Improving Teaching and Learning through Instructional Partnerships: Building Librarian Relationships with One-on-One, In-Depth Conversations

Rebecca Payne and Sheila Stoeckel

Introduction

In 2007, the University of Wisconsin-Madison Library and Information Literacy Instruction (LILI) Program formed a working group to develop and implement a program to facilitate collaboration, communication, and the teaming up of library instructors for the purpose of discussing and working together to improve their teaching.

UW-Madison is a large public research university with 4,378 courses supporting a myriad of undergraduate and graduate programs and as many as 42,401 undergraduate, graduate, professional, and special students. The UW-Madison LILI Program with 21 participating libraries offers more than 2,300 sessions to more than 31,000 users each year. 125 staff members are affiliated with the Program. These include librarians whose jobs focus on instruction and staff who give the occasional library tour. Classes are taught for undergraduate and graduate students, faculty and staff, researchers, K-12 students, and community members.

Staff members participate in a variety of professional development programs. The LILI Program sponsors a monthly discussion forum with programs related to teaching led by LILI staff members as well as invited speakers. The Program holds a full-day annual retreat featuring reports from the instruction programs in campus libraries and a workshop related to teaching. Also, a banquet in May provides an opportunity for fellowship and celebration of the year's accomplishments. In addition, staff members attend campus teaching and learning events such as an annual Teaching and Learning Symposium and brownbag

Payne (*Reference/Instruction Librarian*) and
Stoeckel (*Associate Academic Librarian*)
University of Wisconsin-Madison [Madison, WI]

discussions concerning teaching, learning, and educational technology topics.

Program Background

With so many professional development programs, why initiate another LILI professional development program? A major reason is that there is a need for library instructors, regardless of their years of experience, to continually improve their teaching. Library instructors often chat informally about their teaching, but an opportunity for one-on-one, in-depth, and on-going conversations about the specific aspects of one's teaching is not part of existing professional development programs. Through instructional partnerships, library instructors can regularly discuss and reflect on their teaching together with colleagues to develop their skills.

The program provides structure for conversations among colleagues that previously were happening on the sidelines. It allows the building of relationships among staff not only within libraries but also across the campus libraries, which is important since many libraries have only one staff member who teaches. Also, the program helps librarians who are new to the profession or to teaching to develop their teaching skills.

Further, with a growing emphasis on accountability for and assessment of student learning in academic institutions and libraries, it is an appropriate time to improve teaching as a way to improve student learning. UW-Madison does not have a formal process for the evaluation of librarians' teaching; therefore, there is limited opportunity for individualized feedback on instruction. Information gathered from the program could be used to determine the kind of support needed from LILI Program professional development programs.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

The working group spent the spring and summer of 2007 examining the literature and similar programs, especially related to peer coaching. Peer coaching originated in K-12 education as a means of professional development and involves colleagues working together to improve their teaching by encouraging reflection and offering feedback usually based on observation of teaching. Peer coaching was similar to what we wanted to enable with our program. The working group developed a program structure and tools to be used in partnerships. In the Fall 2007, working group members piloted the program and further developed tools and resources. In December 2007, we opened the program to campus librarians, and 19 signed up to participate in the Spring 2008 program. We organized a kick-off, two-hour workshop where we discussed the program structure, our experiences with the pilot, and the tools and resources available to support participants.

Goals

The program goals were to improve teaching and student learning, and to encourage one-on-one, in-depth discussions focused on teaching. Through one-on-one conversations, the program would facilitate reflection about teaching, development of teaching skills, and opportunities to get feedback and learn from one another. In the process, the program would build supportive relationships and community.

Characteristics

In examining the literature, including the work of Lee-Allison Levene and Polly Frank (1993) and Dale Vidmar (2005) on peer coaching in libraries and similar programs at other institutions, the working group identified some common themes and components of programs and incorporated some of these into our program.

- The program is voluntary. Librarians will be more likely to have a vested interest in the program if they choose whether or not to participate.

- The program is flexible and self-directed. Librarians can choose the approaches and activities that work best for them and their instructional goals.

- The focus of the program is on the development of teaching skills, not evaluation. Colleagues give non-evaluative feedback based on observable behavior.

- The program encourages librarians' reflection and self-assessment. Librarians come to their own conclusions about their teaching.

- Partnerships are between equals and offer feedback to help colleagues reflect on their teaching regardless of their position or years of experience. Partnerships are to be mutually supportive and provide a non-threatening environment for colleagues to work together on their teaching.

Structure

The program structure includes three components: reflection, discussion, and observation. The program emphasizes reflection and combines the peer-coaching models of Levene and Frank and Vidmar. In Levene and Frank's model, librarians form pairs, select areas of focus, observe one another's classes, and hold pre- and post-observation conferences to develop teaching skills. In Vidmar's model, instead of observation, there are 10-minute planning and reflective conversations before and after a class for reflecting on intentions prior to teaching and the teaching experience. The Levene and Frank article offers a useful description of possible observation methods. The Vidmar article provides useful questions for facilitating reflective conversations.

In our program, partners trade off in two roles: instructor and facilitator. The instructor is the librarian whose instructional goals are the focus of reflection, discussion, and observation. The facilitator is the librarian who aids the instructor's reflection and observes and gives feedback on the instructor's teaching. The structure and communication between partners help each partner reflect on their teaching, set goals, and work on improving their teaching.

Partners engage in reflection with each other and on their own. Reflection may be about strengths or areas of improvement, goals, class planning, debriefing a class, or aspects of teaching. Partners discuss their teaching face-to-face, by phone or e-mail. Discussion may be about goals, classes, aspects of teaching, and other topics related to instruction. These discussions may happen before or after a class with or without observation. Depending on their instructional goals, partners may choose to have their partner observe and provide feedback on their classes and teaching. This feedback is based on observable behavior recorded according to methods chosen by instructors and their self-identified goals or focus areas.

Best Practices

From our literature review, we identified some best practices for partner conversations. For example, it is best to schedule partner conversations as soon after instruction as possible. By doing so, the instruction is fresh in the minds of both the instructor and the observer. The purpose of conversations is to facilitate the instructor's reflection. In discussion about classes, start with the instructor's own reflection before the facilitator gives feedback. Limit feedback to the areas of focus or goals of the instructor, not on other aspects of the class or teaching. In addition, base the feedback on observable behavior, being descriptive rather than evaluative. Focusing on behavior keeps feedback objective and on aspects of teaching which can be changed. Kathleen Brinko (1993) identified many of these best practices in an article in which she reviewed the literature about the practice of giving feedback to improve teaching.

Tools

The working group created a Web site (http://tinyurl.com/457jzb) which includes information about the program, a registration form, and tools for working with a partner.

The Toolbox includes materials such as a Planning Worksheet (Appendix 1), Instructional Focus Areas handout (Appendix 2), Questions for Reflection, Observation Methods Glossary, and Observation Worksheet (Appendix 3). The Planning Worksheet guides partners in thinking and talking about instructional goals or focus areas to work on and choosing appropriate activities. The Instructional Focus Areas handout lists some sample goals to help librarians brainstorm about possible goals to focus on.

Depending on their instructional goals, partners may choose to use observation or discussion to improve their teaching. The Questions for Reflection handout includes questions to help facilitate reflection about teaching with or without observation. The Observation Methods Glossary and Observation Worksheet (Appendix 3) guides instructors in thinking about what they wish to learn from observation, how their partner can gather data, how the data will help them, and what, if anything, they will change about their teaching based on the data and their reflection.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Schedule

Recruitment and registration for the program began in early December 2007, and an orientation workshop was held in mid-December in preparation for the Spring 2008 program. By starting the program in December, we allowed time for partners to become acquainted and plan before the busyness of the beginning of Spring semester. During January through March, partners held planning meetings and engaged in self-directed activities of reflection, discussion, and observation. In March, we conducted a survey of participants to gather feedback on the program and how they had benefited. For accountability, encouragement of reflection, and further feedback on the program for the working group, participants wrote reports on their experiences and attended a wrap-up lunch to exchange experiences and celebrate with other participants.

Participants

Nineteen participants registered for the program. These participants represented five campus libraries: Engineering, Health Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences, Life Sciences, and College (Undergraduate) libraries. We paired participants based on similar goals, interests, and schedules. Participants had the option of choosing and signing up with a partner, although no one did. We also paired librarians with other librarians from different libraries, because we thought that participants might find it less threatening to discuss teaching and have their classes observed by someone from a library other than their own. We had nine groups including eight pairs and one group of three members.

Goals and Activities

Instructional goals of participants focused on a variety of aspects of teaching including: presentation skills, pacing and transitions, student engagement and active learning, classroom assessment techniques, use of clickers and technologies, and connecting with students in and outside of the classroom.

Our survey revealed that about 50% of participants had their teaching observed by their partner, and about 60% observed their partner's teaching. Partners reported meeting with each other about three times during the semester and spending on average 5.5 hours on the program. The survey was conducted before the end of the program, and there was probably individual variance in calculation of these numbers.

SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

The table below shows sample activities of a partnership from the perspective of one participant:

Date	Time (hours)	Activity
12/18/07	2	Orientation workshop
01/24/08	1	Planning meeting
02/12/08	2	Observation of partner class and discussion
02/27/08	1	Discussion of my observed class
	2	Communication, reflection, report writing
05/29/08	2	Wrap-up lunch
	10	Total time on partnerships program

PROGRAM BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

Benefits

Based on participants' responses to the survey, the benefits of the program included: fun, time for reflection on and discussion of teaching, support in working on teaching skills, exchange of teaching ideas and techniques, getting to know a colleague, and learning about the instruction that goes on in campus libraries. In participants' comments, there was the theme of support received from their partner. One participant commented: "I think the program is not only beneficial to improving your teaching, it's also a great deal of fun – I look forward to the opportunities that I get to talk teaching with my partner." Another said: "It is wonderful to have someone outside your library listening and supporting you."

In addition, participants acknowledged how the program components were beneficial to them. On the reflection

component, one commented: "The program has been a very positive experience and is forcing me to take the time to reflect and grow." On the discussion component, another wrote: "Just the act of discussing my teaching style with another librarian was helpful. It solidified where I know why I do what I do as well as pointed to places in my teaching of which I am not conscious." Lastly, on the observation component, another participant stated: "This format forces you to make your observations in a quantifiable manner, which could actually lead to change. By focusing on specifics a little at a time, this program can make us better at what we do."

All survey participants indicated that they would recommend the program to a colleague, and all but one respondent indicated that they would participate again in the program. The reason the one respondent would not participate again was due to the time commitment the program required. Sixty-five percent of survey participants agreed with the following statement, "My teaching has benefited as a result of my participation in the Partnerships Program." The relatively brief time of a semester and the timing of the survey were probable reasons more participants did not agree. However, one participant claimed: "The relatively small amount of time the program takes pays off in big ways."

Challenges

Not surprisingly, the biggest challenge faced by participants was coordinating schedules to find times to meet and observe classes. Further, because the UW-Madison is a large campus geographically with libraries dispersed, travel time for meetings had to be factored in. There were other unforeseen circumstances such as a winter of record snowfall preventing planned meetings and a drop-in workshop planned for observation with no attendees. Teaching schedules vary too; one librarian had an unexpected light class load so there was not the immediate opportunity to put insights into practice.

APPLICATION IN OTHER CONTEXTS

While this program was developed within and for a particular context, the program and its components and tools can easily be applied to other contexts. On our campus, we have a large community of teaching librarians in 21 libraries. A campus and teaching community need not be so vast to make use of the components and tools of the program. For example, in a small library, a librarian could team up with a reference librarian, a staff member from academic technology, or a faculty member on the same campus. The librarian could also team up with a librarian on another campus. The structure and tools could also be used by reference services staff to work together with colleagues to improve their reference skills.

CONCLUSION

The UW-Madison Instructional Partnerships Program provides a flexible structure for the teaming up of peer librarians to communicate and collaborate on improving their teaching through self-directed activities including reflection, discussion, and observation. The feedback received about the program demonstrates that working together with colleagues can bring benefits that are not possible when librarians work independently to improve their teaching.

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Instructional Partnerships Program   **Planning Worksheet**

This worksheet is intended to facilitate partner discussions and planning. It is meant to get you started. You may find it useful to follow it closely, to use it as a loose guide, or to come up with another structure.

1. Start to build rapport and trust. Talk about your teaching experiences.

2. Discuss instructional goals/focus areas you want to work on.
    • What do you consider possible areas for improvement?
    • In what aspects of instruction are you confident?
    • What upcoming instruction sessions do you have in mind?

3. My focus area (for now):
4. Based on your focus area, how can you use observation and/or discussion to meet your goals?

Ideas for Using Observation:	Ideas for Using Reflection and Discussion:

5. Work out schedule with timeline and activities.
    • When and how would you like to communicate?
    • Plan next steps.
    • Work out a schedule of key instruction sessions and partner meetings.

After doing this worksheet, take time to review your notes, reflect, and finalize an observation checklist and/or list of reflection questions to send your partner in advance of a session.

Instructional Partnerships Program   **Instructional Focus Areas**

Keep in Mind:
- **Do you have a session** you frequently teach or a planned upcoming session that you want to work on?
- **How could working with a partner help you** reflect on how you can improve your teaching?
- **If observation, be very specific** so your partner can collect measurable data for you.

Session planning
- **Student-centered goals and objectives**--What do you want students to learn and do (learning outcomes)? Are you accommodating various learning styles?
- **Interactive/engaging class sessions**--hands-on, discussion, clickers, small group work, etc.
- **Content**--not too much, not too little; order of presentation
- **Class materials**--handouts, PowerPoint, Library Course Page, etc.
- **Assessment** during and after session, plans for changing content during presentation based on in class feedback
- **Contacting students**--before and after session

Presentation skills
- **Relating to students**--before and after class, responding to students' questions and wrong answers; listening to students; being inclusive in asking both males and females to respond (interaction analysis); what are students doing to show comprehension; what nonverbal cues are they giving during your session
- **Pacing**--effective use of time in session; students have time to ask questions and reflect; following outline/handout?
- **Eye contact**
- **Transitions** between topics and activities
- **Voice**--fast/slow, loud/soft, monotone/changing, enthusiastic/bored, voice habits (um's, constant repeating, like…, etc)
- **Movement**--around room, gestures
- **Planned session vs executed session**-- What changed and why? What you would do differently if you had to do it again?

Teaching Philosophy
- **Self-assessment**--What are your teaching strengths? What would you like to change about your teaching? What changes could you try to see if they are effective for you and student learning? What would you like students to say about your teaching?

Instructional Partnerships Program   **Observation Worksheet**

This worksheet is an example of a way to reflect on your teaching with observation. It is for use by you and your partner for observation of a class or workshop. It includes questions about your teaching you want answered, instructions for how your partner will record data to help you answer those questions, and reflections about how the data will help you improve your teaching and what, if anything, you will change.

Instructional Goal/Focus Area:

> *Example:* Engaging students.

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1. **Question (What do I want to know?)**

   Example: How much time do I spend on each topic?

   a. Method/Data (How will I know it?)

   Example: On the script outline, mark the time at which I start each topic.

   b. Benefit (How will the information help me?)

   Example: The information will help me know my pacing and how quickly or slowly I move through the material. Pacing will determine whether students have enough time to engage with the material or have too much time and become bored.

   c. Based on the information and my reflection, what, if anything, will I change?

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2. **Question (What do I want to know?)**

   Example: How many questions do I ask? What is the amount of time I allow for responses before moving on?   Did students respond?

   a. Method/Data (How will I know it?)

   Example: Mark the number of questions I ask. Mark time I allow for responses. Write verbatim my questions and student answers.

   b. Benefit (How will the information help me?)

   Example: The information will help me know whether my questions are heard as needing answers or as rhetorical devices and my skill at bringing students into the class content.

   c. Based on the information and my reflection, what, if anything, will I change?