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## Your brain on information literacy: ACRL Immersion '05

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Carol Scamman, Robin Kinder, and Priscilla Coulter

## Your brain on information literacy

ACRL Immersion '05

Attention, all those with a passion for information literacy (IL) in higher education: ACRL sponsors a yearly opportunity to truly immerse yourself in that passion. Two options make up the Institute for Information Literacy's Immersion Program: the teacher track, for those looking to optimize their instructional repertoires, and the program track, for those responsible for "selling" IL to university administrators, teaching faculty, and librarians.

While attending Immersion '05, which was held at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, our brains were on IL day and night, forming new connections and assimilating new information. So immersed were we in the company of a new "family" of energetic, remarkably clever colleagues that we scarcely noticed the 'gators dotting the lovely, tropical campus.

The Immersion Program provides a structure for teacher participants to learn effective teaching, learning styles and theory, and assessment. The historical background of emerging IL and current issues begin the program, with both teacher and program track participants, stressing the need to consider conceptual approaches to enhance student learning, such as knowledge construction, knowledge extension, and wisdom.

These approaches place the experience and knowledge of the student in the center of the learning process, rather than the teacher. While information sources, process, and

control have been emphasized in the past, knowledge and wisdom provide critical and necessary approaches to learning and teaching. Following this introduction to the program, program and teacher track participants diverged, coming together again at the end after five full days of Immersion in one of the tracks.



"This is your brain on information literacy," one group's sculptural interpretation of what IL means to them, could be a metaphor for what we learned at ACRL's Immersion '05.

### Teacher track

These three activities—teaching, learning, and assessment—are intricately intertwined. Without even basic assessment—what do I want the student to know?—how do I teach effectively? How do I teach in front of a class without answering that simple question? Randy Hensley provided the example and experience of how to teach in the front, middle, and back of the class, giving participants an honest look at effective teaching, summarized memorably in the words: Be authentic. Can we be authentic without knowing our own learning styles?

The teacher track began with one of Hensley's sessions, Play Dough in hands. We could have simply discussed the article, "Improving learning through understanding

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brain research.”<sup>1</sup> Instead, we modeled how we felt about IL at that point, explained our Play Dough images to the class, and voila! left-brain/right-brain transfer and reflective thinking had already transpired. Cohort leaders modeled great teaching and served as coaches while we coached each other.

That scary moment when we presented to our peers a five-minute slice from the lesson plans we had prepared (sans technology or visual aids) resulted in phenomenal improvements. Many of us felt naked without the technology we have come to depend on. We discovered the power of using our bodies and voices as our primary teaching instruments and experimented with vocal variety under Hensley’s tutelage. We had begun the journey from teaching to learning, from being “the sage on the stage” to being “the guide on the side.”

Beth Woodward traced the learning theories—behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism, humanism—critical to understanding the methods and instruments we use to teach. In examining our own learning styles—we are rarely only one style, but can be predominantly accommodators, divergers, convergers, or assimilators—we recognize our dependence and comfort with a particular style. We reach more students by introducing more learning styles, and we expand our own repertoire in the process, becoming more effective and creative teachers.

One moment that stands out for Carol Scamman occurred in the session on learning styles. “I expected to hear yet once again about auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners. Instead, we took the Kolb Learning Style Inventory,<sup>2</sup> and discovered the nuances of constructivist and other learning styles. Most people teach from their own learning style. Under Woodard’s guidance, we broke into groups. Addressing those whose learning styles were diametrically the opposite of ours, we told them what we

hated about being taught from their style and what style they could use to reach us.” Throughout Immersion, there was an emphasis on breaking something in order to fix it. The idea that we can increase our repertoire of techniques to draw on in the classroom inspired confidence.

Which is easier, wrestling with a ‘gator or writing a learning outcome that can be assessed, complete with criteria? Hint: with Carol Hansen’s expert leadership, we wrestled with and learned the importance of writing learning outcomes for our students. With practice, our brains were rewired to always consider first, “What do we want the students to be able to do as a result of this instruction?”



Immersion attendees demonstrate their newfound “voice” in a round of karaoke at a beach-side social event.

Judith Koveleskie (Seton Hill University) attended the teacher track. Upon her return, she wrote to the Immersion ’05 online community: “At the airport I bought a small flamingo to keep on my desk as a reminder whenever I need to be re-inspired by the Immersion experience. I’m sure that I am one of the older people in the group . . . but I have very little experience and no formal training as a teacher.

“I feel transformed, courageous, renewed, and ready to try all the things I learned at Immersion. I also think this was a very special group of people who enhanced the work of our wonderful faculty.

“Before I came to Immersion, I met a

person who was there in 2004. When I asked her what it was like, she said, 'It's a cult, but it's a good cult.' I'm not sure I agree, but it was like a spiritual awakening to discover the teacher within me."

At the end of the teacher track, Immersion leaders Dane Ward and Craig Gibson concluded with a description of IL that is no longer bibliographic instruction, that is, not "business as usual." The leaders acknowledged the demands made on librarians in promoting and incorporating IL, often with scant support and resources from the institution. The refrain to "be realistic" gave participants the necessary antidote to the intense program of Immersion. They provided frames—political, structural, human resource, and symbolic—for knowing our own leadership qualities and how we may join to collaborate with leaders possessing qualities we do not, in order to build stronger alliances.

### **Program Track**

Dane Ward and Craig Gibson first plunged program track attendees into a discussion of IL as part of a paradigm shift in higher education, rather than glorified bibliographic instruction. This was our first taste of the Immersion learning environment: we strayed from structured lecture into an interactive group discussion of how to best sell IL as something bigger than library instruction, sharing our frustrations and successes openly.

We next delved into theories of leadership, blasting myths ("leaders are born, not made") and clarifying definitions (managers are not necessarily leaders). We took a close look at a set of meaningful leadership qualities and performed a soul-searching analysis of our individual leadership styles. We had asked colleagues at home to rate our leadership qualities beforehand, and the results took many by surprise. We applied the different qualities of leadership to the complex task of advocating for and coordinating IL programs, and quickly learned that no one leadership style will get the job done. To be optimally effective, a leader must be flexible in his or her

approach—and suddenly, our jobs seemed so much larger than ever before.

Our discussion expanded to include campus cultures, and we were again surprised to see how closely the characteristics of institutional cultures matched the qualities of leaders. We practiced navigating the unique (and variable) cultures of campus administrators, teaching faculty, and librarians and realized that we had been given a powerful tool to use as we worked to promote our IL programs: a constant awareness of cultural factors at play in any given situation, and an understanding of how we might use our own leadership skills to make the best of every interaction.

Of course, programmatic assessment was a big item on the Immersion menu, we walked and talked our way through careful assessment of student learning and instructor effectiveness, eliminating much of the mystery and (of course) sharing our experiences and questions to great effect.

We saved what was for many the touchiest topic for last: how to spread and instill the Immersion spirit to our colleagues at home. Play Dough and crayons in hand, we took a colorful stab at our IL programs' internal weaknesses, culminating in a bout of creative, insightful storytelling that left us in no doubt of our newfound ability to lead even the most resistant librarian, faculty member, or administrator into a new era of IL instruction.

### **IL after Immersion**

Listening to other librarians is perhaps the most fruitful experience of Immersion. Leaders gave wide latitude to discussion, and it is rare to have the chance to listen expansively and intently to those who work as I do each day. There was so much talent and creativity

#### **Apply now for Immersion '06**

Immersion '06 will be held at Simmons College in Boston, July 28–August 2, 2006. Complete details about Immersion '06, including application materials, are online at [www.ala.org/acrl/events](http://www.ala.org/acrl/events).



Librarians at Immersion '05 came away with renewed energy, a wealth of new ideas and the knowledge that the Immersion community will outlast the four-and-a-half-day marathon meeting.

in the room, commitment, courage, rebellion, intelligence, and personality—with a great deal of collegiality—that we learned as much from each other as from the Immersion leaders.

Within the Five College community in western Massachusetts, librarians have met twice to listen and learn from former Immersion participants, from both the teacher and program track. The past participants provided a clear outline of what one learns from Immersion, but they did not—and perhaps could not—define the actual experience.

As a recent participant, I realize the difficulty of describing experience and learning as it occurred in Immersion. With discussion groups, conversations, work with cohort groups, shared reflections and observations, and laughter, amid a community of dedicated librarians and leaders, Immersion lives up to its rumored reputation. It is an outstanding experience for those who are willing.

Priscilla Coulter sums up her experience at Immersion '05 as, “an intense lesson in creative, collaborative introspection.” Not only did we get the information on IL instruction and programming that we expected, but we also learned to fully mine a wealth of experience and imagination: our own and that of fellow librarians. This was not an experience that will fade into a few lines on a curriculum vita. It had a true impact on our learning

outcomes, and our own students will benefit from it for years to come.

We would like to thank the Immersion faculty, Craig Gibson, Carol Hansen, Randy Burke Hensley, Dane Ward, and Beth Woodard, for lending their energy, imagination, and knowledge to this experience. We are grateful as well to ACRL, Eckerd College, and St. Petersburg area librarians for sponsoring and hosting the meeting. And, Tory Ondrla, your efforts in coordinating the whole, from the application process to the final evaluation, were appreciated by all!

## Notes

1. K. Wunderlich, A. Bell, and L. Ford, “Improving learning through understanding of brain science research,” *Learning Abstracts* 8, [www.league.org/publication/abstracts/learning/lleabs200501.html](http://www.league.org/publication/abstracts/learning/lleabs200501.html) (accessed August 30, 2005).

2. D. Kolb, “The Kolb learning style inventory, Version 3” (Boston: Hay Resources Direct, 1999). //

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