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Column: Innovation in Libraries

Visible Teaching, Invisible Systems: Rethinking my Approach to Library Instruction

Graeme States, *Anderson University*

ABSTRACT

This reflective essay examines how resource sharing, particularly interlibrary loan (ILL), can bridge the gap between library instruction theory and actual student research behavior. Drawing on my experience as an early-career academic librarian, I explore how engaging with resource-sharing workflows can transform "invisible" library systems into valuable sources of pedagogical insight. I present three practical approaches for integration: emphasizing "access literacy" alongside traditional search skills, normalizing ILL as a core component of the research process, and using borrowing data to identify specific gaps in student understanding. Ultimately, this essay argues for an integrated model of librarianship that breaks down traditional silos to create more responsive, transparent, and effective information literacy instruction.

KEYWORDS

academic libraries, resource sharing, interlibrary loan, information literacy, access literacy, experiential learning in libraries.

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Introduction

After completing my MLIS, I entered academic librarianship well-versed in instructional theory. I engaged students in lectures that were complemented by practical examples. But something felt missing and I could not figure out what. It wasn't until multiple semesters later, when I inherited the responsibility for managing the library's resource sharing, that I began to recognize a gap in my teaching. I was largely disconnected from the systems that shape how students actually access information. The materials students borrowed from other libraries showed me what they were researching and how they were doing it. This shift suggested that resource sharing could function not only as a service point but as a lens for improving instruction. Interlibrary loan, in this way, became a form of pedagogical insight that ultimately reshaped how I teach.

Instruction and resource sharing are often on opposite ends of the library operation spectrum. In practice, resource sharing is reactive, often situated at the end of the research process. The patron has already practiced searching to find several materials to answer their research questions. Resource sharing is an invisible, logistical operation of the library, where most of the work happens behind the scenes (Schmidt, 2017). Instruction librarianship differs from resource sharing librarianship. Because instruction serves as the primary touchpoint for engagement, it is frequently used to demonstrate and advocate for the library's value to the campus community (O'Clair, 2012). This makes instruction proactive, visible, and public facing. However, by focusing primarily on this outward-facing service of instruction, we risk ignoring the invisible systems of access that shape the student's actual research experience. Reconsidering this separation opens up new possibilities for aligning instruction more closely with student research behavior.

This short essay outlines some lessons I've learned as an early-career librarian who works at the intersection of resource sharing and instruction. My focus is on how resource sharing can influence instruction, though the relationship is mutually reinforcing. Librarianship is an evolving field, and these tips are not only methods to integrate resource sharing into instruction, but they are ones that I've adopted over the last three years. Each lesson will include a brief description, an idea for implementation, and a personal anecdote about how I've implemented it. Taken together, these approaches offer a practical model for integrating resource sharing into instruction in ways that are both scalable and adaptable across institutional contexts.

Tip One: Teach "Access Literacy" Not Just Search Literacy

Instruction often prioritizes search literacy at the expense of access literacy. Although the term "access literacy" is not explicitly defined within the literature, the concept is embedded throughout the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, particularly in the frames Information Has Value and Searching as Strategic Exploration (Association of College &

Research Libraries [ACRL], 2015). I define access literacy as the functional knowledge required to navigate the technical and financial barriers between a discovery tool and the physical or digital item.

After taking over our library's research sharing, I noticed that students were requesting materials that the library already owns. Even though we have a link resolver, they did not understand how it worked and assumed that if a database lacked full-text access, the library did not have access. This reflects a simple process that librarians take for granted, but students struggle to conceptualize. In addition, I observed that many lending requests from other libraries were for open-access materials, indicating that access literacy is not a localized challenge. These recurring request patterns in student behavior are not always visible within the classroom itself.

Access literacy is a large umbrella under information literacy and, therefore, implementation for teaching access literacy is dependent on the goals and discipline of the class. For example, in an introductory course focused on finding fewer than ten articles or using primarily full-text databases, resource sharing may receive less emphasis than in a course with an intricate research question using indexes. Both contexts demonstrate access literacy, albeit in different ways. The depth of instruction is at the discretion of the librarian, but strategies might include an icebreaker about encountering paywalled articles, a discussion about how information comes to the library (subscription vs open access) or reviewing database holdings report that breaks down full text versus indexed content. Even small interventions can make access a more visible part of the research process.

In my instruction, I weave access literacy throughout the session. I start with a video showing how an idea comes to the library. I have learned that taking about five minutes at the beginning of class to discuss this process sets students up for later explanations about how interlibrary loan operates. Later in the session, I explain the basics of interlibrary loan and the link resolver. Rather than only explaining how interlibrary loan works, I demonstrate it directly within database workflows in both introductory and upper-division classes. It takes about five minutes to explain and walk through the process, which is valuable class time, but anecdotally, since I have started doing so, I have had fewer students ask me how to access a specific resource.

Tip Two: Normalize ILL as Part of the Research Process, not a Last Resort

In my experience, many students today operate with an expectation of immediate digital availability. This mindset can shape their perception of interlibrary loan, sometimes leading them to view it as a secondary option or a last resort rather than a standard means of accessing information. From my observations at the reference desk and in the classroom, this perception appears to influence not only how students use interlibrary loan but also how they conceptualize the boundaries of library collections. Rather than treating lack of immediate access as a failure of the collection, instruction librarians can frame interlibrary loan as a routine component of the research process, helping to normalize the reality that no single library can provide immediate access to every resource.

The immediate access mindset leads to an unintended consequence: students need an article urgently, and the library does not have it. Many academic librarians have multiple stories of panicked students searching for a source hours before the deadline. While instruction cannot eliminate this behavior, it may minimize it. Intentionally mentioning interlibrary loan processing times helps address students' needs and encourages them to begin research earlier.

A simple, yet effective, idea for implementation is to integrate interlibrary loan into the session outline, even in multiple places. Instruction often conveys implicit messages; for example, presenting resource sharing at the end suggests it is a last resort. Introducing it earlier helps position interlibrary loan as a standard part of research rather than a fallback, while reinforcing the concept of access literacy.

I integrate interlibrary loan into two sections of my outline. First, when discussing database types, I cover subject-specific versus general databases and explain the distinction between indexes and full-text databases, noting that most fall somewhere in between. I introduce interlibrary loan in the context of indexes, connecting it to access literacy by explaining that, due to subscription costs, indexes expand awareness of available information even without immediate access. Second, when discussing how to access materials, I demonstrate how to place an interlibrary loan request. Before doing so, I apply a full-text filter to show that more than half of the results disappear when limiting to full-text. This illustrates that requesting materials from other libraries is a normal part of the research process.

Tip Three: Recognize ILL Patterns to Shape Instruction

Students often borrow materials that do not answer their research questions. While dead ends are a natural part of the iterative research process, they can also stem from not understanding which information types fit specific needs. Analyzing borrowing requests allows a librarian to see exactly where a student's search strategy collided with reality. By identifying recurring errors in resource sharing, we can transform back-end logistics into a source of pedagogical insight, allowing us to adjust future instruction to address specific gaps in student understanding.

Since students have not yet been prompted to submit requests, librarians cannot analyze interlibrary loans for a specific class before it meets. However, past data can inform future instruction. This can be as simple as downloading an anonymized report of borrowing requests and reviewing it for patterns. While it is impossible to distinguish every mistaken request from an intentional one, patterns can still reveal where students struggle. Though imperfect, this approach offers a practical way to incorporate user behavior into instruction.

Given the demands of the semester, it is not realistic to run and analyze reports for every department and class section. Instead, I focus on specific classes I regularly visit. While I cannot directly tie each request to a class session, context often provides enough clarity. If I teach a class on Shakespeare and see a request the next day for prenatal nursing materials, I can reasonably assume it was not prompted by the session. At the end of each semester, I select between three and five class sessions to analyze. For each, I run borrowing reports for two weeks after each class session and review them by hand for patterns. This practice helps align instruction with how students actually navigate research challenges. At a small academic institution, request volumes are often low, and patterns are not always clear. Still, there have been a few instances where this process led me to significantly adjust my teaching to address clear information literacy gaps.

For example, I noticed a recurring pattern in a literature class where multiple students were requesting what they thought were books but were actually book reviews. This pattern revealed that students were struggling to distinguish between resource types in the catalog record. Now, when I visit that class, I make a point to explicitly demonstrate how to identify a review versus a full monograph. Similarly, in a religious studies course, I noticed students requested entire biblical commentaries through interlibrary loan, which were frequently non-circulating and thus went unfilled. I adjusted my instruction to show students how to request specific section scans instead. In both cases, the invisible data of the ILL workflow provided the exact roadmap needed to improve the visible instruction in the classroom.

Conclusion

After three years, I still am not an expert, but my definition of “good instruction” has shifted. I am intentionally working to reach students where they are by highlighting that interlibrary loan is part of the research process. My focus on pedagogical best practices is not absent, but rather reframed through the idea that the visible act of instruction is complemented by the invisible act of resource sharing. When siloed, these services are still beneficial for students, but when they are integrated, it enhances instruction by grounding pedagogy in real user behavior, not just theory.

As I continue experimenting with integrating resource sharing into my instruction, I have come to see back-end systems not only as mechanisms of access but as tools of pedagogy. The data, patterns, and even misunderstandings that emerge through these systems offer a form of feedback that is often absent from the classroom itself. My hope for the future of library instruction is that we intentionally recognize and use these systems as teaching tools to make visible the processes that shape how students find, access, and ultimately understand information. By doing so, instruction becomes not only more responsive but more honest about the realities of research as it is actually practiced.

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