provides a useful framework for future planning.

At a library instruction program meeting, we initiated the SWOT analysis process, which continued to progress in monthly Library Instruction Brown Bag Lunches. The strengths of our program include having our own dedicated instructional space in the library, as well as a formalized instruction agreement with the IU Southeast First Year Seminar (FYS) program. Our weaknesses include low staffing and a tendency to rely on one model of instructional delivery. Opportunities include using technology in innovative ways and collaborative relationships with teaching faculty. And a few of our threats include the impending retirement of one of our veteran librarians and faculty mindsets about the presence of technology in the information research process. Our next step is to develop a mission, vision, and goals based on the SWOT analysis findings.

The second critical structure that supports our bridge is librarian self-assessment. Chapman, Pettway, and White (2001) describe a portfolio-based assessment program at Valdosta State University, where librarians complete a self-reflection questionnaire twice a year. Librarian self-assessment can “be used to address areas of improvement and to suggest activities that the library instruction team could design to promote instructional development” (p. 296). Thus, librarian self-assessment is a critical component of an instruction program improvement plan. When deployed in conjunction with a SWOT analysis, the self-assessment can be a method of responding to the weaknesses identified in the analysis.

In the summer of 2009, I used the ACRL Proficiencies to develop a self-assessment tool for librarians in the library

instruction program I coordinate at IU Southeast. I based the format of the self-assessment survey on a leadership skills inventory I took in the ALA Emerging Leaders program. I altered each Proficiency in order to create a first person statement. For example, Proficiency 1.2., “Works well in a team environment and provides team with knowledge, skill, and time to improve instructional services,” became “I work well in a team environment and provide team with knowledge, skill, and time to improve instructional services.” For each statement, librarians responded with “never,” “seldom,” “about half the time,” “usually,” or “frequently.” The survey instructions informed the librarians: “Some of the proficiencies may not apply to you and the instruction program. Nevertheless, you should still respond to each statement with your first thought about how you most often act.” That is, some of the proficiencies concern skills related to coordinating a library instruction program, which would apply only to the program coordinator, and not all librarians. Each librarian took the survey and then I analyzed the results. The actual survey may be viewed online at <http://bit.ly/librarianassessmentsurvey>.

Based on the results of the Proficiencies Self-Assessment, I identified the Proficiencies that scored “never,” “seldom,” or “about half of the time,” as in “I never/seldom/about half the time do X, Y, or Z.” Of those identified proficiencies, I chose the ones that seemed the most relevant to our particular program. The proficiencies I selected for further examination covered a broad range of skills and activities:

- Administrative skills: 1.1., 1.3.
- Communication: 3.4.
- Assessment and evaluation: 2.1.
- Instructional design: 6.1., 6.2., 6.3., 6.6., 6.7.
- Planning skills: 8.1.
- Presentation skills: 9.1., 9.2., 9.3, 9.5.
- Teaching skills: 12.1., 12.2., 12.3., 12.6., 12.7.

I shared this information with the librarians and asked them to choose from this list Proficiency categories that they personally would like to strengthen in their own practice, and, as a result, help strengthen the program as a whole. We met a few days later and discussed these selected proficiencies. We ultimately selected two broad areas, communication and presentation skills, from this list as starting points for developing professional development goals. These areas corresponded to the weaknesses identified in our SWOT analysis of the instruction program. The goal-building worksheets used in this meeting were also based on a tool I used as a member of the ALA Emerging Leaders program. The goal-building worksheets may be viewed online at <http://bit.ly/librariangoals>.

The goal we developed for communication focused on Proficiency 3.4—“Requests feedback from peers on instruction-related communication skills and uses it for self-improvement.”

Here is where our monthly Library Instruction Brown Bag Lunches were born. In this forum, we talk about teaching, share information and experiences, and elicit feedback from other librarians about any problems or issues. These discussions often address how or what to communicate regarding library instruction to teaching faculty, or how to communicate critical concepts to students. Since communication was an area of weakness identified in the SWOT analysis, the monthly Library Instruction Brown Bag Lunches usefully provided a mechanism for formalizing a communication and feedback method among librarians.

For presentation skills, we focused on Proficiency 9.2—“Presents instructional content in diverse ways (written, oral, visual, online, or using presentation software), and selects appropriate delivery methods according to class needs.” Our reliance on only one model of instruction was identified in our SWOT analysis, so this was a logical area for us to work on as a group. As a result, I began to explore new and diverse methods of instruction delivery, including investigating the use of a classroom response system as an assessment tool, exploring Adobe Captivate as a tool for designing online tutorials, and working with our campus teaching and learning center to develop instructional videos and podcasts.

### **TESTING THE BRIDGE: WILL IT TAKE US THERE?**

Our instructional improvement project at the IU Southeast Library is still in its early stages, yet our efforts already are showing promise. Our monthly Brown Bag Lunches have proven to be a crucial communication method for librarians. Librarians seem to regard it as a safe environment where candor is encouraged and supported. Effective communication is a critical component of a successful instruction program, and institutionalizing a specific format for candid feedback and communication brings us in closer alignment with the Proficiencies. Similarly, the exploration of classroom response systems, instructional podcasts and videos, and online tutorials promises to diversify the methods by which we deliver instruction. This, too, helps our program more strongly reflect the established best practices outlined in the Proficiencies.

It is a challenge, however, to undertake such projects in a small library with a small library faculty and limited resources. It certainly helps to think creatively and make the most of the resources that are available. For example, finding time for librarians to meet is always difficult in a busy academic library, no matter what size. But carefully observing patterns of patron usage can help identify a time that is not as busy as others. At IU Southeast, there are very few Friday classes, and therefore the Library is not very busy on Fridays. And because most teaching faculty members aren't on campus on Fridays, faculty committees on which librarians serve tend not to meet on those days. Thus, for our purposes, Fridays proved to be a good time for us to meet. Once we decided to have the Library Instruction Brown Bag lunches, I scheduled one each month for the entire academic year. This ensured that they were on the calendar well in advance, thus reducing the likelihood of conflicts.

Getting administrative and librarian buy-in is another vital aspect of this instructional improvement project. It is important to make a strong case for such projects to the library director. The ACRL Proficiencies should help with this, because they provide external, professional evidence of best practices, and a good library director should want to make sure that the library instruction program in his or her library is in line with the best ideas and standards of the profession.

### **FOOTBRIDGE OR SUSPENSION BRIDGE? ENGINEERING FOR PARTICULAR NEEDS**

This discussion has focused on the specific needs of the library at IU Southeast, a small academic library with limited resources. Academic libraries, from very small to very large, have needs and requirements unique to that environment. However, I would argue that the processes I've described here are applicable to libraries of any size; the process is scalable to any library instruction program. A SWOT analysis will help a library instruction program identify areas for improvement, as will a librarian self-assessment, whether the library has four librarians or forty. It is how a library responds to the analysis and assessment that determines the path they engineer. Bridges to instructional improvement can take many forms, but as long as they are bolstered with a commitment to a reflective culture of assessment and the best practices and standards of the profession, these bridges will span the churning waters of limited resources, complex challenges, and specific needs and arrive in the land of information literacy instructional improvement.

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