

Learning the Language of Information Literacy: Takeaways from ACRL's Immersion Program

by Rebecca K. Miller and Jonathan R. Paulo

Introduction

When most people think of immersion programs, language immersion programs and summer-long trips to Europe or South America come to mind. However, when the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) does immersion, it speaks the language of information literacy and helps academic librarians become fluent. Now in its 13th year, the ACRL Immersion Program represents a respected learning opportunity for instruction librarians.

The Immersion Program brings together academic librarians for a four-and-a-half day experience intended to strengthen attendees' skills and confidence related to instruction. Attendees are typically "immersed" in classroom techniques, learning theory, instructional design, leadership, assessment, and other elements of library instruction and information literacy. Sessions and cohorts are led by nationally recognized leaders in information literacy, such as Char Booth, Debra Gilchrist, Lisa Hinchliffe, and Megan Oakleaf. Participation in the Immersion Program is competitive; the small number of participants ensures group interaction and encourages active participation.

The ACRL Immersion Program

offers four different tracks every year: the Teacher Track and Program Track are typically offered in the summer, while the Intentional Teaching Track and Assessment Track are usually offered in the fall. The Teacher Track focuses on individual development for librarians interested in enhancing instructional skills, and the Program Track focuses on supporting librarians who are developing or managing institutional information literacy programs. The International Teaching Track is intended for the experienced instructional librarian and helps participants gain instructional awareness and direction. Finally, the Assessment Track, as the title would suggest, emphasizes the role of assessment in helping librarians improve both classroom teaching and program outcomes. More information about each of the four different Immersion tracks is available on the Immersion website: <http://www.ala.org/acrl/issues/infolit/professactivity/iil/immersion/programs>.

Two Virginia librarians—Jonathan Paulo and Rebecca Miller—who attended the 2011 Immersion Program in Seattle, Washington recount their experiences here and discuss how the ACRL Immersion Program has impacted their day-to-day work in addition to their overall career goals.

Jonathan R. Paulo

As the library liaison to all five departments within the College of Education and the Interdisciplinary Liberal Studies Program at James Madison University (JMU) in Harrisonburg, Virginia, I provide research assistance for a student population mostly comprised of pre-service teachers. I also collaborate and work with faculty members who are experts in the field of Education. Considering that I work with a population of educators (and my undergraduate

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minor was in Secondary Education) one might incorrectly assume I already have full knowledge of learning theories, learning styles, teaching methods, assessment, presentation skills, and leadership; in reality, I left ACRL Immersion with new knowledge in each one of these areas. The program was an enlightening experience in which I learned by example, practice, and peer support. I am thankful for the supportive and encouraging environment at JMU because my attendance at ACRL Immersion was far more advantageous than I expected.

ACRL Immersion is not a conference or a training program. ACRL Immersion is truly an essential experience for any instruction librarian. Although numerous librarians who never attended ACRL Immersion are undoubtedly conducting exceptionally valuable instruction sessions, the knowledge gained from the experience is fundamental and transformative. Most of us eventually reach a comfort zone in our teaching; Immersion helps you move beyond that familiar comfort zone. Before attending the 2011 program in Seattle, I considered my teaching skills and pedagogy above average because of my previous teaching experience; however, the Immersion experience revealed significant weaknesses in my instruction and offered four-and-a-half days of expert-guided facilitation. Subsequently, I am a better librarian, and most importantly, I am a better educator.

The content of the program was not a narrow focus on information literacy. The content included a broader and deeper understanding of effective teaching and student-learning. One can't walk away from Immersion and go back to the old ways of doing things without feeling guilty or ineffective. A significant amount of growth and development happens in a short amount of time. In the same way

the Immersion teachers encouraged us to learn how to help our students break down their current perspectives in order to grow, the Immersion teachers helped us break down our own current perspectives in order to grow as educators. One of the most beneficial aspects of Immersion is that the teachers model everything they are teaching the participants. In fact, the student-centered learning perspective that is a major focus of the program is modeled as well. The teaching faculty did not simply pass down wisdom; participants

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learned about themselves, developing a greater awareness of their own learning styles, learning theories, leadership styles, fears, and authentic teaching characteristics. We were encouraged to learn from each other, solve problems, and view the art of teaching from different perspectives, especially the perspectives of students who learn from methods we might not have been addressing in our teaching.

The breadth and depth of content could easily seem overwhelming. In only four-and-a-half days we covered numerous topics, including information literacy, instructional effectiveness, assessment, psychology of learning, and leadership. The teaching faculty encouraged us to focus on an area where we were most interested or in need of improvement. We designed instructional scenarios before arriving and thoroughly revised our instructional scenarios at the end of the week. Assessment was a major focus of my

week, but every day offered various epiphanies.

I now look at my instructional scenarios with a conscious effort to integrate instruction into the course on a deeper level that is more student-centered, with a focus on assessment. I am more thoughtful about what I am including in my lesson plan, why I am doing it, and what students are learning. I am writing better outcomes that are balanced, specific, and connected to a larger context. Thinking about the larger context elicits a more conceptual approach to teaching that supports higher order skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

In addition, before my instruction sessions, I seek more information about the classroom environment in order to mitigate constraints and develop appropriate content for the learning styles, social/cultural factors, and prior knowledge of the audience. During the instruction session, I lecture and demonstrate less. I focus on student-centered learning that allows for shared decision-making, motivates students to accept responsibility for learning, and develops self- and peer-assessment skills. Components of various learning theories help inform this approach. Humanism emerged as a primary learning theory, especially because of the student-centered learning focus on self-actualization, problem-solving, and affective emphasis. Lastly, including assessment in my instruction assures that I am measuring and judging the student-centered learning that has become the deliberate focus of my instruction sessions.

Shortly after my return to JMU we had two workshops on assessment. I was able to contribute to the workshops by sharing the assessment efforts I made since I returned from Immersion. Upon leaving Immersion, participants are encouraged to bring leader-

ship to their organizations. The knowledge gained offers unlimited potential to act as a leader. Participants can share the experience with colleagues who are unable to attend Immersion. Recently, I conducted a 90-minute workshop for my colleagues at JMU focused on writing learning outcomes. I modeled the learning theories, learning styles, teaching methods, assessment, presentation skills, and leadership I learned at Immersion. Workshop participants learned about writing learning outcomes through lecture, problem solving, discussion, hands-on practice, demonstration, and assessment. I also connected the writing of learning outcomes to assessment and instructional design. As a result, my colleagues now have an increased awareness of how to design an effective instructional scenario.

The leadership lesson of Immersion was a smart ending to the program because leadership provides the natural progression from Immersion to home institutions. The learning experience did not end in Seattle, but continued as I returned to JMU and led and shared in the growth, development, and enhancement of library instruction. Equally important, since I'm the Education Librarian at JMU, ACRL Immersion will undoubtedly help me collaborate, work with, and effectively teach a population of future teachers.

Rebecca K. Miller

When I earned my MSLS from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in December 2007, I had no intention of becoming an "instruction librarian." Truthfully, I really had very few intentions at all, other than pursuing my goal of becoming an academic librarian. Although I applied for many different types of library jobs that all seemed to include an aspect of in-

struction and information literacy, I had never had the experience of teaching or leading a class by myself. I accepted the first job that I was offered, and from 2008–2010, I served as the Digital Technologies & Information Literacy Librarian at Louisiana State University (LSU) in Baton Rouge. In that role, I came to appreciate the significance of information literacy instruction. I developed and taught a one-credit research methods class, which I delivered first in-person, and then online. Additionally, I was introduced to the art of the "one-shot," an opportunity to deliver a guest lecture about library research and resources in classes belonging to my liaison areas: Human Nutrition and Food, Human Ecology, and Women's and Gender Studies. When I left that position in 2010 to join the University Libraries faculty at Virginia Tech, I felt confident in my role as an instructor, but sensed that there was definitely room for improvement.

Currently, as the College Librarian for Science, Life Sciences, and Engineering at Virginia Tech, I have the opportunity to work with faculty and students from four different departments: Human Nutrition, Foods and Exercise; Computer Science; Mathematics; and Engineering Education. While my role as a liaison librarian encompasses a wide variety of services—collection management, reference, and instruction—my official job description emphasizes instruction; 30 percent of my responsibilities fall under the major area of "University Libraries' instruction initiatives." This is one of the reasons that I accepted this particular position—my first ventures into teaching at LSU were so positive that I really looked forward to increasing my opportunities to use information literacy to affect change for students and within the curriculum. However, once I started thinking

about library instruction in this manner—affecting change—I really began to wonder whether the methods and strategies I had been using were the most effective.

I began to delve into information literacy research, attended conference sessions focused around instruction, enrolled in an educational psychology class at Virginia Tech, and began to take advantage of opportunities offered through the Center for Instructional Development and Educational Research (CIDER) at Virginia Tech. All of these activities pushed my knowledge and teaching practice a little bit further, but I still felt like I was missing something that pulled it all together, specifically in the academic library context. When I heard about ACRL Immersion, I hoped that it might be the opportunity for learning and reflection that I was looking for. I wasn't disappointed.

The key elements that separate ACRL Immersion from the other learning opportunities that I previously participated in include the week-long, immersive environment, the opportunity to learn from information literacy experts, and the application of instructional methods to a real, specific instructional scenario. The instructional scenario—an analysis of a real class that I teach at least once a year—is the piece that finally pulled everything together for me. Through the instructional scenario that I worked on before, during, and after Immersion, I was able to identify my weaknesses, select appropriate strategies for dealing with limitations, and implement appropriate assessment techniques to mark my progress. By discussing my instructional scenario with faculty members and my cohort, I confirmed what I had long suspected—that I always try to cram too much material into a 50- or 75-minute instruction session. I was comforted to learn that

I am not alone in this, and that many library instructors fall prey to the same tendencies. In recognizing this weakness, I was able to glean strategies for dealing with it through content covered during the five-day Immersion experience.

After returning from Immersion and teaching my first post-Immersion classes, I notice a distinct difference in the way that I approach instruction. Pre-Immersion, I often created a “class outline,” but never a “lesson plan.” Post-Immersion, I have made it a priority to select and focus on no more than three learning outcomes per class; in doing this, I find that I am no longer tempted to cram too much into a short session, or talk at a breakneck pace. For example, the instructional scenario that I brought to Immersion with me had a total of nine learning outcomes, touching on nearly every ACRL information literacy standard, for a 50-minute class. By the end of my Immersion week, I was able to prioritize the learning outcomes and ultimately identify three specific outcomes that would be most appropriate and valuable for my class. These outcomes included evaluating information resources, understanding professional communication through social media, and creating correct citations. Furthermore, I developed an assessment item for each of these criteria that I can use

within the class; for the citation outcome, I use notecards to allow students to practice creating citations and collect them at the end of the session so that I can send feedback to the course instructor. With these sorts of activities, I am able to focus my class, encourage student engagement, and actually assess what happened.

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By focusing on learning outcomes and activities, I am able to focus on the most important needs for a particular class, and make sure that the students are actively engaged in the few seminal ideas I have chosen to work on with them. I now incorporate more discussion time, and relegate most of the technical “how-to” material to online tutorials and screencasts. I can feel a difference in the levels of engagement in my classes, and I actually enjoy teaching a little bit

more. Even the multiple sections of the same class feel wildly different now because the students in each session ask new questions, bring up new points, and drive the entire session in a different manner.

I am deeply grateful that Virginia Tech allowed me the opportunity to attend ACRL Immersion 2011 and that my colleagues and supervisors allow me the freedom to continue to experiment and grow through my instruction. It is because of them, and my new colleagues that I met through ACRL Immersion, that I know I can truly begin to affect change at Virginia Tech and perhaps even outside the university!

Want more information?

If you like what you’ve read about the ACRL Immersion Program, and are interested in participating in future Immersion experiences, keep an eye on the Immersion Program website and note the deadlines for the upcoming Immersion sessions. The ACRL Immersion Program website offers program details, track rubrics, and characteristics of successful applicants. If you have questions or would like to hear more about Rebecca’s or Jonathan’s experiences at Immersion 2011, don’t hesitate to contact them! [v](#)