

Crafting an Experience with Practitioners in the Classroom

By: [Michael Crumpton](#), [Joanna DePolt](#), [Richard Moniz](#), [Tiffany Duck](#)

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Abstract:

Collaboration between faculty, faculty practitioners, and practitioners enhances teaching and research opportunities, provides more hands-on learning opportunities, and improves the knowledge and experience of all of those involved. Students benefit from learning about real world scenarios to couple with theoretical knowledge. Such experience improves student outcomes and informs their professionalism. Practitioners bring value added to the department with real-time information on new practices, trends, and solutions. Administrations recognize this value added and are striving to foster more inclusivity. Collaboration builds more resiliency into LIS programs and encourages the development of new leaders in our classrooms.

This panel will encourage participants to think critically about the role of practitioners in LIS education. While research faculty serve as the backbone of an academic department and many come with field experience, their focus is research and teaching. Practitioners, whether as adjunct faculty, guest speakers, or full-time lecturers, bring greater emphasis to the lived experiences of the field to the classroom. This blend of current research with current experience offers a more holistic program to the student. Both administrators and accrediting agencies recognize the depth this blend brings to departments as evidenced by shifting attitudes and the development of greater support.

Keywords: Practitioners | Adjunct | Collaboration

Article:

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

Crafting an Experience with Practitioners in the Classroom

Michael Crumpton^a, Joanna DePolt^b, Richard Moniz^c, Tiffany Duck^d

^aUniversity of North Carolina, Greensboro, USA

^bUniversity of North Carolina, Greensboro, USA

^cUniversity of North Carolina, Greensboro, Horry-Georgetown Technical College, USA

^dUniversity of North Carolina, Greensboro, USA

macrumpt@uncg.edu, jldepolt@uncg.edu, rjmoniz@uncg.edu, taduck@uncg.edu

ABSTRACT

Collaboration between faculty, faculty practitioners, and practitioners enhances teaching and research opportunities, provides more hands-on learning opportunities, and improves the knowledge and experience of all of those involved. Students benefit from learning about real world scenarios to couple with theoretical knowledge. Such experience improves student outcomes and informs their professionalism. Practitioners bring value added to the department with real-time information on new practices, trends, and solutions. Administrations recognize this value added and are striving to foster more inclusivity. Collaboration builds more resiliency into LIS programs and encourages the development of new leaders in our classrooms.

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ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Teaching faculty; Curriculum; Online learning; Students

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Practitioners; Adjunct; Collaboration

Introduction

This panel will discuss and encourage participants to think critically about the role of practitioners in LIS education. We explore the value of working in partnership with tenured faculty to bring a real-life experience to the academic agenda in order to better prepare LIS students for future employment.

Current interest and attitudes towards practitioners in the classroom

Higher education has traditionally used adjunct faculty members across the broad spectrum of curricular offerings in order to supplement the overall faculty population but also to provide technical expertise and a connection to the industry for which the curriculum outcomes are intended to support (Jackson, Jackson, 2015). The use of adjuncts providing instruction has been studied and analyzed by many disciplines to apply credible evidence of the effective use of this practice.

More recently, adjunct faculty represent approximately 57% of university instructional employees across the nation, which makes the value to the student experience and the professional development of the discipline significant. Labeled by some as the X Factor (Harrison, 2021), the value of adjuncts in the classroom continue to create a win/win scenario for bringing the real-life experiences into the academic experience, thus connecting students to the future expectations of their work.

There can be a downside to the use of adjunct instructors, if this is not done strategically or in partnership with tenured faculty and practicing adjuncts as several inequities exist and need a collaborative approach to work in tandem with each other. Tenured faculty must find ways to support their adjunct partners, through training and mentoring on institutional protocols and also finding ways to create future opportunities for adjuncts if that is desirable. With a trending increase use of adjuncts, tenured faculty can be at risk for the future downgrading of their positions without recognizing the importance of a two-tiered academic labor system (Ramsey, 2019).

The use of practitioners in past and present LIS programs

According to ALISE's 2020 *Statistical Report: Trends and Indicators in Library and Information Science Education* 36% of LIS courses are taught by adjuncts. That figure is up from 31% in 2015 (ALISE, 2020, p.23). There can be no doubt that in a profession which is very "hands on" the value of having practitioners in the classroom is immense. In a commentary published in *Library Journal* discussing the value of adjuncts in LIS education, Berry (2013) notes, "deans and LIS administrators showed that they understand and appreciate that adjuncts share the values and goals of the entire faculty, that they enrich the curriculum with their experience of having applied research and theories from the academic 'ivory tower' to the practice of the information professions." (p.10) Likewise, Ritter (2007) notes that adjuncts "provide the perspective of real-world experiences in the classroom" (p.3). She goes on to comment upon the critical importance and value added by adjuncts that have full-time library roles outside their teaching giving them familiarity with current laws and practices as well as the distinct credibility they bring to the classroom coming straight from their day-to-day work in

libraries. Lester (2011) further notes that their role has been not to replace full-time faculty but rather to “balance and complement the teaching competencies of the full-time faculty” (p.212-213). Her study, which incorporated interviewing deans and directors of LIS programs, determined the “importance to students of having courses with professionals who can speak to the realities of day-to day practice and provide advice on how to be successful in their jobs.” (p. 230). This rings true in the experience of one of the authors of this paper who has received regular and prolific feedback from students over the past 14 years teaching in an adjunct LIS role.

Adjuncts have always played a role in the provision of high-quality LIS programs, and, if anything, that role seems to be increasing. One might surmise with the continued growth of online LIS programs the creative use of adjuncts will grow. Adjuncts may be especially useful when it comes to revising courses and new course development. In fact, the majority of adjunct faculty assist their respective LIS departments in this capacity (Lester, 2011, p.226). One of the key challenges LIS programs will face is how to balance the role of adjuncts and in keeping them engaged and aware of developments within their respective LIS department. Recent experiences during Covid-19 lockdowns provided some rare opportunities in this regard as many LIS departments had to switch to online meetings.

Shifting attitudes at the program level

In the spring of 2019, the LIS department of UNCG began a redesign of the capstone class to include a field experience component - requiring all students to have some form of field experience before graduation. The department administration recognized the value of such experience, not only in achieving the program learning outcomes, but improving the marketability of students immediately post-graduation. They also recognized the value added of bringing a practitioner onto the team. As a practitioner newly turned full time faculty member, one of the author’s contributed to the design of the capstone by providing input as a recent practitioner (valued skills, job requirements, expectations of new graduates).

The program is currently conducting its third section of this new course. One of the authors (DePolt) has facilitated all three. So far, course surveys indicate students appreciate the new model and see its relevance. During development, the department also solicited input from the advisory committee, a panel of active practitioners that help inform departmental decision making. All of this synthesizes into conducting change within our accreditation standards and allows the use of real-time information to inform new practices and standards.

Including practitioners in decision making and investing in adjuncts can make a grave impact on LIS programs as a whole. An article written in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* recommends that administration starts to “persuade research faculty to invest in adjuncts” (2018). Investing in adjuncts can provide an atmosphere where practitioners can feel comfortable contributing to other aspects of the program. This can be beneficial to Deans and administrators who desire to provide a holistic experience for the students and insure some consistency across the curriculum.

There is no doubt that most adjunct faculty possess working knowledge of current practices and issues in their field which most are able to incorporate into the classroom. Ritter

(2007) states “students need a way to learn skills in a school setting and observe effective practitioners applying solutions to real problems” (p. 3). This alone can enrich the educational experience for students and bring ideas and fresh perspectives to courses. Fostering the collaboration between practitioners and full-time faculty can maximize learning potential and growth for both parties. Oftentimes, professional development and keeping up with trends in the field can be challenging. For this reason, Glazer and Hannafin (2006) recommend a collaborative apprenticeship approach when teaching in the classroom. “Then, we propose collaborative apprenticeship, an approach designed to support and sustain professional learning through stimulation of reciprocal interactions”. (p.180)

Some practical ways that we can continue to immerse adjuncts into our programs to better the experience for the students and increase the variety of classes that we can offer is to invite practitioners to faculty meetings. Not only faculty meetings but meetings in regard to creating or making adjustments to the curriculum. This would provide adjuncts the opportunity to contribute to the selection of course materials and allow for an opportunity to discuss adding new courses to the curriculum or revising courses. Lester (2011) did a study of the use of adjunct faculty in distance education programs, and she indicates that 69% of the surveyed LIS schools reported that adjuncts revise courses (p. 226).

Deans must recognize the importance of making a continued commitment to include the practitioners in these conversations. Ritter (2007) highlights “collaboration and interaction with the part-time professors and the full-time professors is necessary” (p. 3). In order to accommodate this, an investment may need to be made. This may include adjusting meeting times to maximize the amount of part-time faculty that may be able to participate. According to the study conducted by Lester (2011), “the overwhelming majority of the adjuncts (87% for the two semesters considered together) were employed full-time in other situations” (p. 219). This means that a more flexible meeting schedule may allow for increased participation amongst the adjunct ranks. Furthermore, seeking out opportunities and encouraging, and allocating budget lines to the professional development of adjuncts coupled with shared instructional conversations can lead to the incorporation of more adjuncts into the fabric of LIS programs.

Shifting attitudes amongst the faculty

The literature shows some concerns in attitudes of tenured faculty towards practitioner adjuncts/non-tenured faculty (Jackson, 2012, Lester, 2011). Concerns center on lack of teacher training, though many tenured faculty members also don't have formal training in instruction. They also want to maintain the integrity of the program/department - poor student experiences with adjunct practitioners could be damaging and/or the transitory nature of the adjunct pool. Non-tenured and adjuncts often carry the bulk of the teaching load for a program - allowing tenured and tenure seeking faculty time to pursue their research. Recognition of this helps fuel a collaborative environment. In our program, anecdotally, students seem to perceive their educational needs as met by a mixture of research faculty and practitioners teaching classes. There is also evidence of this on social media platforms (potential students seeking advice about programs). For accreditation, in our case SACS and ALA, interest is focused on faculty to

student ratio. Hiring of non-tenured practitioners helps maintain that ratio while not being completely reliant on the adjunct pool to bring real world experience to the classroom.

Shifting attitudes amongst practitioners

For many adjuncts there is little to no training provided when they begin teaching in a LIS program. Lester's (2011) study, which incorporated interviewing deans and directors of LIS programs, determined that "a small number of survey applicants indicated that no training for adjuncts is provided (8, 19%), and only a third require training for adjuncts before teaching a course" (p. 227). While this may work out well for some, some form of onboarding to the program's philosophies and foundational work in the course can make onboarding much smoother. The authors of this paper all share the teaching of one class entitled LIS 650 Leadership & Management in Information Organizations. As new adjuncts come aboard and teach this course, they are included in any meetings regarding changes to the course. They are included in the sharing of the syllabi that has already been created in order to provide some consistency for the students in the program. This particular course is required for graduation and therefore oftentimes, multiple sections are needed. With multiple professors teaching the same course each semester, we work together to come up with the assignments. While there is still flexibility in how one carries out the objectives of the course, this allows us to insure some consistency within the program.

As an adjunct, we should feel prepared and supported before entering into a first semester of teaching. Providing background as to why certain assignments had been included---can be beneficial, because without that knowledge, you would not know to include some of those assignments if left to create the course from the beginning. This allows everyone to have fun teaching a course that is consistent with others but also includes ownership and confidence, instead of spending the semester unsure if certain activities or assignments were going to be received well by the students.

Another way that we can retain adjuncts is to recognize the work they are doing in class and in the program. An article written in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* states "reward excellence by paying for it" (2018). It is no secret that there have been disparities and challenges in pay for adjuncts. If adjuncts are doing well, administration should consider alternatives for pay increases or bonuses to show the value of the work that some adjuncts are putting into the classroom. In addition, including adjuncts in decision-making whether it is about a class or changes to the program show that their opinion is valued in that LIS program. Continued support of adjuncts in a holistic way through support, professional development opportunities, raises or recognition may lead to more long-term active involvement in the specific LIS program and the LIS profession as a whole.

Resilience and leadership in action

A common assignment used by the four authors in their management courses is a practitioner interview. The students are required to identify and interview a current practitioner in a library management role. They conduct the interview using a mixture of assigned and optional questions. Of particular interest were the responses gathered during the COVID-19 period – Spring 2020 through Summer 2021. Early analysis shows an emphasis on soft skills – emotional intelligence, communication, decision making, and delegation in response to the crisis. Budget challenges were often discussed, with one report relaying catastrophic impact to the library budget, with most responses indicating the full force of budgetary challenges have not (yet) been felt. Staffing challenges were a common theme, as managers struggled to meet the needs of their libraries in addition to approaching staff concerns regarding safety with empathy.

What this assignment demonstrates is the blending of faculty and practitioner expertise to offer the students a holistic assignment. Response to COVID-19 was a fast-moving phenomenon and by asking the students to interview a practitioner at that time, the goal of faculty was for the student to learn what aspects of the managerial toolkit were engaged in that response.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that adjunct instructors are a value added to LIS programs by bringing forward practical experiences to enrich the academic climate for students and future librarians. How any given program embraces the use and development of adjuncts in their department can impact the quality of instruction (for both sides) and increase the experience for students. We hope that discussing this issue and sharing our experiences will cascade into broader discussions in other programs.

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