

LibRATs Discussion: Reducing Everything to Its Maximum

Presented by Brett B. Bodemer at California Conference on Library Instruction, 2014

Introduction

The discussion of the LibRAT program at CCLI 2014 provided an opportunity to further explore important implications of undergraduate peer reference and library instruction as implemented in the LibRAT Program at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. Previous papers on the program have outlined the history of the LibRAT Program in the broader context of the history of peer reference and instruction and described some of the benefits and advantages. (Bodemer 2014 “They CAN and They SHOULD: Undergraduates Providing Peer Reference and Instruction” *College & Research Libraries*; Bodemer 2013 “They not only CAN but they SHOULD: Why undergraduates should provide basic IL Instruction,” *Association of College and Research Libraries Proceedings*.) Those papers argued for the implementation of peer reference and instruction based on elements of pedagogical theory, various modes of assessment, and operational advantages.

In contrast, this discussion, subtitled “Reducing Everything to Its Maximum” ventures into uncharted waters about the affordances such a program offers to library instruction designed and delivered by professional librarians. Observations on specific examples of student input and influence on the lower division basic information literacy sessions at Cal Poly are described, but primarily as a lead-in to a general reflection of how librarians might be well advised to take great pause and

consider the following far-ranging questions: 1) How can student content choices and delivery inform librarian content and delivery? 2) How should/can instructional design developed with students apply to our own practices? 3) And, at the very broadest level: how can the in-depth knowledge of student lives gained from working shoulder-to-shoulder with students inform a librarian conception of the role and context of instruction? The discussion concludes with a thought experiment that approaches this last question by concretizing institutions, individuals, experience, goals and aspirations in a visualization. The visualization can then be applied to identify gaps and opportunities for enhanced instructional design and delivery.

LibRAT contributions to instructional design and delivery at Cal Poly

In observing some of the first experimental teaching forays of undergraduate LibRATs in teaching in spring 2011, librarians observed some interesting departures, both in content and delivery, from the basic information literacy sessions as led by librarians. The most striking content change was the repeated emphasis on various modes of help in the library (chat, librarians, Research Help Desk) and the variety of other services offered by the library. Not that librarians didn't mention these, but in our haste to move on to more privileged "information resources" (a.k.a. databases and catalogs), we were more prone to blurt out and move on. The student session leaders on the other hand quite naturally (and without coaxing) acted as "sales representatives" of the library. They also opted to draw attention to more databases than those designated in the basic instructional

design. Equally striking was the *way* in which these content additions were conveyed. The help, services and databases were all broached with first-person testimonials, which, coming from students, carried the heft of authenticity. “This works really well for me” or “this worked really well for me” seemed both natural and well received as a communicative trope. When, after measurable success in their exploratory quarter of teaching, the decision was made to have all the LibRATs teach, we built in time for such extended pointing to help and services, also allowing for the peer session leaders to spend a few minutes drawing attention to two or three resources they had personally found to be really useful. Our basic instructional design that first full year had clear objectives, some basic content elements, a tight timeline, one interactive exercise, and although streamlined to include key elements, allowed latitude for individual flair and favorites. No single content piece dominated or waylaid the session design. By condensing, sequencing, and strategic inclusion, it approached the ideal suggested by the seeming paradox of “reducing everything to its maximum.”

In fleshing out the instructional design for the second full year of LibRAT teaching, the LibRATs were solicited for additional suggestions. Surprisingly, they proposed that we offer two options for the English and Communication faculty, noting that the 2-hour sections attending sessions had the benefit of a second hour of guided hands-on-searching, while the 1-hour sections did not. To the LibRATs this seemed unfair to the students who did not get the second hour. Fairness was the key point made by LibRATs (they objected to running a study that would deprive control groups of sessions for the same reason) and this highlights the very

personal way in which these undergraduates approach their position and roles in the library. The suggestion seemed very sound, was followed, and when calls were next put out for instructional requests, the 2-installment option proved very popular, and remains a staple of our offerings.

Open-text evaluation data collected in 2012 pointed to a continuing dissatisfaction with the “non-interactive” nature of the database portion of the sessions, and two LibRATs worked with librarians to design a brief interactive database exercise that became a part of the design for 2013/14. This exercise, which, while seemingly mechanical, reduced complaints about non-interactiveness, but more importantly, librarians and LibRATs alike observed that inclusion of the exercise resulted quickly in student attendees more effectively using limiters and reaching the full text of articles both when immediately available in pdf format or via article linking software. The exercise rarely takes more than 7 minutes, involves competition and prizes, and actually gets the students to “do” something, rather than passively watching someone else’s clicks and result screens.

Have librarians realized the full implications of the instructional situation?

Thinking about these significant contributions to instructional sessions springing both directly and indirectly from the peer providers, I realized that I had not ever really stepped back to think deeply about the implications of incorporating knowledge of their perspectives and lives for my own teaching. Chronic librarian “busyness” had crowded out the necessary epistemic distance to do so. Even now I have not thought clearly about all the things I am learning from them and yet it

seems obvious that if I do there might be extremely important ways to apply that to instruction. My guess is this holds for all librarians who work with students. What do we really know about their lives? How are their lives situated? Like ours, their lives are embedded in a complex set of nested circles, and one must ask, in their lives, where does information sit, where does *academe* sit, and where does our instructional session sit?

Thought Experiment: Reducing Everything to Its Maximum

The subtitle of this discussion hails from the 20th century composer Earl Kim, who is credited with saying: “I am reducing everything to its maximum.” This seeming paradox is highly applicable to the potentialities of library instruction. Reducing, reducing, reducing, to include the totality. In a profession currently fetishizing Empyrean abstractions (value, assessment, student learning) a formidable intellectual counterweight might be found in explicit efforts to imaginatively picture the particular locus of a particular instructional session and all the actors involved. Such a visualization can attempt to locate the instruction session in a context of intertwined domains, both spatial and temporal, asking: “How can the instructional design and delivery of a session be made into a complete drop of water that hits the ocean at just the right angle of incidence, creating ripples an hour later, a week later, even ten years later? How can that perfect drop of water create not only immediate steps towards competence, but sow seeds of practice that will germinate more fully in the long term?”

At the CCLI conference, for conducting this thought experiment, attendees were asked to close their eyes and then listened to the following script, read very slowly. Here is the script, albeit in merely textual form:

“Think about the most recent instruction session you led.

Picture the room in which it takes place, the walls, the furniture, the equipment, the door, the building the room is in, the campus the building is on, the city, the country, the world, and how much money has been spent to put this all here, and why, and try to guess how long education has been done more or less like this, and why, remember the name and face of the faculty you’re doing the session for, what do they expect the students to get out of the session? All of this is ... one ... big ocean.

Now picture the doorway, it’s open, the students coming in, their faces, what they are carrying, what they are doing as they come in, texting, talking, slurping, once they’ve settled in and are looking at you, what are their motivations? Why are they there?

Boom! The session is over. Picture the students leaving. What are they doing? Where are they going? To work? To another class? To hang out with friends? To take care of a sick brother or sister or parent? Commuting home on a hot crowded bus?

Now: how did what you did in the session help these students? Did it help them with the assignment an hour, a day, or a week later? Did it help them grapple with information in any way an hour, a day, or a week later? Did you plant seeds that might sprout best practice a week, a month, a year, ten years later?

Your session should be a complete drop of water that generates ripples at various distances from the session.

Did you make use of every moment of that session to make that complete drop? Did your session hit the ocean at just the right angle of incidence or did it skip off like a stone with no residual impact?"

The intent of such an exercise is to immerse us imaginatively in our lives, the lives of our students, academia, history, our community, and the world at large, in order to realize that we are privileged to have even an hour to try and create meaningful ripples. Some librarians complain, "What can we do in an hour?" But that lament completely takes the hour out of context, and forgets that institutions give us a stage for an hour, and not only that, but multiple audiences, and fails to note that the necessity of assignments give us a great potential hook. How many people get chances like this? We have the opportunity to have an impact, but the question is: do we understand our audience enough, our roles enough, and our goals enough, to reduce everything to its maximum? How do we take that hour and create meaningful impact and not just incidental contact?

This is a challenge instructional librarians should embrace, and that embrace starts with really knowing our audience.