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Equipped for Teaching: Sharing Strategies for Developing Librarians' Skills

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Abstract

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- to provide a forum for discussion of current teaching practices among librarians in higher education institutions
- to compile a list of strategies and tips which could be applied to participants' own situations.

The workshop included small as well as large group discussions and opportunities for participant feedback. It also incorporated a number of activities modelling the topics under consideration. The topics included:

- upskilling librarians with disparate teaching backgrounds and capabilities
- incorporating different learning styles
- using evaluation for ongoing improvement of skills
- development and ongoing use of a resource bank.

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Title: Equipped for Teaching: Sharing Strategies for Developing Librarians' Skills

(Findings from a workshop facilitated by the authors at the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) 5th Biennial Conference, 28 October 1998)

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Introduction

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Background to teaching information literacy skills at the University of Wollongong Library

The University of Wollongong has a student population of approximately 13,000. The University Library has a staff of 65. Information literacy instruction is provided by the Reference Services Team, which comprises: the Reference Librarian, Law Librarian, 10 Faculty Librarians, Outreach (Off Campus Services) Librarian, Electronic Services Librarian and the University Archivist.

In 1997 the Reference Services Team conducted 638 hours of subject specific information literacy instruction for 6457 students. In addition, 512 hours of generic information literacy instruction was delivered to 4397 students.

A team and collective approach to teaching information literacy skills has been a deciding factor in increasing the skills of these librarians and in their move towards becoming reflective practitioners.

Issues and Barriers

In the first of several individual reflection activities during the workshop, participants were asked to think of a colleague who might benefit from improving their teaching and presentation skills, and to consider any issues or barriers which might be hindering their colleague's progress. Responses were then solicited from the group.

A range of issues and barriers, reflecting instructors' different teaching backgrounds, were identified. These could be grouped under the following broad categories:

Individual/personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of self confidence • no formal teaching background • lack of skills and know-how • lack of experience • embarrassment • personality type • reluctance to take on a different role • reticence in dealing with groups of younger students
Group/unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of support from colleagues • no team spirit or philosophy • staff cynical or not interested • sporadic teaching program • resources concentrated on one or two staff who do all or most of the teaching • not in job description
Organisational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • management cannot afford to spend funds/time on teaching improvement activities • institutional attitudes towards information literacy issues • some staff working part-time • lack of facilities • lack of time • fear/concerns about information technology breakdowns
Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • perceptions about librarians' roles as teachers • simply not enough opportunities for practice • only familiar with one learning style • competing priorities • not open to change

These issues and barriers were recorded on butchers' paper as they were identified. Participants were then asked to use coloured dots to indicate those that they felt were of most importance.

The facilitators then divided the participants into small groups, assigned each group one of the 'priority' issues that had been identified in the previous activity and asked them to come up with some possible solutions.

Issue or barrier	Possible solutions
Lack of skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • professional development e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attending short courses • 'work-shadowing' colleagues • professional reading • obtaining material via the Internet • establishing core competencies and skills lists • organisational support for staff development
Competing priorities and lack of time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • personal time management skills • organisational support • prioritising tasks with assistance of supervisor • flexibility
Information technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • closer liaison with IT staff (both within the library and across the wider organisation) • organisations should have a technology plan • ensuring an adequate budget • sharing resources • having backups for relevant technology (ie. 'Plan B') • ensuring software compatibility

Solutions to some of the more common barriers included:

- external training courses
- training courses held on site
- in house presentations or workshops conducted by own staff
- self help books and videos
- material at relevant web sites

Personal Obstacles

A number of 'personal obstacles' that can confront librarians in their role as teachers were also dealt with during this part of the workshop. Suggestions as to how teachers might cope with some of these were discussed.

Coping with nerves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prepare and rehearse your material • steady your breathing • attend a public speaking course
Speech patterns and voice projection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • obtain peer feedback • record your presentations (for self-evaluation) • vary your tone and expression • do vocal exercises/training • utilise team teaching (to share the talking)

Mannerisms and gestures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be more self aware • obtain peer feedback • consider cultural sensitivities (e.g. don't point at individuals)
Dealing with difficult audiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • read your audience (change your pace when the mood requires it) • exercise authority
Questioning techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • vary your technique to suit your audience • seek ideas from colleagues

Preferred Learning Styles

An awareness of preferred learning styles helps librarians to understand the importance of being flexible in their teaching practices and responsive to learners' needs. The facilitators gave a brief overview of the learning styles theory (using material adapted from an MTE *Train the Trainer* program that one of the facilitators had undertaken).

The theory proposes that there are three preferred, but by no means mutually exclusive, learning styles or representational systems:

- Visual – a person who learns by sight, preferring to see concepts displayed/written down or demonstrated.
(Typical characteristics of a visual learner - looks up when asked to recall something, tends to speak quickly and in a higher pitch.)
- Auditory – a person who learns by sound, preferring to hear concepts explained or discussed.
(Typical characteristics of an auditory learner - looks sideways when asked to recall something, tends to talk more and has a rhythmic tone of voice.)
- Kinesthetic – a person who learns by action or 'feel', preferring to work through concepts hands-on.
(Typical characteristics of a kinesthetic learner - looks down when asked to recall something, tends to speak more slowly and in a lower pitch.)

Discussion focussed on how to cater for these different styles in a library situation. The example was given of directing users to another area of the Library - a person who is visual may prefer to see a library floorplan; someone who is an auditory may prefer to hear verbal directions; while someone who is kinesthetic may prefer to walk or be shown the way.

Each small group of participants was assigned a particular preferred learning style and asked to identify various teaching methods or materials, which they could include in a library session in order to cater for that particular learning style.

Learning Style	Suggested methods or materials
Visual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • live demonstrations • screen dumps • overhead transparencies • PowerPoint screens • displays • whiteboard • written brainstorming • handouts and activity sheets • video tape presentations • watching role playing • have them read through material first • seeing the 'real thing' (e.g. microfilm equipment)
Auditory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • verbal explanations • opportunities for discussion (involving whole class / within small groups / in pairs) • verbal brainstorming • question and answer sessions • audio taped library tours • verbal feedback • role playing • playing sounds (e.g. linking class content with appropriate rock song, having background mood music) • having more than one speaker (for variety in verbal presentations) • verbal repetition
Kinesthetic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a range of hands-on activities e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • catalogue and database searching • using a print index • mind or topic mapping • examining journals • interpreting a database record • note-taking (being the group scribe) • presenting • tours showing locations of library collections and facilities (self paced/self guided) • active role playing • group work/team work (non-threatening)

Lesson Planning

The completion of lesson plans for all information literacy classes has become standard practice at the University of Wollongong Library. Lesson planning has proved beneficial in ways that far outweigh any perceived disadvantages.

Lesson planning disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• onerous• time consuming• does not allow for individuality• locks you in
Lesson planning advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• thoughtful and reflective process• standardisation• assists preparation• useful backup in emergencies• benefits colleagues• allows for evaluation (of self and participants)• documentation

Evaluation and Reflective Practice

The role of evaluation and reflective practice in helping librarians to improve their teaching skills is an important one. There are a number of ways in which this type of evaluation can take place.

Self evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• write brief comments on lesson plan after class is over• try to allocate time (however brief) for some reflective practice
Feedback from library colleagues	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• discuss/share experiences with peers• show lesson plan to supervisor for comment
Academic feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• invite lecturer/tutor to sit in on class• ask them to relay students' subsequent comments
Student feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• note comments during class• monitor requests for help at Information Desk from students in that class• distribute evaluation forms• arrange focus groups

Collective Approach to Teaching Practice

A collective approach to teaching should allow library staff to feel actively involved and part of the information literacy agenda within their organisation. This may occur at either an individual level, with peers or at the organisational level.

Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• preparation (individually / jointly)• presentation (individually / team teaching / many individuals all teaching)
Peer Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• videotaping classes• colleagues sitting in• comparing lesson plans, instructional materials and activities
Organisational	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• resource it - add it to the budget!• encourage staff to:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• write articles• submit applications for grant funding• present at conferences• allow staff to hold:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 'teaching in focus' days• academic forums• reflection days• retreats• involve staff in committees within your institution outside the library. Examples at the University of Wollongong include:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Faculty Education Committees• Campus research groups (e.g. Teaching and Learning Research Group)• Tertiary Literacies Working Party

Support Material

Developing a collective approach does not need to be a costly exercise. As an individual activity, participants were asked to identify some of the support material, practices, people and resources which could be utilised in their own organisations. With the use of a topic map, answers were grouped under the following headings:

Resource material	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• a resource folder of past lesson plans• having a common area for storing resources• sample exercises and activities• keeping electronic copies on main network for ease of access• using module boxes/kits *
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Information sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • informal sharing of ideas • articles in campus newsletters • e-mails to team on new teaching successes • 15 minute spots at team meetings • updates and refresher sessions for Information Desk staff
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • guest presenters such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education Faculty academics • Disabilities Co-ordinator • International Students Advisor • study leave • adult education courses • courses offered to new academics (e.g. the University of Wollongong offers an 'Introduction to Tertiary Teaching' course)
External support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • membership of discussion lists – general and discipline specific • web sites • key journals in easily accessible areas • table of contents sites • e-mail alerts • attendance at external training courses • university centres for staff development or similar support units on campus

* Module boxes are used at the University of Wollongong Library specifically for the teaching of generic information literacy classes. These classes are prepared by individuals within the Reference Services Team and then taught by a number of staff as part of the weekday lunchtime and Saturday morning workshops program. A module box may include items such as a detailed lesson plan, overhead transparencies, script for a PowerPoint presentation, backup disk of a PowerPoint file, master copies of activity or exercise sheets to hand out to students, whiteboard markers and evaluation forms.

Modelling Concepts

The facilitators concluded the session by summarising the various teaching techniques they had modelled during the workshop. These included:

- introductory techniques and icebreakers
- using anecdotes / relating concepts to own situation
- using different questioning techniques / instruction techniques / reporting techniques
- achieving consensus about key issues for discussion
- explanation and discussion

- modelling concepts
- using handouts and activity sheets
- mind mapping
- brainstorming
- structuring activities for individuals / small groups / whole class
- team teaching
- and lesson planning.

Helen Mandl, Information Access Coordinator, University of Wollongong Library

Helen has recently been appointed to the position of Information Access Coordinator. Prior to this she held the position of Faculty Librarian for Informatics and STS for 4 years. She was a recipient of the Vice-Chancellor's Award for Outstanding Services for the development of 'The Research Edge', a modular course in postgraduate information skills. The modular design of this course has lent itself to a wide range of applications within the Library's information literacy agenda. Helen has a teaching background and an interest in information resource management.

Susan Jones, Faculty Librarian - Commerce, University of Wollongong Library

Susan has held the position of Faculty Librarian for Commerce for the past 6 years. She won the Library's Merit Award for her development of a inhouse instructional guide for one of the major Australian bibliographic databases. She has completed a Train the Trainer course and subsequently has trained other library staff in preferred learning styles. Susan has completed 'Introduction to Tertiary Teaching (ITT)', a credit point course offered through the University's Faculty of Education. She has developed a range of generic library workshops and has an interest in reference sources for company, industry and statistical information.