

Instructional Improvement:

Building Capacity for the Professional Development of Librarians as Teachers

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How do librarians become better teachers, and what can library leaders do to support the professional development of librarians as teachers? In an earlier column in this series, Bonnie Gratch Lindauer expressed her belief that many librarians are “passionate and disciplined about improving [their] teaching,” but how much is really known about how to support librarians in that effort?¹ The purpose of this article is to review the state of instructional improvement programs in libraries and to draw on the broader literature of instructional improvement in higher education to identify issues to which the field must attend in order to foster the professional development of librarians as teachers. Although the examples discussed in this column focus on the academic library experience, the lessons one may learn from studying these programs can be applied to any library environment in which teaching is recognized as an essential feature of the organizational mission. If all libraries are now teaching libraries, then all librarians can benefit from thinking about what research and practice has taught us about instructional improvement.

What is “Instructional Improvement”?

“Instructional improvement” is a term found in the literature of higher education to describe professional development opportunities for college faculty aimed at helping them to improve their performance in the classroom.² For more than 30 years, students of college teaching and practitioners in the faculty development movement have led efforts to help faculty focus on their work as teachers and to identify organizational structures that motivate faculty to participate in instructional improvement programs and “take teaching seriously.”³ While faculty development programs have provided support for a variety of activities (e.g., financial support for travel to scholarly conferences), much of the practice in this field focuses on instructional improvement.⁴ Instructional improvement activities are coordinated on many campuses through offices such as the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Kansas, and may include: (1) workshops focused on developing specific teaching skills; (2) programs designed to provide useful feedback on one’s work as a teacher; (3) instructional grants and financial incentives to encourage classroom innovation; and (4) opportunities to discuss issues in higher education related to teaching and learning.⁵ Although many academic librarians collaborate formally and informally with campus teaching centers to provide information literacy instruction, there is no evidence to suggest that any major studies of instructional improvement practice have included librarians in their role as college teachers.⁶ In short, many teaching centers recognize that librarians have something to offer *to* campus-wide instructional improvement programs, but fewer appear to recognize how much librarians might benefit *from* participation, as teachers, in such programs. This is unfortunate given the wide variety of venues (physical and digital) in which many librarians are now

routinely called upon to teach, but it should not stop one from considering theory and practice in instructional improvement in order to identify approaches that can fruitfully be applied to the library context.

Instructional Improvement in Higher Education

The literature of instructional improvement in higher education is a rich one, and it cannot be effectively reviewed in an essay of this length. Even a brief review, however, may provide a framework for better understanding the instructional improvement programs currently emerging in libraries across the country.

Maryellen Weimer and Lisa F. Lenze, for example, identified five overarching types of “instructional intervention” commonly used on college campuses: (1) workshops and seminars; (2) consultation with instructional designers and campus teaching experts; (3) instructional grants (e.g., funding for teaching materials); (4) distribution of resource materials (e.g., synopses of effective teaching practices); and (5) programs that allow faculty to offer collegial review and support for each other’s instructional activities.⁷

While few (if any) libraries provide all of these resources to librarians interested in improving their teaching, the majority provide at least some support.⁸ Reviewing the framework provided by Weimer and Lenze may provide librarians responsible for designing or implementing instructional improvement programs with guidance in how to adapt the experience of faculty development professionals to their local conditions.

Joanne Kurfiss and Robert Boice conducted a national survey of faculty development professionals and found that instructional grants, consultation with campus teaching experts, and orientations to teaching for new faculty were among the most common instructional improvement programs available on campus. Moreover, they

found that these efforts typically complemented programs focused on the evaluation of teaching.⁹ In libraries, too, there is rising interest in the evaluation of instruction, and anyone responsible for evaluating library instruction must remember that any such effort should include a component focusing on instructional improvement.¹⁰

W. Alan Wright and M. Carol O'Neil conducted a similar survey of faculty development professionals and identified practices and conditions that respondents believed contributed most to improving the quality of teaching at their institutions. Among these were: (1) including a demonstration of teaching as part of the hiring process; (2) recognizing teaching in tenure and promotion decisions; (3) providing access to mentoring programs focused on teaching; and (4) evidence of support for teaching among administrators.¹¹ The importance of administrative recognition and support for individual efforts to improve one's own teaching is especially significant and is also discussed in studies of effective leadership in higher education.¹² Recent studies of teaching in academic libraries suggest that, as in the academic department, administrators "play a pivotal role in improving teaching by creating an environment in which the importance of the teaching function is articulated and supported."¹³

Often, the environment for instructional improvement is discussed as part of the broader question of how to foster the development of a "culture of teaching" across an academic department, school, or campus. Michael Paulsen, Kenneth Feldman, Robert Armour, and Mary Lou Higgerson have identified the elements of a healthy culture of teaching in an organization, including: (1) support among senior leadership for instructional improvement among the faculty; (2) faculty involvement in the development of instructional improvement activities; (3) opportunities for mentoring; (4) the presence

of a teaching center on campus; and (5) frequent opportunities for faculty to come together to discuss issues related to their teaching.¹⁴ There have been few studies of the organizational culture of libraries that ask specific questions about the practices and structures that support the development of a culture of teaching, but many of the issues discussed in the studies noted above could certainly be addressed in the library context. Likewise, there are related questions unique to libraries, e.g., does the library include an independent office or committee focused on guiding both its instructional services programs for the public and its instructional improvement programs for staff?

Finally, while there have been numerous studies of the need to provide support for new faculty members as they enter the classroom for the first time, there is increasing interest in articulating a developmental approach to instructional improvement, i.e., answering questions about how to develop effective and engaging programs to help mid-career and senior faculty members to continue improving as teachers.¹⁵ Successful professional orientation and mentoring throughout the career have also emerged as important issues in the library literature as the field engages questions of recruitment and retention, both into the profession and into library leadership.¹⁶ Instructional improvement, which includes the orientation and mentoring of teachers, can clearly be examined within the broader rubric of organizational development in libraries.¹⁷

What are the instructional improvement activities in which most faculty regularly engage? How can academic administrators help faculty members to focus on their teaching as an area for ongoing professional development and demonstrate support for the development of a culture of teaching across a department, school, or campus? How can instructional improvement programs engage faculty at every stage of their careers?

These are the questions addressed in the literature of higher education and in the day-to-day practice of faculty development professionals, and each is critical to the professional development of librarians as teachers and to the ability of individual libraries to meet the challenges inherent in making a commitment to information literacy instruction as a strategic priority for the 21st century.

Instructional Improvement in Academic Libraries

While rarely guided by the instructional improvement programs that emerged as part of the faculty development movement in higher education, librarians have developed an active network of professional development opportunities through in-house training and through programs sponsored by organizations such as the American Library Association and the Association of College & Research Libraries (including, most recently, the Institute for Information Literacy's "Immersion" program). Over the past 20 years, research in this area has included a number of surveys of continuing professional education experiences among instruction librarians. Although differing widely in their design, the results of these surveys clearly relate what is known about instructional improvement among librarians to what is known more broadly about instructional improvement in higher education.¹⁸

For example, on-the-job teacher 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. Almost as common among librarians as participation in formal instructional improvement programs, however, is individual pursuit of continuing

education through independent study. Independent study has always been a key avenue for instructional improvement among librarians not only because of the lack of attention to teacher training as part of library and information science (LIS) education,¹⁹ but also because librarians have rarely been the target of the instructional improvement initiatives that arose on campuses across the country beginning in the 1960s. The situation described in early surveys has started to change over the past decade as academic libraries increasingly pursue formal instructional improvement programs similar to those long familiar to the classroom faculty, including the development of workshops, discussion groups, and assessment programs aimed at the improvement of instruction.

The workshop is the basic building block of the instructional improvement program. For decades, workshops have been offered to college faculty on topics such as delivering effective lectures, facilitating student discussion, and using active learning in the classroom. Similar workshops have long been part of instructional improvement programs in libraries, as evidenced by published materials such as *Learning to Teach: Workshops on Instruction* (1993). These have typically revolved around topics such as fundamentals of pedagogy, effective design of instructional materials, and techniques for the assessment of student learning.²⁰ Priscilla Atkins and Catherine E. Frerichs provide one model for how a campus teaching center might adapt its experience in providing workshop programming to the library context, but a rich set of examples can also be drawn from the listing of topics found through articles and Web sites documenting the in-house training programs at institutions including the University of Arizona, the University of Michigan, the University of Texas, the University of Kansas, and Washington State University.²¹ By adding topics such as fundamentals of teaching users

for whom English is a second language and fundamentals of adult education to familiar workshop topics on integrating active learning into the classroom and teaching with technology, these programs demonstrate how instructional improvement models developed in the academic context might complement practice in other types of libraries.

Another important feature of any instructional improvement program is the provision of regular opportunities for teachers to actually talk about their teaching with colleagues.²² Stephen Brookfield wrote that “[silence] surrounds us as teachers,” and providing a forum in which teachers can discuss their work is one of the best ways to foster a culture of teaching within an organization.²³ Here, too, libraries have developed several models for effective practice. Sarah Leadley, for example, describes how librarians at the University of Washington, Bothell, came together for regular “teaching meetings” with the director of their Writing Center. Anna Litten describes a different approach to fostering substantive “teacher talk” among librarians, i.e., the organization of a full-scale “retreat” focused on instructional issues. The award-winning “Instructor College” at the University of Michigan provides another model for this approach to instructional improvement through its inclusion of a “reading club” as part of its program.²⁴

Finally, there are a variety of new approaches to the assessment of instruction increasingly found on campus, including critical self-reflection, peer coaching and evaluation, and the use of teaching portfolios.²⁵ These increasingly significant approaches to assessment and evaluation of teaching are also becoming part of how we discuss instructional improvement in libraries. Lee-Allison Levene, Polly Frank, and Dale Vidmar, for example, have described the use of peer coaching as a framework for

instructional improvement, and peer-centered programs have appeared in recent years at institutions including The Ohio State University, Dartmouth College, the University of Notre Dame, Syracuse University, Oregon State University, and the University of Kansas.²⁶ Interest in using teaching portfolios and peer review of instructional materials is also on the rise in many libraries.²⁷ No essay of this length can do justice to the many facets of these programs, but the degree to which these “changing models” for assessment and evaluation of teaching have been adopted by libraries across the country suggests that this is an area in which further research will undoubtedly be needed in the future.²⁸

As much as looking at the broader context of instructional improvement in higher education can help to identify what should work in library-based instructional improvement programs, it can also help to identify areas in which additional work is needed. For example, one of the basic tenets of research and practice in instructional improvement is that an effective orientation to teaching is crucial to new faculty as they begin their professional development as teachers, but there is limited evidence of substantive and formal orientation programs focused on teaching in libraries (although there are some excellent models for orienting future librarians to their teaching responsibilities that might inform similar efforts aimed at new professionals, e.g., at Indiana University and the University of Iowa).²⁹ Likewise, there is considerable attention paid in the literature of higher education to the role that administrators play in fostering and supporting a culture of teaching in an academic department, but there has been limited attention to this role in studies of library leadership. Further inquiry into best practices for orientation and mentoring programs focused on instruction will be critical to the ongoing development of the teaching library, as will further study of the role of senior

administrators as instructional leaders in the library and advocates for the significance of the library as a center for teaching and learning on the campus and in the community.

Conclusion

Why worry about instructional improvement? Quite simply because, even after 30 years of discussion and debate, teacher training is still a relatively minor part of the professional education for librarians even as it becomes an increasingly important part of their daily work. Regardless of whether you work in a public, academic, special, or school library, developments such as the rise of end-user information technologies and the transition of health, financial, and government information to the Web environment ensure that your professional future lies in being a teacher. How prepared are you to meet that future? If you are a library leader, how prepared are you to help your colleagues and staff to meet that future?

Making a commitment to instructional improvement is ultimately the responsibility of every teaching librarian, but helping to foster an environment conducive to making that commitment is one of the responsibilities of an instructional leader.³⁰ Examining the role of the librarian and library administrator as instructional leader is a critical area for further research owing not only to the lessons learned from the literature of higher education regarding the role that such leadership plays in the improvement of teaching and learning on campus, but also to issues unique to the library environment that demonstrate the need for more focused attention on instructional leadership. For example, a recent study of teaching librarians suggested that the lack of an effective introduction to the teaching role during LIS education contributed to a difficult transition into their first professional positions.³¹ Designing an effective instructional improvement program and

making it accessible to librarians and staff as part of fostering a culture of teaching in the library can ease that transition, provide crucial support to new librarians (and to experienced librarians new to teaching), and aid in recruiting, orienting, and mentoring the next generation of librarians for an information (and, hopefully, information-literate) society.

The models for instructional improvement in libraries discussed in this article may provide the inspiration for a personal commitment to instructional improvement, or they may spark the development of an innovative program in one's local library. Either result will mean that there is an opportunity to improve the teaching and learning that occurs in one's library and one's community and that participating libraries and librarians are building their capacity to meet the challenges inherent in the idea of the teaching library. While the experience of a generation of instructional improvement experts may inform both how one chooses to pursue one's own continuing education, as well as the range of resources and programs provided to library staff, it is important to remember that "there is no single best way to improve teaching."³² Each of the models discussed in this article will be the subject of future research as the community of practice gains additional experience with the use of instructional improvement strategies such as ongoing workshop series, discussion groups, and the application of new models for assessment and evaluation of teaching. In libraries, as elsewhere on the college campus, instructional improvement practice has far outpaced research and the challenge now is to design research studies that will help the profession move from emergent practice to best practice.³³

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