

Mentoring Teaching Librarians: A Discussion Of Possibilities, Pitfalls, And Best Practices In Supporting New Instruction Colleagues In Your Library

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Abstract:

How do librarians learn to teach? Most people studying to be teachers spend years studying content and pedagogy and developing relationships with other teachers. Then they engage in student teaching before graduating and getting a job in a school.

However, a library student might have a single class in information literacy instruction. If the student is really lucky, he/she might get an internship opportunity that includes teaching. But many early career librarians are thrown into the classroom with no preparation and have to learn how to teach via trial and error. How can we help these new librarians gear up for teaching? Mentoring is an effective response to this challenge.

Our LOEX 2016 program explored the opportunity for new teaching librarians to learn from the past experiences (good and bad) of veteran librarians, as both new and veteran librarians work together to build the future of information literacy. Mentoring can reinvigorate an information literacy program by providing safe feedback and suggestions that result in better teaching, less stress, and improved morale and job satisfaction.

In this article, we elaborate on issues of definition and provide more detailed case studies of our current experiences as mentors of new teaching librarians. We conclude with some lessons learned and recommendations

Keywords: academic librarianship | teaching librarians | early career librarians | mentoring | information literacy

Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

MENTORING TEACHING LIBRARIANS: A DISCUSSION OF POSSIBILITIES, PITFALLS, AND BEST PRACTICES IN SUPPORTING NEW INSTRUCTION COLLEAGUES IN YOUR LIBRARY

LISA C. LOUIS AND STEVEN M. CRAMER

INTRODUCTION

How do librarians learn to teach? Most people studying to be teachers spend years studying content and pedagogy and developing relationships with other teachers. Then they engage in student teaching before graduating and getting a job in a school.

However, a library student might have a single class in information literacy instruction. If the student is really lucky, he/she might get an internship opportunity that includes teaching. But many early career librarians are thrown into the classroom with no preparation and have to learn how to teach via trial and error. How can we help these new librarians gear up for teaching? Mentoring is an effective response to this challenge.

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ISSUES OF DEFINITION

When we first approached this topic, we had a somewhat simplistic view of mentoring. Under the label “mentoring,” we began examining all the different ways that one librarian could assist another librarian with developing his or her abilities as a teacher. The literature we were finding indicated that several different terms were being used to describe an array of functions. Indeed, in her important book on mentoring, *Mentoring at Work*, Kathy Kram notes that when she did an extensive research study on mentoring, she had to avoid using that word in her study because it had so many connotations (Kram, 1985, p. 4). She used the term “developmental relationships” instead. Given this, we believe some engagement with the terminology is necessary.

The word “**mentoring**” is, in its most precise sense, used to describe a relationship between a more experienced practitioner and a novice (Farmer, Stockham & Trussell, 2009; Ghouse & Church-Duran, 2008; Goldman, 2011; Hicks, 2011; Moore, 2007). The mentors, by virtue of their experiences both in their profession and in life, can provide advice, support, and constructive criticism, all with the goal of enabling growth for the mentee and helping the mentee confront the challenges that all new professionals face when embarking on a career. Mentors also benefit from working with their mentees: they may learn new ideas; they may expand their perspective by looking at their organization or their profession through their mentee’s eyes; they may discover things about their own teaching habits. Mentoring can be wide-ranging as well, not necessarily limited to a single job function (Bosch, 2010).

“Coaching” is another term that is often used to describe one professional helping another to improve in some aspect of their career (Arbeeny & Hartman, 2008; Levene & Frank, 1993; Vidmar, 2006). Coaching is usually highly focused in terms of its scope: you would want a running coach to help you with your stride; a swimming coach to help with your stroke. In this way it differs from mentoring, which tends to have a broader perspective on the mentee’s development as a practitioner.

Finally, a number of the research articles that we identified use some form of “peer learning” such as peer coaching, peer mentoring, or peer review to describe yet another kind of developmental relationship in which two individuals (or a group of individuals) at more or less the same level of expertise and experience help each other to improve by offering assistance and providing feedback (Fyn, 2012; Haller, 2012; Ozek, Edgren, & Jander, 2012; Snively & Dewald, 2011). This is different from either mentoring or coaching in that there is not necessarily a “more senior” or “more experienced” member of the pair or group.

In trying to explain how these terms relate to one another, we’ve devised the following:

- A mentor says “I’ve been there, so I can guide you.”
- A coach says “I know this thing, so I can help you do this better.”
- A peer says “I’m here with you, so let’s explore together.”

We have found that the terms “mentoring” and “coaching” as well as “peer” phrases like peer mentoring, peer coaching, peer review of teaching, peer observation, etc., are used fairly interchangeably and not always with clear distinctions. So for our review of the literature (see the Appendix), we looked at programs in which professionals form a developmental relationship to improve instructional skills, regardless of whether such programs feature mentoring, coaching or peer learning.

LISA’S STORY: MENTORING NEW TEACHING LIBRARIANS AS A DEPARTMENT HEAD

In my position as Head of Research and Instruction, I provide support for all the librarians who teach research skills classes at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. This support is particularly crucial for librarians new to the profession who may not have had experience with teaching or exposure to information literacy instruction in graduate school. My job as a department head is really two-fold: to be a resource for these librarians when they have questions or concerns, and to proactively engage with them about teaching and learning. This is where mentoring comes in.

When a librarian begins working with us, I meet with them and discuss how they see themselves with regard to

teaching. So, for example, I find out whether they have taught in a classroom before, whether they took a class in information literacy in graduate school, or, if they are inexperienced, how they feel about doing presentations or other forms of public speaking. There are also nuts and bolts that have to be covered: how our instruction program works, what classes they will be expected to teach, and what technology they have available to them for teaching.

Then they observe several instructors’ classes so they can benefit from seeing different styles of instruction. I encourage (but don’t require) the new librarian to meet with the instructor before the class to set the stage and discuss how that instructor prepared for the class, and then again after the class to discuss how it went. The observing librarian completes a form with questions about the presentation they visited. The questions help guide their attention to aspects of presentation style and technique in addition to content. Then we meet to discuss each observation. These conversations and their own self-assessment help me gauge when they are ready to begin teaching classes.

Next, the librarian might co-plan/co-teach a class with another librarian, or they might jump in on their own. At this point, my role becomes that of a cheerleader/coach. I touch base with them regularly to discuss how teaching is going, and I will observe a couple of classes fairly early on, to get a sense of how things are progressing and to identify specific areas where they are doing very well or where they might need improvement. After each observation we meet and discuss. In addition to listening to the librarian’s observations about how the class went, I try to pick at least one aspect of the presentation to praise, and one aspect to improve on, so that the emphasis is always on progress and getting better as a teacher. I encourage the librarian to self-reflect on teaching as well by writing down their thoughts about what worked and what didn’t, what they might do differently next time, and how they felt about the teaching experience. Finally, I invite my colleagues to observe me and give me feedback on my teaching, because I think it’s important to show that I’m also willing to be observed and to receive constructive criticism about my work in the classroom.

Although this mentoring can be time-consuming, it has benefits for myself, for the mentee, and for the library:

1. The new librarian receives assistance in becoming an intentional, self-aware practitioner who inhabits his or her teaching role securely but who is also open to developing skills as a teacher throughout their career in librarianship.
2. The new librarian becomes oriented to the library and to their work as an instruction librarian.
3. As a supervisor, I am actively involved with the new employee so that I can spot problems early and encourage their successes.
4. The library benefits from having an employee who is engaged with their work, successful in the classroom

and more likely, we hope, to stay in their position and thrive.

STEVE'S STORY: MENTORING NEW BUSINESS LIBRARIANS IN INSTRUCTION

I am the business librarian at UNC Greensboro (UNCG) and in this position I have had a variety of mentoring roles. But the focus here is on mentoring UNCG's two most recent Diversity Resident Librarians, both of whom are now academic business librarians. In their second year at UNCG, both residents focused on teaching business students in one-shot research workshops as well as co-teaching research-intensive classes as embedded librarians. These two young librarians accepted offers of permanent positions before their UNCG residencies had officially ended, in part due to the residents' significant accomplishments in the classroom and their experience as embedded co-teachers, according to the libraries that hired them.

The UNCG diversity residency is a two-year, post-MLS position (University Libraries, UNC Greensboro, 2016). In the first year, the resident cycles through three library departments, starting with the Research, Outreach, & Instruction Department (my department). In the second year, the resident focuses on one area of interest. Our last two residents—Nataly Blas and Orolando Duffus—chose to focus on business librarianship, especially teaching, research consulting, and database evaluation. While I did work with both residents in their first year, it was in their second year that I was really able to mentor the residents in business research instruction and classroom involvement.

Teaching business research can be challenging. Depending on the local curriculum, the teaching business librarian may need a basic understanding of several sub-disciplines—management, marketing, accounting, finance, entrepreneurship, etc.—which use different sources and research strategies. The teaching business librarian has to be comfortable with retrieving and interpreting numeric data. Business students in research-intensive classes usually work in teams and so the business librarian should be adept at facilitating team-based learning and managing team dynamics. A mentor should support a new teaching business librarian with all these aspects of business research.

We began with the resident observing me teach in three different teaching situations: one-shot instruction, my co-teaching of two research-intensive classes as an embedded librarian, and my own 3-credit entrepreneurship research class. We often reviewed an assignment and syllabus and then brainstormed a lesson plan and active learning strategies for a session. Later the residents began co-teaching one-shots with me as well as participating in one of my embedded classes. After the sessions, we usually de-briefed each other on how things went. Finally, both residents began teaching one-shot sessions by themselves.

I did not introduce Orolando or Nataly as my mentee, junior colleague, or intern. I introduced each one as “my fellow UNCG business librarian” or sometimes “diversity resident and fellow business librarian.” They deserved credit for their already impressive skills and subject knowledge, and introducing each as an equal helped establish their authority in the classroom. I think introducing them as equals contributed to their success in the classroom when we were co-teaching, as well as in networking situations with faculty and administrators.

Both residents also created their own embedded librarian roles in other research-intensive classes. Nataly helped teach an undergraduate “campus entrepreneurs” class, in which the student teams work to create an on-campus business (Blas, 2014). Orolando helped teach the MBA capstone class, in which the student teams consult with local companies or organizations on a new initiative. Nataly and Orolando would talk to me occasionally about what is going on in those classes, and to confer on some tricky research topics. But they served as co-teaching embedded librarians on their own. My main role was first discussing which classes might be good targets for their embedded experience, introducing each resident to the target professor, and then helping sell the idea of the professor and residents working together to better meet the research needs of the student teams.

I have enjoyed staying in touch with Nataly and Orolando and hope both of them someday have the opportunity to mentor their own new business librarian colleagues.

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our review of the literature and our own experiences as mentors of teaching librarians, we have the following recommendations:

1. Don't get hung up on the terminology. Whether you use the term mentor, peer-mentor, peer-observer, coach, or critical friend, what really matters is the program meets the needs of the librarians involved.
2. Begin with learning the background and needs of the new librarian, and discussing the local instruction situation. Then provide observing opportunities with debriefings, followed by co-teaching. Eventually, have the new librarian solo-teach and then provide some self-reflection, or observe the new librarian teaching and debrief afterwards. If you intend your feedback to be formative only, keep the debriefings and self-reflection confidential (Haller, 2012; Levene & Frank, 1993; Samson, 2008).
3. While mentoring usually implies a hierarchical relationship of an older, experienced professional guiding a younger, less-experienced one, effective mentoring/coaching can take place between peers as well (Goldman, 2011; Haller, 2012; Henrich & Attebury, 2010; Levene & Frank, 1993; Ozek, Edgren, & Jander, 2012; Samson, 2008; Sinkinson, 2011).

4. In a mentoring relationship, learning and growth should be happening in both directions for best results (Ghouse & Church-Duran, 2008; Goldman, 2011).
5. Good mentoring also requires providing opportunities for the mentee to make connections with faculty and administrators, and even peers on other campuses. So don't overlook networking as a goal (Ghouse & Church-Duran, 2008; Moore, Miller, Pitchford, & Jeng, 2007).
6. Also consider external mentors or peer-mentoring with a counterpart from a different library. (Goldman, 2011; Moore, Miller, Pitchford, & Jeng, 2007; Zabel, 2008). Mentors should be sharing experiences and ideas with other mentors too, as long as confidentiality is maintained.

APPENDIX

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