What They Didn’t Tell Me (or what I didn’t hear) in Library School
Perspectives from New Library Instruction Professionals

Julie VanHoose, Bridget Farrell, and Emily Rae Aldridge, Guest Columnists

The transition from library school to the professional library instruction environment is fraught with challenges and ripe with opportunities. Each new teaching librarian has to find his or her own style and establish a toolkit of teaching techniques. However, much can be learned from the experiences of others who have gone through the same process. The narratives that follow were written by former students in the School of Library & Information Science at the University of Kentucky. Each new librarian focuses on a different aspect of instruction planning and implementation. Their goal in sharing their stories is to assist other new librarians in their own professional transitions and to help existing library professionals develop a greater awareness of ways in which they can mentor the next generation.—Editor

WHAT THEY DIDN’T TELL ME IN LIBRARY SCHOOL IS THAT STUDENTS DON’T CARE ABOUT LEARNING TO USE THE LIBRARY

By Julie VanHoose

While working as a graduate assistant in the reference department at the University of Kentucky’s (UK) William T. Young Library, one of my responsibilities was library instruction. I was fortunate to be able to work with the instruction team there to learn through observation, participation, and training. During my time at UK, I also took a class dedicated to library instruction and a couple of cognate courses in the curriculum and instruction department. All of these educational opportunities gave me a solid grounding in the theory of education, but I have learned that there is nothing quite like getting out there and actually teaching.

When I first began teaching, I quickly learned that just because I was enamored with libraries, it certainly did not mean that the average freshman was. Sure, many students view the library as an integral part of the campus experience, but for most of them it is more about the space itself than the abundant informational resources that it contains. And I knew going in that I had a limited amount of time to teach those students how to use our resources and, ultimately, how to be information literate. Those are lofty goals, and the personal pressure to reach them was occasionally a bit overwhelming. I knew the theory, but I didn’t really know how to use it in application. And that is the first lesson that really sank in for me—that I could have a rich, deep knowledge of educational theory, but without actual time spent in the classroom, I could never really understand it.
Understanding scaffolding, the zone of proximal development, constructivism, and the countless other theories and methods of instruction is certainly helpful. But it is not enough. You have to have direct experience before you can skillfully design classes that utilize those foundational principles. But don't worry—I am by no means saying the education is not necessary, because it definitely is. I am simply saying that new library instructors should be encouraged to just get out there and get to know the classroom. Assuring new instructors that they are not expected to be perfect right out of the gate is integral to giving them the confidence to experiment and find their own teaching style. And once they are comfortable in the classroom, they will get better and better at developing solid instruction.

In our college instructional classes there is a lot of talk about engaging students in active learning, teaching to different learning styles, and crafting meaningful assessments. We spend significant time learning these, and rightly so. But there is a significant difference between practicing those skills on our classmates and actually practicing them in a library instruction session. Our fellow library students are just as enamored with libraries as we are, so of course they are engaged. But those non-library lovers are a different ballgame. We have to work to figure out what interests them, and in order to do that we just have to get to know them. In practice, what it all really boils down to is finding activities that keep the students interested and make learning about the library's resources something that is not completely and utterly dull.

As is usually taught, the easiest way to engage the students is to make the class directly related to an assignment that they are currently working on. Seems simple enough, right? But when we actually begin to teach, we learn that even when we have the professor's cooperation with scheduling their library instruction class in tandem with a project, we still aren't guaranteed that the students have actually begun doing that project. I'm sure you all remember your library school days. How many of us received our assignments and promptly developed a plan of attack and began doing our research? I'd venture to say not many. Certainly not me. Work emergencies, family obligations, social events, and other homework assignments always managed to get in the way. And if graduate students, who have proven themselves to be dedicated and qualified for graduate-level work, aren't always organized and proactive with their assignments, what are the odds that the freshmen are? We have to be realistic about our students. So we are still left with the question of how to get students interested in what we are talking about.

If the drive to learn about library resources is not already there, then we have to create that sense of need. And how do we do that?—By showing the students that if they pay attention, their workload will be significantly lessened. You can't just say it. You have to convince them of it. This lesson took a while to settle in for me. Students are bogged down with their day-to-day lives, just like we are. We cannot realistically expect them to hang on our every word and love us for paying for the resources that they use. At first, I thought that maybe I was doing something wrong in the classroom—that my activities weren't active enough, that I wasn't explaining the library tools effectively, that somehow I was just missing the mark. But I eventually realized that the students just didn't feel the need to internalize the information that I was providing to them. And it wasn't because my class was improperly designed. It was simply because the students weren't interested. A seasoned librarian may understand this because they can recognize that creating the perfect library instruction session is the holy grail for library instructors. But a new, inexperienced librarian has not been around long enough to see the ongoing discussion amongst her colleagues. So assure your newly graduated colleagues that they should trust their training for the design aspect of the class, but give them guidance for connecting the theory to the application.

So how can you help us lowly graduate students and new librarians? Just remember what it was like when you first started. Remember that we have the theory and knowledge necessary but most likely do not have the hands-on experience. Let us shadow you. Talk us through how and why you created the activities that you did, give us room to make mistakes and tell us about some of your own, encourage us to persevere through student apathy, and, most of all, give us as many opportunities for experience and constructive feedback as possible.

**WHAT THEY DIDN'T TELL ME IN LIBRARY SCHOOL IS THAT SITTING DOWN AND TALKING WITH FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATION IS A VITAL STEP IN THE PROCESS OF PREPARING INFORMATION LITERACY CLASSES**

By Bridget Farrell

Through the course of my time in library school, many of my classes included discussions on the importance of making patrons aware of library services. However, once I dipped my toes into the murky waters of information literacy instruction, I quickly discovered that getting faculty and administration buy-in is more difficult than simply reading the “tips” page in my library science textbook and applying what I read. The “if you build it (and promote it), they will come” philosophy that was touted in my classes does not even begin to address the complexities of working with departments where the administration and faculty often have different visions for how the library can help them. And it certainly does not express the challenge of instilling the importance of information literacy instruction into the minds of already overworked faculty (whose feelings on the topic range anywhere from indifference to excitement).

I, like many of you, found all of this out first-hand through the course of developing and teaching my first information literacy classes. My introduction to collaborating with faculty for library instruction began when I developed and taught a series of information literacy classes for students.