

What we learned along the way: Librarian experiences from k-12 and how they aid in university library instruction

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Abstract:

This article shares the perspectives of two former high school and middle school librarians who moved into academic libraries. The move from the K–12 sector to higher education offered them unique insights into working with first-year students as they started their college careers. Existing literature discusses the importance of collaboration between high school and academic librarians. The authors of this article have firsthand experience of how students work in the middle and high school realm, and they demonstrate how to apply that knowledge and experience with college students.

Keywords: First-year college students | library instruction | instructional improvement | academic libraries | school libraries

Article:

INTRODUCTION

The move from high school to college can be a difficult transition for students, as they must learn about and grow in a new world. College students may be away from parents for the first time, having to make life and study choices on their own. The academic library can be one of the best places for first-year and transfer students to visit to gain knowledge and understanding about this new environment in which they are living. Unfortunately, because of earlier experiences, many students feel that libraries aren't important to their academic lives (Barefoot 2006b). Before going to college, students see their school libraries or media centers as places where they go to pick up a book, possibly do some research, sometimes play computer games, or maybe find a quiet place to get some homework done. What academic libraries can offer students in comparison to school libraries is frankly overwhelming, from online sources and databases to the

sheer size and amount of books in a university or college library. It is no great surprise that students get overwhelmed (Barefoot 2006b; Fitzgerald 2004; Smith 2002).

Fortunately, programs involving academic and high school librarians who work together to get students ready for the college research experience are becoming more common. Students who have had positive experiences with libraries at the middle and high school levels will commonly use their libraries at the university and college level as well (Pearson and McNeil 2002). The first year at a university is where lasting habits and attitudes can be formed. Introducing students to the university library early in their academic career is important since it points them in the direction to success (Barefoot 2006a).

THE LIBRARIANS

One middle school librarian and one high school librarian decided to make a career move. Both ended up at the same university, one as the Instructional Outreach Librarian working mainly with first-year students as they navigated their early careers in university research. The other became the Education Librarian, working with students in multiple disciplines such as education, communication, sociology, and human development. Each knew that their secondary education background gave them an extra advantage in working with students in higher education.

The High School Librarian

My library degree was earned in 1974, and I went directly to an elementary school where *World Book* was the standard reference source. I was woefully lacking in reference skills, and I was truthfully like most incoming freshmen. My school system didn't have the money to purchase access to databases. While this same lack of preparation was frustrating to me, and, I am sure, to my fellow librarians, it was this lack that most helped me understand our students. When I came to the academic world, my learning curve was steep! I had little experience using databases and electronic journals, and then there was the library jargon to contend with. Terms that I had been familiar with in library school (*periodicals, serials, annuals, stacks*) and new terms (*DOIs, persistent links, article linkers, OPACS*) wrangled around my head like a foreign language. As I gained confidence in my skills at the academic level, I was able to pinpoint areas that were most challenging to students. While these areas were perplexing to students, they were second nature to most academic librarians. A fresh set of eyes helped to solve some frustrations on both the students' and librarians' ends.

The Middle School Librarian

Libraries have always been a special place for me. My parents used to take me to the library when I was younger, and they would let me check out as many books as I was allowed. That never happened at the candy store or the mall. But, at the library, I could leave with a stack of books, and it was okay. I loved to read. In grade school, I enjoyed helping in the library. My senior year of high school I had the opportunity to be a librarian assistant. When I went to college, I was offered a student job as a cataloging assistant. Libraries had always been one of my favorite places. Thus, it didn't really surprise anyone when I finally went to work in one. I

grew up with computers and technology, and today's librarians and media specialists are the expected technology experts in the schools.

WHAT SCHOOL LIBRARIANS CAN BRING TO THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY

Learning Theory

As school librarians we have training and experience in education, which includes knowledge of learning theories. It is important to have a grasp of how students learn and how information is stored in the brain. It is easier to create meaningful lessons if one knows how to create activities to help students retain critical pieces of information. Learning theory tells us that for students to retain knowledge, they must interact with it. Along with learning theories comes the idea of active learning. Too often professors will develop hour-long lectures without planning any type of activity to which students can relate the content of the lecture. Lecturing is important, but without checking for student understanding, it becomes something else altogether. Students need to be actively involved in the learning process (Krajewski and Piroli 2002). Eye contact with your students, moving around the classroom, and pausing for comments and student interaction give students a chance to let the librarian know whether they are involved or totally lost (Walker 2006).

Classroom Management

While classroom management is a major issue in K–12, such is usually not the case in higher education. For the most part, students attending college want to be there because either they or their parents are paying for it. That does not mean that they see the value in every course. If they do not see how this course will help them in the future, they may decide to spend time texting or surfing the Web. Having a well-thought-out lesson plan that includes time for interaction and practice helps with classroom management. Little tricks such as moving around the classroom, making eye contact with individual students, and talking with students as they enter the classroom go a long way to maintaining a conducive classroom atmosphere. It is also important to treat these young adults with respect. They are not children to be shushed. Don't be afraid to use humor as well. It's appropriate to smile and be friendly and welcoming to students as they enter the room. Librarians can use humorous stories and anecdotes as examples during their teaching to make a point (Walker 2006).

Lesson Planning

Along with an understanding of learning theories, an understanding of how to create an instructional session is another important skill typically learned in the K–12 arena. While instruction is expected of many librarians, how to create a lesson is rarely taught in library school. Knowing how to create objectives, prepare an anticipatory set, model, check for understanding, and guided practice help to provide a framework for student learning. Simple things such as posting the objectives on the board and giving examples of how this will be of value to them go a long way to set the tone for students. Instructional librarians do many one-shot teaching sessions, and it is important to be able to monitor our students and make adjustments when it is apparent that the planned lesson is either too simplistic or too advanced.

Librarians are often very anxious to share everything they know about research, spending most of the sessions lecturing students on all the different things they can think of concerning a certain database and its eccentricities. They miss out on the most important part of the lesson—the hands-on practice. Hands-on practice, especially if it has been designed in a meaningful way, can give students a chance to interact and can also let the librarian know if the instruction has been successful. Having one-shot library sessions set up in a problem-based learning scenario, where students have to think critically, solve problems, and answer questions using library resources, can also be useful. Working in groups and having to show effective communication skills in the library session can also serve as a way to demonstrate understanding to the instructional librarian (Kenney 2008). If half the class is having trouble with a database, chances are the instruction has not been clear. It is better to teach the generalities of an objective and check for content before introducing the specific characteristics of the objective. Hands-on or guided practice allows time for the instructor to work one-on-one with students. Some students will not ask questions in the whole class because they do not want to be seen as not understanding the objective. These same students will ask a question in private or in small groups, especially if the librarian is interested in knowing how they are doing with the lesson.

Along with presenting the material in an organized instruction session, we have learned that it is important to present the materials in several different modes. Students are provided tip sheets, links to screen casts, and the kinesthetic mode of hands-on practice. Some students will want the step-by-step tip sheet helping them to locate information, while others want to watch and listen to a screen cast demonstrating how to locate information. Providing these types of scaffolding will help all students to be successful.

Assessment

Assessment is an important part of instruction, and it is possibly the most neglected area in library school. Being able to monitor and adjust a lesson when it is not meeting objectives is one of the most important skills K–12 had to offer. While monitoring a lesson can involve formal assessment, most often in a one-shot instruction session it will involve informal assessment. A few well-placed questions are usually the quickest way to discover how the lesson is progressing. Another method of informal assessment can take place during the hands-on part of the session. If everyone is having trouble with a specific part of the guided practice, this is the time to stop and find out where the problem is occurring. Librarians are so comfortable with the resources that we sometimes assume the students are just as comfortable, and we may neglect vital pieces of instruction.

An even better indicator of how the session is progressing is the expressions on students' faces. If most of the class has that glazed look on their faces, something is wrong. Learn to make eye contact and watch student's faces. There is nothing wrong with changing the course of the session if it is too advanced or too simplistic. It is always important as a librarian to pay attention to your “audience.”

WORKING WITH COLLEGE STUDENTS

Coming to an academic library from the K–12 world gave us a unique insight into the frustrations of many undergraduates. We were prepared in ways that our fellow colleagues might not comprehend. We understood why students asked for the location of the fiction section. The Dewey Decimal system is used in most high school and public libraries, while the Library of Congress is used in most academic libraries. Biographies are shelved with the subject area, and fiction is shelved with the appropriate literature section. The sheer sizes of academic libraries are overwhelming to many students. Most middle and high school libraries are one or two rooms, and the librarians are viewed as authority figures more than consultants or collaborators. The latter surprises most students almost as much as the size of the library. Librarians can do much to help the students change their mindset, if they understand the previous situations and its implications.

“You can only expect students to know what they know” was once said to one of us in a K–12 professional development workshop. That is the case in middle or high school, and that is true for incoming college students as well. An instructor or librarian may want them to know more or expect them to know more; however, what they know is what they know. As a result, it is our job as instructional librarians to find out what knowledge our patrons have and proceed from there. Our students come from a high school library with thousands of books. When they come to college they are confronted with libraries that hold millions of volumes. Many of these materials have never been encountered by our young students, and librarians have to lead patrons to where they can best find information in a way that doesn't overwhelm. Our job is to take them from where they are and move them to where they need to be without being judgmental or condescending.

One of the biggest advantages of coming from K–12 is the experience to teach, construct a lesson, and understand learning theory. Most academic librarians have a background of collection management, cataloging, and content expertise, but very few have learned about instruction. One of the biggest components of teaching is not only how to structure a lesson but also an understanding of how students learn. Having the ability to look at a professor's assignment and craft a lesson that will impart some information literacy skills and give students the scaffolding to be a success in that assignment has been priceless. Many academic librarians struggle with the essential components of a lesson. They want students to succeed, but librarians know that many students will have only one or two sessions in a library, with as much as possible crammed into those sessions. Hands-on time is essential to retaining knowledge, yet it is often overlooked. One of the most valuable lessons a student can take from an information literacy session is that librarians are available and willing to help. This is where librarians can help change students' mindsets. By simply being open, friendly, and offering different information options, librarians can help students understand the importance of a librarian as a collaborator.

Having a background in education has helped us both exponentially. If preservice librarians have never been taught how to craft a lesson plan, as instructional librarians how should they know how to do so? When preservice librarians pursue an MLIS with a focus in school libraries, they are taught how to teach. They are instructed how to match lessons with the standards for each state. On the other hand, when preservice librarians pursue an MLIS with a focus in academic

libraries, students rarely have classes that focus on instruction. Thus, when librarians go into academia and have to teach, they often don't know what to do.

We have had the opportunity to take our previous experience in the K–12 setting and use it to make our patrons, who are new to higher education, more comfortable in their library reference and research. We understand that for freshman who arrive on campus in August, it was only three months earlier when they were high school seniors. Having that knowledge and understanding allows us to aid these students as they enter a new chapter of their lives. We have been able to share our awareness of incoming freshmen's reference skills and experiences with our fellow academic librarians. This allows academic librarians to more realistically align what they can expect of undergraduates with what the undergraduate really knows. As the saying goes, your high school seniors are our college freshmen; your K–12 librarian is now our academic librarian. Our transitions have enabled us to make our students' transitions much easier.

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