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Trial by Fire: New Librarians as Team Teachers

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Abstract

New librarians are often thrown into library instruction with little or no formal training. Team teaching is one method that can be adopted by new librarians to ease them into their instructional duties while still delivering a quality information literacy program. As new librarians, the authors used a team-teaching mentoring partnership to deliver an instructional program to over 400 students.

Introduction

Team teaching has become an acceptable teaching method in librarianship. There are many examples in the literature where team teaching has been successfully implemented in various disciplines, including education, communications, management, engineering, computer science, chemistry, and history. [1] These examples of teaching partnerships consisted of a faculty member from the specified discipline and a librarian. Recent examples of team teaching with two librarians are more difficult to find. Morganti and Buckalew discuss this lack of literature in their 1991 article, stating: “[n]o articles were found on librarians team teaching *together*” (p. 195). Since this time, there have only been a handful of such articles. [2] Specifically there is an obvious gap in the literature regarding new librarians as participants in the team teaching process. LaGuardia, Griego, Hopper, Melendez & Oka (1993) describe the technique used by librarians who are learning to teach as “trial by fire” (p. 54). They go on to say that it can be difficult to learn to teach without feedback from colleagues, and they recommend the use of team teaching to introduce new librarians to the process of library instruction. This form of instructional mentorship was used in the Herbert T. Coumts Library at the University of Alberta to ease new librarians into their teaching responsibilities.

In September 2002, the authors team-taught over 400 undergraduate students in pre-service teacher education to locate curriculum resources in the library and on the World Wide Web. As new instructors this was our first experience in organizing and delivering such a large instructional program. While we received many positive comments from students, we were certainly not experienced instructors. As 'rookies', we needed an approach that would allow us to put together an intensive library instruction program that would be informative and enjoyable for students. At the same time, we wanted a method that would help us to advance our skills as instructors. This article will discuss how we used the instructional method of team teaching to deliver a high quality program while at the same time developing our instructional skills.

Background

We began our professional careers as librarians in the University of Alberta's Academic Library Internship Program. We were both placed at the Herbert T. Coumts Education Library at the University of Alberta, a large research-intensive university in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Part of our internship experience was to learn about instruction by participating and leading in bibliographic instruction sessions. As graduate students in the Master of Library and Information Studies program at the University of Alberta, we had some experience in instruction. Angie had taken a course in library instruction and Jessica taught several library sessions to undergraduate students during her library school practicum. [3]

As an intern in the 2000-2001 year, Angie had almost two extra years of experience before Jessica's internship began during the summer of 2002. As an intern, Angie worked with an experienced librarian who was responsible for coordinating the Department of Secondary Education's (EDSE) undergraduate library instruction program. When this individual left, Angie assumed the role of EDSE program coordinator. Six months later, Jessica began her internship with the Education Library. Angie became the logical choice to help ease Jessica into her teaching responsibilities by enlisting her as a co-teacher in the EDSE program.

Students in the Department of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta choose a major and a minor subject area on which to focus their studies. These are the subject areas that students will be teaching during their practicums and as professional teachers. As part of their course work, students take a library instructional session that introduces them to curriculum material in their minor subject area. Each library session is usually an hour and twenty minutes in length, and in September 2002, we taught 17 sections of approximately 20 to 25 students each.

The focus of the sessions was on the location and use of curriculum resources in print and electronic formats. Angie began the session with an overview of resources from Alberta Learning, the government department responsible for education in the province of Alberta. Jessica followed this with a discussion of ways to locate additional material in the student's specific subject area using the library catalogue and the World Wide Web. She finished each

session by discussing the importance of evaluating curriculum materials. Students were then asked to spend the remainder of the session completing a worksheet that encouraged them to practice what they had learned. At the end of the session, we asked the students to complete an anonymous evaluation form that assessed our teaching style and class content. Students rated both their overall evaluation of the session, as well as how useful the session was for them. We also left room for comments. After each session we took time to review the students' evaluations, to discuss our instructional techniques and provide feedback to each other.

Team Teaching as a Way to Initiate New Librarians

The process of preparing for the EDSE library program was useful for both librarians. We began by discussing the goals and objectives of the instructional program. We revised the existing program to create a balance between providing students with necessary information literacy skills while showcasing specific curriculum resources. For example, we instructed students on search techniques to use in the library catalogue and also highlighted student textbooks and teacher resources that they would find when using these search techniques. The handout, which was distributed at the beginning of each session, was revised to address specific questions that students would have when looking for information. For example, the handout was structured to help students answer specific questions such as how to find information on what to teach, how to find information on how to teach, and how to find learning resources online. We also changed its appearance to make it more visually appealing. Angie, who had assisted with this program in previous semesters, acted as a liaison with the faculty, while Jessica provided a fresh view of the instructional content and style. Angie was able to revisit the content and style of the instruction and handout, while Jessica was able to become more comfortable with the instructional resources by revising the handout. Finally, the preparation process allowed us to get a better sense of each other's work styles and personalities. This made the transition into the classroom easier for both of us.

In the classroom the team teaching approach helped to build our teaching skills. During the sessions we would often interject during each other's instruction to help clarify a point or to provide additional information. Angie was able to assist Jessica with questions she may not have been comfortable answering, while Jessica was able to provide new approaches to the material of which Angie was not yet aware. For example, Angie was able to assist Jessica with questions regarding policies specific to the library, while Jessica was able to demonstrate new strategies for searching the library catalogue and the World Wide Web. These informal exchanges of information helped us both to increase our awareness and knowledge of the content. An added benefit to these discussions went to the students, who were able to gain new information and insight from our in-class knowledge exchange.

The team teaching environment proved to be less stressful for both of us as new librarians. As other librarians have found (Jurena & Daniels, 1997; Oka, LaGuardia & Griego, 1994), having

another individual in the classroom relieved some of the tension that may have existed had we been teaching alone. Moreover, as LaGuardia et al. (1993) point out “our egos have toughened up” (p. 59), and we found that the benefits of having a teaching partner outweighed the nervousness that came with having one instructor observe the other. As a result of this less stressful introduction to teaching, we felt we were able to provide a more relaxed learning environment for the students.

Another advantage to our team teaching approach was that it allowed us to gain confidence in our teaching style by providing for each other new models of instructional techniques. By observing each other interacting with the students and discussing ideas in the classroom, we were able to see how another individual would approach the teaching material. LaGuardia et al. (1993) define this kind of observation as “demystifying the process” (p. 61), helping new librarians build teaching confidence by observing how other librarians present information to a class. Indeed, we found that the collaborative approach gave us new ways to tackle the same material, thus increasing our success in delivering information to students.

While observing each other certainly increased our teaching confidence, we would argue that team teaching also helped us as new librarians to develop skills outside the realm of library instruction. We took what we learned from each other and used it to provide more successful and consistent service on the reference desk. In addition, this shared knowledge gave us a better foundation on which to build the library’s collection, as we were more aware of the resource needs of the students.

Team teaching also provided us with the opportunity to learn first hand the benefits of teamwork. As new librarians this experience enabled us to learn the importance of working together in a team-based environment. Our other professional responsibilities require us to function in teams, and having this experience of team teaching early in our careers helped immerse us into this culture.

Although the literature suggests possible incompatibility between instructors (Bakken & Clark, 1998; Buckley, 2000; Forcey & Rainforth 1998; Hatcher & Hinton, 1996), we found that was not the case for us. We connected as new librarians who were energetic and enthusiastic about the opportunity to teach together. Angie was happy to have a new librarian to work with, while Jessica was glad to be given such an extensive teaching assignment so early in her career. This teamwork approach further developed into a sense of collegiality. While teams can sometimes be artificially or arbitrarily formed, whether it is by supervisors, as was our case, or by colleagues, we found that over time our sense of team grew into a sense of collegiality and friendship. Team teaching gave us direct experience as to how librarians can work together to gain mutual respect for one another and for the work they do.

The only downside we experienced in team teaching was the time commitment that was required by us both. Jurena & Daniels (1997) and LaGuardia et al.. (1993) address these time constraints and note the problems when two librarians are out of the library during class time. Our teaching sessions were held in September, which is traditionally the busiest time in our library. Our instructional workload was in addition to our regular responsibilities of reference, collection management, and web development. The EDSE program required us to spend half of each day in the classroom for approximately four weeks. As a result of this heavy teaching commitment, we found it necessary to adjust our schedules as it was not uncommon for us to many work extra hours during this period. However, like Jurena & Daniels (1997), we also believe that “team teaching is a choice made because it significantly contributes to the quality of instruction” (p. 8). In our case the team teaching approach helped us to become better instructors.

Conclusion

We found that the team teaching approach was a practical way to deliver a successful library instructional program while providing new librarians with a venue to develop their instructional skills. This instructional approach provided each of us with the opportunity to become more comfortable with the teaching material. This was important, as we use this material not only in the classroom, but also on the reference desk when assisting students and in helping inform our decisions when building the library’s collection. We both experienced an increased level of confidence, as we were able to share the preparation and teaching, which resulted in less stress for us. Finally, we developed a better appreciation for teamwork, which lead to a stronger sense of collegiality.

Looking back, it is possible to see how having two new librarians in the classroom may have been a disadvantage to us and to the students. However, we found the opposite to be true. The completed evaluation forms showed that students were generally very pleased with the instruction they received and they did not appear to notice our inexperience. In fact, one student went so far as to comment: “You’ve done this for a long time, so it’s nice to have experienced librarians guiding us, not rookies.” More than anything, comments like these reinforce our belief that team teaching is an excellent way to introduce new instructors to the art of teaching.

Endnotes

[1] See for examples: Bakken 1998, Buchanan, Luck & Jones 2002, Chiste, Glover & Westwood 2000, Jurena and Daniels 1997, Ricker 1997, Weiner 1996, Zhang 2001.

[2] See for examples: Hulbert & McBride 2004, Jurena & Daniels 1997, LaGuardia, Griego, Hopper, Melendez & Oka 1993, Oka, LaGuardia & Griego 1994, Osbourne & Wyman 1991.

[3] The authors of this article have chosen to use “we” and “us” when referring to actions taken by both, and to first names when referring to actions taken by individual authors.

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