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## Re-centering Teaching and Learning: Toward Communities of Practice at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries

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## Re-centering Teaching and Learning:

### *Toward Communities of Practice at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries*

Erica DeFrain, Leslie Delserone, Elizabeth Lorang, Catherine Fraser Riehle, and Toni Anaya

The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) presents important opportunities that can transform learning, but many academic librarians at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) struggle to find a scholarly center when their teaching roles are frequently that of external collaborator. Challenges such as access to student data, meaningful evaluations of instruction, limited opportunities for funding and professional development, and uncertainty over how to negotiate for these have contributed to librarians remaining on the periphery of SoTL work. Hoping to overcome some of these hurdles, UNL librarians are developing a community of practice (CoP) around teaching and learning.

In the summer of 2016, UNL librarians began developing new collaborative structures and practices to increase and encourage library-wide professional development, and this case study captures and reflects upon these attempts. This discussion has three goals: (1) to present the emerging efforts in the UNL Libraries to develop a more intentional CoP around teaching and learning, (2) to outline three recent, multidisciplinary SoTL projects in which librarians played critical roles, and (3) to reflect on how this CoP is inspiring librarians to be more systematic in approaches to teaching, in analyzing these efforts, and in sharing these outcomes and findings broadly.

## Developing Collaborative Models of Instruction at UNL Libraries

Unlike many of its peer universities, UNL, a member of the Big Ten Academic Alliance and a Carnegie R1 institution, does not currently have a Center for Teaching and Learning; a previous center was closed due to budget cuts in 2000. Despite this setback, teaching and learning initiatives on this campus of 26,000 students are still institutionally valued and incentivized, and they occur across many units. Some of these initiatives have been out of reach to the majority of librarians, who have faculty status but generally do not teach credit-bearing courses. For example, the faculty-led Peer Review of Teaching Project has guided hundreds of UNL faculty through the process of developing reflective course portfolios, but only faculty teaching semester-length classes are eligible to apply.<sup>1</sup> For the other initiatives in which librarians were eligible and had participated, they typically did so in isolation from one another along traditional liaison lines.

Struggling to meet the demands of a growing student body with only twenty-two liaisons, librarians began seeking alternatives to the siloed structure of the liaison program and its approach to teaching that would foster greater collaboration and social interaction. Inspired by Belzowski, Ladwig, and Miller's application of Wenger's CoP theory in an academic library,<sup>2</sup> they formalized a mission statement for the liaison program, explicitly stating the program's movement toward a CoP and a SoTL culture.<sup>3</sup> Next, they launched a series of voluntary professional development initiatives centered on teaching and pedagogy. In 2016, two librarians introduced Practicing Pedagogies, a bi-monthly, internal workshop series, designed to provide teaching support and peer review for curriculum development and instruction.<sup>4</sup> The series has covered topics such as reflective practice, active learning, embodied pedagogy, and assessment theory. There will also be a two-day Practicing Pedagogies retreat for academic teaching librarians across Nebraska during summer 2018, which will provide opportunities for librarians to participate in sharing, discussion, and professional development programming related to teaching and learning, as well as for the development of personal teaching philosophies and teaching portfolios.

At the same time as the emergence of Practicing Pedagogies, librarians also began initiating campus-wide events that would help situate UNL Libraries directly within external conversations about teaching and learning. With support from the dean, UNL Libraries sponsored a campus-wide program that featured a keynote and panel discussion of three librarians connected with the Instruction Matters: Purdue Academic Course Transformation (IMPACT) program.<sup>5</sup> The event drew more than seventy attendees, including administrators, teaching faculty, and librarians from around the Midwest. Later that year, UNL Libraries appointed Alison Head of Project Information Literacy as Visiting Scholar for 2016–2017.<sup>6</sup> This was the first time UNL Libraries had ever bestowed such an appointment, which provided a unique opportunity for librarians and faculty from the entire University of Nebraska's four-campus system to engage with Head about research methods and students' information literacy needs. With additional financial support

from the University Research Council, librarians again hosted a well-attended campus-wide program, which included a keynote by Head and a panel discussion titled “Critical Literacies for the Mass Information Age,” which included four UNL faculty.<sup>7</sup>

## Building Connections through the SoTL

While UNL librarians’ teaching practices are shifting toward a more community-oriented approach, more collaborative research partnerships are also forming. The following librarian-led and librarian-engaged SoTL projects, based in three UNL colleges, highlight challenges and opportunities of these multidisciplinary collaborations, provide some preliminary findings, and demonstrate how the SoTL CoP is shifting the boundaries of UNL Libraries’ liaison program.

### INFORMATION LITERACY SKILLS FOR FIRST-YEAR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

When the Office of Academic Affairs at UNL launched an internal SoTL grant competition in 2016, DeFrain, a social sciences librarian, and Anaya, the multicultural studies librarian and instruction coordinator, immediately began discussing how they could use this opportunity to better understand the information literacy needs of UNL’s international students. They shared their interest with other liaison librarians who had worked closely with this population and realized their interests and concerns were broadly held. Due to an established relationship, they reached out to the faculty coordinators of U.S. Education in the Age of Globalization (CYAF 121), a course required by all international students during their initial year of study, and let them know of their interest in using SoTL methods to evaluate the course. The coordinators enthusiastically agreed, and together they submitted a successful funding proposal.

Focusing on this course was a strategic choice for the librarians: it is offered year-round (making it ideal for iterative assessment), enrolls approximately 150 students each academic year, and implements a standardized syllabus. The course’s main objective is to help international students adjust to life in the United States by emphasizing student success skills and campus resources, university expectations, and a comparative exploration of global cultures. As the course was not assigned to any individual liaison, numerous librarians had assisted with it over the years, providing instruction and tours of the library.

Despite this longstanding relationship, librarians sensed that their efforts were not supporting course objectives. They struggled to provide support for students working on a difficult writing assignment, which required a minimum of five scholarly sources for an essay comparing educational systems of their home country, the United States, and one other nation. They were also challenged by the time spent supporting the course. Librarian in-class instruction, initially scheduled for twice a semester, often resulted in additional visits and individual reference consultations as instructors responded to the students’

ongoing struggles. Devoting multiple class periods to library-related instruction negatively impacted progress toward other learning objectives, and the unclear outcomes of the information literacy sessions in relation to student needs and assignment objectives was a concern. As a third challenge, librarians felt ill-prepared to effectively teach this diverse group of students, given their wide range of English fluency.

With the format of the Visiting Scholar and Practicing Pedagogies programs as a model, DeFrain and Anaya used part of the funds to bring in an outside expert to help facilitate conversations about teaching between the librarians and the course coordinators. This was the first in-depth conversation the librarians had ever had with the coordinators about the course and was a tremendous opportunity to discuss goals and obstacles.

Almost immediately, the value of the project and the strengthening of the community of practitioners involved was evident. Initial conversations between the librarians and the instructors revealed shared values around teaching and learning and a commitment to experimentation and continuous assessment of the course. The instructors welcomed the librarians as partners, granting them access to student data, inviting their feedback, and modifying the curriculum based on project findings. After DeFrain and Anaya presented about the project at UNL's Spring 2018 Teaching and Learning Symposium, a new department approached them about conducting a similar study in the future.

## RESEARCH AND INFORMATION LITERACIES ACROSS UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULA IN THE COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE

While DeFrain and Anaya were working on their project, two other librarians were invited to collaborate on another SoTL study, also funded by the Office of Academic Affairs. Two College of Architecture faculty, who coordinated the required first-year Design Thinking (DSGN 110) and capstone Design Research (ARCH 489) courses, were frustrated that students' understanding and abilities in information literacy and research practices seemed no better in their final year than in their first. Upon receiving notification of funding to improve undergraduate information literacy across the college's curricula, they sought out the architecture librarian, Kay Logan-Peters, Riehle, the learning resources design librarian, and two instructional designers, to create the research team.

A challenge for the research team was to define the study. Course improvement was a goal, but the faculty also wanted to understand students' development of information literacy competencies throughout their programs. The research team considered a variety of methodologies and consulted with UNL Libraries' Visiting Scholar Alison Head on several occasions during the project design phase, an opportunity that was valuable not only for consultation specific to the project but also as professional development for the librarians in particular. Ultimately, the team decided on a two-fold focus: (1) the integration of information literacy in the first and final-year courses and (2) the college's approach to information literacy on a broader scale. The focus on each course's design supported

specific changes related to course learning outcomes. The latter objective acknowledged that student engagement with information literacy would not be limited to these two required courses. The research team designed a two-part study involving curriculum analyses for both courses and a qualitative exploration of the college faculty's approach to information literacy and their perceptions of students' information literacy abilities.

The researchers invited all faculty within the college to participate in semi-structured interviews, using an interview protocol designed by the research team. The librarians conducted the interviews to facilitate open discussion since both architecture instructors are college administrators. Meanwhile, the instructors completed curriculum alignment exercises for each of their respective courses with guidance from the instructional designer and librarians. Using a backward design approach<sup>8</sup> and with learning outcomes identified for each course, each instructor mapped outcomes relevant to research and information literacy to course assessments and activities in order to identify gaps in the course designs and to make changes accordingly.

In DSGN 110, mapping information literacy outcomes to design thinking learning outcomes generated an “a-ha moment” for the instructor. A major course goal is that students value information in the design process; the Information Has Value frame from the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* resonated with the instructor.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, design thinking process stages and outcomes such as Empathize, Define, Ideate, and Test, mapped to information literacy outcomes related to determining information needs, accessing and evaluating information, and using information effectively for a specific purpose. In collaboration with the librarians, the instructor worked from these connections to more thoughtfully and explicitly integrate information literacy skills and competencies throughout the course.

The librarians co-designed and led two in-class sessions focused on framing and scoping design problems and conducting research to support design challenges as students embarked upon their first major projects. As pre-work for these sessions, students engaged with pieces providing professional perspectives about design research, including methods for collecting information and the value of research to their design processes. Librarians assigned introductory research-related tutorials on topics such as navigating the libraries website, determining the credibility of information, and searching effectively in a major multidisciplinary database. They also created a tailored online research guide for students to refer to throughout the course. These efforts were significant, as the architecture librarian had not previously been involved with the course. The context of the SoTL project and the new collaboration between the architecture and learning resources design librarian helped spark creativity so that librarians could envision a different way to contribute to this key course in the program's curriculum.

Collaborating on this research project and related teaching efforts and sharing the process with colleagues within and outside UNL Libraries have contributed to librarians' professional development and supported our developing CoP. The research team anticipates that sharing the study's findings will spark strategic conversations among college faculty

about the role of and approach to information literacy in the curricula. In the meantime, one of the study's co-PIs participated in the panel following Head's Visiting Scholar keynote, offering insights related to information literacy in general and as relevant to her course and the SoTL project. Logan-Peters and Riehle also shared about the project at a recent internal event, during which librarians and staff members present on their research projects.

## RESEARCH AND INFORMATION LITERACIES FOR HISTORY UNDERGRADUATES

Librarians working within history courses at UNL noticed challenges similar to those identified by College of Architecture faculty. In particular, Lorang, a humanities librarian, and Delserone, the government information librarian, recognized that approaches to research and information literacies within the history curriculum did not seem to lead to students' growth and expertise with regard to finding, using, and creating information. Two long-term goals emerged from their participation in the visit by Purdue's IMPACT team and the readings and discussions from the Practicing Pedagogies series: (1) developing scaffolded learning opportunities for students, appropriate to the level and composition of the course, and (2) gaining experience in reflective, critical practices for librarians to improve their teaching. Along with these goals, librarians' observations of students and discussions with history instructors strongly informed and influenced their approach.

Prior to the project, a significant challenge was the divergence between history faculty expectations, student preparation, and the instruction that librarians traditionally provided. For example, both librarians consistently received the same request from instructors—an introduction to the libraries' resources and services—regardless of course level, content, or student backgrounds and experience with research. In general, faculty assumed that students learned the research process elsewhere and that the completion of a research project created a competent, confident student-researcher. Given these assumptions, faculty requested instruction about specific resources and services rather than teaching toward the research process and essential dispositions such as the identification, synthesis, and evaluation of information environments.

In response, the librarians identified strategic courses within the history curriculum where they might partner with instructors to engage students in fundamental learning about the research process and associated information environments, as well as build students' confidence in their abilities to do research. The librarians considered courses that were foundational to departmental curriculum, motivated students to consult with librarians, and/or were part of a curricular sequence. They identified *The Historian's Craft* (HIST 250) and *Rights and Wrongs in American Legal History* (HIST 340) as candidates.

HIST 250 is a major requirement; students usually take it early in their program, and a minimum of four sections are taught each academic year. The humanities librarian contacted the primary instructor, who agreed to collaborate on a more deliberate integration of information literacy and the research process into the course. Lorang assembled a team that included Delserone, Riehle, and the university archivist. Delserone identified HIST

340, an upper-level legal history course, as a potential avenue for introducing government information literacy into the history curriculum; students in this course frequently requested assistance. A meeting between the librarians and the legal history instructor identified a sequence of five courses that could benefit from a similar integration. When the College of Arts and Sciences announced an internal funding opportunity for curriculum improvement in spring 2017, the librarians initiated writing a successful proposal in collaboration with the legal history instructor to implement the work over a two-year period.

Each team identified challenges students typically faced in the courses and then determined learning objectives and demonstrable activities students should be able to complete if the teaching and learning were successful. The challenges students faced in both courses were very similar, so the teams worked from similar objectives and goals. The objectives and practices fell broadly under the categories of asking questions, distinguishing among and using different types of sources, and attributing information. The legal history team added goals related to the nuances of legal and upper-level historical research (e.g., legislative chronologies).

The librarians took the lead in these particular areas but in collaboration with the instructors of record. The teams amended existing coursework and assignments to better achieve particular goals and outcomes. Both teams recognized the value of increased time with librarians as well as the pairing of in-person teaching with virtual learning opportunities. Students completed interactive tutorials, created by the humanities librarian, which asked them to embrace curiosity as central to historical research, learn strategies for asking historical research questions, and link those questions to information needs and sources. These tutorials required students to participate at each point in the process and to reflect on their responses. The government information librarian created an online course guide to provide students with key resources for historical research and several narrated videos which demonstrated the why and how of searching for relevant digital sources.

The projects are ongoing, with formal assessment of the first iteration underway. Anecdotally, both librarians noted increased requests by students for research assistance after the course integrations began; outside of formal consultations, several students volunteered that they found the legal history materials useful. Both history instructors reported stronger final projects in both courses than in previous semesters. However, many variables (e.g., students' prior experiences, the link between student completion of the virtual modules and performance on research assignments) are awaiting analysis. Students did well in performing and documenting the research process within the virtual modules—which asked them to consider their particular research for the course—but further assessment is necessary to see whether students successfully transferred and applied learning from the modules to their research projects more broadly. Ongoing assessment work will inform refinement of the pedagogies, teaching materials, and learning opportunities for both courses. Next steps include sharing results from this first stage of collaboration within the UNL Libraries and with colleagues in history. Preliminary assessment information, including feedback from the history instructors, supports further implementation, such as working with the history capstone course as well as other courses in which students require learning opportunities in legal historical research and government information.

## Conclusions

Creating a CoP around teaching and learning at UNL Libraries has required a cultural shift but the benefits are many. The internally organized professional development opportunities and multidisciplinary, formal SoTL projects detailed in this case study provided opportunities for reflection, clarification, and sharing regarding teaching identities, practices, and findings. Librarians at UNL identify as scholar-practitioners, emphasizing “cooperation, collegiality, and collaboration”<sup>10</sup> and the integration of daily practice, research questions, and critical reflection. The reflective practices and intentional teaching and learning activities associated with SoTL map to the scholar-practitioner model; for some librarians with teaching apportionments, SoTL may be an essential part of their professional practice and/or scholarly output. Further, the cultivation of a CoP—which situates learning as social participation<sup>11</sup>—among the librarians taking part in these projects disassembles the silos of librarians’ instruction efforts.

The collaborations of disciplinary faculty and librarians at UNL are encouraging. Across the three SoTL projects featured, librarians engaged at all levels of the undergraduate curriculum and within three of the university’s seven colleges. This experience suggests that the CoP has fostered more thoughtful, deeper, and intentional integration of research and information literacy competencies in courses and curricula. The accomplishments to date also suggest that librarians are ideal initiators and leaders of SoTL projects. In each project, librarians established themselves as equal partners in SoTL, either by participating actively once brought into a team or by initiating the project with disciplinary faculty.

Finally, the CoP provides support for librarians to grow professionally as teachers, through opportunities to read, discuss, and present ideas, and develop curricula alongside colleagues. It also creates an environment that engages librarians to view the liaison program’s and UNL’s instructional efforts more holistically. This bringing together of people, expertise, and approaches has the potential to create new synergies and connections, with UNL Libraries and librarians playing a major role.

## ENDNOTES

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4. Lorna Dawes and Elizabeth Lorang, “Practicing Pedagogies: Summer Teaching Summit,” accessed February 27, 2018, [http://unl.libguides.com/Practicing\\_Pedagogies/Summit](http://unl.libguides.com/Practicing_Pedagogies/Summit).
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11. Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Learning in Doing: Social, Cognitive, and Computational Perspectives (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4.

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