The Quarterly Interview: Sarah McDaniel

University of Wisconsin-Madison
-Edited Transcript-

LOEX: *Where do you work? What is your title and main responsibilities? How long have you been in this position?*

McDaniel: I work as Information Literacy Coordinator for the University of Wisconsin – Madison Libraries, a position I've held for about six years now. We have a very large campus and library system (with over 30 individual libraries), and our two-librarian Information Literacy Office leads instruction and information literacy initiatives in collaboration with a council of Instruction Coordinators from each of our large libraries. We also lead some campus-level educational initiatives related to general education, the first year experience, and faculty development, as well as the campus-wide common reading program, Go Big Read.

What books or articles have influenced you?

I'm always adding new things to my repertoire based on the work I'm doing and who I'm collaborating with, so my favorites change all the time. I'm really interested in things that look at broader conceptions of information literacy.

1) Recently, I've enjoyed reading more about threshold concepts, for example: Townsend, L., Brunetti, K., & Hofer, A.R. (2011). Threshold concepts and information literacy. *portal: Libraries and the Academy, 11*(3), 853–869.

The Director of Writing Across the Curriculum, who I work closely with in the faculty development arena, had previously recommended that threshold concepts could be really useful in the workshops we do about designing research assignments, so I was glad to encounter this reading.

2) I also liked this year's Rockman Award Winner: Holiday, W., & Rogers. J. (2013). Talking about information literacy: The mediating role of discourse in a college writing classroom. *portal: Libraries and the Academy, 13*(3), 257-271.

I try to pay attention to the Rockman Award winner each year, ever since I served on the Committee years ago, and this article explores developing shared understandings of information literacy with other stakeholders.

3) Probably my favorite, though, is from the rhetoric and composition world: Bean, J. C. (2011). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom* (2nd Ed.).

This blockbuster of a book synthesizes the best research and practice in writing across the curriculum, and conveys key ideas in simple, clear writing. It also includes an excellent chapter on research assignments, including many examples that appeal to faculty from a range of disciplines.

What one or two initiatives that you have undertaken/ implemented at UW-Madison are you most proud of?

At UW-Madison, our engagement with the General Education program has been very significant and sustained since 1995. We have been using a blended learning approach for most of that time period, and have been through many iterations of a required online tutorial (http://clue.library.wisc.edu/). Sustaining and improving this work requires year-round collaboration with instructors and directors of communication courses, governance committees, administrators, learning technologists and librarians. We collaborate on a regular cycle of assessment projects such as developing rubrics to evaluate student work and focus groups with students and instructors. This summer we're collaborating with faculty to launch the first fully online general education communication course. This work is very visible on our campus and has a huge impact, reaching 70% of first-year students and all upper-division students with substantial learning activities and assignments to foster information literacy. UW-Madison recently awarded us a significant Educational Innovation grant to create a Next-Generation version of CLUE, so we're thinking about instructional models and technologies that will help achieve the learning outcomes for students completing that requirement.

Also over the past few years, I've devoted significant time to working with cross-campus teams to create new faculty development programs. For early-career faculty, I contributed to the development of a year-long program and collaborated with the Director of Writing Across the Curriculum, Brad Hughes, to develop a four-week unit on Writing and Research-Based Learning that really digs into assignment design and assessment. I also work on the planning and facilitation teams for two faculty development programs, blend@uw and teachonline@uw; both improve our campus's capacity to develop quality blended and online courses and curricula. These collaborations require thinking very broadly about teaching and learning, and it's exciting to participate in the overall development, as well as to think about how to foster useful library connections.

What key opportunities do you see UW-Madison instruction librarians tackling in the future?

While we anticipate continuing with established instruction programs across campus, we're currently very focused on developing good practices for working with faculty who are teaching online and blended courses. We have had tutorials, course pages, and other learning objects for a long time, but we have been giving more thought to how to organize and share those. We are always interested in assessments of student learning that advance the goals of the university, and

I think we'll continue to have some great opportunities and collaborations there. Recently, the General Education Committee charged a group to propose an assessment strategy for our large, upper-division writing course, and we'll be working on that since information literacy is included in the required outcomes of the course. Our campus has a very collaborative assessment culture, and participation in assessment projects will continue to be a great way to advance instruction librarians' work. We are all interested in students as content authors, and have a number of new spaces and programs in our libraries, and instruction librarians will need to be involved in those. Of course, many initiatives emerge at the school or college level, so the trick is to identify some shared activities that move everyone's goals forward.

You are active in the ACRL Instruction Section, including a term as chair. What lessons did you take from leading such a large and active group?

I chaired the ACRL Instruction Section (IS), then went on to chair the former ACRL Information Literacy Coordinating Committee (ILCC). The work and reputation of IS were already formidable when I started my term as Chair, and we had strong leadership throughout the Section. I learned so much working with this committed group, both about advancing large initiatives and about leadership. I learned that you can't push any one mandate so hard that people no longer enjoy the work and want to contribute to the community. Particularly for a volunteer organization, you can work with the membership to accomplish big things, but you also have a huge responsibility to sustain the group long-term as a place members want to be to accomplish the work of the profession. IS has some great projects, some new and many sustained over a long period of time, so leaders and members seem to be finding the right activities to work on and a good balance in leadership approaches over time. I also learned that some jobs, like IS Chair, require being available all the time, and that can work out if you find the right mix of activities and really enjoy what you're doing.

You are ACRL's liaison to EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI). First, what is the ELI? What can instruction librarians get out of it? Second, what do you do as a liaison?

EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative "is a community of higher education institutions and organizations committed to the advancement of learning through the innovative application of technology." UW Madison is one of over 300 members (the vast majority of which are college & universities). Before I began in my liaison role, I originally participated in ELI programming with learning technology colleagues, and realized that there are a number of active librarian members who are sharing expertise on issues such as learning spaces and information literacy. So far, I've worked with the ELI leadership to identify shared goals, and academic library concerns have been voted up in ELI's list of priorities or

"Content Anchors." These anchors drive ELI initiatives and professional development programming. I've also connected ELI with librarian leaders for topics they're interested in, cross-promoted programming, promoted librarian concerns at conferences and online, and participated in the development of a new ELI publication, "Seven Things You Should Read About…" This new series is related to the established publication, "Seven things You Should Know About…" but explores some topics in more depth to curate some starting points for those who would like to learn more. Since this is a new liaison role for ACRL, I began by exploring ways of identifying shared concerns and ways for librarians to participate in key conversations. Before I finish my term (2012-2015), I'd like to connect with ELI leaders and other librarians active in ELI to see how we could create the most successful sustained collaboration.

You were also on the Working Group on Intersections of Scholarly Communication & Information Literacy, which wrote this white paper in early 2013. What was the impetus for this paper? How does the group hope it will be utilized?

The Working Group was convened by leaders who saw that we could draw a closer connection between these two major priorities within ACRL. I was invited to participate in my role as a leader in the ACRL Information Literacy Coordinating Committee, but there were several other information literacy leaders involved from the outset. At the end of the paper, there are some specific recommendations related to information literacy program goals and curricula, campus collaborations, and advocacy. And there are some specific examples about teaching in areas of intersection such as copyright and publishing. But the overall message of the white paper is that silos between these areas are not beneficial for student learning or for academic libraries.

As someone who occasionally teaches online courses for librarian continuing education, what do you find as the biggest challenges in successfully teaching online?

For the past six years, I have periodically taught a face-to-face course for library school students who would like to gain experience with IL and library instruction; it includes both a practicum placement and regular seminar meetings. I've learned a great deal from that experience, both about course design and about mentoring. This semester, I also co-taught an online, continuing education course on Assessment of Student Learning with Annie Armstrong. I have been a facilitator in faculty development programs about how to teach online for a while, so it was nice to gain some additional experience and credibility through actually teaching a fully online short course. I think the biggest challenges in teaching online are balancing instructors' social and managerial roles with all the time it takes to develop content and grade. It's so important to develop rapport, both between instructors and students and between students; to engage students who bring a broad range of prior experience; and to make sure every learner gets effective feedback.