

Lessons Learned in Academic Libraries: What I Wish They Told Me in Library School

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Abstract: This column muses on topics and issues not covered during a Master of Library Science program and offers advice that would be useful for a recent graduate with little experience in libraries entering the field.

Keywords: *new librarians, advice, recent graduates, library school, academic librarianship*



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When I mention to friends, family, and the occasional stranger that I am an academic librarian, they often ask one of two questions: “Aren’t libraries becoming obsolete?” or “Did you have to get a master’s for that?” While I aggressively defend libraries and explain the former, I find I refer to my master’s program almost as if it was a dear friend. The short answer is usually, “Yes, I did, and it was my favorite academic pursuit to date.” The faculty, classes, and my cohort made for a time I treasure even when it felt stressful and challenging. I left feeling confident I made the right choice in a career path, and I recognize how fortunate I am to have attended graduate school and to have the experience I had.

I went into my program not knowing where I wanted to be in the library world, and so I dabbled in my classes. I took courses related to children’s librarianship, special libraries, and archival science, but it was the reference and user experience courses that interested me the most. So, while I did not find myself on any set “track” in library school, I left with the sense that the research and instruction field in academic libraries would be the best fit for me. However, when I found myself working in academic libraries, I quickly realized that as wonderful as my experience was (and as much as I love being a librarian), there were certain lessons I wished I had learned or been exposed to before diving into this profession. I absolutely recognize that library science programs are not created equal, and the classes I pursued may have limited my exposure. The following four points are merely reflections on those lessons and advice for those who find themselves working as an academic librarian fresh out of library school.

How to Lesson Plan and Teach (Library Instruction)

Whether it is in front of a class of undergraduates or one-on-one help with a library resource, instruction is a common thread in the field of librarianship. Knowing this now, I constantly question

why there was not an introductory course in educational theory or pedagogy offered in the curriculum in my master's program. It is, of course, not realistic to expect graduate students to fully understand these theories when they are not pursuing a degree in Education, but "there are accessible theories that have real world applicability. Some of these can lead to ideas that will improve instruction and allow us to be a more reflective and engaged teachers" (Montgomery, 2015, p. 21). While one class does not an expert make, the exposure to the process would have been exceedingly helpful before becoming an instruction librarian. I was so full of doubt (and nerves) the first time I taught, that I have little to no memory of what happened during the experience. I had to teach myself strategies and exercises to deliver helpful, and hopefully memorable, instruction. For example, I quickly realized after observing completely disengaged students in one of my early lessons that active learning of any kind made for a much better experience for the learner – and for me. Allowing for them to learn by doing was incredibly valuable and was a way to have them develop some type of connection (or muscle memory) when they would use the library resources on their own later. I also observed my more experienced colleagues teach their lessons and searched for lesson plans through places like the ACRL's Lesson Plan Sandbox for the Framework on Information Literacy, the Community of Online Research Assignments (CORA), and the Consortium of Academic and Research Librarian in Illinois (CARLI). While that learning experience was valuable, it was one that resulted in many days of trying to reinvent the wheel and an unnecessary guilt that I alone was responsible for each student's success with using the library.

This all being said, if you are eager to pursue library instruction, I would strongly encourage you to explore any education theory or teaching methods course that you can take in your program or institution. If you cannot, take the time to explore resources and lesson plans from your colleagues and

peers to learn how to write a lesson plan that works for you and how to set *reasonable* learning objectives. Look into books and materials that cover the concepts of learning and development theories; one book that I have found useful later in my career and would highly recommend has been *Understanding how Students Develop: A Practical Guide for Librarians* by Rempel, McElroy, and Bridges (2017). Create active learning opportunities for your students and do not worry if those lessons fail. Do not be afraid for the inevitable silence that comes after you ask a question. Allow time at the end of a class to assess how the session went and read the feedback closely. Brainstorm with colleagues or faculty within an education department on your campus to improve your instruction. Lastly, remember that it is an ongoing process; what are librarians if not adaptable?

Community and Technical College Libraries

At some point we have all been guilty in thinking about academic libraries as glamorously old and ornate spaces or ivy clad buildings for students pursuing a bachelors, masters, or PhD. So, let me take this moment to remind you that community and technical colleges have a thriving and unique population of students who also need libraries and all the wonderful services they provide, which often include innovative solutions to real problems in higher education, such as developing strong OER initiatives and programs.

Frequently these institutions are overlooked when academic libraries are discussed. It may not be done intentionally, but there are certain stereotypes people may have when you say, “I’m an academic librarian.” I was guilty of this myself after completing my master’s program. I had earned this degree and while I had no real work experience in libraries, I was applying to jobs I was not even qualified for. At a certain point, I stumbled into a job posting for small technical college and decided to

apply. The opportunity to work there would prove to be one of the best learning experiences I could have asked for.

Working at a two-year college generally requires a librarian to wear many hats. While this may not be for everyone, for a new graduate who is unsure of what area of librarianship to dive into, becoming familiar with multiple roles has its advantages. This does not just fall into categories like technical services or instruction or cataloging. There are also components of a two-year college that are very similar to a public library. Not only were county public library patrons' users of our space, two-year colleges are known to have an incredibly diverse population as they "serve a large proportion of minority, first-generation, low-income, and adult students" (Ma and Baum, 2016, p. 5). The exposure you have in a two-year college library is immense and a very worthy consideration of your time and talents.

Tenure is Not All about Publishing

One thing I heard repeatedly while in library school was to work in academic libraries meant researching and publishing frequently. It was depicted as an incredibly difficult and arduous process, and at the time, it was intimidating and resulted in my having doubts I could hack it in a college or university library. However, it is not nearly as tumultuous as one may think and often not the primary focus of a tenure packet. Scholarship/ professional development is only one portion being evaluated during tenure, and it is usually assessed alongside an individual's teaching/ performance and service. At the College of Charleston, we define those areas as Professional Competency (which includes library instruction), Professional Growth and Development, and Service (to the College, library, and community). Since each of those area directly correlate to my position description, it means that 90%

of my time is spent to Professional Competency and the remaining 10% is shared between Professional Growth and Development and Service. Of course, other academic institutions will weigh the importance of those areas differently, but it is important to remember that going through the tenure process is more than research and writing for multiple peer-reviewed journals and presenting at major conferences. Do these things help and look impressive on your curriculum vitae? Absolutely. But they are not the only benchmarks you have to meet.

It is also helpful to remember that if you find yourself in a tenure-track position, your library administration *wants* you to succeed. It is amazing how this little detail can make a huge difference in how you approach the tenure process. The artifacts required to successfully obtain tenure should be clearly explained, which makes it easy to set specific goals for yourself. Do not be afraid to ask your tenured colleagues for advice and put out feelers for collaboration efforts- not just regarding scholarship but also in programs or projects within your departments. You will also likely go through a third-year review process before you approach tenure. Look at this review as a chance to get constructive and valuable feedback on what you are doing well, what you should keep doing, and what you need to start doing to have a successful tenure review. Again, not everyone's tenure process will be the same, and each institution will vary in requirements. These notes, however, can better prepare you for understanding the tenure process if you are unsure of what to expect in the first place. If you find yourself a candidate for a tenured position, it would be to your benefit to inquire about the process during the interview.

Speaking of Publishing: Professional Development is Not as Scary as it Seems

While publishing is one component of the tenure process, it is still a reality that may feel intimidating if you have limited exposure to it. The good news, however, is scholarship within the field of librarianship is rather inclusive given the nature of the profession being so practice-based. The best advice I have received about publishing since working in libraries was “do the thing, talk about the thing, and then write about the thing.” A very simplified description, to be sure, but the sentiment is key. It is of course helpful to have research interests and important to pursue them, but do not discredit the work you are doing in your day to day. There will always be an interest in hearing about new instruction strategies you have tried in your one-shots or the development of an OER initiative and a plethora of other things. How did they succeed and fail? Share these findings and experiences at a conference. Continue to improve your methods and keep documenting your work. What data did you gather? How have things changed? Here is an opportunity to present again or perhaps to write an article.

You can of course look for journals specific to the field of librarianship, but also consider other education or scholarship of teaching and learning journals. Many lessons from libraries are transferable to other academic departments or organizations. You should look for calls for chapter proposals, as well. Lastly, do not fear rejection. The first article I was the sole author of was rejected by the first journal I submitted it to. I was fortunate that their editorial board sent me a great deal of comments as to why the article was denied, but that did not completely resolve my immediate reaction of dread and self-doubt. After a walk and chat with a tenured colleague, I decided to submit the same exact article to another journal. My thinking was that if it was rejected a second time, I would

at least have a wide range of comments to refer to when making revisions. It so happened that the second journal accepted my submission pending my revision process, and it was later published. While no one wants to be rejected, I cannot deny it being a valuable experience. It makes submitting anything – articles, conference proposals, columns – feel much easier because the illusion is broken; rejection is survivable and ultimately provides you the chance put the best version of your work and research out there.

While I wish I had heard these lessons (and more) when I was in library school, I recognize that learning them on the job is what many people go through- constantly. Despite what some may say, this profession is very much alive and changing. With new growth will always be something new to understand and perhaps wish we had known sooner. Let us all strive to build on those conversations, however, and remember to support and encourage each other.

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