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## **This I Believe—All Libraries Should Be Teaching Libraries**

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# This I Believe...All Libraries Should Be Teaching Libraries

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Catherine Palmer

**abstract:** In this article, I imagine a library that prioritizes teaching users how to find, evaluate, and use information over the traditional library public service activities of collection development, access to materials, and reference services. If I ran the library, all services would support end-user education.

In May 2007, I found myself outside Chicago, attending the annual LOEX conference. Because I had arrived a day early, I took advantage of an opportunity, arranged by the conference organizers, to visit the Elmhurst College Library, which had recently undergone extensive renovation. The purpose of the visit was to tour the facility's state-of-the-art library classroom and to learn how the physical environment had been modified to make it as user-friendly as possible. It was a remark by one of the librarian tour guides, however, that made this visit memorable. The guide was explaining the reasoning behind the location and design of the public reference desk, which was a simple office desk, out in the open, and very visible and accessible from the main entrance to the building. She stated casually in passing, "Since we're a small staff, it was very easy for us to decide that, instead of reference librarians, we were going to define ourselves primarily as instruction librarians and make teaching the central focus of our library." I experienced a pang of pure envy when I heard those words. At that moment, I seriously considered what it would take to uproot my life and apply for a job at Elmhurst College so that I could work in a library that articulated its most important function as teaching. Being an eminently practical person, I quickly realized that relocating from southern California to a suburb of Chicago probably was not the best move for me, but I continued to daydream about what it would mean to transform a research university library from one that is focused on the traditional activities of collection development, access to materials, and reference to one that defines teaching users how to find, evaluate, and use information as its organizing principle.

Sometime later, I was listening to *This American Life* on National Public Radio, and I heard a story "Unbreaking the Bank" from a show called *Scenes From A Recession*.<sup>1</sup>

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"Unbreaking the Bank" described how the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) took over a small, failed bank in western Washington and transitioned it to a new, solvent owner. The FDIC agents came in at 5 p.m. on a Friday afternoon; and, by Monday morning, XYZ Bank had become ABC Bank, with the same customers, assets intact, and a new financial future. Of course, many of the details did not match up, but it made me wonder, "What would our library look like if we closed on Friday with our traditional services and structures for providing them in place and opened on Monday, having been transformed into a true teaching library?" This article attempts to answer that question.

### **Why Does This Matter?**

It is easy to understand why the FDIC has an interest in making sure that the banks, whose deposits they insure, are solvent. It may not be so apparent why making teaching central to a library's mission may end up being key to its continued relevance in an age in which information is so widely and easily available. One way to begin is to look at our library statistics. As illustrated by the following graph, on a typical day at the University of California Irvine Libraries, we provide two instruction sessions that reach an average of 55 participants. We engage in 360 reference transactions. This includes in-person reference, chat, and e-mail reference, telephone reference, and research consultations. Among our three buildings, our gate counts show that we have 8,100 visits. Our most popular destination is the libraries' Web site, which gets an average of 25,000 visits per day (see graph 1). The difference between the number of physical and virtual visits and the number of those users who ask for help is dramatic. Even as both faculty and librarians acknowledge that the information landscape is increasingly complex and multi-faceted, the number of users we reach proactively through our instruction program is dismally low.

### **Instruction as Marketing**

Although there are sound educational and philosophical reasons for integrating information literacy and library instruction into the academic curriculum, other factors may be

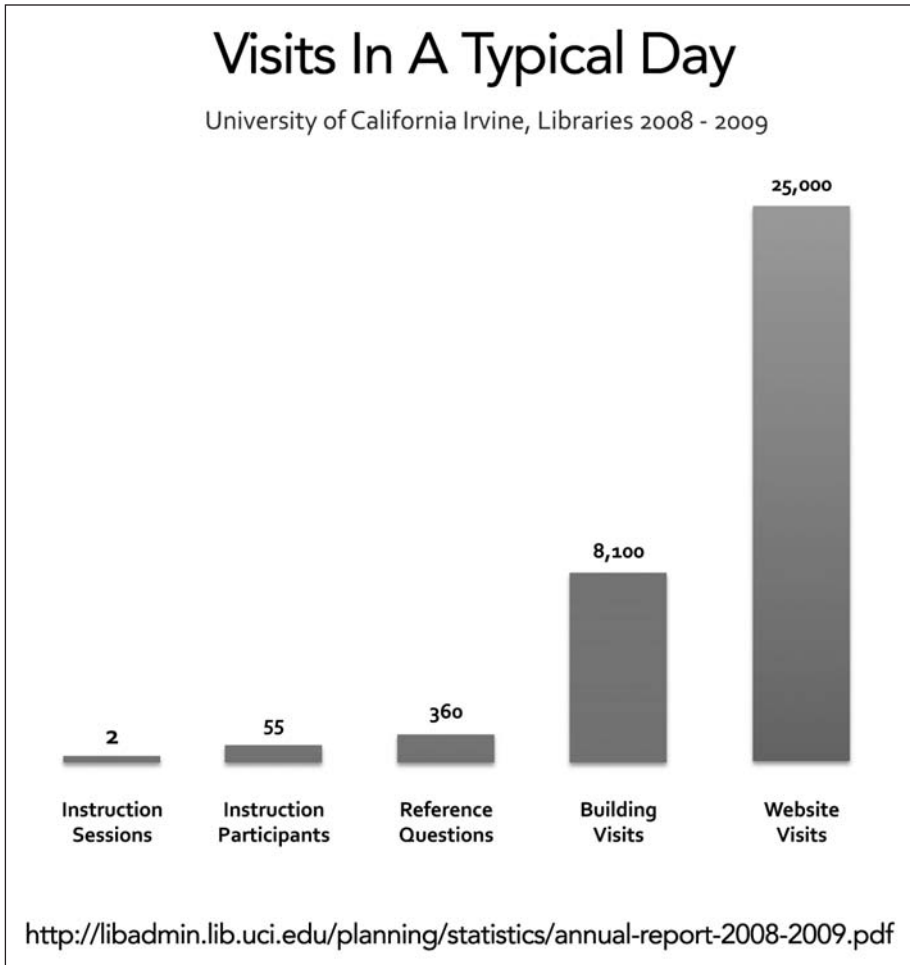
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even more compelling as libraries and librarians make decisions on how to best deploy and use their limited (and seemingly ever diminishing!) resources. We need to embrace instruction, whether provided in-person or online, as the most effective marketing tool we have at our disposal. The best way to ensure that the patrons (the majority of whom are undergraduates) who come into our buildings in the thousands, based

on gate counts, have some idea of what libraries can offer them—besides a safe, clean, quiet place to study—is to have an engaged, enthusiastic, knowledgeable librarian teach them. This is true of one-on-one encounters—a good reference transaction can leave a profound impression on a student—and it should be just as true in instruction sessions.



Graph 1: University of California, Irvine Libraries Visits in a Typical Day, 2008-2009

The beauty of marketing our resources and services through instruction is that we reach 23 or 53 or 333 students all at once. I used to make a joke—until I said it so many times I could see the look of “OMG, she’s going to say it again!” every time the topic came up—that instruction librarians are reference librarians who have learned self-defense. It is far easier to reach a group of 23 students with enthusiasm and energy during a class than to devote the same amount of energy to helping those students one-on-one 23 times. This is not to diminish the importance of the reference services we provide to individuals. We cannot possibly address each individual student’s information need during a class session in the same way that we can during a reference transaction. We can ensure that students have a baseline knowledge of the resources and services available to them, however; and, perhaps most important, we can give them a vocabulary that will help them ask better questions when they do need individual help.

Besides the opportunity to market our services, there are other reasons to consider instruction as the primary function of an academic library, reasons that have conse-



quences for the broader society outside the academy. Most librarians who work in higher education are familiar with the tension between teaching and research experienced by tenure-track faculty at a research university. The conventional wisdom among faculty

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is that research always wins. Whatever our personal response to this perceived reality, the fact is that our libraries have evolved to support the research needs of faculty and, to lesser extent, those of graduate students and, to a far lesser extent, those of undergraduate students. This maps to what I think of as the research university “pyramid of influence,” with faculty sitting in small numbers at the top but exerting great weight, graduate students sitting under faculty in somewhat larger numbers and exerting somewhat smaller influence, and undergraduates sitting at the bottom in large numbers and with little influence. If we think in terms of scholarly output, this model makes perfect sense; but, if we think in terms of wider influence outside of the university, it begins to break down. The fact is that most undergraduates go into the workforce, not on to graduate school. If we expect our society outside the academy to understand what it is that its tax dollars allow research institutions to do and to make informed decisions on how to support those institutions, then it is undergraduates who are most in need

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of understanding how universities “make knowledge.” Librarians are in a unique position to help this learning take place. Unlike faculty, who teach content, librarians are experts at teaching process, at teaching others how to do something, and, along with that, at teaching the meta-cognition processes that help others “learn how to learn.” Without our collections, we would have little to teach; but without teaching others how to find, evaluate, think about, and use those collections, there would be little need for the collections we have and little support for allocating scarce resources to acquire more.

### **What Would a “Teaching Library” Look Like?**

Putting aside the philosophical considerations for a moment, what exactly would a “teaching library” look like? How would it look and act differently from a library focused on collecting materials and providing assistance in their location and use? What would it do and not do? In many respects, little would change. We would continue to acquire high quality materials in all formats that meet the research, teaching, and



learning needs of all of our users. We would continue to enhance our physical plant to make it an attractive, safe, clean, and welcoming environment. Our library staff would continue to strive to provide excellent customer service to library clientele. The changes that calling ourselves a “teaching library” would bring about, at least at first, would be internal and largely invisible to someone looking in from outside. Let’s consider why these subtle changes are important.

- Labels matter. By calling ourselves a teaching library, we would begin to think about ourselves differently.
- We would learn a new vocabulary, a new story to tell to our clientele, or a new way to tell an old story about what it is that libraries do and how they do it, and what this means to our listeners.
- We would spend less time trying to anticipate how to make it easy for patrons to use our resources and more time learning how people learn, and then we would learn how that works in our environment.
- Instead of viewing each instruction session as a “one-off,” we would spend time and energy finding out how students experience the curriculum in their chosen majors; and we would work hard to embed information literacy instruction into the courses that make sense.
- We would think about how to leverage what we do individually to help patrons so that we could repurpose and reuse our skills, expertise, and materials to reach large numbers of users.
- We would transform our library Web site from a collection of passive links to an interactive educational experience for our users.
- We would continue to collect materials, but we might begin to use different criteria in their collection. For example, if we place less emphasis on the size of our collection and more on the quality of our services, we might become more open to a “purchase on demand” response to acquiring materials, rather than the current “purchase just in case” model.
- We would continue to maintain and improve our physical space, but we might begin to make changes that would change the ways in which students use it.

The biggest change, though, would be a shift from an emphasis on helping individuals once they get to us to an emphasis on reaching groups of individuals in settings outside the library. If we look at all the services that libraries provide through the lens of “How can we maximize the number of people we reach, and how can we reach them as efficiently and effectively as possible?” we will begin to consider the services, resources, and spaces that we provide in new ways that will profoundly shift the focus of our professional conversations.

### **How Can We Transform the Collections and Reference Library Paradigm to the Teaching Library Paradigm?**

Thinking about what a teaching library is and what it could be is easy. Transforming an organization with a long history of doing things in a certain way is quite the opposite. If we could simply wipe the organizational slate clean, almost like the FDIC wiped out



all traces of XYZ Bank over one weekend and reopened as ABC Bank on Monday morning, it might be easy to create an instruction department and fill it with personnel who had the right expertise, abilities, and ways of thinking to embody what it means to be a teaching library. If research libraries, which tend to have large staffs and well-defined bureaucratic structures, could simply decide—like the Elmhurst College librarians did—to become a teaching library and to act accordingly, that might achieve the desired change. If the library's top leaders really wanted to transform their organization, they could dictate that departments change names, librarians drop some responsibilities and take on others, and achieve transformation in a top-down manner. But the reality is that any of these methods are (a) highly unlikely to occur and (b) would not really ensure that we achieve the transformation we desire. It is one thing to assign bodies to a task and change the names on departmental offices but quite another to expect librarians to embrace and embody the change we hope to make.

Since most of us work in the real, not the ideal, world, we need to consider more practical and, ultimately, more effective methods to help us reach the goal of becoming a teaching library. Most research librarians have three primary job functions—collection development, reference service, and education. Most research libraries organize their public services personnel into departments of bibliographers, reference, and instructional services. Librarians might have more or less responsibility and work related to these areas, depending on a variety of factors. We could simply assign some librarians, based on their strengths, to each of the three departments and charge the instructional services department to lead the transformation effort.

A more creative approach is to consider a model that has proven to be a very effective method of providing librarians with an opportunity to learn how to be good teachers. ACRL's Information Literacy Immersion Program provides instruction librarians with the opportunity to work intensively for 4 ½ days on all aspects of information literacy. I include myself among those who have been privileged to participate in this intense and intensely rewarding workshop that allows and encourages librarians to think deeply, intelligently, and creatively about what information literacy means and how to incorporate it into their own approach to teaching, into programmatic approaches within the library, and beyond. I am not suggesting that we send every librarian to the ACRL Immersion Program. Instead, we can empower our instruction departments to design an immersion experience for librarians whose primary assignment might be reference or collection development but who also provide instruction.

The way I imagine that this would work is that the library would have, or would establish, an instructional services department with a small number of permanent staff (two or three) who are master teachers through virtue of experience, education, and enthusiasm for teaching. Then, we would create a rotation whereby a few research librarians from collections and reference or other library departments would have a one- or two-year assignment to the instructional services department. The experienced instruction librarians would act as mentors, role models, and coaches for their honorary colleagues. The "temporary" department members would have the opportunity to focus on instruction in a larger context than simply responding to requests from individual faculty to provide workshops. Each cohort of colleagues would be expected to examine the curriculum of their liaison departments in order to determine how students go





through the curriculum and to target gateway or entry-to-the-major courses for a more advanced level of instruction than is provided to lower-division students. They would also identify opportunities to provide advanced instruction to students in their majors. In some disciplines, this would be fairly straightforward; others would prove more difficult to penetrate. But, by acting programmatically, the libraries could slowly inculcate the expectation that all students, regardless of their major, would graduate with a sense of how knowledge in their chosen discipline is created, shared, evaluated, and archived for use by future scholars.

This model would create some logistical issues, but it would address several challenges that face many library education departments; and, more important, it would provide a sustainable administrative structure to support the provision of instruction by research librarians while continuing to provide reference services and to acquire materials. First, there would be more people available to do the work of the instruction department. Second, it would allow research librarians multiple opportunities to learn and apply good pedagogy to information literacy instruction. Finally, it would help to develop an institutional memory for instruction and allow the library to develop new leadership for this important function.

Up to this point, I have emphasized ways in which we can promote the teaching role of librarians and libraries in on-the-ground, face-to-face instruction. The ability to develop online instruction materials for use in library education and research is equally important and must also be addressed as we allocate resources to the goal of becoming a teaching library. The library instruction department should have a small, highly talented technology staff with the expertise necessary to create high quality, pedagogically effective, online learning materials. This group would need to have a close relationship with the libraries' information technology and Web services departments and, ideally, would include an instructional designer and a graphic designer.

## Achieving a New Paradigm

The changes and the methods of achieving them that I have described are well within the reach of most institutions. Making in-roads into the academic curriculum is never easy; but, with careful tracking, we should be able to document progress over time. Most of us collect detailed instruction statistics that cover how many instruction sessions we provide, how many students we reach, and how much time we spend teaching; and, hopefully, we will see those numbers increase. We can also begin the practice of collecting and examining those statistics at a more granular level so that we can determine if we are, indeed, providing introductions to disciplinary resources in classes that reach students as they enter their major field of study and more advanced instruction to disciplinary resources for students in upper-division classes. We will need to establish metrics for success, some of which will be specific to our own institutions but which will allow us to measure the progress we make toward transforming ourselves into a teaching library.

The process of experiencing institutional change is often painful, and it meets with resistance for all kinds of reasons—some legitimate, others not. But, if there is the will to achieve the goal of remaking ourselves into a teaching library, we have the creativ-



ity, the intelligence, and the ability to make this happen. The ultimate benefit is that we can increase the visibility of librarians at every level of the university. Librarians will come out of the library and into the spaces that faculty and students inhabit. It is no longer enough for librarians to simply respond when asked for information; they must continuously promote library resources and services in a manner that engages and addresses the needs of the appropriate audience and reinforces the role of the library and librarians in the intellectual life of the campus. If we expect not to just survive but to thrive in the near and long-term future, the decision to become a teaching library is not "Will we?" but "How will we?"

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## Note

1. "Scenes From a Recession," host Ira Glass, *This American Life*, WBEZ, March 3, 2009, <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/377/Scenes-From-a-Recession> (accessed September 13, 2010).