

Mentoring Students to Success

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Library instruction is a central aspect of academic librarianship. However, existing literature suggests that many Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) students are “not being adequately prepared through professional coursework for their roles as teachers” (Westbrock & Fabian, 2010, p. 572). While some MLIS students have the opportunity to complete a for-credit practicum in an academic library where they may gain experience with library instruction, many still graduate with a limited understanding of the role of information literacy instruction in academic libraries and its importance to higher education. Despite this, new reference librarians at academic libraries are expected to have an understanding of information literacy instruction practices and an awareness of current issues relating to instruction. Therefore, information literacy instruction programs and academic libraries in general would benefit by providing inexperienced librarians with opportunities to develop instruction skills. One such opportunity are mentoring arrangements between students and instruction librarians that enable individuals to gain valuable knowledge of library instruction. This essay describes MLIS students’ need for instruction experience and suggests that librarians can contribute to students’ professional success by mentoring students in library instruction and, more broadly, academic librarianship.

The “What” and “Why” of Mentoring

Mentoring involves seeking out, identifying, and developing, in a variety of ways, the leaders of the future (Battin, 1997). Mentoring in a professional setting is a partnership where an experienced person acts as a guide to someone less experienced regarding the norms and best practices of a particular profession, along with other career (and sometimes personal) advice. In the short book *Mentoring in the Library*, Marta Lee (2011) provides an excellent guide for establishing mentoring programs. Lee describes mentoring as a vital part of being a librarian, pointing out that mentoring “...involves your knowledge; you have a commodity that others are able to tap into, gain knowledge from, and use to make a difference in the world” (ix).

MLIS students’ knowledge and understanding of the LIS profession is often limited, and for this reason many MLIS students often do not realize that there are many aspects of the library profession that they will not learn from their graduate coursework. For example, because students are not typically required to take courses involving library instruction, students readily underestimate the importance of library instruction to academic librarianship. Just as undergraduate students frequently lack an understanding of library resources and research processes and thus have difficulty identifying opportunities to improve their research skills, MLIS students lack an understanding of the library profession sufficient to allow them to recognize the steps that they must take in order

to succeed professionally. Moreover, students may avoid approaching librarians and trying to form relationships because they feel intimidated or unwelcome, or they do not perceive librarians as having time to take on mentoring activities.

How Does Mentoring Work for Librarians?

Formal mentoring arrangements are widely available for new librarians; for example, it is common that when a librarian is new to a job, a colleague with experience at the same institution is assigned to mentor the new employee (e.g., to acclimate them to their new work culture, to inform them about what meetings to attend). Additionally, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Instruction Section Mentoring Program offers librarians who are new to teaching the opportunity to be formally paired with experienced instruction librarians at other institutions; however, ACRL does not offer a similar program for LIS students. In a review of the top ten Library and Information Studies schools, according to the *US News & World Report* rankings (2009), eight MLIS programs provide career guidance and ways to connect students with practitioner mentors but only two offer formal programs where students are actually assigned mentors. Thus, new instruction librarians often acquire necessary teaching skills on the job through trial and error. These learning experiences can be complemented by professional development activities such as attending conferences, participating in workshops, and, for experienced instruction librarians, ACRL’s Immersion Program. However, not all new instruction librarians have travel funds available to attend these useful programs, and MLIS students need experience with library instruction in order to get an academic library job in the first place. Therefore, it is incumbent upon experienced practitioners, even those who work at an institution without a library school, to mentor MLIS students by providing experiences that enhance their library instruction skills and contribute to their professional development generally.

Suggestions for the “How” of Mentoring

In academic libraries, instruction librarians can actively seek out students who are pursuing advanced degrees in library and information science and engage them in conversations and experiences that contribute to students’ awareness of the importance of library instruction. Students who work or volunteer in academic libraries can simply “shadow” a librarian in order to learn what the day-to-day activities of an instruction librarian are. Over time, the mentee will gain the confidence and knowledge necessary to provide instruction, and, at the discretion of the practitioner, can be allowed to participate in instruction sessions. For instance, a mentee could handle small portions of a instruction session co-taught with her mentor and, as experience is gained, gradually could

provide progressively more, and more complex, instruction later in the year. The key is that at some point the mentee will do instruction and gain practical experience, which is of great value to the student, who is thus made more marketable and more likely to succeed in their first professional position. For more details on how to help ensure any mentoring is effective and time-efficient, it is very likely your institution's library has resources in the collection that can be of assistance, such as Lee (2011), Johnson (2007) and ACRL (2011).

Mentoring Beyond Instruction

Beyond instruction, there are many other areas of academic librarianship that students can be mentored, as well as myriad aspects of the academy. Students can benefit from candid conversations with practitioners regarding professional etiquette, the promotion process, scholarly publishing, the importance of list-servs in staying up-to-date & getting assistance and time management. Additionally, there can be a benefit from straightforward suggestions regarding conference attendance, membership in professional organizations, and volunteer activities. For example, the alphabet soup of library terms and organizations (e.g., ACRL, LOEX, WILU, ili-l). Also, in the unfortunate scenario of an MLIS student experiencing bullying, harassment, or mistreatment in the workplace, a mentor can provide vital emotional support.

Benefits to Students

Existing LIS literature describing MLIS students who sought mentors in academic libraries suggests that at least some MLIS students recognize the value of practical experience in academic libraries (Gruber & Stone, 2011; Lee, 2009). However, studies documenting librarians' efforts to reach out to students are few. Certainly, some MLIS students are motivated to seek out mentors, and practitioners should welcome opportunities to develop professional relationships with such enthusiastic students. However, because the possibility exists that many promising MLIS candidates may simply not realize the potential rewards associated with seeking out mentors, the development of mentoring relationships must not depend upon MLIS students' formal requests for mentors. Students' limited understanding of the library profession often prevents them from perceiving of their need for a mentor; therefore, it is illogical to be willing to mentor only those students who *ask* to be mentored. Michelle Dunaway, a student at the University of Pittsburgh iSchool, developed an informal mentoring relationship with an instruction librarian after being recruited to volunteer at the LOEX 2010 Conference. "As a student, I am very fortunate to have met an academic librarian who was willing to take the time to reach out to me and make suggestions about ways to become more involved in this profession," says Michelle. "My mentor has taught me a great deal about what it means to be an instruction librarian, and this has really helped me create goals for my future."

How Can Librarians Seek Out Students?

It is axiomatic that the successful formation of mentoring relationships depends upon a connection between a mentor

and a mentee. Librarians who are affiliated with universities where there is a library and information science program have many opportunities to interact with LIS students; these interactions provide opportunities to form informal mentoring relationships. College and university libraries at schools that do not offer a MLIS program may employ LIS students as staff members, student assistants, or volunteers. Librarians at these libraries can also apply their own professional networks to connect with colleagues who know of LIS students who are interested in connecting with a mentor. For example, librarians can reach out to advisors and career services personnel at their alma mater and express interest in engaging students in mentoring activities. It is important to note that mentoring relationships can develop by chance; therefore, as Lee (2011) writes, "Be open to mentoring opportunities everywhere."

Benefits to Mentors and Libraries

The benefits of mentoring relationships accrue to academic librarians as well as to MLIS candidates. Many LIS students are adept with various information technologies and are eager to direct these skills towards professional activities. For example, the author of this essay was very fortunate to meet a student who offered a great deal of assistance with the preparation of a PowerPoint presentation for a professional conference. Having recently completed an information technology course required for her MLIS program, this student transformed a solid but basic PowerPoint presentation into an engaging and polished PowerPoint that this author was very proud to present. Since then, this student has observed several of the author's library instruction sessions, and has volunteered to assist with library instruction research projects. These kinds of experiences, along with the knowledge of information literacy instruction issues that such experiences provide, will help new librarians to transition into professional positions (Lee, 2011, p. 3).

The institution where a mentored student begins her or his career gains a new librarian who is familiar with information literacy instruction. Further, a new librarian with experience in library instruction will be aware of important aspects of library instruction, including assessment, best practices, and the importance of relationships with departmental faculty. A successful mentoring relationship contributes to a positive outlook for librarian mentees as mentees begin their careers; therefore, mentees will likely be more productive at their libraries and will be prepared to provide service to the profession in return. These benefits contribute to the effectiveness of information literacy instruction programs, as students certainly benefit from a librarian who is not doing instruction for the very first time.

Summary

In the absence of systematic changes to the MLIS core curriculum, and because MLIS students do not necessarily understand the importance of mentors, it is incumbent upon all practitioners, even those who work at institutions without library schools, to strive to seek opportunities to engage

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brief service-learning project that would introduce students to research, fit into one or two class sessions (in addition to homework) and benefit the community partner. She had used a similar project herself in one of the Social Work courses she taught.

The course I would be working with was UVC 101: Super Hero, Super Student, a comic book and super-hero themed one-credit first-year seminar. When This (the instructor) and I met with Project READ staff, we took with us the sample service project developed by Twill and one of her colleagues. The assignment required students to: 1) Research how comic books helped reluctant readers; 2) Create some sort of promotional material (a brochure or a poster, for example) to educate friends, coworkers, family or others about Project READ, and 3) Collect small monetary donations, if possible, from these friends, coworkers and family members to purchase comic books or graphic novels for Project READ. During the meeting, This, Project READ's director, and I determined that it would also be mutually beneficial if students compiled some resources for an annotated bibliography that addressed the questions: "What are the connections between comic books or graphic novels and literacy?" and "How do comic books promote literacy among reluctant readers of all ages?" The topic fit nicely within the theme of the UVC 101 course, giving students the best chance at retaining the information literacy skills they would practice while compiling resources for Project READ. As he continued planning his syllabus for the quarter, This realized that he might be pressed for time if he had to facilitate his UVC 101 students' success in both the annotated bibliography and also the promotional material with money collection parts of the project. He thus decided to as-

sign only the annotated bibliography to ensure that he would have enough class time throughout the quarter to cover other important course material. Project READ still benefitted from the promotional material and money collection part of the project because This assigned that to students in a different class he taught in sociology.

This scheduled two library visits for his UVC 101 course. The first visit included an introduction to library services just as we provided for all first-year seminar (UVC 101) classes. During the second visit, I helped the students navigate the scholarly education literature to find sources that answered Project READ's research questions. Since the education literature provides plenty of evidence to support the connections between comic books and literacy, one library instruction session was sufficient. Students used the sources they found during the library instruction session to complete the annotated bibliographies for homework. In the end, Project READ's staff was grateful for our help (as we did work a resource-constrained non-profit could not readily do on its own) and used the research students found to write grants and prove to potential donors the need for more comic books and graphic novels.

References

See reference list here, <http://bit.ly/AAf6GN>

In Part II, I compare and contrast how service-learning partnerships can be similar or different than typical faculty-librarian collaborations and offer advice for librarians who may have the opportunity to support or become a partner in service-learning courses.

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MLIS students in experiences that cultivate their interest in and experience with information literacy instruction. Some librarians may understandably feel that students must take responsibility for their own professional success, and therefore that the onus is upon students to seek out mentors, but as noted earlier, we can't rely on students to know what they don't know. Regardless of whether you seek out students, or choose to allow students to seek you out, adopting a mentoring philosophy will help you to make a difference.

Conclusion

The benefits of mentoring relationships are many for all involved. There are currently 54 accredited library and information science master's degree programs throughout the United States and Canada (American Library Association, 2011), and with thousands of enthusiastic students motivated to build relationships and gain experience, opportunities for practitioners to mentor LIS students are abundant.

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by Denise's mulish hee-haw. Use wisdom in separating them"), so it's an enjoyable read rather than a hard slog (p. 194). I believe *Successful Classroom Management* should be read by every librarian who's just found out instruction is one of his/her duties, and ideally even by those who have been at it for ages. One of the things we learn as librarians and edu-

cators is that the best teachers are themselves constantly learning; this is just as valid for technique as it is for content.

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describing a new learning activity you want to try out in your next class.

In the past, you would have had to remember where and on which devices you stored all of this information. Now, however, you can simply create an ACRL notebook in Evernote, add each document, recording, and photograph as you go, and add tags describing the content. When you return tired and happy from your conference experience you'll have everything you learned organized and searchable right at your fingertips.

Figure 5: Share your notebook with individuals or the world

For Instructors

Evernote can be used to collect interesting teaching ideas and/or relevant articles that you may encounter as you go about your daily work. By adding relevant tags, you can easily locate these items again when you start to develop your lesson plans. For that matter, you might choose to develop those plans right within Evernote. Consider creating a notebook for each of your topic areas and/or class sessions.

Another option is to use Evernote's sharing capabilities to provide your students with information that you create and/or collect for them. For example, you might want to share your lecture notes with the class and could do so by inviting your students to view a shared notebook containing those materials.

For Students

Evernote can serve as a highly effective research management tool for students. For those conducting research projects, they can use Evernote to collect and store the information that they discover throughout the research process. And, for those working in groups, they can share their individual notebooks with one another so that they can more easily track their overall progress. Additionally, if a student group is using a whiteboard to sketch out ideas, a picture can be taken at the end and archived for later viewing.

These are just a few ideas to get you started. Although it may take a false start or two before you get a sense of all the different ways to use this tool, I predict that you may be surprised with how quickly and dramatically it will change your workflow. Give it a try the next time you attend a conference or long meeting and see how well it helps you with organizing, and then later accessing, all your thoughts and the insights you gather from others. With a little exploration and experimentation you can probably think of a multitude of ways to put this versatile research management tool to work for you!

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