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Capturing the big picture: Academic library instruction across an institution

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Abstract

This project report describes an internal scan of library staff involved in instruction in a large academic library system. 64 semi-structured interviews were conducted and qualitatively analysed in order to produce a summary of instruction across the library system, and both the challenges faced and supports desired by these instructors. The most often mentioned challenges included the wide variety of students and class characteristics encountered, limitations around time, and navigating faculty expectations. The supports described with greatest frequency were professional development opportunities to support instruction practice, a greater sense of community among those doing instruction, and increased awareness of instruction practices both across the library system and in the institution at large. These findings allowed the authors to form recommendations for the library system to help advance instruction in support of teaching and research in the institution.

Keywords

academic libraries; Canada; information literacy; internal scan; interviews; library instruction

1. Introduction

This project report describes an internal scan of instruction librarians and library staff conducted at the University of Toronto Libraries (UTL). The internal scan was the first project undertaken by the Teaching and Learning Project (TLP) at the University of Toronto Libraries. The TLP was launched in 2019 to increase capacity for instruction, and more specifically to support instruction at scale, curriculum mapping, and online teaching tools. At the time this project was conducted, the TLP consisted of one full-time librarian seconded for three years to the role of Teaching & Learning Project Lead and one librarian on a part-time secondment (one day a week).

An internal scan of one's environment is an important complement to externally focused environmental scans (Association of College and Research Libraries & American Library Association, 2010). While 'environmental scanning in general assists educational institutions in understanding the changing needs of learners and in shaping how they market their programs and services to meet those needs' (Association of College and Research Libraries & American Library Association, 2010, p.3), an internal scan gives a picture of where an organisation is at and allows the organisation to assess how well it is equipped to meet the needs of learners. For this reason, an internal analysis is an important part of strategic planning exercises (Germano & Stretch-Stevenson, 2012). Due to the large size of UTL, information can be held in departmental silos and not widely shared. While statistics gathering about library programming is suggested as a 'useful mechanism for tracking current practices, determining levels of curriculum integration, sequencing needs, trends, strengths, weaknesses, as well as serving to support budgetary and staffing needs' (Association of College and Research Libraries &

American Library Association, 2010, p. 26), this is only part of the picture. Qualitative analysis through interviewing was how the TLP felt a bigger picture of instructional strengths and weakness could be revealed.

Therefore, gathering and sharing a picture of instruction within UTL was an important first step for the TLP. The goals of the scan of instruction were to:

- increase awareness of the instruction landscape within the central libraries
- surface opportunities for improved support of instruction
- enable the TLP to establish goals and priorities for its first year

The scan of instructing librarians focused on the central libraries, consisting of 18 libraries. From May to December 2019, 64 colleagues who provide instruction in the central library system were interviewed. This report highlights key themes and recommendations that emerged from those interviews as well as insights into conducting an internal scan of instruction.

Methods

To begin the interview project, literature on best practices in interviewing as well as internal instruction scans in libraries was consulted. While there was not much written about the latter, one Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) document called *Analyzing your Instructional Environment* (2010) helped with some initial planning.

The document outlines that:

An analysis of the instructional environment is not complete without an examination of the current instructional program, especially in documenting the relationship between the program and the library's and institution's strategic plan (Association of College and Research Libraries & American Library Association, 2010, p. 26).

2.1 Question Development

An iterative approach was taken to develop and refine the interview questions. The University's Curriculum Development Specialist was consulted to discuss question development. Once the initial questions were developed, they were then reviewed by the Deputy Chief Librarian and Associate Chief Librarian for Science Research & Information, and pilot-tested and evaluated by interviewing and holding a focus group with one library. With this collective input, the following seven questions were finalised:

1. In which courses/departments do you teach?
2. What does your teaching look like? (i.e. online/in class, which teaching methods do you use? Is your instruction over multiple sessions, one-shot)?
3. What kinds of support do you think students will need in the next few years?
4. What training/courses have you taken to prepare yourself for teaching?
5. What are the pain points/challenges in your teaching?
6. What kinds of support would assist you in your instruction?
7. What additional thoughts about instruction at UTL would you like to share?

2.2 Interview Process

Managers were asked to share the names of staff members in their departments that provide instruction. With this list, 65 people were emailed with an invitation to arrange an interview and only one person did not reply to the request. Whilst this level of engagement was ideal and colleague participation in the interviews was perceived by members of the TLP as enthusiastic, colleagues may have felt obligated to participate. In the future, providing a general "opt in" form

where colleagues could indicate they are interested in being interviewed might have helped to mitigate a feeling of obligation that a personalised email may create.

64 library staff members were interviewed between May 2019 and December 2019. The scope of the interviews was instruction to students, faculty, and staff, and did not cover internal library staff training or instruction. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual participants and were conducted by one or both members of the TLP. Interviews took place in a variety of settings including private offices or meeting rooms. Some people opted for an interview outdoors on campus during the summer months. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours with the most common time being around one hour.

The interviews were recorded using point-form, handwritten notes. A deliberate decision was made not to use a recording device. Consulting other librarian colleagues who had conducted interviews, they noted that recording devices were obtrusive in the interview process and made people conscious of being interviewed. This is also highlighted in the literature (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Interviewees were given a chance to review the interview notes and provide any additional details or clarification when needed. A goal of sharing the notes with interviewees was to continue the conversation about instruction and to create transparency and accuracy, allowing each person to see what had been recorded during their interview.

Throughout the interview timeline, preliminary themes were identified and recorded. Literature on developing codes was consulted and once interviews were completed, coding was done using NVivo 12 software. A codebook of approximately 200 codes was developed along with definitions and examples of each code. Codes were refined and revisited during the coding process and codes that overlapped were combined to create a total of 161 codes. This iterative process allowed for a more holistic interpretation of interview data over time.

Both authors, who themselves teach within the library system, had to consciously acknowledge their own perspectives on teaching and how that could influence the interview process. As such, it was necessary to acknowledge where objectivity may be difficult.

Keeping a reflective research journal throughout the interview project allowed the interviewer to address challenges continuously during all stages of interviewing.

Both interviewers also consistently discussed the interview process with each other to iteratively improve areas in which they believed they may have limitations. Even with a concerted conscious effort to surface limitations, these strategies can only be successful to the extent the interviewers had awareness of their emotions, bias, and skill in interviewing, interpreting and analysing, and reporting their findings.

3. Interview Findings

3.1 Overview of teaching within the institution

We learned that interviewees conduct a wide variety of teaching, including workshops for faculty in specific academic departments, open registration workshops, course integrated (session content tailored to course assignments in consultation with instructors), course embedded teaching (collaboratively developed with instructor), library orientations for academic programs, and more.

The most frequently used approach described when talking about their personal teaching was active learning, mentioned by 51 out of 64 interviewees (80%). This included demonstrations, activities, think-pair-share, classroom polling, discussions, etc.

One-shot instruction, meaning students are seen once in a class, was the most prevalent type of instruction done by interviewees. It was explicitly mentioned by 43 interviewees (67%). 20 interviewees (31%) also mentioned having taught multiple sessions in a class but this type of teaching is not as common as one-shot sessions.

There are also several instances, often associated with teaching in professional or graduate programs, where a liaison librarian is embedded in a program, participating in curriculum or course committees, and who may grade assignments, or teach a full credit course. In some cases, these credit courses are in the faculty with which librarians liaise, but several librarians also teach in the library school curriculum outside of their work for UTL.

Unprompted, 21 interviewees (33%) mentioned a student-centred approach to teaching. Student-centred learning has been described as 'adjust[ing] teaching activities in ways that enhance student learning' (Wright, 2011, p. 92). Interviewees described how their teaching method 'depends on the class', meaning that the size of the room or class, the subject or academic level of students, requires a different strategy or focus from the instructor.

3.2 Instructor Challenges

A major area of focus in the interviews was on challenges shared in response to the question, "*what are the pain points or challenges in your teaching?*" In total, 23 different instructor challenges were raised in response to this question. The top three themes that were discussed by the greatest number of interviewees are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Instructor Challenges: themes discussed, frequency, and select comments

Top themes	% Interviewees	Definition & Comments
Student and class characteristics	50	<p>Elements of the class or student group that are out of the instructor’s control. These included characteristics such as class size, whether students are taught in-person or remotely, students’ existing knowledge, experience, attitudes, and more.</p> <p><i>It's hard to gauge student interest; are they bored? Interested? Is it sinking in? How do you know if it's a good or bad session if they don't say anything?</i></p> <p><i>It's a challenge to find the right pace and content for everyone in a class</i></p> <p><i>How do you reach remote students?</i></p>
Time	45	<p>Preparation time, notice given prior to instruction requests, competing time commitments.</p> <p><i>Teaching takes a lot of work, energy and effort</i></p> <p><i>You can always do more; could use more prep time but other daily issues come into play</i></p> <p><i>Not getting enough notice before sessions; you have other duties so you can't prepare enough for late notice requests</i></p>
Faculty expectations	39	<p>Issues with communication, session expectations, and differing expectations that faculty have about library instruction.</p> <p><i>Feeling confident to say no if you disagree, if you're given too much to do justice to in a short amount of time, you may not feel confident at first to negotiate, it takes time to build this dynamic</i></p> <p><i>Sometimes what that prof wants students to know is different from what the students want/need to know</i></p> <p><i>There are those faculty members who see the value in the library, and others that see the value but don't give enough time to do a session (i.e., 20 minutes)</i></p>

3.3 Instructor Supports

Relating to the challenges of instruction, Table 2 details responses to the question “*what kinds of support would assist you in your instruction?*”

Table 2: Instructor Support: top themes discussed, % interviewees, and select comments

Top themes	% interviewees	Definition & Comments
Professional development	55	<p>Learning conducted outside of a formal degree program, on a continuous basis to develop and maintain skills.</p> <p><i>A better understanding of what a librarian as an instructor looks like</i></p> <p><i>It would be useful to see the best practices for teaching for a certain type of topic</i></p> <p><i>“Consultations for teaching” would be helpful: meet with someone to get advice on how to approach a course or other instruction related question</i></p>
Building teaching community	41	<p>Desire to form a deeper community of teaching, to work with others across units and departments, and to have the opportunity to talk about teaching.</p> <p><i>More community: rapport and feedback on teaching; instruction seems personal or hidden, people seem nervous to share</i></p> <p><i>More information sharing and an open channel of communication. It is nice to loop one another in versus everyone seeking out this information by themselves as its onerous to continuously be up to date</i></p>
Awareness	36	<p><i>We don't talk enough about teaching</i></p> <p>Knowledge about what other library and University departments and individuals are doing with their instruction.</p> <p><i>Outside of [my department], I'm unsure of what else is happening at UTL</i></p> <p><i>What is the state of instruction with basic literacy skills?</i></p> <p><i>There is a central library calendar, but people are not checking to see what others are doing; it would be useful to know who is doing what and not duplicate effort, and you could work together</i></p>

4. Recommendations

Based on the findings, recommendations were presented to the library's leadership. While many recommendations came directly from the interviews, we amplified some due to the changes in instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically support for online teaching and learning.

4.1 Create a culture of sharing among instructors

Many of the interviewees shared that they are not sure what others are doing and worry about potential duplication of effort or conflicting information being delivered.

A sentiment that was expressed through the interviews was whilst one may teach in a specific discipline or with specific collections, they would like to learn about how others teach to understand contexts outside of their department. As teaching and learning continues to be interdisciplinary, sessions we teach will touch on a variety of skills and subject areas. Building a cross-disciplinary understanding of teaching not only helps to support students more holistically, but also builds the teaching community and awareness that most interviewees mentioned would be helpful.

There have been attempts to share teaching materials with colleagues either within a department or through committees. However, few materials have been shared, and staff are not aware of where these items can be found. The interviews also showed that there is reluctance to share due to a fear that one's practice does not measure up to an undefined standard. Having a defined, shared instruction approach would help create a feeling of inclusion, allowing people to feel secure in their practice and more willing to share. This, in turn could help to break down silos, reduce isolation, duplication of work, and provide more opportunities for collaboration. When providing these opportunities to share, it will be important to include multiple ways of sharing that suit different personality types and comfort levels for example, in meetings or online with opportunities for reflection.

The challenge of time – not having enough time to do things as we wish – could be addressed partly through sharing materials so that instructors (particularly new instructors) have a template to build on.

4.2 Strive for consistency and standardization where possible

A few interviewees discussed the need for consistent onboarding and training of staff, especially for those who are new to UTL or have limited experience with teaching.

Consistency in the context of these interviews refers to:

- Consistent staff onboarding and training
- Collective best practices
- Shared and standard content for instruction to students

Interviewees noted that a lack of oversight and coordination with instruction left them uncertain if they were best meeting instructional needs. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenge of quickly creating online instruction objects provided an opportunity and motivation to coordinate and collaborate across departmental boundaries. This new reality finally allowed us to address duplication in instruction that exists between campuses. Offering a standard orientation session for onboarding twice a year addressing logistical considerations as well as pedagogical best practices for instruction was recommended. For example, modules for library staff on such topics such as equity, diversity, and inclusion, accessibility, active learning, differentiated instruction etc. would ensure consistent understanding of key instructional issues and practices.

4.3 Support for instruction at scale

To further support instructors with time and other capacity challenges as well as provide more equitable access to instruction for students, support for instruction at scale would be beneficial.

Currently, some students receive library instruction through several optional programs for first-year students. The authors proposed these initiatives be expanded to all students to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities that will set them up for success. Expanding programming would require partnerships with coordinators of first-year initiatives in Arts and Science as well as with student services, writing centres, and registrars.

Related to the recommendation above, *Consistency and Standardization where possible*, standard, shared content and approaches to library workshops would help to address issues of scalability and ensure that instruction to students is more widespread and equitable.

During the 2019/2020 academic year, the TLP collaborated with liaison librarians and faculty members in Mathematics and Architecture to undertake two pilot projects to provide curriculum integrated instruction to large first-year undergraduate classes. A Teaching Assistant (TA) training approach was found to be the most effective and efficient method to deliver quality instruction to large numbers of students. Working with the university's Teaching Assistants' Training Program to expand training to TAs on library research could also assist with getting library training to large numbers of undergraduate students without solely relying on library staff.

4.4 Stronger foundation and support for online teaching and learning

Prior to spring 2020, most of the teaching done by interviewees had been in-person, face-to-face instruction in classrooms or labs. The trend toward more online teaching & learning was something that a few interviewees highlighted as anticipated upcoming changes. A push toward more online learning offerings has been the trend in higher education for the past few years (Lederman, 2018). However, what was quite unanticipated was how quickly instructors would have to adapt to online teaching and learning during the Winter 2020 semester.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about unprecedented institutional and global changes. The move to online classes at the end of the Winter semester and for the entire Summer 2020 semester required flexibility in library teaching delivery and the use of different tools and platforms to support students, faculty, and staff. Interviewee suggestions of providing just-in-time student support such as online modules for students to access and complete on their own pace has become more relevant in the current teaching reality.

To build expertise in best practices for online learning, continued and strengthened collaboration between university and library IT departments is needed. As online learning reveals issues in equity and access in a myriad of ways, more support for software and tools to address challenges with technology and access is required.

5. Conclusions

Instruction is a core service that academic libraries provide to supports students, faculty, and staff in their teaching and research. It creates a connection between the community and the library, building awareness of what is possible to achieve with information. Library instruction has the capacity to impact information behaviour in a way that stretches past degree programs and extends into life-long learning.

The internal scan was an excellent opportunity to see the types of teaching that are happening across the central library system. The interviews also allowed for those who teach to reflect on their practice and share, in a productive way, what is working and where improvements or

support would be beneficial. Meeting these recommendations will require sustained collaboration and focus over time, but these efforts will strengthen the already outstanding work that is happening with instruction at the institution.

For others who may wish to take on an internal scan of instruction through interviews, the authors offer a few suggestions:

Reflect on your work

Keep a journal of your process and write in it regularly. Setting a timeline for check-ins or reflection can be useful in creating this habit and intentionality. Continual refinement and reflection is key.

Discuss your process with others

Be sure to have others review your questions or test out your process. Interviewing is a great way to connect with others, but unreflective work may hinder this connection without feedback on how to improve your process. While the content of your interviews may be confidential, your process should be transparent. Having others to discuss ideas and talk through interviewing or coding questions has been very helpful.

Stick to your deadlines

After our interviews, a timeline of two days was provided for when interview notes would be provided to interviewees for review. Interviewees were also given two weeks to review notes and provide clarification or further comments. Adhering to these deadlines is important for building trust. If people cannot rely on you to follow through with small things, they may not have trust in you with the bigger picture of work you are doing. Not to mention, sticking to deadlines is crucial for keeping your project on track.

Strive for Objectivity

When interviewing one's own colleagues, it is tempting to relate what they are saying to your own experiences, agree or disagree. Remain mindful of your role as interviewer; this is your colleagues' time to share their thoughts with you. Keep in mind the purpose of your project is to be open to all perspectives and to surface the thoughts of others about your organisation.

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