

## Learning Community as a Model for Cultivating Teaching Proficiencies Among Library Instructors – A Case Study

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### Abstract:

*Learning to teach can be achieved through formal teacher education programs, or through in-house training programs that are pedagogically designed to develop teaching proficiencies for subject and disciplinary experts. At Virginia Tech, a library curriculum was developed for a cohort of new library instructors to prepare them for teaching roles within the changing library environment. The cohort's year-long experience used a learning community model that was designed to immerse participants in an instruction experience that involved practical exercises designed to not only create an understanding of theoretical underpinnings of the scholarship of teaching and learning, but also to provide participants the opportunity to develop a teacher identity that would help shape their techniques as library instructors. A cohort of 10 librarians and staff participated as members of the learning community, and were guided by three experienced instruction librarians as facilitators.*

*This paper discusses the rationale and goals of the Virginia Tech Libraries' New Instructor Cohort, as well as the various methods and resources employed to cultivate teaching proficiencies of the participants. The paper includes preliminary outcomes of the program, evaluative feedback from the participants that were garnered via journaling during training, and recommendations for other institutions that may wish to adopt this model of supporting library instruction.*

**Keywords:** Library Instruction, Teacher Education, Learning Community, Community of Practice.

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## **Introduction**

### *Transitioning workplace*

The University Libraries at Virginia Tech, like many other academic libraries, are undergoing significant changes that have led to the need to expand its instruction capacity. For example, in the past few years, Virginia Tech has developed new programs including the First Year Experience (FYE) program, Undergraduate Research (UR) program, and a revised Curriculum for Liberal Education (CLE). Many similar programs and initiatives, such as the design of a new Integrated General Education (IGE) curriculum, are also on the horizon. All of these campus-level changes have led to an ever-increasing need for library instruction; a demand that is rapidly outpacing the teaching capacity of the current number of instruction librarians. This is especially true of the demand for entry-level instruction in the English and Communications departments, the FYE program, and other large service classes that integrate inquiry skills.

Parallel to the campus-wide changes, the University Libraries are undergoing considerable internal transformation resulting from the Library's change of strategic direction as reflected in the new Strategic Plan 2013-2018, which shows a considerable shift towards an increasingly digital agenda, anchored by four main areas of: learning spaces; research and curation; teaching, learning and literacies; and collection access. Consequently, librarian and staff responsibilities are being reconfigured to support these new and emerging areas. One of the areas impacted by these changes is library instruction. The redeployment of instruction librarians to other strategic areas has necessitated a shift in our instruction strategy in order to meet the growing instruction demand. In particular, the need to cultivate greater instruction capacity going forward has become a key priority. To that end, the library's instructional program has developed a two-pronged approach for expanding its instructional capacity. First, the program has outlined an aggressive agenda for expanding online instruction to reach more people. Second, the library has developed a training program for library instructors, using an innovative collaborative model. This strategy has enabled continuing support and enhancement of library instruction within the changing library environment. In its first year, the *New Instructor Cohort*, as the program is referred to, has helped cultivate the teaching proficiencies of 10 librarians and staff across all library departments.

### **Rationale and goals of the new instructor cohort**

#### *Can you teach?*

Teacher education is not always achieved in a formal way. In many colleges and universities, professors and other disciplinary experts often find themselves teaching content that they are experts in without any teacher education background. Subject matter expertise is not always sufficient for successful teaching. Similarly, for instruction librarians, there is a perceived disconnect between library school training and roles of instruction librarians. According to Westbrook & Fabian (2010), the 2007 revision of the 1986 Standards for proficiencies for instruction librarians and coordinators (ALA, 2007) provides for a better connection between the new instruction roles of librarians and required proficiencies. However, the required proficiencies are still largely obtained independently of the formal library school education. As teacher education is not typically part of the library school curriculum, academic librarians have to take deliberate steps to acquire teaching proficiencies. Moreover, as most of the library instruction is integrated within academic disciplines and courses, librarians must be competent to teach within different disciplinary settings and, as Kraat (2005) outlines, be ready to enter in various types of collaboration with collegiate faculty.

In her decades-old review of Clark and Jones (1989)'s discussion of on-the-job training, Baker (1989) poses critical questions: "Where do beginning librarians acquire the necessary background and

exposure to teaching techniques and educational theories? What opportunities are available for new and established librarians to improve their teaching capabilities? How have those who lack formal education for bibliographic instruction integrated that role into their view of librarianship? As experience in bibliographical instruction becomes a requirement for public service positions even at the entry level, it is essential that answers be provided to such questions.” (p. 84). In answering these questions, Baker recognizes the importance of in-house staff development and continuing education. In evaluating the importance of 84 bibliographic instruction proficiencies, Shonrock and Mulder (1993), found that among the top-cited sources where librarians thought they should learn these skills and proficiencies, were library school and on-the-job training. On-the-job training has long been recognized as a viable option for building job-related proficiencies, particularly for newer skills that may not have been learned during professional training.

Borbye (2010) argues that success in careers depends on an individual's capacity to master professional skills and respond appropriately to dynamic situations with flexibility, adaptation, and innovative thinking. In this learning community at Virginia Tech, we had to be agile and respond very quickly to transformational changes that were occurring in the workplace, and put in place a program that ensured support for library instruction in a dynamic environment.

## **Methods, resources, and activities**

### *Learning community*

The two overarching goals for the New Instructor Cohort members were the development of instruction proficiencies and of teacher identities. The cohort leaders reviewed the Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators, which organizes the proficiencies into 12 different categories, and selected communication skills, curriculum knowledge, information literacy integration skills, instructional design skills, planning skills, presentation skills, and teaching skills as the most appropriate for emphasis with the cohort. As part of the learning process, the cohort discussed all 12 proficiencies as well as the leaders' rationale for focusing on the above skills. It was acknowledged that these proficiencies were cultivated individually over time during one's professional career, and that members of the cohort should embrace and begin cultivate them going forward.

The model adopted for teaching the new instructors as a cohort, was based on the theory of situated cognition (Anderson, Reder & Simon, 1996), which posits that *'knowing is inseparable from doing.'* This theory provides good framework for communities of learning as well as communities of practice, both of which describe the nature and purpose of the instruction cohort. This model for teaching the new instructors worked best as it provided an opportunity for 'bonding' among the participants, which was a desired outcome in order to develop a strong base for supporting library instruction. Furthermore, anthropologist Jean Lave's situated learning theory, which posits that *'learning is unintentional and situated within authentic activity, context, and culture'* (Lave, 1991), reinforces the concept of learning within an authentic context. Lave defines a community of practice as a group of individuals with a common professional interest. These attributes defined our goal and purpose, and provided a solid platform for conceptualizing the training program. By working as a cohesive group, the cohort was able to share discussions and experiences that helped members develop a sense of their own teacher identities while still receiving the reinforcement and support provided by other group members. The experienced instructors leading the cohort reinforced this sense of belonging by maintaining a collegial, rather than a hierarchical, format. Thus the cohort members felt that they were a valued part of the larger library instruction community as well their own sub-group.

In a research by Akers, Martin & Summey (2000) a similar learning community model was adopted at Emporia State University's William Allen White Library in Kansas for professional development courses that involved collaboration between faculty and librarians. The outcomes not only met the instructional goals of developing effective practices in using library research resources, but also paved the way for future collaboration between librarians and other faculty. Furthermore, this collaboration

highlighted the library as an active and evolving instructional setting. In evaluating on-the-job training of librarians, Click and Walker (2010) found that although these efforts are very beneficial to participating librarians, it is important to have some more structured training to ensure optimal benefits. They also found that at times there were ‘disconnects between librarians perceptions of the usefulness of such training and the perceptions of the administrators. Needless to say these findings highlight the importance of thorough evaluation of such programs.

### *Training curriculum*

Cohort leaders first requested volunteers to participate in the New Instructor Cohort in spring 2012. The initial 12-week training program, which took place summer 2012, consisted of bi-weekly meetings, with regular readings and homework assignments between each gathering. The program devoted one session to each of the following topics: overview and discussion of proficiencies and standards, student characteristics and learning preferences, learning theories, instructional design, teaching technologies and a classroom tour, and a workshop day in which each cohort member prepared a lesson and presented it to the group.

In fall 2012, the New Instructor Cohort focus shifted away from readings and mock-up class presentations toward real-life class observations. All cohort members had the opportunity to observe one or more members of the larger instruction community during an introductory English, Communications or FYE session. Cohort members completed an evaluation matrix at each class based on the lessons from the summer readings and discussions. The cohort also continued to meet regularly for discussion and reflections on their experiences and observations.

In spring 2013 the cohort continued observations and also had the opportunity to co-teach some of the introductory courses with more seasoned instructors. The cohort members kept journals as a reflective practice to further enhance their learning experiences. Additionally, cohort members were encourage to participate in Virginia Tech Libraries’ Instruction Learning Community and the regional Library Exchange Observation group, in order to build relationships with the larger instruction community and glean additional insight into instructional librarianship.

### *Immersion*

Decades ago, Lutzker (1982) argued that those who would like to participate in instruction programs need the opportunity to stand before a group and teach. Some people are natural teachers; they glow at the idea of an audience, especially a large, captive one. However most of us never get over the "butterflies in the stomach" syndrome. People whose first reaction to the thought of standing up in front of a classroom is absolute panic, can make marvellous teachers; but they are not born performers and they need an opportunity to "try their wings." (p. 64)

The cohort’s year-long experience immersed them in a learning experience that involved reading and reflection, practical experiences designed to create an understanding of theoretical foundations of teaching and learning, and provide the opportunity to develop a teacher identity that would help shape participants’ techniques as instruction librarians. The curriculum included training sessions, practical exercises, and seminal readings on various topics including:

- Readings that supported development of an individual teacher identity
- Review and development of an understanding of *Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators: A Practical Guide* (ALA, 2007); and *ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (ALA, 2000), and their respective functions in shaping library instruction
- Exploring student characteristics and learning preferences
- Exploring various learning theories and how they can be employed in instructional design
- Completing exercises in instructional design of mock instruction sessions

- Working with a myriad of teaching technologies
- In developing the curriculum to cultivate teaching proficiencies for a cohort of new library instructors, the facilitators took into account the key elements in the ADDIE (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, Evaluation) model of instructional design, as well as the necessary theoretical foundation necessary for designing instruction. The cohorts' participation in a learning community provided for their shared experience and helped build a common sense of belonging amongst the members.

A full spectrum of participant activities on the above curriculum was programmed. Prior to teaching 'solo', each of the cohort members participated in a mix of meetings, lectures, independent readings, workshops, instruction observations, journaling/reflection, instruction simulations followed by discussion, consultations with expert instruction librarians, and Q&A sessions. Although the availability for participation was not uniform, the facilitators ensured that all members of the cohort had a tailored experience that ensured they were ready to start teaching by the spring 2013.

As part of this immersive experience the cohort also participated in another instruction learning community - the Virginia Tech Libraries' Instruction Learning Community - that was in progress at the same time, and sponsored through Virginia Tech's Center for Instructional Development and Educational Research (CIDER) grant awarded in the fall of 2011. In addition, the cohort also participated in the inter-institutional Library Exchange Observation (LEO) program that provided them the opportunity to take part in instruction workshops and observe library instructors at three participating Universities: Hollins, Radford, and Virginia Tech. These two additional opportunities provided the cohort with diverse opportunities to interact with other library instructors within and outside Virginia Tech.

### **Preliminary outcomes**

As stated in Hafler (2011) "workplace learning truly is extraordinary when it is marked by structural congruence and a positive synergy among the intended and formal preparation of professionals, that tacit learning occurs within the hidden curriculum, and that the subsequent demands, both formal and tacit, are embedded in subsequent workplace setting." (p.v)

#### *Greater capacity for supporting instruction*

One of the main goals of this training was to increase capacity for library instruction. Even though the program lost three of its original members through attrition, this goal was met. By the end of spring 2013, the new instructors had all taught some sessions. Although the number of sessions varied from individual to individual, overall more than 20 sessions were either taught or co-taught by the cohort.

#### *Sense of community*

The outcomes observed in this case are congruent with those found in a similar effort reported by Madaille (2011). Not only did the participants go through a similar training program that included on-the-job training that integrated reading professional literature; attending workshops and conferences; taking a formal course in instruction; and other methods, but also reached similar outcomes, which Madaille stated as "training helped library staff to feel more prepared for teaching and to embrace instructional work as integral to their professional identities. Study participants derived enjoyment from instruction in the form of satisfaction with facilitating student learning; relationship building; personal development; task variety; and appreciation of the heightened profile of library staff".

#### *Professional growth*

The training for the cohort was deliberately designed to offer a wide array of opportunities for general professional growth that is not necessarily relevant to library instruction. Because the cohort was

made up of librarians and staff, some without a library degree and others will a library degree but working in paraprofessional positions, it was necessary to provide a broad range of professional development opportunities. Among the most successful of these was conference participation and presentations. Several conference presentations emanated from this program in 2013, including:

1. International Conference on Higher Education Pedagogy - Blacksburg, VA,
2. Library Orientation Exchange (LOEX) – Nashville, TN,
3. WILU (Workshop for Instruction in Library Use) - Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, and
4. IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) Congress - Singapore.

### *Future opportunities*

The regular record keeping and lesson planning by the cohort leaders resulted in a well-documented training program that can be replicated elsewhere by others, including other departments. Given the flexibility of the cohort model and general course outline, future use is not limited to application in instruction scenarios. For example, Virginia Tech Libraries has similarly adapted the model for developing reference proficiencies among a volunteer group of reference assistants and librarians.

The program has now entered into its second year, a new cohort of participants have just enrolled, and will complete the immersive program from summer 2013 through spring 2014. Whereas they will follow a similar agenda, the facilitators will be integrating new training components based on the feedback received from the first cohort. Furthermore, as the workplace continues to evolve, corresponding changes will continue to be added to the program to ensure that all new and old library instructors are ready to provide library instruction within an evolving environment.

### **Challenges**

One of the main challenges in creating and sustaining the cohort was time. Participants generally needed permission from their supervisors to take time from their regular duties in order to take part in cohort activities. Supervisor support was generally available in principle, but there were occasions on which the demands of regular job requirements and those of the cohort placed a strain on members' workload. Similarly, scheduling group meetings proved a challenge, since cohort members and leaders all had to find time to meet. Leaders felt that attendance at group meetings was essential to the cohort framework, and as such were emphatic that all cohort members be available for regular participation.

As a result of these and other factors, participant attrition became a challenge as the year-long program progressed. During the course of this year, two of the cohort members got jobs as librarians at other institutions, while others' responsibilities shifted as the libraries reorganized workflows to reflect the goals in the new strategic plan. These shifts in responsibility often meant that a cohort participant needed to focus more time in their "home department," leaving less time available for cohort participation.

### **Evaluative feedback**

The cohort leaders solicited feedback on the program throughout the year, both through discussion and by way of journal entries. At the culmination of the spring 2013 section, the leaders administered a formal, 13 question Qualtrics survey to the cohort participants. This survey looked at factors regarding participant motivation, challenges, overall impact of cohort participation on individuals and the library as a whole, and feedback for future iterations of the program and desired continuing education opportunities.

Cohort members unanimously indicated that participation in the program had left them with increased confidence in their public speaking and teaching skills. Many of them indicated interest in further development and continuing education surrounding teaching and learning, direct involvement in

Virginia Tech Libraries' instructional program, and in further research in the areas of instruction and learning.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The cohort environment proved very useful with regard to the development of teacher identities. All new instructor cohort members went through the process of reconceptualising their roles within the library to incorporate "instructor" or "teacher" into their self-concepts. Some cohort members were members of technical services or other, traditionally "invisible" departments, and were thus required to make significant shifts of self-perception. Being able to do so within the collaborative atmosphere of the cohort and the larger instruction community increased the speed at which cohort members felt comfortable with their new identities.

The following are some recommendations for other institutions that may wish to adopt this model of supporting library instruction:

- One size does not fit all. It is important to tailor participants' experiences individually. Although the learning community model is effective for cultivating a sense of community, it was clear from our case study that developing of individual instruction proficiencies also required some individually tailored experiences to address individual comfort levels and attitudes towards teaching
- Be flexible with the training curriculum and seize additional impromptu learning opportunities for participants
- Ensure buy-in across the entire library. This model does not work without wide buy-in
- Capture and document participant experiences as you go – The information is a key component of your formative evaluation.

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