We're All in This Together:

Holistic Approaches to Training New Instruction Librarians

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

Readers will be able to

- describe the benefits of developing a holistic training program for new instruction librarians;
- identify specific methods for providing complementary professional development and training opportunities for new instruction librarians, such as peer observation, workshops, mentorship, and instruction unit meetings;
- plan and implement cross-unit collaborations to support the development of new instruction librarians;
- explain the importance of mentoring relationships in an instructional training program; and
- create professional development opportunities for experienced instructional librarians to share their knowledge with new library instructors.

Background

New instruction librarians typically bring a variety of backgrounds, knowledge, and experience to their roles. Whether new librarians have a background in classroom teaching or have never taught an instruction session, thoughtful, interactive, and dynamic training is critical to a new librarian's success in instruction. To this end, the Research and Instructional Services (RIS) unit at J. Murrey Atkins Library at UNC Charlotte approaches training new instruction librarians from a holistic perspective by promoting continuous professional development throughout the librarian's career. The unit utilizes a range of ongoing professional development initiatives to build the skills of instruction librarians, introduce them to new technologies and instructional approaches, and prepare them to further the library's instructional mission in their subject areas. The RIS unit has created a comprehensive training program for new instruction librarians as well as established librarians who are interested in learning about new teaching topics and updating their instruction. This program involves instruction librarians from throughout the library to ensure that all librarians have opportunities to learn from each other's unique experiences and insights. Training components include a mentoring program, monthly instruction meetings, a summer workshop series, and a peer observation program. Each component of the program is planned and implemented by the Instruction and Pedagogy Working Group, a small team of instruction librarians who have a significant amount of experience with teaching. Each part of the overall initiative is designed to complement the others in order to build a robust instructional training experience.

Library instruction at Atkins Library is primarily provided by librarians in the RIS unit. Additionally, specialized instruction that involves special collections and archives and technology resources is led by librarians in Special Collections and Digital Scholarship and Innovation respectively. The Research and Instructional Services unit is made up of two subunits—subject librarians in the Research Services subunit and librarians in the Instruction and Curriculum Engagement subunit. Research Services and Instruction and Curriculum Engagement have different areas of focus regarding library instruction, with Research Services librarians working on subject-specific instruction and the Instruction and Curriculum Engagement team focusing on first-year students and writing courses. Both groups work together to provide an engaged and dynamic program of instructional services to support student success. In a group of sixteen librarians, there is a range of instruction backgrounds and experience. Some librarians in the unit have backgrounds in education, others have learned about instruction on the job, and others are recent graduates from library science programs who have limited experience with teaching. Due to librarians' varied experiences with instruction, the department developed an ongoing training program that fosters and supports all librarians no matter what stage of their careers they are in to enhance and further their instruction skills.

Supporting instruction at all levels is essential to ensure that teaching is effective and makes a positive impact on student success. Scott Walter suggests, "On-the-job training is common among instruction librarians, as it is among members of the classroom faculty. Likewise common among the two professional groups is the preference for attendance at

workshops sponsored by professional associations, campus teaching centers, and other organizations, as a means of instructional improvement."[1] New librarians with limited or no instructional coursework and experience often face challenges as they begin working at academic libraries. Library science graduate programs do not always provide their students with a strong foundation in teaching and instructional design. This can lead to a need for supervisors of new librarians to spend time teaching basic library instruction skills.[2] The results of a study by Lund et al. provided encouraging news when it revealed that "library schools better prepare students for instructional roles compared to past decades. Expectations for preparation have also increased."[3] However, there continues to be a strong need for providing instructional training, programming, and mentorship opportunities for librarians in positions requiring library instruction.

Approaches

Mentorship of New Librarians

When new librarians join the Research and Instructional Services team, the head of the unit pairs them with a mentor. These mentors are teaching librarians who have been with the department for at least two years. Mentors are available to help guide new librarians as they begin teaching instruction sessions and to answer any questions they might have about how library instruction is implemented. At their initial meetings, the new librarians and their mentors develop goals for the mentorship. To help facilitate the relationship, a research guide provides new librarians and mentors with helpful resources and guidelines for their collaboration. Mentors will often invite their new colleagues to co-teach or team teach with them in order to gain instructional experience. Additionally, mentors are encouraged to share lesson plans, active learning strategies, and teaching methods that can be used in instruction sessions. The head of Research and Instructional Services, the head of Instruction and Curriculum Engagement, and the new librarians' mentors observe the librarians teaching mock instruction sessions, provide immediate feedback, and ask constructive questions about the librarians' instructional techniques. This allows the new librarians to acclimate themselves to the department's instructional program early during their tenure and better prepares them to provide library instruction to students in their assigned subject areas.

Mentorship within the department can take a variety of forms in addition to the formal relationship established between the official mentors and the new librarians. New librarians are encouraged to observe and meet with other veteran instruction librarians in the department to learn from their experiences and gain ideas to incorporate into their own instruction sessions. They can meet before and after they observe an experienced librarian's instruction session to discuss content and strategies. In some cases, a new librarian will assist veteran librarians during the session by passing out handouts or acting as a student if a demonstration is necessary. This provides exposure to different teaching styles and provides new librarians with a sense of how library instruction is implemented in classes across a variety of subject areas.

Instruction and Pedagogy Working Group

In early 2018, the library's head of Research and Instructional Services charged a small team of instruction librarians with developing training and educational opportunities for librarians who teach information literacy and research skills. This meant including not only those librarians in the Research & Instructional Services unit but also teaching librarians in Special Collections & University Archives, Digital Scholarship, and Area 49 (the library's technology spaces). This team of librarians serves as the Instruction and Pedagogy Working Group, which meets monthly to set the direction for educational initiatives for the library's instruction team.

Recognizing that the library's instruction team benefits from ongoing educational experiences, the head of Research and Instructional Services tasked the group with developing an ongoing program of instruction meetings, peer observation, and summer workshops. The need for training opportunities for instruction librarians aligns with the findings of a recent study by Lund et al., which identified that instruction librarians need opportunities to gain teaching experiences beyond those provided in library school.[4] These initiatives allow teaching librarians to learn about educational theory and pedagogy, teaching practices such as scaffolding and active learning, student engagement strategies, and approaches to assessment, among other topics.

While several members of the instruction team at Atkins Library have an educational background (undergraduate degrees and K-12 teaching experience), the majority of the group learned about teaching and student learning by observing other teachers, attending workshops and conferences, and gaining experience on the job. Brecher and Klipfel state, "To succeed as an instruction librarian, or as any librarian with an instructional aspect to his or her position in the 21st-century library, an understanding of how students learn is critical."[5] This knowledge about student learning, whether self-taught or gained through traditional education, is essential for librarians who are teaching students research skills, critical thinking strategies, and information literacy concepts.

At Atkins Library, the instructional philosophy of Research and Instructional Services includes the tenet that when one librarian gains experience and expertise, the whole team becomes stronger. To that end, the department focuses on exploring instructional topics, theories, and strategies that might be new to some members of the team while others may be more familiar with the concepts and content. This approach provides the group with the chance for more experienced instructors to share their knowledge by leading sessions, contributing to discussions, and providing examples from their backgrounds. This model of collaboration and partnership helps avoid a siloed environment in which those with less teaching experience and education are reluctant to ask for input, express concerns, and seek advice from peers.

The Instruction and Pedagogy Working Group develops a year-long slate of meetings and workshops keeping the demands of the academic instructional calendar in mind. The team schedules sessions on more scholarly, reading-intensive topics for months with less instruction while creating opportunities for instruction librarians to interact and share experiences during the months with a heavier instruction load. These more interactive

sharing sessions allow for collaboration and growth. Martinez and Forrey suggest that sharing stories and learning about the experiences of others can reinforce the idea that trying something new can be good even if it doesn't work.[6] The library's workshop series is scheduled for the summer when instruction librarians have time to take a deeper dive into topics and to learn and explore during two- to three-hour sessions. Planning these educational opportunities while considering the requirements of the academic calendar provides opportunities for personal and professional growth without placing unrealistic demands on teaching librarians.

Instruction Meetings

Instruction meetings at Atkins Library are held once a month and take the place of a regularly scheduled Research and Instructional Services unit meeting. While not mandatory, all instruction librarians are encouraged to attend. The Instruction and Pedagogy Working Group sets the agenda for these meetings. At the beginning of each fall and spring semester, the group collects topics and ideas for meetings from library instructors to address the needs and interests of teaching librarians. Many academic librarians who find themselves in instruction positions may feel unprepared to teach. In fact, "many of these librarians lack the education necessary to excel in these positions."[7] Therefore, regular instruction meetings are designed to help instruction librarians as they develop effective instructional practices and prepare them to deliver high-quality library instruction to students.

Topics for meetings focus on practical methods for improving library instruction and analysis of teaching and learning theory to advance the development of teaching librarians. Instruction meetings may address big-picture topics, such as critical librarianship and anti-racist pedagogy, or teaching and assessment tools that librarians can seamlessly incorporate into their instruction sessions. The meetings are positive and engaging and serve as a safe space not only to learn but also to share ideas and frustrations and to consider teaching as part of the librarians' professional identity.

The structure of instruction meetings looks different from meeting to meeting. Often, the goal is to model a teaching technique while the group is engaging with the topic of the month. For example, the group utilizes think-pair-shares, jigsaws, brainstorming, and debate-like activities. Recently, the meeting incorporated a matching activity based on the article, "The Many Faces of Instruction: An Exploration of Academic Librarians' Teaching Personas" by Elena Azadbakht.[8] In small groups, the librarians matched personality traits to teacher archetypes. No matter what topic is discussed, open dialogue is encouraged and anecdotal evidence from teaching experiences is shared in hopes of improving librarians' instructional skills. Topics of note from instruction meetings include challenges from recent instruction sessions, ideas about how to better teach online, and incorporating assessments.

Instruction meeting time is also used to highlight exemplary work and acknowledge expertise. Presentations about formative assessments, instructional infographics, and presentation slide design have been conducted by librarians within and outside the RIS unit during our instruction meetings. Recently, lightning talks were presented by four librarians on different aspects of their instruction practices. Occasionally, presenters

from outside the department are invited to meetings to share their expertise and offer suggestions. For example, the assessment librarian presents an overview of the instructional statistics that each librarian submits throughout the semester. This allows the group opportunities to discuss insights and trends derived from the statistics to plan for upcoming semesters.

Instruction meetings can take on a variety of forms: formal or informal, highly organized or unstructured, mandatory or non-mandatory. The overall goal of instruction meetings is to provide the time and space to discuss ways to improve and enhance library instruction. These meetings serve as a place for librarians to feel comfortable discussing not only their fears and concerns about teaching but also to share instructional successes. The meetings operate on the idea that professional growth takes place in spaces where librarians can speak freely about their experiences without judgment. Humble brags and venting sessions are not uncommon during instruction meetings. Someone observing these meetings might note that the format, content, and tone are different each month; however, the main goal of providing a space conducive to professional development is almost always achieved.

Workshop Series

Every summer, the Instruction and Pedagogy Working Group organizes a series of three to five workshops that focus on specialized topics related to instruction. While the department's monthly instruction meetings are geared toward librarians who have instructional responsibilities as part of their regular job duties, the summer workshop series is open to anyone in the library regardless of whether they regularly engage in library instruction. The goal of the summer workshop series is to connect library faculty and staff with a variety of new pedagogical approaches, technologies, and teaching strategies. This allows all library faculty and staff to think about how they can apply these ideas to their work.

The Instruction and Pedagogy Working Group begins the process of planning and scheduling the workshop series during the spring semester. The planning process is initiated by a general discussion about which instruction-related topics might be interesting not only to instruction librarians but also to other library faculty and staff. After an initial discussion about workshop topics, the group narrows down the list of ideas to between three to five possible session topics and asks a member of the group or another instruction librarian to plan and facilitate each workshop. Often, multiple librarians will work together to plan and lead a workshop. The planning process presents opportunities for collaborations with library faculty and staff from departments other than Research and Instructional Services. For example, RIS librarians partner with faculty and staff from Special Collections and Digital Scholarship and Innovation to plan and conduct workshops that incorporate their unique expertise in archives and emerging technologies. Each summer, the Instruction and Pedagogy Working Group invites a librarian from another educational institution to speak about a topic such as critical pedagogy or backward design at one of the workshops. This practice of featuring an outside speaker allows Atkins librarians to explore a new and often unfamiliar pedagogical concept.

The Instruction and Pedagogy Working Group does not typically assign a common theme for workshops in the series. This gives the group the latitude to address topics that are of the most interest to library faculty and staff at that point in time rather than being constrained by a common theme. The group also considers suggestions for workshop topics from faculty and staff throughout the library; this ensures that the workshops have genuine interest from faculty and staff and are responsive to their needs.

Workshops within the series have addressed a wide variety of topics, including lesson planning, learning principles, critical pedagogies, and visual design concepts. No matter what the subject of a session may be, workshop organizers are encouraged to provide attendees with practical applications of the content. Organizers are also strongly encouraged to incorporate active learning into their workshops to provide attendees with an opportunity to practice what they are learning and think about how they could apply these concepts to their professional practice. This ensures that the sessions will present learners with a highly engaging experience that will result in long-term knowledge retention.

This approach is exemplified in one of the most well-attended summer workshops: a session devoted to design principles for librarians. The session was developed due to an expressed interest by library faculty and staff who do not typically engage with design principles but were interested in how they could utilize these concepts in their work. In this session, the library's First Year and Online Learning librarian teamed with the Technology and Multimedia Production coordinator to plan and facilitate a session focused on basic principles of visual design and multimedia learning and how those principles can be applied to common projects in library work. The facilitators explained how principles such as segmenting content and visual hierarchy make it easier to communicate through instructional media such as infographics and video tutorials. This focus on the basic need to communicate to library users, no matter what one's role in the library may be or which method of communication is being utilized, made it more applicable to a wide range of library faculty and staff. The session began with a brief tutorial on the concept of visual design and multimedia design principles. The workshop facilitators described basic visual design principles such as contrast and repetition alongside selected concepts from Mayer's Principles of Multimedia Learning, such as segmentation, coherence, and signaling. The facilitators also provided examples of how these principles could be applied in scenarios that were relevant to library work. The attendees were then organized into groups and participated in an activity that required them to identify applications of the principles in infographics that focused on communicating information about using the library. Feedback from workshop participants was positive, particularly regarding the interactive nature of the session and the focus on infographics in the active learning activity.

The intent of these workshops is to introduce new concepts and provide librarians with the opportunity to apply them to their work. Feedback from workshop participants is critical to understanding how learners perceive the overall value of the sessions and is useful in helping inform the design and focus of future workshops. For example, positive feedback from the session that centered around design principles helped shape the development of a workshop focused on designing infographics while also incorporating elements from design thinking. The infographics/design thinking session also provided

librarians in Research and Instructional Services with another opportunity to collaborate with colleagues from Digital Scholarship and Innovation.

Workshops that involve collaboration with faculty from Special Collections are also an indispensable part of the workshop series. While Special Collections is a separate unit from the Research and Instructional Services unit, the instruction archivist is considered an integral part of the instruction team. Much of the instruction archivist's work focuses on providing library instruction that incorporates the rare and unique materials that are part of the library's Special Collections. Library instruction that involves Special Collections materials commonly takes place in the Special Collections reading room, and instruction workshops focusing on Special Collections are also typically held in this space to allow attendees the opportunity to see how instruction takes place in context. These workshops showcase a variety of different active learning activities that are utilized during library instruction sessions involving Special Collections materials. Activities include examining archival materials and finding commonalities among the artifacts. The materials used include manuscript collections that focus on Charlotte, NC-based activists, urban renewal, and regional maps. Special Collections instruction workshops encourage participants to collaborate with faculty across the university as well as the Research and Instructional Services team and the instruction archivist. The Special Collections workshops are always well-attended and illustrate how primary source literacy can be incorporated into library instruction.

The ultimate value of the summer workshop series lies in its ability to provide library faculty and staff opportunities to think about skills and concepts they may not encounter regularly in their day-to-day duties and to forge connections among colleagues throughout the library. The Instruction and Pedagogy Working Group has created a workshop series that engages library employees with new ideas and approaches to teaching, informing, and helping users.

Peer Observation Program

Peer observation is a common professional development technique in the field of teaching and broadly involves one colleague attending another colleague's class, observing their teaching practice and resulting student behavior, and providing constructive feedback and ideas after the session. While there is a wide range of practices and models for peer observation, the ultimate goal is to assess and improve teaching performance and, as a result, increase student success. Several studies point to the positive impact peer observation may have on both the teacher being observed and departmental culture. These programs can increase individual teacher confidence in the classroom and may play a role in developing a strong instructional climate.[9]

Peer observation programs also serve as a reminder that no classroom is an island and that both observer and observed can mutually benefit from the assessment process. While it may appear so at first glance, peer observation is not one-sided. While the observed librarian may receive constructive feedback to improve their performance, the observer can benefit from the exposure to different teaching techniques and styles. As Hendry, Bell, and Thomson explore in their study on peer observation at a large research-intensive

institution, not only does the observer potentially gain new teaching ideas, but they can see their current work affirmed when the observed successfully implements a shared teaching practice.[10] As most teaching librarians do not have a formal background in education and learning, these experiences of seeing the effectiveness of their adopted techniques and practices can be powerful moments in building confidence and identities as educators.

David Gosling identifies three models for peer observation in a report frequently cited in the literature on peer observation in higher education settings.[11] The evaluation model has a figure of authority serving as the observer in order to appraise the performance of the instructor. The development model sees a highly experienced teacher or instructional leader observe to assess teaching competencies and then share their expertise in relation to measured deficiencies. The peer review model makes more authentic use of the term "peer" by having instructors observe each other to engage in productive discussion and professional reflection. An extension of Gosling's peer review model may be seen in the "critical friends" approach of peer observation taken by instruction librarians at the University of Washington-Bothell and Cascadia College Campus Library, where the elements of self-reflection and peer trust are viewed as essential to an effective program.[12] The purpose of the Atkins Library peer observation program is to encourage both the individual professional growth of our instruction librarians and to strengthen the overall effectiveness of the instruction team. Our program is most closely aligned with Gosling's peer review model, where members of the Research and Instructional Services unit are observed by their peers in a non-judgmental, constructive fashion. Following the ethos of Gosling's third model, observations are conducted in a formative rather than summative manner and are meant to foster professional growth. Our program is, notably, not part of our annual review, reappointment, or promotion process.

At the start of each fall semester, the head of the department places instruction librarians in pairs. These pairs alternate as both observer and librarian being observed, allowing each librarian the opportunity to give and receive feedback on their teaching. Pairs are guided to hold a pre-instruction meeting that takes place a few days before a scheduled observation to identify session goals. Pre-observation questions are provided to guide the conversation and identify areas on which the observed may want targeted feedback. These questions include "What are the plans or learning activities that you will use in order to achieve these goals?" and "What would you like me to focus on during this instruction session?" The pre-observation questions generally remain the same from year to year, but the group is open to making revisions based on feedback from participants. The librarian being observed is encouraged to share their lesson plan and other instructional materials with their observer beforehand.

During the observation session, the observer utilizes a rubric to provide specific, constructive feedback to the librarian being observed. This rubric is available as a worksheet that the observer can reference during the instruction session. The worksheet lists several areas related to key elements of a library instruction session, such as content organization and instructor delivery. As the librarian teaches the session, the observer uses the rubric to note that these elements were observed during the instruction. The worksheet also includes space for the observer to make notes about parts of the session that were done well and aspects that the librarian could improve in future sessions.

After the observation occurs, the pair is encouraged to meet soon after and talk about the session. The observer may review portions of the worksheet with their colleague, sharing their thoughts on the overall effectiveness of the session, offering suggestions for improvement where needed, and brainstorming ideas for other activities, assessment techniques, or approaches that could be taken by the instructor in the future. As highlighted by Dimmit, Maxwell, and Nesvig, trust and self-reflection are critical components at this stage in the observation process.[13] Conversations should be honest and constructive, grounded in the principles of mutual respect and collegiality, and most importantly, confidential. For effective peer observation programs, trust between observer and librarian being observed is key to maintaining a supportive and positive observational environment.

Our program reflects many of the benefits and challenges seen by other peer observation programs. Similar to the case of a peer observation program detailed by Bell and Cooper, our program allows for the furthering of a supportive learning environment, where teaching librarians can turn to each other as colleagues for support or draw on each other as a group of educators with their own unique set of strengths and skills in the classroom.[14] In enhancing a spirit of community and open discussion around teaching strategies and techniques, individuals can feel less isolated, an impact found by Hendry, Bell, and Thomason's survey on academics' experience of observation.[15] As the group learns from one another and adopts each other's effective practices and techniques, they can become a more cohesive, consistent, and ultimately effective instructional program.

Peer observation programs can raise anxiety on both the part of the observer and observed. As noted in the detailing of a peer review teaching program for pre-tenure librarians, the observer may find it difficult to offer feedback that is more critical in nature while the observed may find receiving either praise or constructive criticism to be difficult.[16] In our case, this peer observation program is just one component of a larger program of instructional professional development. The stress and anxiety that may come from the observation experience can be mitigated when observations are done within a holistic program that frames the individual practice of library instruction within a growth mindset and provides colleagues with structured and supportive opportunities to disclose and discuss their challenges in the classroom.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The Instruction and Pedagogy Working Group views each of its approaches to training instruction librarians as essential in helping librarians build their instructional skills. The mentorship program and peer observation sessions provide specialized support and feedback to librarians both at the beginning of their time at Atkins Library and throughout their careers. Initiatives such as the workshop series and instruction meetings provide forums for librarians to share ideas and learn from each other in supportive settings. Taken together, all these approaches provide librarians with opportunities to learn and improve at every stage of their careers.

As the group moves forward with building the library's program of instructional training and development, it is exploring ways to engage with academic institutions in the

region to foster connections between Atkins librarians and other instructional librarians. Due to the success of the summer workshop series, the group is planning to invite librarians from other institutions in the region to future sessions. These workshops could be beneficial to librarians from a variety of institutions. This would provide all participants with the opportunity to learn from others' professional experiences and to collaborate with peers from other libraries.

The group is also planning to establish a separate monthly meeting for teaching librarians that focuses on complex questions that arise from reference interactions. In addition to teaching library sessions, instructional librarians at Atkins Library assist library users with research and reference questions in a variety of ways, including at the information and research desk, through the library's chat service, and through in-person and virtual consultations. In the proposed meeting, librarians with specialized experience and expertise in areas such as primary source research, data services, and assisting with systematic reviews will demonstrate how to respond to requests for help on these topics. While some librarians encounter such questions more than others due to their assigned subject areas, all librarians benefit from gaining some knowledge about these types of specialized questions.

Every year, the Instruction and Pedagogy Working Group assesses its membership to ensure that the range of programmatic and pedagogical experience among the teaching librarians is adequately represented in the group. New members are regularly added to ensure that the group continues to cultivate innovative ideas and engages new librarians in the work of providing robust professional development opportunities.

Instruction at Atkins Library is constantly evolving as teaching librarians build new collaborations with faculty, become embedded in both online and in-person courses, and incorporate new concepts into their teaching. The instruction program will respond to these changes by continuing to create meaningful opportunities for internal development and training to ensure that all teaching librarians, particularly those who are new to the profession, have the support that they need to succeed in their professional roles.

Notes

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