The Quarterly Interview: Lori Townsend

University of New Mexico
-Edited Transcript-

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

Townsend: I work at the University of New Mexico where I am the Learning Services Coordinator. I am also the Subject Liaison to Communication and Journalism and OILS (the Organization, Information and Learning Sciences program), plus I share the College of Education with another liaison. I've been the Learning Services Coordinator for about a year and a half.

What books or articles have influenced you?

1) Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice (2006) by James Elmborg. This article changed the way I see what we teach and how we teach it.

2) *Research Strategies: Finding your Way through the Information Fog* by Bill Badke. This was my unofficial textbook when I taught students F2F and it saved my life in the first two years I was teaching a credit course — for real. A retiring librarian gave me his copy and I honestly can't remember a more valuable gift. I continue to find Badke's comments on ILI-L and his articles helpful and inspiring. (A new, 5th edition was released in 2014).

3) Finally, everything Barbara Fister writes. My research partners and I are huge Fister fans.

What have been the one or two biggest challenges, and biggest opportunities, since you have become Learning Services Coordinator at a large university library?

Challenges:

- Incorporating threshold concepts into the curriculum of a big state school in a sustainable and effective way: This is something I've been thinking about for some time and still haven't found a good solution for. There is this tension between depth and reach. My supervisor wants to make sure we retain our broad reach—which we achieve largely through one-shot instruction (we are piloting a flipped program this year). I want to develop our depth. And if that means sacrificing some reach, I'm happy to do so—he's not so happy with that outcome. But it's a friendly disagreement.

- Communicating my understanding of information literacy to my colleagues: I think of what we teach as an introduction to the interdisciplinary world of information studies/science. I think it stands on its own. I don't believe we have to teach it in the context of another discipline. I also think transferable knowledge needs a conceptual underpinning. It's a different approach than many librarians are used to.

Opportunities:

- I have a very supportive supervisor who lets me run with almost everything I think of. I'm currently working to create a lower division information literacy course that I hope we can get into the core General Ed curriculum. I read this great article in *College and Research Libraries* by Jean Cook at the University of West Georgia, "A Library Credit Course and Student Success Rates," that really made me feel this was something worthwhile to pursue. She found that students who opted to take the library course graduated at significantly higher rates than those who chose otherwise. She is very careful about enumerating the limits of her analysis, but I found it inspiring. We have an academic department housed in the library (OILS), so I think I'm in an environment that is particularly encouraging for credit course creation. Also, there is precedent because another librarian here worked to get the three-credit course INFO 320: Information Management for Professionals (now OILS 320) on the books right before I started working here.

- The new ACRL Framework for Information Literacy will allow me to be more "official" about using threshold concepts in our IL program. Threshold concepts are transformed from "those things Lori obsesses about" (or "Lori's research area") to crucial building blocks of the new Framework as articulated by one of our most prominent professional organizations. Exciting!

How did you first become interested in threshold concepts?

I attended a conference held by the CSU (California State University) system about transferring courses into the online environment. One portion of several full days of training was devoted to threshold concepts. The theory, first developed in 2003 by two UK education professors, Jan Meyer and Ray Land, was only a few years old at that point and the literature in different disciplines was just getting started. At first it didn't even seem to me that "information literacy" would have threshold concepts. I was stumped, but intrigued because I had been confounded by the Standards and figuring out what to teach in my classes that students would find both interesting and meaningful. I took it back to Korey and Amy and we started talking about it.

How and why did you hook up with Korey Brunetti and Amy Hofer for your work in this area?

In Fall 2006, Korey and I were hired as Electronic Collections Librarians at Cal State East Bay (CSUEB), where the librarians are faculty and everyone teaches LIBY 1210, a two-credit information literacy course for first year students.

Amy was initially my intern in Spring 2007, while she was a grad student at San Jose State University. At that point I was still teaching LIBY 1210 in person; Amy was my TA for the class. When she graduated at the end of her internship, she was hired for a one-year temporary position at CSUEB. Korey and I decided to move the class online and asked Amy if she wanted to help.

We'd been talking about threshold concepts for a little while at that point and they informed how we structured our class and the kinds of assignments and activities were included. We have always approached threshold concepts as practitioners trying to improve our practice, not theoreticians. We wanted to write about threshold concepts in order to share our excitement about this new approach that was helping us re-see our content and re-design our classes.

Beyond the three of us, we've added a research partner, Silvia Lu (La Guardia Community College) for a Delphi Study we're conducting. We're all big nerds who love talking about these conceptual ideas in our field. We're always forwarding news stories to one another related to various IL threshold concepts, such as how social media posts regarding big news events tend to conform to the whole filter bubble notion and the threshold concept "information goods" or "information as a commodity" or "information has value"—same big idea, different names.

What has been the one or two biggest surprises about the high-level of interest by instruction librarians in threshold concepts?

I did not expect the new ACRL Framework for Information Literacy to use threshold concepts, which brought a significant amount of attention to the theory. In fact, I was not initially in favor of using them for the Framework because I though they needed more work out in the field, but the Task Force insisted. And the work is proceeding apace now that drafts of the new Framework have been released. In fact, I just read an awesome article by Megan Oakleaf on assessment and the new Framework that spent a lot of time dealing with assessing threshold concepts. So I think including them in the new Framework resulted in some positive forward momentum and dialogue within the profession.

The attention our first article garnered was very surprising. I think threshold concepts came along at a critical moment in our profession. The Standards had moved us away from bibliographic instruction, but many librarians still tended to treat the Standards as this checklist of stuff to teach, which is not hard to do in a one-shot environment dominated by faculty expectations of database demos. However, a hardy minority have been teaching big ideas in information literacy forever – and that minority has been growing over the years. Threshold concepts help those of us without a background in educational theory articulate and teach these big ideas.

How have threshold concepts improved your teaching?

They've given me a way to organize my courses and a helpful set of criteria for identifying what I want my students to learn. My courses make sense and hold together in a way they didn't before. There is now a unifying narrative and a path, where before there was a confusion of ideas. I also think they've deepened my understanding of our field because they tie together a bunch of the stuff I learned in library school. I am happy to see the current movement towards exploring threshold concepts for library school students.

You teach a three-credit, 300-level online course at UNM (OILS 320: Information Managements for Professionals). What technology tools have you used to help make that class as successful as possible?

My colleague Kathleen Keating developed it. We use Blackboard—it does some things well (e.g., rubrics and group discussion) and some things not so well (too many to name). I have used a lot of technology over the years, but I still love Voicethread and Weebly because they make it easy to do things that previously would have required specialized software or advanced technical knowledge—and both of them produce beautiful results. I've used a lot of different screencasting tools—such as Captivate, Camtasia, Jing, Screen-Flow—all have advantages and disadvantages depending on the context. We are using Qualtrics for surveys for our flipped ENG 120 instruction and I love it because it allows me to easily gather and analyze student responses – both to assess student learning and the effectiveness of the online instruction.

Increasingly, I want to see students grapple with big ideas. Normally this involves lots of reading and writing, but I also find concept maps to be a wonderful alternative way for students to create and express meaning. There are several online tools for concept mapping out there — I usually give students a list of possibilities and let them choose.

Why is the OILS 320 class online, instead of face-to-face? Are there any plans to offer it in hybrid form?

It is offered online because that is the format most convenient to students. This course is for Organization, Information and Learning Sciences (OILS), an academic department housed in the library that offers Bachelors, Masters and PhD degrees. Many of our librarians teach in the department part-time, but the core professors are full-time traditional faculty. OILS is currently re-designing their undergraduate degree and OILS 320 will be a required course and we expect enrollment to increase once that happens. At that point we may try splitting the class into disciplinary sections (arts/humanities, social sciences, sciences). We may also explore the hybrid format if students express an interest. But right now we offer the class once a semester and students come from departments all over the university, so an online course makes sense.