Assessing Your New Library Position: A Story about Creativity, Collaboration, and Collegiality

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how librarians can use assessment to determine the needs of colleagues in order to provide direction for new professional roles.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Eleven librarians were interviewed and surveyed gathering data using mixed methods assessment.

Findings: Results include providing direction for the research instructional services department, creating valuable programming, and inviting more transparent relationships.

Practical Implications: This creative approach to internal assessments allows librarians to make evidence-based decisions within library departments regarding professional development.

Introduction

To set the scene, picture a budding library professional graduating with her MSLIS in 2014 and heading out to the job market. After a few stops and starts, she settles on a full-time position as the instructional services librarian at Saint Louis University, a mid-sized, four-year institution in St. Louis, Missouri. This job is brand new to the librarian as well as the library, but the librarian is ready to jump in feet first.

Cut to one month into the position: our professional librarian has learned a lot, is just beginning to navigate the places and politics of her new institution, and has taken on minor responsibilities. She has the freedom to design the new position as she pleases, and relishes the thought! But she cannot shake the feeling that something is not right. Without the guidance that an established position affords, she is not sure what she is supposed to be doing with her time. Is this all there is?

One year later, this librarian has assessed her way into her job using mixed methods assessments and by collaborating with colleagues in and outside of the library. By closing the loop on these assessments, she has established herself as a trustworthy colleague, built a cache of short- and long-term goals and projects, and begun developing a team of instruction librarians eager to work together in a community of practice.

Background

Pius XII Memorial Library is one of three libraries within the Saint Louis University (SLU) library system. It is home to over 1.3 million volumes, houses the Vatican Film Library, and serves over 14,000 students, faculty, and staff across four campuses, including a campus in Madrid, Spain. The three largest departments are Collection Management Services (CMS), Circulation and Information Services, and Research and Instructional Services (RIS). At the time of the initial survey in 2015, there were 12 librarians including the instructional services (IS) librarian in the RIS department. However, personnel changes reduced that number to 10. These 10 librarians teach information literacy across campus. In addition to the librarians within Pius' RIS department, there are librarians within the Medical Center (MCL) and Law libraries who teach within health sciences and law. Librarians in archives and records management and special collections also teach information literacy sessions. RIS librarians taught 323 classes reaching 5,083 students during the 2014–2015 school year and 337 classes reaching 4,880 students during the 2015–2016 school year. It was during the spring of 2015 that the librarians sought to hire a full-time IS librarian to provide guidance to the librarians in the RIS department as well as other teaching librarians within the university libraries. This role provides leadership and expertise in the assessment of the effectiveness of the library's instruction program, monitors the implementation of the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher

Education, and strives to improve the library's subject-based activities.

The IS librarian arrived at SLU in late September 2015 with the instruction librarians well into their teaching. As a way to become acquainted with the new position and the RIS department's instructional activities, a survey was created and distributed by the IS librarian. Following the survey, the IS librarian developed a program, the Instruction Community of Practice (iCOP), in order to more fully serve the teaching librarians. This program consists of a series of workshops, brown bags, journal club discussions, and informal meetups to discuss various topics related to information literacy instruction. Follow-up interviews were conducted with the RIS librarians at the end of the spring 2016 semester to determine the efficacy of iCOP activities and establish a direction for the future.

Method

There are 23 total teaching librarians within Pius and MCL. All are invited to participate in the iCOP, and do so voluntarily. However, the IS librarian chose to survey and interview only those in RIS, as this is where the main responsibilities of the position lay. The demographics of the RIS department vary. Years of service within RIS range from almost 30 to just one year. Each librarian has subject specialties in which they liaise with anywhere from two to six academic departments. Teaching duties vary depending upon the information literacy needs of liaison departments; however, all but one librarian is required to teach three to five sections of the freshman writing and rhetoric class commonly known as the Freshman Writing Program, or English 1500/1900/1920.

The IS librarian sent the survey at the end of October after informally speaking with each RIS librarian about instruction as part of the orientation process. The librarians had one week to complete it. Qualtrics Survey Tool was used to deliver the survey questions, and results were exported into Microsoft Excel. The IS librarian collaborated with the director of the Paul C. Reinert, S.J. Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning to refine the survey questions. The Reinert Center, as it is called on campus, offers faculty, graduate students, and other educators on campus instructional development services and programming on various topics relating to pedagogy.

The survey questions were designed to:
- Glean the general impression of the RIS librarians' instruction activities
- Understand librarians' feelings about their instruction
- Understand what they hope to achieve as result of working with the IS librarian and/or the Reinert Center
- Record the types of activities they wish to participate in
- Record the types of resources and content they want to explore

The librarians were also given space to include anything else they wanted to share. The results were anonymous unless the individual librarian chose not to remain so; however, the non-anonymized results were undisclosed and not shared with anyone but the IS librarian.

Findings

All 11 librarians completed the survey for one hundred percent participation. The survey was divided into three sections based on the types of questions asked. The first section of the survey established the state of the librarians' current instruction sessions. Eight of the 11 felt "somewhat satisfied" with their instruction sessions, and those who elaborated cited a vast number of reasons as to why they were not completely satisfied. The number one reason for dissatisfaction is frustration with the English 1500/1900/1920 classes. Most felt they were more effective teaching within their subject specific areas. These sessions also take place in September, potentially leaving librarians feeling burned out due to the large quantity of instruction sessions taking place within that month. Librarians are also frustrated by faculty who do not communicate effectively regarding the assignment or session learning outcomes, thus making preparing for the session difficult. One librarian felt there was not enough time to go in depth into any topic during instruction sessions, while another cited the one-shot model as ineffective, but was not sure what an alternative would be.
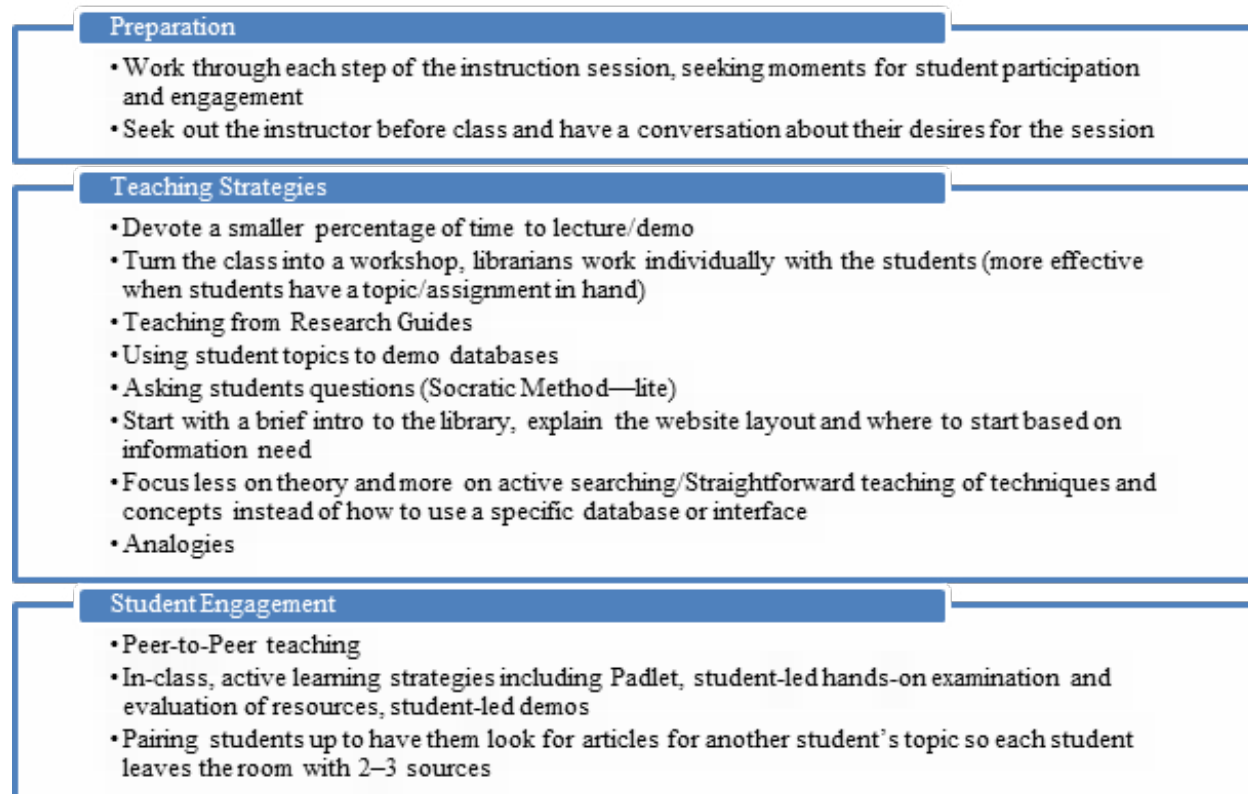
When asked, *"How do you want to feel when you teach?"* (Question 2), librarians had many similar responses. In summary, most wanted to feel effective, knowledgeable, engaging, that they were making an impact on students' skill and comfort levels, and providing them with an enjoyable experience. The responses seemed evenly split between librarian-

centric feelings and student-centric feelings. Both types of responses are valid.

Throughout the survey, librarians expressed an interest in learning what their colleagues were doing in their instruction sessions. Thus, the answers to Question 4 were shared with all RIS librarians as part of the feedback loop. Their answers fell into three main categories:

Figure 1. What is currently working, or has worked well in the past, in your instruction prep, instruction sessions, and/or post-instruction sessions? (Question 4)

Preparation
- Work through each step of the instruction session, seeking moments for student participation and engagement
- Seek out the instructor before class and have a conversation about their desires for the session

Teaching Strategies
- Devote a smaller percentage of time to lecture/demo
- Turn the class into a workshop, librarians work individually with the students (more effective when students have a topic/assignment in hand)
- Teaching from Research Guides
- Using student topics to demo databases
- Asking students questions (Socratic Method—lite)
- Start with a brief intro to the library, explain the website layout and where to start based on information need
- Focus less on theory and more on active searching/Straightforward teaching of techniques and concepts instead of how to use a specific database or interface
- Analogies

Student Engagement
- Peer-to-Peer teaching
- In-class, active learning strategies including Padlet, student-led hands-on examination and evaluation of resources, student-led demos
- Pairing students up to have them look for articles for another student's topic so each student leaves the room with 2–3 sources

Question 5 ("*What would you like to change, or what new strategies or tools are you interested in trying, if anything?*") garnered various responses, from "open to suggestions" to more specific ideas and interests, including:
- Informal discussion
- Informal and formal observation
- Pedagogy
- Assessment
- Intentional design
- Classroom management techniques
- Active learning techniques
- Technology as educational support
- Move beyond demos to teaching information literacy concepts
- Planning
- Communicating value of instruction to faculty members
- Assignment design

- Integrating information literacy into the curriculum via scaffolding

Section Two offered a look into what the librarians' goals were for their instruction sessions, and the outcomes they would like to achieve by participating in activities that may influence their instruction. Librarians stated that their instruction session goals (Question 6) include wanting to provide information literacy skills, which encompasses finding relevant information, using appropriate resources, and understanding and using search strategies. Another desired main outcome of their instruction sessions is to teach students how to get help from the library, which is viewed as a form of outreach. They also want the teaching faculty to understand the value of working with a librarian. Finally, other concepts such as teaching transferable skills, giving students

hands-on practice, and "surviving September" were also goals of instruction sessions.

The main themes emerging from Question 7 ("*What would you like to happen as a result of working with the instruction coordinator/your colleagues/the Reinert Center?*") were transparency or knowing what others are doing/experiencing as instructors, re-energizing instruction, learning new approaches such as active learning techniques and using technology, connecting learning outcomes to assessment, student engagement strategies, how to create better learning objects, lesson planning or offering pre-made lesson plans or activities to mix-n-match, and working with the new ACRL framework. Other ideas included participating in activities such as workshops, demonstrations, discussions, and formal events through the Reinert Center.

Section Three discerned the types of activities the librarians were interested in doing, and their level of comfort surrounding these activities, including being observed or having an instruction session recorded. Question 8 confirmed interest in a mix between both individual and group activities. Most librarians were willing to share their experiences with others, and less than half would be comfortable with being recorded or observed and receiving feedback about their teaching.

Question 11 asked everyone to choose preferred activities and/or resources they would like to use to learn more about instruction. The top six priorities (four, five, and six were tied) that were chosen are:
1. Informal Discussion Sessions
2. Demonstrations (i.e., technology)
3. Creation of an instruction toolkit in LibGuides
4. Formal Sessions
5. Instruction Sandboxes
6. Peer-to-Peer presentations

The instruction coordinator used the top five answers to the question "*What type of content would you like to discuss?*" to determine what would be the priority in terms of content. This included:
1. Information Literacy Concepts
2. Assessing Student Learning
3. Assessing Instruction Sessions
4. Educational Technology
5. Pedagogy/Andragogy

The IS librarian followed up with the RIS librarians six months later using a formal interview process. These interview questions included:
- What types of classes did you teach this semester?
- What types of activities did you do?
  - What worked?
  - What didn't?
- Overall, what are you goals for instruction, or as an instructor? Next year?
- How have the activities we have done so far been helpful to you?
- What would you like to learn more about?
- What do you want to get out of the group activities?
- As a group, what direction do you think we should be headed? Do we need group goals?
- How can I better support you in your instruction and in achieving your instruction goals?

These interviews illuminated the need for the iCOP to have a more strategic direction, including mission and vision statements for instructional services, creating a web presence for these services, and working toward greater acceptance of information literacy on campus. The IS librarian was encouraged to continue working on developing activities that involved devising new ideas for student engagement, assessing student learning in class sessions, using new technology to enhance instruction sessions, and continuing to work with the framework.

Discussion

Following the survey, results were shared with the director of the Reinert Center. The IS librarian and the director discussed specific ideas and brainstormed further opportunities for collaboration. The IS librarian then created an executive summary, shared with the librarians at an instruction meeting.

The goals for the following projects and activities were to generate discussion; give librarians a variety of options in terms of format and content; and introduce ideas and concepts related to new teaching techniques, student engagement, assessment, and dealing with burnout. Ultimately, the main goal was to encourage the growth of the iCOP. It is important that the librarians learn to lean on their colleagues and work together on their instruction. The first major component to emerge out of this assessment was the Information Literacy Instruction Toolbox,[1] which is a collection of resources designed to assist

librarians in their planning, teaching, assessment, and collaboration.

As a result of these assessments, 13 instruction-related presentations, workshops, and discussion sessions have been carried out via the iCOP thus far:

- Two presentations and a workshop on the ACRL Framework
- An instruction sandbox on collaborative tools for the classroom
- An informal discussion session
- A journal club discussion session on Social Justice and Information Literacy related to the university's mission
- Two wrap-up discussion sessions (fall 2015 and spring 2016)
- Two "Revisiting the Framework" sessions (instructional design using backwards design)
- A workshop series with two sessions:
  - Strategies for Effective Lesson Planning
  - Engaging Assessment Activities
- A brown bag session to kick off fall 2016 instruction

Feedback from the RIS librarians has been frequent, enthusiastic, and positive. Anecdotally, they are pleased with the iCOP, and express that the activities have been practical and thought-provoking. The most positive feedback the IS librarian has received thus far is from librarians who say they have changed something about the way they teach, have successfully incorporated new activities into their instruction, or have found a new way to assess student learning.

Conclusion

One year later, our IS librarian is right at home in her role, and is using the data she collected to make improvements in the lives of teaching librarians at SLU. By using a mixed methods approach gathering quantitative, qualitative, and anecdotal information, the needs of the RIS librarians became illuminated. The IS librarian was able to use assessment to devise creative solutions to the issues librarians face in their teaching, and to operate in such a way that was compassionate, inclusive, and collegial. The idea of "teaching the whole person" is at the core of SLU's Jesuit Mission, and was the inspiration for these assessments and creating the iCOP. The hope is to be able to teach the "whole librarian." Instruction is perhaps the most vulnerable part of a librarian's work. Assessing the needs and desires of

colleagues can open up a dialogue and create a truly welcoming environment for creativity, collaboration, and collegiality.

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Endnote

1. Information Literacy Instruction Toolbox, http://libguides.slu.edu/toolbox.

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Appendix
Instruction Coordinator Survey

Q1: How do you feel about your instruction sessions? Choose all that apply.

- ☐ Very Satisfied
- ☐ Somewhat satisfied
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat dissatisfied
- ☐ Very Dissatisfied

Q2: Please elaborate if you wish to say more.

Q3: How do you want to feel when you teach? Please elaborate.

Q4: What is currently working, or has worked will in the past, in your instruction prep, instruction sessions, and/or post instruction sessions?

Q5: What would you like to change or what new strategies and tools are you interested in trying, if anything?

Q6: What are your goals when it comes to your instruction?

Q7: What would you like to happen as a result of working with the instruction coordinator/your colleagues/the Reinert Center?

Q8: Would you like to participate in group activities or individual activities? Group activities could be informal or formal gatherings, discussions, or instruction sessions. Individual activities could be on your own or 1:1 with the instruction coordinator, 1:1 with a Reinert Center staff member, 1:1 with another instruction librarian.

- ☐ Individual
- ☐ Group Activities
- ☐ Both

Q9: Are you willing to share your instruction experiences with others?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Maybe
- ☐ No

Q10: Are you willing to participate in activities where you may be recorded or observed and receive constructive feedback?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Maybe
- ☐ No

Q11: What activities or resources do you feel you and/or your colleagues would benefit from? Choose all that apply.

- ☐ Informal Discussion
- ☐ Instruction Sandbox
- ☐ Formal Sessions, i.e., attend a Reinert Center workshop for RIS faculty
- ☐ Peer-to-Peer Presentations
- ☐ Instruction Observation (RIS group)
- ☐ Instruction Observation (Reinert Center)
- ☐ Beginning of the semester kick off sessions/End of the semester wrap up sessions
- ☐ Monthly meetings
- ☐ Demonstrations, i.e., technology
- ☐ Instruction toolkit, i.e., in LibGuide format
- ☐ Instruction Newsletter
- ☐ Instruction boot camp
- ☐ Online professional development
- ☐ Other _____

Q12: What content would you like to discuss? Choose all that apply.

- ☐ Pedagogy/Andragogy, i.e., High Impact Practices, Critical Pedagogy, Problem-Based Learning, etc.
- ☐ Information Literacy Concepts, i.e., ACRL Framework
- ☐ Learning Theories
- ☐ Universal Design for Learning, i.e., designing culturally responsive sessions, sessions for students with disabilities
- ☐ Lesson Planning
- ☐ Writing Learning Outcomes
- ☐ Curriculum Mapping
- ☐ Assessing student learning
- ☐ Learning from assessment data
- ☐ Communicating value of instruction to library stakeholders, i.e., faculty members
- ☐ Educational Technology
- ☐ Assignment design
- ☐ Strategies for online instruction
- ☐ Other _____

Q13: What else would you like me to know? Please tell me any other thoughts, feelings, or suggestions.