Librarians as Teacher Leaders: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities

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Information literacy, or the ability to locate, access, evaluate, and use information efficiently and effectively, has been identified as a component of critical thinking and an essential element of lifelong learning.[1] As institutions of higher education and the organizations that accredit them continue to incorporate information literacy into their standards and curricula, academic librarians are taking on ever greater responsibilities for instruction. Indeed, reviews of academic library job postings indicate that instruction has become an integral part of the academic reference librarian's job,[2] signaling a "major change in the job of the reference librarian."[3] A comparative study of U.S. and Australian job postings found that information services, including information literacy, bibliographic instruction, and user education appeared more frequently in job postings in the U.S., and in fact constituted one of the core competencies sought by employers.[4] Instruction responsibilities are even making their way into job announcements for catalogers and other positions traditionally regarded as "technical services."[5]

The importance of instruction in academic library settings is reflected in other areas as well. Many library schools within the United States incorporate some aspect of library instruction into their curricula. Sullivan found that of 33 library schools surveyed, 19 included a separate offering on library instruction or user education, while another five incorporated the topic into other courses.[6] Only nine schools did not address the subject at all. Nevertheless, there is concern within the profession that librarians are not adequately trained to be teachers, and that library schools need to incorporate instruction on teaching and pedagogy even more ubiquitously into their curricula.[7]

Perhaps even more importantly, academic librarians are beginning to identify themselves as teachers. Walter found that librarians he surveyed saw teaching as a central or core function, one that influenced other parts of their work such as reference and collection development. These librarians tended to seek out jobs with strong instructional components. With employers seeking librarians willing and capable to take on teaching roles, and as librarians begin to think of themselves as teachers, the profession must begin to define what, exactly, a teacher-librarian in an academic library setting is.[8] In response to the changing role of librarians in academic libraries, Fowler and Walter challenged librarians to "consider what you should expect of your instruction coordinator," and suggested the expectation should be "instructional leadership."[9]

Teacher-Leaders: Qualities and Competencies

Instructional leadership refers to a teacher's influence beyond the classroom environment to initiate change among peers, administrators and within the institution. While the idea of teachers as leaders, especially within the classroom and with their students, is not a

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new one, researchers have only recently begun to explore and study the traits and behaviors that define teacher leaders within their larger institutions and communities.[10] Most previous research has focused on those in assigned managerial positions, including principals, department heads, deans and provosts, with the apparent assumption that such positions of authority offer the greatest opportunities for influence. While general leadership theory, especially as it evolved after the "great man theory," or trait leadership, emphasizes the idea that leadership is not synonymous with titles or positions,[11] it is only within the last two decades or so that researchers in education have begun challenging the "pervasive view that equates school leadership with the principalship."[12] This shift in perspective has helped to highlight the ways in which teachers, and others in instructional roles, can influence and effect change within their organizations.

At all levels of education, from kindergarten through higher education, teachers are expected to use their knowledge of subjects and pedagogy to influence their students to learn. Much has been written in education and related literatures (including library and information science and psychology) about best practices for achieving learning in the classroom. While promoting learning within the classroom may be the main objective of teaching, some researchers are becoming interested in those teachers who use their influence to effect change beyond their own classrooms. Often dubbed "teacher leaders," these instructors do not necessarily hold management positions, but they exhibit the qualities and skills which allow them to inspire colleagues and administrators and to motivate change to improve teaching practice.

Research on teacher leadership has identified sets of skills, knowledge and behaviors that tend to characterize teacher leaders, and which can be grouped into three realms: personal, interpersonal, and organizational. Although the largest body of research centers on teachers at elementary and high school grade levels, the same sets of traits also appear in literature focusing on university instructors, and in many cases are relevant and applicable to academic librarians.

Personal Traits

Those teachers who assume formal or informal leadership roles are often identified as exhibiting specific personality traits or behaviors. Perhaps one of the most important, and most widely identified, of these characteristics is that teacher leaders tend to take responsibility for their own continuous learning and professional development.[13] Such teachers epitomize life-long learning by constantly updating their knowledge and skills through a variety of learning opportunities. They are also likely to use research and data to inform their decision-making. As York-Barr and Duke state, "'[t]eacher leadership is inextricably connected to teacher learning,'"[14] and indicate that teachers who are identified as leaders tend to "assume a learning orientation in their work."[15] Foster maintains that "on-going professional learning [is] critical in the development of leadership"[16] while Lambert describes teacher leaders as those who are "focused on improving their craft."[17]

The importance of professional development and continuing education for librarians, whether through formal or informal means, is widely discussed within the profession.[18] Rapid changes in technology, as well as the changes engendered by expanded teaching roles, makes it necessary for librarians to continually seek out opportunities to update their skills. A number of schools and professional associations offer such opportunities, and they range from intensive training programs such as the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) Institute for Information Literacy Immersion to credit-bearing courses and non-credit workshops offered by continuing education programs of ALA-accredited library schools. That librarians avail themselves of these opportunities is evidenced by the fact that in 2003 1980 people earned credits for continuing education, while an additional 20,359 pursued non-credit professional development opportunities.[19]

One aspect of the learning orientation demonstrated by teacher leaders is that they tend to use research and data-collection to inform their decision making.[20] Hatch, White, et. al. found that teachers who relied on research and investigation to solve problems and inform practice gained wider influence within their institutions and communities, concluding "[i]nstead of the power, authority, and control that can come with formal positions, the teachers in this study… build their expertise, credibility, and influence by engaging in personal and public inquiries [and] deepening their understanding."[21] Frost and Harris refer to this investigative nature as "technical-rational authority" and suggest that it is becoming

increasingly important as the evidence-based practice movement grows.[22] This trend permeates the library field as well. Booth notes that in medical and health librarianship, evidence-based practice is now commonplace,[23] and indeed many authors offer support and advice for implementing this practice[24] and the profession offers its own open-access publication, *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, published by the University of Alberta Learning Services.

The motivation to keep learning and to use that learning to inform practice helps to build a teacher's reputation as an authority or expert in the field, a reputation which has been identified as key to the teacher leader's ability to influence others for change. Frost & Harris identify personal and pedagogical knowledge as part of a teacher leader's source of authority.[25] York-Barr and Duke identify "expertise about teaching and learning"[26] as an essential component of leadership, and maintain that the majority of teacher leaders are those with a significant amount of teaching experience, even suggesting that in general teachers will not be ready to become leaders until midway into their career. Academic librarians are often faced with a situation in which they are not viewed as peers or colleagues by teaching faculty. While a Master of Library Science may be considered a terminal degree in the field (and many librarians supplement this with additional graduate degrees), and while some campuses grant librarians faculty status, librarians often feel they are not viewed on equal footing with faculty. As such, librarians may have to work harder to establish their expertise and authority. As Frank & Howell point out, "success is based on several attributes or characteristics…[librarians must be] credible, with appropriate academic credentials, including graduate degrees."[27]

One repercussion of teacher leaders' success within the classroom and reputation for authority is that they are more likely to be tapped by administrators for formal leadership positions.[28] Nevertheless, a study conducted by Center for Teacher Leadership at the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Education found that 82% of these teachers indicated that they had not received training for the roles they were expected to assume,[29] underscoring the importance of a teacher leader's willingness to seek out and pursue professional development opportunities. Second, researchers indicate that many of the teachers identified as leaders are listened to and able to exercise influence because they are viewed as authorities or experts.[30] Related to the idea of informed decision-making is the teacher leader's propensity for reflective practice. In other words, not only do teacher leaders keep themselves informed, and use research as evidence for decision-making, but they also take the time to step back from their practice and to think critically about what they are doing. Such teachers will identify areas of concern and seek methods to improve. Lambert describes "reflective practice as the genesis of innovation."[31]

Within the world of academic libraries, Lupton stresses the importance of critical reflection as an important tool to improve one's teaching, and encourages librarians to reflect on their own practice, but also to debrief with colleagues in order to share others' input.[32] Since it is relatively new for librarians to think of themselves as teachers in the classroom-style of teaching, and because many librarians feel under-prepared for this role, self-reflection becomes a crucial way of understanding teaching in order to improve learning.[33] Samson and McCrea describe ways in which librarians can also employ peer-to-peer assessment for critical reflection and improved practice.[34]

Indeed, innovation is another key to leadership, as teacher leaders are characterized in the literature by their willingness to take risks, whether through piloting new practices within the classroom, or voicing ideas and concerns.[35] Lambert refers to this orientation as a "strong sense of self" and asserts that this self-knowledge means "they are not intimidated into silence by others."[36] Mader maintains that for academic instruction librarians, the willingness to take risks is essential.[37] She notes a study by Sheldon which applied Bennis and Nanus' model of leaders to librarians. Sheldon found that the traits of vision, communication, self-confidence, and trust that had been identified by Bennis and Nanus in corporate leaders held true for librarians, but that the librarians also valued risk-taking. Likewise, an active learning session at the 1996 LOEX conference found librarians identifying the willingness to take risks and responsibility, as well as being able to create an environment where it is alright to fail, as the second most important of nineteen qualities needed by instruction librarians.

Interpersonal Traits

A teacher leader's ability to influence change necessary depends on her ability to interact successfully with colleagues and peers, and teacher leaders tend

to demonstrate strong interpersonal skills and behaviors. Indeed, the willingness and ability to work collaboratively with peers and colleagues was probably the most widely identified characteristic of teacher leaders.[38] In York-Barr and Duke's review of twenty years worth of education literature, "collaboration was identified as the primary means by which teachers made an impact,"[39] and they emphasize "that building relationships with colleagues and principals emerges as a key factor in the effectiveness of teacher leaders."[40] It is of equal importance for instructional librarians to be able to communicate their vision of instruction to colleagues within and outside the library, and to build relationships with faculty across campus.[41] Indeed, the ability to work collaboratively and the importance of relationship building is deemed such an important aspect of teacher leadership that Donaldson suggests "relational leadership" as a more appropriate term to describe the phenomenon[42], while Knight and Trowler, working in a university setting, adopt the term "interactional leadership."[43]

Means and methods of collaboration can vary. Dozier describes cases of teacher leaders who use professional organizations as a means to effect change, such as a middle school teacher who used her position within the state art teachers association to influence a change of standards to align with those of the national association.[44] Little describes the most successful teachers as those who "were explicit and consistent in expressing the importance of working together,"[45] and highlights examples of teachers who used staff meetings to discuss problems of practice in order to find solutions. These teachers were often the first to voice problems that turned out to be common, giving increased credence to the idea that teacher leaders are also risk-takers.

The strong emphasis on collaboration and relationship-building as essential to teacher leadership underscores the idea that such leadership often occurs when colleagues draw on each other's experience and expertise. In this vein, authors point out that by nature teaching tends to be an isolated profession. Schools are typically structured such that classrooms are fairly self-contained, and teachers do not always have professional interaction built in to their work.[46] In a university setting, the culture of professional autonomy can be even stronger.[47] Thus, educational institutions need to find ways to provide atmosphere and opportunities for teachers to work together.

While classroom teaching may be a solitary endeavor most of the time, the job of most librarians, particularly instruction librarians, tends to lend itself to collaboration and relationship-building. Many academic libraries employ subject specialist or implement liaison programs, both of which create natural connections with teaching faculty as certain librarians become point people for academic departments.[48] When developing information literacy classes, instruction librarians may collaborate even more closely with faculty. Librarians often contact faculty to discuss the research topics and assignments for the class in order to make the library session relevant by tailoring their instruction to coordinate with class content.[49] Beyond tailoring instruction sessions, some librarians will even work with faculty to design assignments that integrate information literacy learning outcomes and appropriate use of library resources.[50] Indeed conspicuous involvement of a librarian in the classroom tends to result in better student learning for information literacy.[51] Moreover, many librarians reach beyond faculty to collaborate with other campus partners such as writing centers, academic support departments, and academic technology or instructional design centers.[52] The relationships built through these collaborative efforts offer librarians a number of advantages. First, when faculty and other campus departments endorse the library, which may encourage students to make greater use of the resources and services offered. In addition, as librarians work and share ideas with others on campus, they can gain a greater voice in the broader campus context. As Graham notes, "building relationships and creating positive word of mouth are some of your strongest marketing tools."[53]

While collaboration and strong relationships offer possibilities, teacher leaders need to gain the trust of their colleagues in order to be able to exert influence,[54] with Frost and Harris arguing that "trust could be said to be a crucial element of social capital which is clearly necessary for the successful development of teacher leadership."[55] The suggestion is that colleagues will only allow each other to become leaders if they feel trust in one another. Some authors explicitly identified an individual's emotional quotient (EQ) or their ability to understand, empathize with, and manage the feelings and emotions of others as an important skill for teacher leaders.[56]

Organizational Understanding

Finally, several authors underscored a teacher's understanding of their institutional or organizational culture, and ability to work within that culture to effect change, as a key characteristic of a leader. While teacher leaders are often catalysts for change, they are not generally depicted as renegades, but as team players who are able to influence the system because they understand the system and know how to work within it. Frost & Harris refer to this type of understanding as "situational knowledge," which they describe as an ability to read and understand different environments, rather than a body of knowledge.[57] In particular, they assert that teacher leaders understand the political landscape of the institutions and organizations within which they function, know where the power bases lay, and understand how to act strategically within this framework. With their focus on distributed leadership within a school context, James, Mann, and Creasy align organizational understanding with emotional intelligence, and suggest that leaders have to be able to function within and manage the "emotional dynamics of the organization."[58] York-Barr and Duke also acknowledge the importance of the teacher leader's "understanding the school culture and how to initiate and support change,"[59] with particular reference to the need to build political support within the organization. Dozier relates the case of a teacher who wanted to revise certain processes within her system, but sought and collected feedback from assistant directors and directors within the district before pursuing change. Dozier maintains that "understanding of the districts chain of command and her successful use of her spheres of influence," ensured a smooth change.[60] Blackmore studied leadership in a university setting, and concluded that different departments each evolved their own culture and preferred ways of communicating, and that effective leaders may need to adapt their style when they moved between or among departments.[61] Similarly, Knight and Trowler claim that "cultural sensitivity is paramount," and emphasize the importance of working within the norms of the various departments in higher education.[62]

Shane recognizes the importance of organizational understanding for librarians, stating "political savvy and involvement in the campus bureaucracy have also become necessities for librarians."[63] She offers a list of internal and external factors with which librarians must be familiar if they want to influence change on campus. Shane goes on to underscore the need for instructional librarians, in particular, to identify "key players" and other influential individuals on campus in order to achieve goals for information literacy programs. Frank & Howell emphasize the need for librarians to be aware of strategic priorities and political realities within their institution, and be adaptable to them.[64] Once again, organizational understanding tends to draw on relationship-building skills. Rettig states "the challenge to reference today is to discern existing and developing boundaries and to bridge these through new relationships with those whom we serve."[65]

Current Practices

Throughout the summer of 2009, the author visited four colleges and universities accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education to interview faculty, staff, and administrators responsible for administering the campus' information literacy program. Each of the institutions (hereafter referred to as Institutions A, B, C, and D) was chosen because it offered an example of a robust information literacy program, including high levels of collaboration between faculty and librarians, integration of information literacy beyond one-shot sessions, and some form of assessment beyond the class level. As such, it is reasonable to think that librarians at such institutions would exhibit the traits and qualities associated with teacher-leaders, and indeed the interviews and observations bore this out, confirmed by administrators and faculty who repeatedly pointed to the librarians as leaders for information literacy on campus.

All of the librarians engaged in professional activities which aided them in keeping their skills and knowledge base current, and helped them solidify reputations as experts for information literacy both at their own institutions, and in some cases nationwide. Two of the librarians at Institutions A and B have published articles and book chapters, and while many attend conferences regularly, at least one has been traveling recently to conduct workshops and present at conferences. Another, who had only recently graduated from library school, is considering pursuing another advanced degree while she worked as a business librarian. This librarian emphasized that her undergraduate degree in business was important in building credibility with her faculty. The librarians also demonstrated critically reflective practice. Using tools such as minute papers, quizzes, and focus groups with

faculty, the librarians attempted to uncover the areas in which students needed the most support, and to refine their instruction to best meet those needs.

The interpersonal skills of the librarians at these institutions was evidenced by the levels and types of collaboration in which they engaged. Two of the institutions, A and B, offered examples of courses in which librarians and faculty were involved in a level of collaboration that amounted to a partnership. In each case, librarians attended classes with students, assisted faculty in designing and grading assignments, and taught several class sessions throughout the semester. Indeed, at Institution B, the faculty-librarian team won an award from the Center for Teaching Excellence for their work. At Institution C, faculty regularly consult with librarians on how to incorporate information literacy into their courses and programs. Further, the librarian at this institution was heavily involved in the First Year Writing class. She had designed an assignment along with the faculty, which she administered and graded after her session.

These librarians are cognizant of their need to constantly cultivate relationships with faculty and administrators, and repeatedly used words such as "relationship-building," "personal diplomacy,"and "boundary-spanning" to describe their outreach efforts. A librarian at Institution B, in particular, emphasized the importance of finding "key allies" on campus. In cultivating these relationships the librarians also demonstrated knowledge of and involvement in the organizational structure of their institutions. In institutions B and C, librarians sat on influential campus-wide committees, including Faculty Senate and Curriculum committees. Such positions offer librarians an opportunity to network with other influential people, and to promote their causes. Indeed, at Institution C, all new or revised courses submitted to the curriculum committee must have information literacy objectives included, attesting to the influence librarians have had in promoting information literacy campus-wide. As stated, each of the four institutions described here were chosen because of their exemplary information literacy programs, and in each case the traits and qualities from the three realms of teacher leadership exhibited by the librarians underpinned the success of these programs.

Assessment: Outcomes in Search of a Leader

Nevertheless, just as instructional librarians share many of the same opportunities and strengths as leaders, they also share a common area of weakness. While the ultimate goal of teachers is to improve student learning, the biggest criticism of the notion of teacher leadership within education literature is the general lack of solid empirical research on the topic. The majority of studies that have been done are small in scale and rely on convenience samples. Additionally, the studies tend to be qualitative in nature, often taking the form of case studies and interviews.[66] As a result, the claims of teacher leadership at this point outweigh the evidence, as there is simply not enough research to support.[67]

Studies thus far seem to focus on defining teacher leadership, rather than assessing its impact on schools and students. Authors repeatedly assert the importance of improved practice, and by extension improvements in student learning, to the concept of teacher leadership, but studies repeatedly fail to make a connection between the two areas. York-Barr and Duke note that overall lack of evidence to support the assertions of improved learning, and indicate that the greatest amount of evidence points to positive effects on the teacher leaders themselves.[68] Indeed, perhaps because of lack of clear definition, the majority of studies train their focus on the behavioral and personality traits of individual leaders. References to practices related to instruction and improved learning tend to be tangential, such as the emphasis on modeling critically reflective practice, while areas of direct impact, such as assessment or learning outcomes, are largely ignored by the literature. For instance, Nichols found an emphasis on pedagogical enrichment, but the focus was on teachers' professional development,[69] while Farquhar's study identified nine themes related to instructional leadership, none of which directly related to classroom practice or student learning and assessment.[70] Likewise, Cochran conducted a collaborative study of classroom teachers and teacher leaders, and found that in a value exercise, both groups rated knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment was rated as most important by both groups, but did not probe to see how these teachers implemented such practices.[71] Overall, the literature seems to lack a strong empirical connection between instructional leadership theory and improved student learning in practice. Indeed, in her review of three decades of literature, Little found that data on teacher leadership focused "resolutely and astutely on instructional improvement" remains small.[72] If the ultimate goal of

teacher leadership is to improve student learning outcomes, than more research needs to be done to establish a correlation between the two.

Library literature abounds with articles on evaluating and assessing instruction sessions. However, much of the writing is either descriptive or prescriptive in nature, rather than being research-based. For instance, survey articles review a number of direct and indirect methods for assessing information literacy learning outcomes and outline the advantages and disadvantages of each.[73] While these overviews offer important information on trends and tools available and may offer advice on implementation, they are descriptive in nature, and do not delve collection or use of data gathered from assessment. Like in the education literature, those library articles that do review assessment in practice are typically very small in scale, relying mainly on convenience samples, and offering results which, though informative, are not generalizable.[74] Moreover, these articles overwhelmingly focus on assessment at the course level, which though it may show some results, it does not offer the insight into overall gains in knowledge as program level assessment would. Lindauer, Arp, et.al. note that while information literacy programs are growing, assessment of these programs often lags behind.[75] Indeed, in a 2001 survey of academic libraries conducted by ACRL, only 13% of respondents had formal assessment programs in place.[76]

At each of the case study institutions, librarians did employ some assessment tools to measure student learning outcomes and program efficacy. In general, these consisted of class or course-level assessments, including graded assignments, minute papers, and quizzes. Institution D also implemented an institution-level assessment. The librarians created a local online quiz which has been administered to incoming first-year students to create a baseline of information literacy knowledge. Over the next few years, the librarians hope to administer the test to seniors in order to assess the change in information literacy knowledge over the course of their education. While these institutions stand out in that they do incorporate assessment, librarians at each institution acknowledged challenges in achieving wide-scale authentic assessment. Indeed, none of the institutions currently are involved in direct program level assessment of information literacy, and while course-level assessment is certainly valuable, it does not allow institutions to track students' growth over time, nor does it indicate whether students are achieving the specific information literacy goals for their majors and programs of study.

Thus, it may be in assessment of learning outcomes related to information literacy that librarians have the greatest opportunity to take on a leadership role. ACRL stresses the growing need for assessment in its 2007 environmental SCAN.[77] The document lists basic knowledge of and ability to use assessment techniques as a core skill for librarians, and points out that regional and professional accreditation organizations will be demanding greater accountability. The SCAN report also contends that higher education will be run increasingly like a business, meaning that librarians will be called upon to demonstrate in specific terms the contributions they make. One way for instructional librarians to do this is to align their instructional outcomes with the curriculum learning outcomes of the institution, and with the relevant accreditation standards for their geographic area and program offerings, thus demonstrating how they help achieve those goals and standards.[78]

Indeed, an expert panel convened to explore the future of information literacy stressed the importance of assessment and suggested that instructional librarians need to develop a thorough understanding of assessment tools and practices.[79] In fact, the panel sensed that there is a lack of understanding among both faculty and librarians about how to properly implement assessment, and one panelist suggested that if librarians become knowledgeable in this area, they could "lead by example and, thereby, open up more opportunity for collaboration with faculty."[80] Thus, just as teacher leaders tend to be viewed as "authorities" or "experts" in their practice, so must they become authorities in assessment in order to lead their colleagues to the next level of practice.

Conclusion

As instructors in the area of information literacy, librarians display many of the competencies and qualities associated with teacher leaders in the broader field of education. Librarians tend to take advantage of the many professional development opportunities available to them in order to keep up with trends in the field, and to continually sharpen their skills. They use their strong communication and interpersonal skills to build relationships and collaborate with colleagues

across campus, including faculty members, student support staff, and others, and thus they become knowledgeable about the organization in which they work, how it functions, and how to influence it. Moreover, the literature shows that librarians are likely to employ critical reflection, either on their own or with peers, in order to become more aware of how they teach, and how to improve. Indeed, it appears that the time is ripe for academic librarians to seize the opportunity and "become aggressive and dynamic participants in the campus community's teaching, learning, and research agendas" (Rader, 2004, 80, 83 cont'd).[81] As accreditation organizations, the government, and other stakeholders increase pressure for institutions of higher education to be accountable for their goals and offer proof of gains in student learning, the area of assessment may be the next opportunity for librarians to develop and implement their expertise.

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