CHAPTER 14

Adjusting Roles:
Lessons Learned from Applying Non-LIS Teacher Training to Library Instruction

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

Readers will be able to

- recognize important differences between library instruction and other forms of academic teaching;
- identify the promise and peril of translating non-LIS teaching experience to library instruction through a first-hand example;
- distinguish the onboarding needs of librarians with non-LIS teaching backgrounds who accept academic librarian roles from those of candidates with other types of backgrounds; and
- infer opportunities to leverage the non-LIS teaching backgrounds of staff or students to improve learning support across different instructor cohorts.

Introduction

As much recent professional literature argues, librarianship faces an increasing and ongoing need to improve teacher training in library and information science (LIS) graduate programs and academic libraries. Candice Benjes-Small and Rebecca Miller observe that

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the problem has persisted "for decades,"[1] even as the demand for library instruction and its presence in reference librarian job ads has grown dramatically.[2] In acknowledging the need for more and better quality teacher training, the literature on the subject often posits two scenarios for early-career librarians with instruction duties: either the librarians new to teaching have been under- or unequipped by their LIS graduate education, or they come to librarianship, as Benjes-Small and Miller describe, with a "teaching background outside of libraries," reporting that "they [do] not need training."[3] While early-career librarians more often than not face the former situation (i.e., find themselves underprepared for library instruction), the latter scenario is worth unpacking for insights into how non-LIS teacher training translates (or does not) to the context of library instruction, how the non-LIS teaching experience and training of these new librarians might be deployed to enhance teacher training for their library colleagues, and what support these new and potentially overconfident librarians might need to smooth their own transition from other parts of the academy into the library, where their teacher training might not fully prepare them for the unique instruction that librarians do.

Drawing on my transition from a graduate student and instructor of English/writing to librarian, I reflect in this chapter on my teacher training in non-LIS fields and describe the experience of applying that training to library instruction. I was fortunate to develop a teacher identity, to learn pedagogical methods and best practices, and to apply my training in the classroom before becoming a librarian. Nevertheless, I quickly learned that library instruction presents challenges for which my prior experience had not prepared me. Notably, the skills and habits I learned in my pre-librarian teaching experience did not always translate frictionlessly to a context defined by one-shot classroom interventions, standalone workshops, and student-learning trajectories both shorter (the individual class session) and longer (the length of students' entire program) than the semester-length courses to which my teaching had been attuned. Moreover, I had to develop co-planning and co-teaching skills to effectively work with faculty. No longer the sole instructor, I had to help faculty realize their student learning goals while educating them about best practices in information literacy instruction. These reflections will, I hope, engage graduate students in non-LIS fields who see librarianship as an attractive alt-ac career pathway but who might benefit from a more nuanced understanding of how their skills and experiences could translate to public-service librarianship. I also aspire to reach library administrators, instruction coordinators, and graduate-school faculty who could take better advantage of these experienced teachers' knowledge to create peer-learning groups for all teaching librarians at their institutions. Lastly, I want to address library supervisors who may be unaware of the challenges of onboarding and supporting librarians whose teacher training comes from outside professional library education.

Non-LIS Teacher Training

My introduction to teaching at the university level was daunting but fairly typical. Having been awarded a teaching assistantship as part of my acceptance into the creative writing master's program at Temple University, I was assigned to teach two sections of first-year

composition (English 50) in my first semester as a graduate student (fall 2003). During my time at Temple, English 50 was the required writing course into which most first-year students were placed through the results of a diagnostic writing test. As the sole instructor for two sections of approximately twenty students each, I taught a standardized syllabus featuring a set of readings that interrogate the relationship between vernacular and academic knowledge, including texts by Antonio Gramsci, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Mary Louise Pratt. My cohort of fellow graduate teaching assistants and I were each charged with not only preparing students for a series of progressively complex writing assignments but also teaching students of various backgrounds to engage with difficult, theoretical texts that they then redeployed in the service of those written arguments. The engagement with complex readings was in line with the pedagogical aims of the syllabus. Nonetheless, the students had as their guides graduate students, myself included, with little or no experience as an instructor.

Equipped with some limited experience teaching high-school English prior to my enrolling in graduate school, I was slightly better prepared than most of my peers. Regardless, it would be fair to call our experience one of immersion. We learned primarily by doing. In fact, I taught my first sessions of English 50 before my graduate-level courses had even begun. Our situation was much like the one that Jessica Restaino describes:

> New teachers, charged with the task of getting students to write and navigating new graduate programs themselves, are largely untrained, unsure of their responsibilities, and equipped with a syllabus they did not design and perhaps a list of pedagogical procedures they do not understand. The first semester is more of a day-to-day keeping afloat than it is a carefully constructed, planned course.[4]

To supplement whatever experience or training with which we came into our respective programs,[5] and to ground that training in the discipline of composition and rhetoric, the TAs were assigned a teaching practicum (English 508: Composition, Theory and Practice), an invaluable introduction to pedagogy and writing theory that furthermore offered a space for dialogue among the TA cohort. As the course instructor, Stephen Parks, described it in an email from 2006:

> The goal of the course [was] to provide students with a theoretical and pedagogical framework to teach in [Temple's] undergraduate writing classrooms[,] a space framed by cultural and critical theories of language. For that reason, students [were] asked to engage with both composition theorists, such as David Bartholomae, and cultural theorists, such as Antonio Gramsci. Throughout, they [were] asked to teach an undergraduate course focused on the relationship between vernacular and academic knowledge.

This course contributed significantly, albeit somewhat belatedly, to our understanding of student learning, writing praxis, and cultural theory. Although valuable, the practicum

ran parallel to our first semesters of teaching. We encountered many issues within the classroom before they were addressed by the content of the practicum or in conversation with our peers. In subsequent semesters, I acquired increasing proficiency and confidence. I adapted to curricular changes and eventually developed my own syllabi for the first-year writing courses, teaching additional courses in literature and creative writing. In those first days as a TA, however, I was largely staying just one step ahead of the students. Even after that first semester, the practicum formed the bulk of my formal pedagogical training, the rest of my development occurring through classroom experience and information-sharing among the TAs.

My teaching at Temple continued over the course of my two-year master's program and a subsequent year as an adjunct at Temple and a local community college. I then enrolled in a doctoral program in English literature at the University of St Andrews in Scotland, where I taught a very different audience of undergraduate students in a significantly different system (one based on modules consisting of small-group tutorials paired with large-group lectures). I had to adjust my expectations of what students would know walking into the classroom, pegging my understanding to the affordances of and emphases in British and—with St Andrews's large foreign student body—international secondary education. As a lecturer and tutor in the School of English, I prepared and delivered lectures on topics in my areas of expertise (e.g., Victorian studies) and led very small, tutorial-style classes in which the students and I would unpack the course readings and discuss feedback on writing assignments. St Andrews supported its student instructors through both a general orientation course, which included a mix of administrative, logistical, and pedagogical advice, as well as a department-based induction undergirded by a TA handbook. Although useful, this support was nonetheless cursory, designed as a basic introduction to best practices in teaching and a guide to compliance with university policy. Without the benefit of my previous teaching experience, my transition to teaching at St Andrews would have been more challenging.

Transferable Skills

Despite my commonly shared experience of learning to teach through somewhat haphazard and less-than-thorough training programs, I nonetheless emerged from these experiences equipped with a wide range of transferable skills and habits. By leading class discussions with groups of various sizes and providing feedback on student assignments, I learned how to facilitate conversation and promote learning environments in which students felt comfortable and encouraged to participate. I learned how to guide students through their assignments from ideation to revision, particularly with an emphasis on writing as a process of learning and thinking. I learned how to develop and sequence informal and formal writing assignments that fostered progressive learning and provided evidence for assessment keyed to course learning objectives. Furthermore, I became better attuned to the ways in which my classroom persona could aid or hinder discussion and learning. I honed that persona in ways that sought (not always successfully) to decenter my authority, activate the range of student knowledge and experience in the classroom,

and enliven the content to inspire engagement. In addition to these skills that I developed directly through teaching, I also acquired an increasingly intimate understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by teaching faculty, an understanding that has since allowed me in my librarian roles to empathize and relate to faculty in ways that promote better co-teaching. Other librarians who have transitioned into their roles from non-librarian teaching jobs cite similar benefits, such as familiarity with "designing and assessing student work"[6] as well as "first-hand insight into the information literacy needs of students."[7]

All the skills and dispositions described above remain invaluable in my work as both an instruction librarian and a leader of teaching efforts in my library. Despite the value of this preparation, transitioning to a teaching-librarian role required a reorientation and recontextualization of my knowledge, as well as the development of new skills. This reframing was made harder by my inexperience as a teacher in collaborating with librarians on one-shot sessions—an opportunity rarely emphasized by the programs in which I taught. No longer the sole instructor, I now had to intervene in courses with established learning objectives and in which the students and professor had already developed a strong rapport through shared readings and classroom discussions. Most guest lecturers understand their role as providing an expert perspective on subtopics within the class, but the librarian's role is more ambiguous (in the minds of students, faculty, and librarians alike). I had to ask myself: Was I a gatekeeper to library collections—one knowledgeable in the holdings and procedures of the libraries but not necessarily a disciplinary expert—or were faculty asking me to collaborate because my subject expertise was somehow complementary to their own? Furthermore, I had to rethink my approach to learning assessment, relying mostly on quick verbal checks for understanding rather than a series of formative and summative evaluations that could gauge and track student learning over time. These issues are well-known and common aspects of the one-shot bibliographic instruction session. Librarians must parachute into courses to foster skills that are sometimes partially or fully devoid of context, depending on the librarian's familiarity with the course and its content as well as the number of opportunities that the course instructor and librarian have to co-plan and co-teach the session. Library instructors must often develop an instantaneous rapport with both students and new faculty, and they must often rely on faculty to measure the learning that takes place during these sessions. While there is much one could say (and has been said) about how to improve or deemphasize the one-shot model, it nonetheless remains one of the primary modes of library instruction.[8]

Introduction to Library Instruction

Although it happened more than a decade ago, I remember well the experience of teaching my first one-shot session—an experience undoubtedly shared by many new teaching librarians today. A senior professor in the Spanish department at Haverford College contacted me.[9] I had just assumed my role as a research and instruction librarian at the college, and he was generously inviting me to lead a one-shot session for his course on "quixotic narratives." Students in the class conduct close readings of *Don Quixote* and

other picaresque intertexts, and the Haverford College Libraries are fortunate to own several first and early editions of Cervantes's masterpiece as well as first editions of related early modern Spanish literature. The professor hoped to center the class session on an engagement with these early editions. The students were also preparing for a research assignment, so I needed to work some traditional bibliographic instruction into what might have otherwise been a simple visit to the rare books library.[10] Knowing my background in literature, and perhaps trusting my judgment too much, the professor gave me great leeway in designing the lesson. Knowing *Don Quixote* fairly well in translation (although not its textual history), having a PhD in English literature, and possessing a scholarly interest in book history, I was both excited and overconfident about my skills. With a researcher's enthusiasm, I took the professor's recommendations and consulted further with my colleagues in special collections to select and reserve relevant first editions for the class, carefully bookmarking the cancellations, printer errors, and other highlights of the artifacts that the professor and I had wanted to underscore for the students. I simultaneously began in-depth research into the textual history of *Don Quixote* and the provenance of Haverford's particular copies. Lastly, I spent a great deal of time familiarizing myself with the history of Cervantes scholarship, creating a research guide for the class that listed the rare editions with which they would work, scholarship on their textual history, and general sources for secondary research on Cervantes and other authors featured in the class.

Armed with this abundant new knowledge and an overstuffed agenda, I eagerly welcomed the students into the library on the day of their assigned visit. The rare editions were arrayed in book cradles along a long, narrow table in one of the library's reading rooms. At one end of the table, I had set up the projector and screen for the research lesson in the latter part of the class. Students took their seats, after which I gave them some brief instructions on caring for the material. The professor introduced me and then gestured for me to take over the class. I began, as I often had in my own classes, by directing students to specific passages in the books before them—the early editions of *Don Quixote*—asking them questions about what they were observing and how it might relate to their understanding of the narrative. The challenges inherent to this kind of teaching became immediately apparent. Students were reluctant to answer the questions: Were they unprepared, respectful, intimidated, or disengaged? Without an established relationship with them, I found it hard to know the cause. Had I made bad assumptions about what the professor had done to prepare the students for the session or about how much of their course readings they had completed? A course instructor might struggle at times with students who have come unprepared to class by not having done the readings; however, the assigned readings for the day would have been clearly demarcated on the syllabus, and the instructor could at least count on some of the students' having completed the reading. While this class had been reading and discussing *Don Quixote* prior to my session with them, I realized the students had not been sufficiently prepared to anticipate and look for new information in the artifacts before them; they saw the collection as interesting but disconnected from the exegetical work that they had been doing in class. In short, I had failed to fully appreciate how this visit represented a rupture, not a continuation, in their

ongoing discussion about Cervantes's work as presented to them through their student edition of the text. Most had never engaged with rare books, and—despite their ineffable reverence toward them—had no template for reading and analyzing these objects.

In the latter part of the class, we shifted to the research overview aimed at preparing the students to complete their research assignments. Again, I found myself performing an unfamiliar type of teaching. In applying to librarian jobs, I had theorized about the transferability of my teaching skills, and I had delivered a job talk that, I felt, productively complicated research as recursive and iterative and yet manageable with the right strategies. At this moment, though, I realized that the job talk—as engaging as I had tried to make it—was still essentially a lecture. And in channeling that mode, I was delivering a rather staid lecture to this class, covering what most one-shot library sessions feature: a basic overview of the catalog and relevant databases, search strategies with examples, and general research advice. I was unwittingly recreating the database-demo model that I had seen librarians deliver in my experiences as a student. As the students continued to give me their polite but largely indifferent attention, I once more came to realize how much more work I would have to do to translate my teaching skills to this context. I would have to understand and communicate better—through the course instructor, perhaps—the objectives of the lesson. I would have to make the content of the lesson more interesting to students—by preparing them better to analyze and ask good questions about rare books and archives on the one hand and by making search and research more interesting and valuable to them on the other. No longer could I rely on texts that I had selected especially for their ability to generate productive dialogue and their intertextual relationship to other course readings. Now I would have to focus on quickly equipping students with the skills needed to work with primary sources and conduct secondary research, identifying and building on their existing knowledge, creating in-class opportunities for manageable and hands-on practice, and structuring ongoing support for them as they apply their new skills to complete a specific course assignment.

In reflecting on the challenges I faced in delivering this first one-shot session, I also had to think critically about the students' perception of me and my relationship to them. Who exactly was I to the students? What preconceptions about librarians were informing their understanding of who I was to them and the nature of our interaction? Before that moment, I had taken for granted the teacher-student relationship and its parameters. Students often assume—too coarsely at times—a transactional relationship between teacher and student, one in which the teacher imparts or fosters knowledge through a more or less successful (yet largely predictable) praxis. They might be confused about the active role they must play in their own learning, but they are usually clear-eyed about their orientation toward getting good grades and the instructor's nominal role in achieving that goal. As a course instructor, I too had been clear about the role I played and its relationship to students, but as a teaching librarian I was now acutely aware of the need for a new persona—one that must perform a tricky balancing act of establishing one's authority, decentering that authority to empower students, challenging assumptions about libraries and librarians, and leveraging students' experiences with libraries to design constructivist lessons that augment their information literacy. Having had no training or experience in

library instruction during my LIS master's program, I was just then realizing the full extent to which I still had to synthesize my non-LIS pedagogical training with my knowledge of library science and archival research. And instead of relying on a careful curricular design that I created myself, working backward from my learning goals and scaffolding assignments to help students achieve them, I would have to engage more deeply with course instructors to understand their goals, assess their knowledge of contemporary libraries and the roles of instructional librarians within them,[11] and carefully plan the session to make it an integral part of the students' learning experience. Most important, I had to understand better that I was no longer there to share directly my knowledge of literary history and analysis, although that knowledge remains very useful to my library instruction; rather, I would have to reorient myself as an information expert. Ultimately, I realized that I had overprepared as an expert on Cervantes and early modern literary/book history and underprepared as a teacher of information and primary source literacy. Unintentionally, I had competed rather than collaborated with the course instructor, even though our planning had been marked by enthusiasm and generosity and the professor was generally pleased with the outcome. Since this first professional foray into library instruction, I have come to understand better who I am as a teacher-librarian and not just as a teacher. I draw on my disciplinary knowledge to understand the content and form of classes with which I work, but I now occupy a different space as an information expert who deploys a related but distinct mode(s) of teaching.

Assessment

Although the Haverford Libraries and academic libraries more generally have become better at assessing both the teaching and learning for which they're responsible, I continue to see at the different institutions where I've worked an inconsistency with respect to assessment. I no longer remember whether I administered an evaluation at the end of that first library instruction session. If I had, it would have been a fairly simple evaluation form that captured students' satisfaction but indicated little about their learning (much of which they had not yet applied to their research). Although the responses might have offered clues about their level of engagement, they would also have been drawn from the same preconceptions about librarians that I had insufficiently considered prior to the session. There might—as was typical—also have been a question on the professor's course evaluation at the end of the semester asking about the library visit, but it would have again offered little insight into the students' learning and the quality of my teaching. Here was another missed opportunity to draw from my experience of using formal and informal assessment in the classroom—short in-class writing exercises, for example—to get a better handle on the value of my teaching and its impact. It was also a missed opportunity to interrogate and adapt those familiar assessment practices to a new context in which a substantive evaluation would have to be accomplished in collaboration with the professor, who was better positioned to measure the effect of my effort. In subsequent years at Haverford, we would develop an explicit instruction program with a set of four-year learning goals keyed to the objectives of individual academic departments. Had such a system been in place at the time of my first one-shot session, I could say

that I also missed an opportunity to place that lesson in the context of the students' more general undergraduate (information literacy) learning trajectory. Considering the students' longer learning arc—as an administrator or librarian might—was not something to which I was yet accustomed, familiar as I was with a focus on the single semester-long course. Whatever the students came away with that day—and I hope that they did learn something of value—was decontextualized and potentially ephemeral.

Conclusion

Although some of my experience is idiosyncratic, there are lessons that can easily be extracted from it that are relevant to many new librarians, supervisors, and graduate school administrators. Crucially important among those lessons is that translating non-LIS teaching experience to library instruction requires conscientious effort and an explicit reorientation on the part of these librarians, aided by their professors, supervisors, or peers. In contrast to the "teacher anxiety" that many new professionals feel as they are asked to perform teaching duties for which they are not prepared,[12] these librarians often bring with them a confidence in their teaching ability and identity alongside an insufficient appreciation for the ways in which they must adapt, revise, and (re)present that identity from the position of a librarian. In offering more teacher training and hands-on practice, graduate LIS programs can give experienced teachers opportunities to refine and reorient their non-LIS pedagogical training. Library supervisors can also help such individuals—some of whom might be hired without an MLS—to transition to library instruction by recognizing the unique challenges and opportunities they face rather than assuming that they are fully prepared for library instruction and the new identity that they must forge. Both graduate school administrators and library supervisors can amplify the value of non-LIS teaching experience among their staff and students by structuring learning environments and training programs that capitalize on that pedagogical knowledge while reframing it in the context of library instruction. Librarians coming into the profession with teaching experience in post-secondary or K–12 schools (or other related instructional environments) bring invaluable knowledge into academic libraries that can elevate the teaching and assessment practices of their peers, but they also have specific onboarding requirements and need ongoing support to maximize those potential benefits. Although the focus of this chapter has been on one-shot library sessions, the lessons and opportunities that I have tried to highlight herein are applicable to a number of instructional modes, including standalone workshops and even reference work.[13] By understanding the support that experienced teachers need in making the transition to librarianship, libraries can better capitalize on those librarians' potential as instructors and the value that they can bring to other librarians through their pedagogical expertise and experience.

Notes

1. Candice M. Benjes-Small and Rebecca K. Miller, *The New Instruction Librarian: A Workbook for Trainers and Learners* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2017), 8.

2. Robert Detmering and Claudene Sproles, "Forget the Desk Job: Current Roles and Responsibilities in Entry-Level Reference Job Advertisements," *College & Research Libraries* 73, no. 6 (November 2012): 543–55, https://doi.org/10.5860/crl-304.
3. Benjes-Small and Miller, *The New Instruction Librarian*, 5.
4. Jessica Restaino, *First Semester: Graduate Students, Teaching Writing, and the Challenge of Middle Ground* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 1.
5. Including the English PhD program and the master's in creative writing.
6. Jacalyn E. Bryan, "The Preparation of Academic Librarians Who Provide Instruction: A Comparison of First and Second Career Librarians," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 42, no. 4 (July 1, 2016): 347, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2016.05.010.
7. Bryan, "The Preparation of Academic Librarians," 348.
8. Lisa Becksford, "Teacher, Librarian, or Both? A Quantitative Investigation of Instruction Librarians' Teacher Identity," *College & Research Libraries* 83, no. 3 (2022): 378, https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.83.3.372.
9. Haverford is a small, elite, and well-resourced liberal arts college that attracts intellectually curious and high-performing students; however, the format and challenges inherent to the library session that I describe here are similar to many library sessions that I have experienced and witnessed at a range of institutions.
10. I use the term "bibliographic instruction" advisedly to evoke the kind of instruction that I reference here, despite the fact that I find the term generally inadequate to describe the type of teaching that librarians now typically do and to combat the stereotypes about the predominately book-centric nature of library work.
11. For a discussion of the misalignment of faculty and librarian perceptions (and a potential remedy to the problem), see Nora F. Belzowski, J. Parker Ladwig, and Thurston Miller, "Crafting Identity, Collaboration, and Relevance for Academic Librarians Using Communities of Practice," *Collaborative Librarianship* 5, no. 1 (January 2013): 3–15.
12. Becksford, "Teacher, Librarian, or Both?," 374.
13. As James Elmborg has eloquently described. See James K. Elmborg, "Teaching at the Desk: Toward a Reference Pedagogy," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 2, no. 3 (2002): 455–64, https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2002.0050.

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