Becoming a Leader:
Creating Change as a New Instruction Librarian
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In the Summer of 2018, I began my professional career as a librarian when I accepted the position of the Learner Experience Librarian at the College of Wooster. The College of Wooster is a residential, small, private liberal arts college in Wooster, Ohio with about 2000 students. Information literacy instruction, mainly in the form of one-shot sessions, begins in a First Year Seminar class that all students take and builds throughout their four years to ultimately prepare them for their required, senior year Independent Study project, an undertaking that necessitates the deep involvement of librarians (e.g., one-on -one consultations). Fresh off finishing my MLIS degree and completing a Research and Teaching fellowship at my graduate school library, I was now tasked with leading this library instruction program .

The Learner Experience Librarian role was a new position; it was created—after the restructuring of an old position following a retirement—to empower someone to focus on bringing an instructional program, which had grown mainly through individual action, to be more fully cohesive. The intention was not necessarily to hire someone into this position who was recently graduated, but hiring efforts were less concerned with years of experience than on knowledge of emerging instructional modes and pedagogy. This matched my background, because while I was a brand new librarian, I had experience teaching at the high school level as well as a graduate student. Nevertheless, I still had to learn to navigate the expectation of providing leadership on teaching to my colleagues, all while tackling a steep learning curve myself as a brand-new librarian. There are seven librarians—not including our director, the Librarian of the College—at the College of Wooster, and all are required to teach as part of the library instruction program, often conducting one-shot-sessions in courses. When I arrived at Wooster—although my librarian colleagues are all deeply invested teachers—through discussions with my colleagues and the library director, I recognized a need for a more connected, intentional approach to information literacy instruction as well as an opportunity to build a teaching community of practice to support all the librarians, myself included, and to amplify the expertise and strengths of individual librarians. Over the past two years, I have learned some lessons about creating the change I wanted to see as a new librarian while finding my footing in the profession, including some opportunities and challenges early career librarians may face, such as overcoming imposter syndrome.

Challenges as a New Librarian

New librarians can come into their positions with a variety of diverse and valuable prior experiences: while they typically have just completed an MLIS, they may have entered the field as a first career, as a second career, or after working in libraries in different roles (e.g., technical staff). But regardless of their background, for any early career person in a new institution, there is a significant learning curve in trying to grasp one's responsibilities, understand the culture of an institution, and figure out how to apply what you learned in library school more fully to a professional position. Within all these challenges, though, are opportunities. As a new person in a position, you're a set of fresh eyes, someone who is often is expected to ask questions and try new things. Although one of the strengths of mid- and late-career librarian colleagues is that they have a lot of institutional memory, concurrently one of the strengths of new librarians is that they tend not to be beholden to the past and thus hopefully suggest new and innovative projects and initiatives.

Being able to pursue these initiatives and make these changes in our instruction program necessitated some trust building. When I started, my colleagues had no particular reason to trust me, a new librarian whom they did not know well. In an article on supervising veteran staff as an early career librarian, Faulkner explains the importance of these relationships and how to begin establishing this trust: "show your willingness to learn from them and your commitment to supporting their work" (2016, p. 5). Although I was not in a supervisory position like Faulkner, I was in a leadership position where my colleagues had many more years of experience than me. Tapping into their expertise, relying on the knowledge they had about the institution, and utilizing their teaching experience while supplementing their knowledge with my own were all essential to creating the changes I was looking for in the library. Building in opportunities for us to learn from each other was therefore important to achieving any success. My colleagues' knowledge and experience with prior initiatives taught me what had not worked in the past and why, and if the circumstances that had made these efforts in the past ineffective remained the same or if the situation had changed. They were also able to identify gaps or potential enhancements to our instruction efforts that needed someone with the time, authority, and expertise to take them on. Gathering this information from them and understanding how it fit together with my own ideas about changes was an ongoing and necessary process. Still, even with the support of colleagues, embracing the opportunities of being a

new librarian and overcoming the challenges can be hindered by a feeling of being an imposter.

Imposter Syndrome and New Librarians

Many librarians experience imposter syndrome, with Clarke, Vardeman, and Barba finding in their 2014 study that as many as one in eight librarians report experiencing imposter syndrome to a significant degree. Furthermore, their study found that both new librarians and young librarians exhibited higher occurrences of imposter syndrome feelings than those who were older or had more years of experience (2014). Imposter syndrome is characterized by three signs: "the sense of having fooled other people into overestimating your ability, the attribution of your success to some factor other than intelligence or ability in your role, and the fear of being exposed as a fraud" (Harvey & Katz, 1985, p. 8).   These feelings of being a fraud can have serious consequences for anyone experiencing them, both for their mental health and career. People who experience imposter syndrome often also experience anxiety, a lack of confidence, doubt, as well as harmful ways of coping such as self-sabotaging. For example, they may leave their job before they can be "discovered" as a fraud, or overwork themselves to try to compensate for their perceived lack of ability, intelligence or knowledge, and procrastination (Kets De Vries, 2005). These self-limiting behaviors and the lack of self-confidence that come with imposter syndrome may make it difficult for new librarians to create change and lead at their institutions, especially when balancing other obstacles to do so. For me, like many new librarians, the feelings of being an imposter were strong, and I worried every day that someone would realize that I did not belong and that I had somehow ended up in my position accidentally. I continue to work to overcome this, so while the feeling of being an imposter is still there, it is not as strong as it was in the beginning. So how can new librarians in similar situations work to tackle imposter syndrome.

1. Recognize that what you're feeling may be imposter syndrome. Naming this phenomenon was an important first step for me. Having a name to put to what I was experiencing made me feel less alone and helped to separate feeling from fact. Moreover, identify what are some of the reasons you're feeling this way. Beyond your own capabilities, there might be outside factors that are making you feel like an imposter. Is it because of something in your institution's culture? Job responsibilities that evolved to be far outside the original hiring description? You may be blaming yourself for something that is systemic at your institution and/or in the field of librarianship itself (e.g., race or gender inequities) and thus may need to look to work with others to affect change.

2. Talk to other people! There are other people out there who are feeling this too. Be in conversation with your colleagues; they may be able to give you some perspective on what the expectations of you are.

3. Set realistic goals with the help of a mentor or supervisor, and when you reach these goals make sure you reflect on how you got there. Look at all the steps you took to reach them—it probably wasn't an accident or pure luck.

Collaboratively Making Change as a New Librarian

Managing imposter syndrome along with all the other challenges of beginning a new career or working at a new institution while trying to make positive changes in your library can be a challenge. In my first years as a librarian I struggled with this balance, but I was able to begin to accomplish my goals for creating change. Knowing that I was struggling with feelings of being an impostor, I looked for low-stakes ways to engage with my colleagues and create a way for us to learn from each other. To address this and simultaneously begin to transform the approach to our instruction program, soon after arriving at the College of Wooster I created "Teaching Reflection Groups." These groups were designed to facilitate reflective teaching practice and to create more of a community of practice among our teaching librarians who at the time did not have an opportunity to come together and discuss their teaching work. I led two of these groups, each with four librarians, that met roughly once a month throughout the year. Each meeting discussion varied; typically I supplied discussion questions or as a group we had decided on topic of our discussion ahead of time. These topics included classroom management techniques, inclusive pedagogy, a reflection on our personal teaching philosophies, and more broadly what was working or not in our teaching practice. As part of these groups, we also conducted peer observations of each other's teaching which further enriched our discussions. Although I provided a form to help guide the observation, the peer observations were entirely voluntary and informal, with librarians typically working in pairs first to observe and then have their teaching observed. The Teaching Reflection Groups and accompanying peer observations were a valuable opportunity for me to learn about my colleagues teaching styles, but also provided an opportunity for all of to reflect on our teaching and incorporate new and different techniques and activities into classes that we learned or observed from others.

Additionally, the Teaching Reflection Groups also helped to lay the groundwork for an initiative to write shared programmatic learning outcomes for the Libraries, furthering my efforts to create a more cohesive library teaching program. Learning goals for the Libraries instruction program had been created several years before I started in my position, but they were outdated, not in active use by any of the librarians, nor were they in align-

ment with the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy. These new outcomes were developed collaboratively with all of the librarians, as well as with input from other library staff, to create a shared set of outcomes together on which all instruction could be based, from instruction in First Year Seminar classes to work with seniors on their Independent Study projects. Creating this shared understanding of what we find important and meaningful in our work as information literacy experts and instructors was a major goal for my first year as a librarian and was an important evolution in our approach to teaching. Hopefully, this increased interconnectedness will allow us to make other improvements, such as in assessment (due to increased ability to compare classes) and in our ability to scaffold information literacy instruction across a student's four years. It has already paid off in other ways, for example, the new learning outcomes helped to guide me in making changes to the modalities in which we taught in the Libraries, another part of my job description. Previously, we had not had significantly engaged in online learning opportunities. Working again as teams, I led my colleagues in creating our first set of online learning modules to further enhance our teaching program, whether it is for students taking classes on campus or online.

Conclusion

The changes I was able to make in my position over the past year and a half are hopefully just the beginning of many more. Change does not happen overnight though, and setting realistic expectations is an important aspect of this. As new instruction librarians find their footing within the profession and overcome potential obstacles such as imposter syndrome, beginning to make change in their institution and provide leadership is not something to be held back by the newness of their position. Rather, it is an opportunity to take advantage of their circumstances, while continuing to be generous with oneself and colleagues.

References

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