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Transformative Role Playing:

Embracing Non-Library Instructional Opportunities to Enrich Professional Identities

John Stawarz and Sebastian Modrow

The library instruction session could not have gone any better. After all, the students enthusiastically participated in the group activities, and more than a few smiling students voiced gratitude as they left the classroom. But after riding a rush of adrenaline during the past hour, self-doubt began to creep in and anxiety spiraled into a series of questions: Was the instruction session meaningful for the students as a learning experience? Did the session align with the faculty member's broader curricular agenda and pedagogical strategies? How does (or could) library instruction connect to the broader teaching and learning that takes place within our institution? And finally, what do this experience and the ensuing anxiety tell us about the dominant roles, perspectives, and identities of library professionals^{*} who provide instruction?

DISORIENTING DILEMMAS AND CATALYSTS FOR TRANSFORMATION

Not only is library instruction an integral part of an academic library's services, but its function and modality differ significantly from that of faculty and course instructors. For

* We use the term "library professionals" to emphasize that librarians are not the only library professionals who provide library instruction. In other places, however, we continue using the term "librarian" to best reflect our own personal experiences.

many—if not most—library instruction sessions, a faculty member invites a librarian to serve as something of a special guest during a regularly scheduled class session. In this guest role, library professionals usually teach a one-shot session on course-relevant resources that is integral to but nevertheless separate from the rest of the students' course-long learning experience. In these one-shot instruction sessions, as they are called, the librarian would typically introduce the students to the library's resources and demonstrate how to successfully use them for an upcoming research assignment. Once the session ends, however, instruction librarians often have little additional communication or interaction with the students they have worked with during these one-shot sessions. In effect, this arrangement leaves instructional librarians largely disconnected from the students' broader learning experiences as well as the institution's overarching educational aims and processes.

Somewhat frustrated with this situation, many instruction librarians have attempted to move beyond the structure of the one-shot session, but the opportunity exists to move beyond even the role of instruction librarian or even instruction in library-centric credit courses. Can stepping out of this role and into the shoes of a disciplinary instructor provide a better perspective on the role of teaching librarian? In this chapter, we argue that a librarian's "stepping-out-of-character"—that is, into the role of a course instructor—can provide transformational experiences and perspectives that could inform their roles within the library's instruction program.

EXAMINING, EXPLORING, AND REFLECTING

"Academic librarians in the United States have wrestled with their academic status, job rank, and roles in academia for many decades," wrote Freedman in 2014.¹ Nearly a decade later, this professional precariousness still often impacts librarians, whether they are considered faculty or staff, but particularly so for those with teaching duties. With regard to the librarian's daily practice, Freedman's statement gains momentum when we acknowledge that "the role as instructor" constitutes, as Cisse asserts, "an increasingly essential part of academic librarianship." According to LeBeau, this factor influences why "[l]ibrarians feel closely allied with the teaching profession."² There has accordingly been an increasing interest in library science literature on learning theories, not the least of which are Mezirow's observations on transformative learning.³

Mezirow's reflections on transformative learning seem to have mostly the student-learner in mind, but many of his observations, in particular his frames of reference theory, can be applied to the educator as well. Mezirow defines transformative learning as "the process of effecting change in a frame of reference."⁴ The frames of reference are, according to Mezirow, the structures of adult thinking (associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses) developed through experience that help us navigate and make sense of this world. It is a bias developed over time and in certain situational contexts, and Mezirow calls it a "frame" because it is this cognitive structure into which we usually integrate all new experiences, which indicates that to no small extent the meaning of the new experience is determined by the developed frame. The only way in which we can change our frames of reference is through examination of their genesis—that is, "through critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based."⁵

But how can we, as librarian educators, collaborate more effectively in a learning process that is centered around the interaction of faculty and students? If becoming “critically reflective of the assumptions of others is fundamental to effective collaborative problem posing and solving,” then it should be advantageous for the librarian to immerse themselves in this conventional learning framework in order to check old assumptions from a new perspective.⁶ As Mezirow reminds us, becoming “critically reflective of one’s own assumptions is the key to transforming one’s taken-for-granted frame of reference, an indispensable dimension of learning for adapting to change.”⁷

The ubiquity of the one-shot session format substantially frames the librarian’s perspective on the instructional process, though librarians have often recognized these limitations and sought different ways to broaden their horizon (e.g., engaging with instruction-related research, attending workshops, and reflecting on more effective librarian-faculty collaboration).⁸ Academic librarians have pursued designing and offering library-based credit-bearing courses, often as a part of disciplinary or general education programs; such experiences have helped librarians push their pedagogical knowledge beyond the one-shot teaching experience.⁹ Embedded librarianship is another approach to the outlined dilemma, and it was explored extensively, for example, in Kvenild and Calkins’s edited volume *Embedded Librarians: Moving Beyond the One-Shot Instruction*.¹⁰ In this volume, Brower cites Shumaker and Talley’s description, which asserts that “[embedded librarianship involves] ‘...focusing on the needs of one or more specific groups, building relationships with these groups, developing a deep understanding of their work, and providing information services that are highly customized and targeted to their greatest needs.’”¹¹

Brower then breaks down this high-level description into actionable domains for library professionals to concentrate efforts. In their estimation, embedded librarians

- collaborate with their users,
- form partnerships on the department and campus level,
- provide needs-based services,
- offer convenient and user-friendly services outside of library settings,
- become immersed in the culture and spaces of users, and
- understand the discipline, including the culture and research habits of users.¹²

In addition to credit-based library courses and embedded librarianship, which more closely align with what we might consider more “traditional” librarian responsibilities, we argue here for the temporary but complete immersion of the librarian as faculty into the “[c]ulture and [s]paces of their [traditional] [u]sers.” We are, however, not arguing for supplanting library-situated credit-bearing courses or alternatives to embedded librarianship on the class level; instead, we consider adjunct teaching as an additional layer of librarian-embeddedness at the institutional level. At the same time, we are also painfully aware of the pervasiveness of the “adjunct problem” in academia and are by no means arguing for the further “adjunctification” of higher learning.* Librarians provide a well-trained pool of teaching practitioners, and it is only about the advantages from

* For an exploration of the “adjunctification” of higher education, see, for example, Adam Harris’s “The Death of an Adjunct,” *The Atlantic* (April 8, 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/04/adjunct-professors-higher-education-thea-hunter/586168/>.

the librarians' perspective that we argue the case here. In our experience, we have found that assuming the faculty role in another department or academic unit adds another valuable perspective that can lead to novel reflection—not limited to but also evidenced in our writing this chapter—and at least extends the frames of reference for a librarian's instructional identity.

BUILDING SKILLS AND CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE

Experiencing the faculty perspective and connecting with student learning needs in a new way, we came to realize, contextualizes our work as instruction librarians. We learn to look at the libraries through the eyes of a student rather than at students through the lens of the library, and through facilitating the student learning processes for a whole semester, we have become increasingly aware of how, for example, applicability and information quality need to be prioritized over an unmanageable abundance of resources. We have experienced LeBeau's realization that "[t]he opportunity has given me a different vantage point on my academic environment."¹³

One way for library staff to gain new institutional and instructional perspectives is to embrace campus instructional opportunities that extend beyond the library itself and that offer transformational learning opportunities. As staff members at Syracuse University Libraries, we have recently embraced opportunities across our campus that allowed us to move beyond our precarious role as quasi-staff/quasi-faculty and engage more deeply with teaching opportunities that offer sustained and deeper engagement with coursework, curricula, and, most importantly, students' learning experiences.

Building Skills: John's Perspective

I serve as both the online learning librarian at Syracuse University Libraries and as an online adjunct instructor in the Master of Science in Library and Information Science program (LIS) at Syracuse University's School of Information Studies. I have also had the opportunity to serve as a lead facilitator in a required course designed for first-year undergraduate and transfer students; in this course, students are challenged to develop communication skills and self-reflection as new members of our campus community.

Building Skills: Sebastian's Perspective

Along with my previous role as curator of rare books and manuscripts, I have also worked as an adjunct instructor for two programs at Syracuse University—the School of Information Studies' Library and Information Science program and the School of Design's Museum Studies program. For the LIS program, I designed and taught *The History of Libraries and Archives in the Western World* as well as *The History of the Book*, with both courses drawing heavily on the collections of the Special Collections Research Center. For Museum Studies and the LIS program, I taught the cross-listed course *Introduction to Cultural Heritage Preservation*.

PLANNING AND PILOTING IN PRACTICE

These opportunities have allowed us to move beyond the “special guest” status of the one-shot instruction sessions and engage more deeply and consistently with students and their learning experiences. Above all, embracing these instructional opportunities outside of the library has helped transform our instructional identities beyond that of librarians as one-shot session providers and added a faculty perspective that will help us—in any kind of instruction situation—to keep the students’ long-term learning process and goals in view.

Before we focus on the benefits for other key players in this learning process, we want to acknowledge how assuming the faculty role helps alleviate one of the primordial experiences of new instruction librarians: impostor syndrome. Is an instructional librarian an instructor? Lacey and Parlette-Stewart, for example, maintain that librarians usually wear many hats and are unable, therefore, to fully focus on their instructional responsibilities, a challenge compounded by the broad range of subjects that an instruction librarian usually serves on campus.¹⁴ This experience of “jack of all trades, master of none” is in stark contrast to the adjunct instructor role where—with still more time constraints than in the case of full-time faculty—the librarian instructor is able to focus and dive deeper into a subject, experiment, learn, and correct. Alleviating the impostor syndrome leads to another welcome effect: embracing instructional roles outside of the library also has allowed us to begin dampening the “vocational awe” inherent in our field, which Ettarh identifies as “the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique.”¹⁵ Some of this movement can be attributed to a growing awareness of the performative nature that often accompanies library instruction and instead being pulled toward fostering a lasting impact on student learning. The faculty role allowed us as teaching librarians to develop, for lack of a better term, an insider-outsider perspective on our own profession and to critically rethink certain habits and approaches. In these ways, we could effect a change in our frames of reference and deconstruct institutional and hierarchical barriers between staff and faculty.¹⁶

Planning and Piloting in Practice: Sebastian’s Perspective

Since librarians usually assume the adjunct professor role in an area of their own expertise, an almost necessary effect is the acquisition or further development of secondary skills related to their specific library roles. Teaching courses on library, archives, and book history has expanded my knowledge of my department’s rare book and archival sources since my courses constantly drew on the resources of Syracuse University’s Special Collections Research Center. This knowledge, in turn, came in very handy during one-shot instruction sessions in which I collaborated with other faculty. Incorporating these materials purposefully into semester-long courses has raised my awareness of the role and function of the study of these primary sources within the students’ learning process. Due to this heightened awareness, I tended to study course syllabi for classes visiting the Special Collections Research Center much more closely and made a more targeted selection of

materials according to session topics and intended general learning outcomes as outlined in the respective syllabi.

Planning and Piloting in Practice: John's Perspective

In my experience, helping students engage with library resources has also been an important part of my experience teaching several sections of an online course for LIS students. In this course, which has already been developed by a departmental faculty member, students must use library resources to construct a literature review related to library planning, marketing, and assessment. Being able to work with these students over several months per quarter provides a window into students' information literacy skills and engagement with library resources that would not be observable during a one-shot instruction session. Also, as an online learning librarian, I have been able to engage with online students directly, providing a sustained opportunity to learn more about supporting fully remote students, which has led to projects such as developing an online module for new online students that has been embedded in new online undergraduate courses.

Similarly, assuming the role of an adjunct instructor has also provided me with a window into the experiences and perspectives unique to both adjunct and tenured/tenure-track faculty members. Taking part as an adjunct instructor in activities, such as ordering textbooks at the university bookstore, for example, can help inform us how and where the library can offer support to faculty throughout the entire curricular lifecycle beyond the limited one-shot windows. Based on this new perspective, I have partnered with two library colleagues to offer workshops for faculty and teaching assistants that highlight how the library can support their courses and student learning through instruction sessions, asynchronous library tutorials, course reserves, streaming video, and best practices for linking to the library's licensed resources.

Taking the Faculty Perspective into Library Practice

Teaching credit-bearing courses has broadened our understanding, therefore, of how library resources and efforts fit within the broader learning context and curricula. Developing the faculty perspective—through teaching but also through participation in non-library communication channels, such as through departmental listservs—and the experience of student learning needs, we came to realize, contextualizes our work as instruction librarians: we learn to look at the libraries through the eyes of a student rather than at students through the lens of the library and through facilitating the student learning processes for a whole semester. Deepening the librarian's understanding of faculty and student perspectives, we argue, could help the library develop new or modify existing services or resources to better serve individuals from these communities.

TAKING TRANSFORMATION FORWARD

Based on our experiences as adjunct faculty members, we will continue building on our non-library instructional opportunities. Since the time we began this chapter, Sebastian

has accepted a tenure-track position in the School of Information Studies, which in many ways demonstrates that instructional identities are constantly being reworked, interrogated, and transformed. Meanwhile, John has also sought out additional instructional opportunities—primarily as a course instructor with Library Juice Academy, which has allowed him to develop his own online asynchronous course helping library professionals across the globe create digital learning objects for their libraries.

Sharing what we have learned throughout our transformational journeys, we encourage library professionals to also consider exploring non-library instructional opportunities after reflection on their own abilities, interests, and limitations, not the least of which is the time commitment that is often in addition to any already existing professional and personal responsibilities. Ideas for discovering non-library instructional opportunities could include

- reaching out to nearby or online colleges and universities, including the one where you currently work, to ask about adjuncting opportunities in areas that you would be qualified to teach in, such as within Library & Information Science or Museum Studies programs;
- inquiring whether there are orientation or introductory courses at your institution that often seek instructors from campus staff and faculty, such as Syracuse University’s SEM 100 or FYS 101 courses that are required for first-year and transfer undergraduate students;
- developing or leading a for-credit information literacy course at your institution;
- exploring other instructional opportunities at your institution, such as developing and leading a workshop series for faculty members to learn more about research metrics, developing learning activities involving primary sources, or other topics;
- contacting a faculty member you have worked with in the past to ask whether there might be opportunities for library instruction to be more deeply embedded within a course; and
- searching for opportunities to develop or teach a course, workshop, or webcast through online platforms such as Library Juice Academy, the ALA, ACRL, or other local or statewide library organizations that you participate in.

To make the most of these non-library instruction opportunities, we offer the following advice:

- Do not overextend yourself by taking on too much. As both research and our own professional experience have shown, “academic librarians are, generally speaking, in a state of burnout.”¹⁷
- Take time to critically reflect on the instructional experience, in whichever form of reflection would work best for you. Collaborating on this chapter has been an important and necessary additional corrective for us authors as it has added just another layer of reflection and a welcome birds-eye-view after the busy months of actively engaging in adjunct instruction.
- Close the loop by thinking about how these non-library instruction sessions could improve your impact within the library now that you have been able to experience the role of faculty member and engage more deeply with students.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL IDENTITIES

For anyone interested in exploring non-library instructional opportunities, we offer the following questions for consideration:

- How might traditional one-shot instruction sessions impact the teaching identities of library professionals, such as how we see ourselves on the staff-faculty continuum?
- How does what we do as library instructors fit within students' broader learning experiences across the institution?
- As our engagement with students and faculty is often limited to one-shot instruction sessions, how might we embrace non-library instructional opportunities to deepen our understanding of student and faculty perspectives?
 - Several possibilities include deepening our partnerships with faculty members, embedding ourselves more broadly within a course, strengthening our assessment methods, familiarizing ourselves with the literature related to the impact of library instruction, conducting our own research on student learning, or, as the authors of this paper have explored, serving as adjunct instructors to credit-bearing courses at our institution.
- Ultimately, how might embracing the role of adjunct faculty member enrich our professional perspectives and identities?

NOTES

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