

# MOVING FROM NOVICE TO EXPERT TEACHER: TURNING YOUR CRAFT INTO ART

ANTHONY STAMATOPLOS

## INTRODUCTION

*What one sees as good teaching, and how one teaches, depends on what conception of teaching one has.* (Biggs, 1999, p. 61).

Because information literacy is a significant aspect of academic librarianship today, it is incumbent on librarians and leaders in the profession to consider ways to improve the quality of librarian teachers. There is a need to reexamine, understand, and improve librarians' teaching practice. This applies individually, institutionally, and throughout the profession. It is especially relevant in light of the current emphasis on demonstrating the value of academic libraries and librarians.

Teaching has become a substantial part of the job for many academic librarians. Positions routinely carry expectations of teaching information literacy (Davies-Hoffman et al., 2013; Hall, 2013; Lynch & Smith, 2001). Analyses of job advertisements have shown a significant increase in instruction as a requirement for reference and other library jobs (Hall, 2013). For the most part, however, academic librarians enter the profession with limited teacher training. Summarizing the findings of several studies over several years, one article describes a "contradiction between the growing importance of information literacy to the library's core mission and lack of pedagogical training for new librarians" (Davies-Hoffman et al., 2013, p. 9). This lack of pedagogical training "not only leaves many students ill-prepared to enter the profession, but also leaves them with a skewed view of their professional futures" (Brecher & Klipfel, 2014, p. 45).

Discussion of teacher training for librarians usually centers on accumulating skills, which presumably prepare librarians to function as teachers at a level assumed adequate for their jobs. Similarly, subsequent continuing development as teachers focuses on adding new techniques through

professional reading and participation in workshops and conferences. This paper presents a framework for examining this problem by applying two models of teacher expertise from outside the library world.

## TECHNIQUE AND CRAFT

How does the library profession perceive teaching craft and teacher expertise, and do those views help us as we broaden our roles and claim value in the academic world? Whatever it means to be a good teacher, it must begin with content knowledge and teaching skills. If learning a craft is about acquiring skills and experience in a domain, what does it look like to move from novice to expert teacher? Overall, there may be a sense that we learn teaching basics at some point, add to that from time to time, and then gain expertise through practice. We often say, "Practice makes perfect." But does simply practicing the same thing over time necessarily improve one's skills and result in expertise? Is a repertoire of skills or several years of experience all there is to teacher excellence?

In a recent study, some of the most commonly reported ways that new librarians learn to do instruction are "on-the-job training," "observing other instructors," "assisting other instructors," and through "trial and error." Among the ways those respondents believed to be the best ways for new librarians to learn to do instruction were: "on-the-job training," "observing other instructors," "assisting other instructors," and an "in-house training program" (Hall, 2013, pp. 31-32). Such findings might give an impression that we don't see teaching as terribly complex to begin with. Or perhaps the relative importance of teaching in librarianship is not great enough to warrant in-depth and targeted attention. Either way, it would appear that our profession has not seen teaching as deserving of the attention and respect we give to other aspects of our work. Some librarians will admit that they "didn't sign on to be a

teacher” in the first place, and instruction is something they take on only because they have to.

When we talk about skills, we essentially are talking about the ability to perform a task. Some problem areas are largely straightforward and “structured,” such as mathematics, but most are “unstructured.” Unstructured areas are those that “contain a potentially unlimited number of possible relevant facts and features, and the way those elements interrelate and determine other events is unclear” (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986, p. 20). One such area is teaching. To train, develop, and assess librarian teachers, we must first understand the difference between the novice and expert teacher.

What does an “expert teacher” look like? Is it simply about acquiring a specified number of skills and practicing those skills consistently? Is there something more, in the nature of what the expert teacher does and how they do it that makes them a good teacher? Is it more than accumulated skills and good technique? Do expert teachers think and behave differently from novice teachers? Such questions deserve serious consideration in our profession, beginning with the craft of teaching.

A useful tool in understanding how people learn skills is the “Dreyfus Model” of skill acquisition. The model proposes five stages of increasing proficiency: 1) novice, 2) advanced beginner, 3) competent, 4) proficient, and 5) expert (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). Skill level or proficiency exists on a continuum, so becoming an expert entails progressing along that continuum from novice to expert. Applying the model to librarians learning teaching skills can help us understand the learning process and assess a teacher’s proficiency level. Beyond describing relative ability levels, the Dreyfus model analyzes how learners think about their skill. It characterizes the learner’s approach in the novice stage of skill acquisition as context-free and rule-oriented. The learner applies their skill by adhering to the rules they’ve been taught, without reference to the context or situation, and does not exercise any “discretionary judgment.” As skill increases through the stages, rules give way to guidelines, and then deliberate planning. Eventually, as the higher levels are achieved, learners see situations holistically and use intuition, based on their experience and understanding of a situation. Overall, Dreyfus and Dreyfus state that the five-stage process is a:

progression *from* the analytic behavior of a detached subject, consciously decomposing his environment into recognizable elements, and following abstract rules, *to* involved skilled behavior based on an accumulation of concrete experiences and the unconscious recognition of new situations as similar to whole remembered ones. (p. 35)

Academic librarians generally are not taught to think of themselves as teachers, and for the most part are not prepared to be teachers. And given the nature of much of their teaching, it is understandable that they would continue to lack opportunities for development and growth. The Dreyfus model can be a useful tool as librarians examine more closely how they

learn teaching skills and progress along the proficiency continuum. It can help identify where they may be in the process. Some might find that, regardless of many years of teaching, they remain at the novice or advanced beginner stage, simply because of limited circumstances or lack of opportunity to develop. Others might be at the competent stage, and unaware of the possibilities for developing expertise. Understanding the circumstances and obstacles that prevent transition from one level to the next, librarians can suggest ways to move toward expertise.

## EXPERTISE AND ART IN TEACHING

Being an expert teacher is much more than the ability to do things. Sole focus on technique can result in a “mechanical” view of teaching. Teaching is more than technique. Studies of good teachers find that they think and act in particular ways that make them effective and differentiate them from less effective teachers. Expert teachers have moved far beyond the idea that teaching is the mere “transmission” of knowledge from teacher to student. Studies of novice and expert teachers can help librarians understand what good teaching looks like and provide valuable insights as they strive for expertise and excellence.

In a comparative study of novice and expert teachers, Livingston and Borko (1989) examined how teachers applied their knowledge and skills, and how they performed in terms of improvisation. The study identified and analyzed patterns in planning, interactive teaching, and post-teaching reflections, finding clear differences between novice and expert teachers. Novices, for example, were quite detailed, and even scripted in their lesson plans, while experts used extensive mental plans that anticipated improvisation in class. Novices struggled with responding to students’ in-class comments and questions, even getting off-track at times, while experts incorporated students’ comments and questions into the lessons and managed to maintain their direction. In post-lesson reflections, novice teachers expressed a variety of concerns, particularly about what they did and its effectiveness, while experts were more concise and focused on student understanding (Livingston & Borko, 1989, p. 38). Though participants of the study were schoolteachers, the findings can provide important insights for anyone who teaches, including librarians examining their own practice.

In another relevant study, Ornstein (1995) analyzed several studies of novice and expert teachers, and summarized how they differ in certain areas:

1. Experts tend to analyze student cues in terms of instruction, whereas novices analyze them in terms of classroom management.
2. Experts make the classroom their own, often changing the instructional focus and methods of the previous teacher.
3. Experts engage in a good deal of intuitive and improvisational teaching.

4. Experts continuously mediate between the objects of the lesson and the students' perceived understanding of the lesson.
5. Experts seem to have a clear understanding of the types of students they are teaching and how to teach them.
6. Expert teachers are less egocentric and more confident about their teaching.

Ornstein's findings are congruous with those of Livingston and Borko, and both studies can inform librarians as they consider and improve their own expertise.

Patterns in how expert teachers plan, interact, respond, and think about teaching overall, in many ways represent the "art" of teaching. The view of teaching as art is not new, though until recently it was applied mostly to schoolteachers and not higher education. Lupton's (2013) exploration of the art and craft of teaching presents a model of the relationship of art and craft. It suggests that, "craft is usually associated with conformity, utility and preconception of outcome, while art is usually associated with uniqueness, improvisation, expression and communication of meaning" (2013, p. 156). Lupton's model includes four elements that characterize the relationship between art and craft: 1) function, 2) skill, 3) degrees of freedom, and 4) expression (2013, pp. 158-159). The first two elements are associated with "what the teacher does." This forms a foundation for the next two elements, where teaching becomes an art. According to Lupton, "an art view of teaching would assume that the teacher will draw upon established techniques and methods (craft) but that these simply form a point of departure for the myriad ways a teacher constructs and improvises their teaching" (2013, p. 160).

As artists, expert teachers also have a strong sense of "who they are," not simply "what they do." They see a difference between "doing teaching" and "being a teacher," that is, a sense of "teacher identity." On this topic, Parker Palmer (2010) comments that, "Technique is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives" (p. 6). Palmer asserts that "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (2010, p. 154).

## TRANSFORMING LIBRARIAN TEACHING

The importance of the librarian's teaching role necessitates a reexamination of how we prepare for and develop as teachers. Looking at the craft and art of teaching, we can see what it really means to be a teacher, and ask some challenging questions. Among these are:

- How do librarians become teachers and think about teaching? Can they benefit from an understanding of how other teachers become experts? Might some of those practices be adapted for librarian teacher training and development?

- What can we learn from the way schoolteachers prepare and develop? What about college professors? What practices might we borrow or adapt from them? How would that affect LIS programs?
- Are there ways we might use models such as Dreyfus' and Lupton's in our assessment, development, and mentoring of librarians?
- What does it mean to be an expert teacher in the context of libraries and information literacy instruction? What about artistic teaching?
- Should we change the way LIS programs prepare librarians for teaching, or encourage additional preparation through advanced studies? Should we consider broadening existing in-service professional development opportunities such as ACRL's Immersion Program?
- Teachers in other contexts have a passion for teaching and see themselves as teachers, not simply as people who happen to teach; could librarians benefit from adopting such as professional teacher identity?
- Should we expect that most academic librarians will teach to some extent, or would it make more sense to develop a system of teaching specialists?
- What kinds of incentives and rewards could be developed to encourage and maintain artistic teaching by librarians?
- What are the implications for our work, institutions, and profession of transforming our craft into an art?

---

## REFERENCES

- Biggs, J. (1999). What the student does: Teaching for enhanced learning. *Higher Education Research & Development, 18*(1), 57-75.
- Brecher, D., & Klipfel, K.M. (2014). Education training for instruction librarians: A shared perspective. *Communications in Information Literacy, 8*(1), 43-49.
- Davies-Hoffman, K., Alvarez, B., Costello, M., & Emerson, D. (2013). Keeping pace with information literacy instruction for the real world. *Communications in information literacy, 7*(1), 9-23.
- Dreyfus, H. L., & Dreyfus, S. E. (1986). *Mind over machine: The power of human intuition and expertise in the era of the computer*. New York: The Free Press.

- Hall, R.A. (2013). Beyond the job ad: Employers and library instruction. *College & Research Libraries*, 74(1), 24-38.
- Livingston, C., & Borko, H. (1989). Expert-novice differences in teaching: A cognitive analysis and implications for teacher education. *Journal of teacher education*, 40(4), 36-42.
- Lupton, M. (2013). Reclaiming the art of teaching. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18(2), 156-166.
- Lynch, B.P., & Smith, K.R. (2001). The changing nature of work in academic libraries. *College & Research Libraries*, 62(5), 407-420.
- Ornstein, A.C. (1995). Beyond effective teaching. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 20(2), 2-23.
- Palmer, P.J. (2010). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.