

Embedded Librarianship: What's it Worth?

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INTRODUCTION

If the goal of information literacy instruction is to educate students in the discerning art of filtering information, then the obvious problem we must solve is how to accomplish it. What is the impact—real or potential—librarians have on the core mission of the university?

Specifically, within the context of this study, what value do embedded librarians bring to the campus community? It has been demonstrated time and again that information literacy instruction results in better research, better research papers, and an overall better educational experience. This is the common report within the limited contexts in which information literacy assessment experiments have been conducted: in this class or that, students do better, students understand information better, students learn more about the subjects they are researching.

Embedded information literacy (IL) instruction and the embedded librarians that go with it have resulted in and reported the same experience as IL instruction when looked at generically. The results are nothing but good. “Improved research abilities will result in increased student success...” (Owens 2008, 10). Students of midwifery have reported “an increased understanding of how to search for and retrieve information” from quality resources (Appleton 2005, 170). In addition to improvement overall in student learning, students benefit by “acculturation to the higher education community” (Bielema, et al. 2007, 335). So, following the

narrow line of information literacy instruction and the benefits thereof, we see an overall positive trend which descends from the increased willingness of students to seek out the librarian for help when they know that librarian is “an integral part of the class” (Herring, et al. 2009, 630).

But what if we widen our field of view a bit? What if we ask not how does IL instruction impact students, but how does it impact the university, the college, the campus community? And what if we further ask what is the overall impact of embedded librarianship specifically on the functioning, atmosphere, and efficacy of the campus?

THE VALUE OF EMBEDDED LIBRARIANSHIP

In many institutions there is a need to prove value for a service in order for there to be continued funding. For many years it was thought that the academic library was of value to the university because of its service and content. Due to strained, frozen, and negative budgets all campus units have to provide measurable service outcomes supportive of institutional missions in order to receive a level of sustainable funding. Libraries are in a position to do more than just measure usage metrics and gate count. Their value, although difficult to measure, can stem from services that directly affect student learning, faculty research productivity, and the overall state of the university.

Defining the term “value,” which is murky in an academic setting, is similar to defining worth. Since the academic library is seen as the black hole of funding in institutions, it is important for librarians and their administrators to be armed with data that proves reasons for stable or increased budgeting. Although libraries might be labeled an academic unit within the institution, they do not function like other academic units, and therefore the reporting and communication that happens between those units and higher administration is different from the

communication between the library administration to a provost, academic affairs, or a chancellor. This is true because of the nature of librarianship.

The importance and value of an academic library goes beyond its holdings. Librarians have known of the intrinsic value of their research skills and teaching and have recently been told to demonstrate business like values such as return on investment or cost benefit analysis. Those business terms are mostly applicable when there are expenditures. According to Creaser and Spezi, “libraries are struggling to find appropriate, and systematic, ways to capture evidence of their value for teaching and research” (Creaser and Spezi 2012, 1).

What is the value of an embedded librarian? The value isn't a monetary unit, but the benefit of service that meets the mission of the institution. The value stems from the “rate of return” in learning and research and promoting a positive perception of the library as seen by faculty, students, and administration. In order to measure the value of an embedded librarianship program one must turn from the financial aspect and look towards value-added services that aren't quantifiable in terms of money, but can be documented by achieving goals, assessing outcomes, and engaging people. “Librarians can show their value...most effectively by describing [evidence] in terms of benefits, for example, staff time saved, increased quality of student assignments, [and] increased contact hours” (Creaser and Spezi 2012, 1). Shumaker and Tyler suggest the value of embedded librarians is defined by the information services provided to the community served. “The emphasis is on targeted, ‘just-in-time’ delivery of information of immediate importance to the work of the group” (2007, 3).

According to the report by Creaser and Spezi (2012), embedding a librarian into a departmental course was seen by teaching faculty as the most valuable service a library could

offer. This is because the goal of embedded librarianship is to impart information literacy instruction at a point where students see the immediate benefits at each interaction, integrating what they have learned from a librarian with the specific content of the course. In instances where the embedded librarian serves as a co-instructor, value is added through the faculty-librarian collaboration. As co-instructors, librarians can contribute to the content of the course, the design and assessment of course assignments, teaching duties, and implementation of information technology tools. When information literacy is part of the course content the students are able to see the library's applicability and relevancy from the very beginning of their learning experience. "[Embedded librarians] can explore with students the wide range of resources the library offers as well as include some critical thinking workshops, supported by examples from the literature to illustrate the argument" (Creaser and Spezi 2012, 7).

The concept behind embedded librarianship is different from traditional library services because embedded librarians are integral to the community which they serve. Unlike traditional services that are uninvolved in specific learning objectives and wait for students to approach a librarian for help, embedded librarians can anticipate the students' needs and have a fuller understanding of the information necessary to complete assignments as well as the courses they are integrated into. (Shumaker 2012)

COLLABORATION IS KEY

There are several spheres in which embedded librarianship can and does have a measurable impact on the institution that has been wise enough to encourage it. Collaboration is one obvious benefit of embedded librarianship. The importance of collaboration between librarians and teaching faculty cannot be over-stated. Brown and Duke (2006, 173), citing Caspers and Lenn (2000), underscore the emerging importance of such collaborations.

“Collaboration with faculty is essential for the success of an embedded librarian project” (Owens 2008, 9). Successful collaborations can break down the barriers between different faculty cultures, bridging the gulf between the “content-based” culture of discipline faculty and the more “process-based” focus of librarians (Mounce 2010, 305).

And these collaborations can take various forms, freeing colleagues to find their comfort zone in their dealings with each other. Collaborators can form “instructional teams” of multi-disciplinary faculty, including subject specialist librarians. Assignment design can be done collaboratively by the librarian and the teaching faculty, resulting in a more meaningful integration of the IL instruction into the course’s content. When faculty rotate in teams “across disciplines,” interdisciplinary programs develop and the relevant IL instruction strategies along with them. Instructional technology is a popular and evolving medium for the incubation of collaborative relationships. Colleagues come together with their students using innovative technologies that are fast becoming standard. Outreach is another form of collaboration that is giving information literacy instruction increased visibility across campuses (Brown and Duke 2006). The collaboration between librarians and teaching faculty, which is increasingly becoming the established norm on American campuses, was predicted as long ago as 1990 by the Australian National Board of Employment, Education and Training (Dorskatsch 2003).

According to Kenedy and Monty, in order for any collaboration to be deemed successful, it must result in total integration of the library into the curriculum (2011). They argue for “a totally symbiotic approach to an overall process throughout the breadth of a course” (2011, 116). They also posit, as do many others writing on this subject, that librarians must not only teach classes, they must be included in the development of the overall curriculum and the syllabus in order for collaboration to be as complete as they insist it must be (2011).

Collaboration, of course, tends to be based on mutual interest. Mutual goals—such as creating respect within students for the place of books and journals in the intellectual exchange (Yousef 2010, 1) or something as general as inculcating in students an appreciation of “the nature of research” (Kobzina 2010, 300)—can result in building a campus-wide “social and learning community” (Yousef 2010, 1). Common sense, supported by research, tells us mutual interest cannot be discovered without communication, without dialogue. It is therefore imperative that librarians communicate clearly with faculty and on a level likely to elicit a response and that both parties engage in “conscious acts of listening” (Raspa and Ward 2000, 3) and that they listen “in an attentive, trusting, and respectful manner” to each other (Gallegos and Wright 2000, 98). In this way, the embedded librarian becomes a “networking agent” (Jeffries 2000, 115) bringing ostensibly disparate segments of the campus community into a focus that might not otherwise have happened. This is a process that must be ongoing, if it is to take root—to embed, as it were—as an institutional norm. As successful collaborations become known across campus, more will be encouraged to seek out such collaborations between faculty and librarians (Caspers and Lenn 2000).

Collaborative relationships based on mutual interest can evolve through common concerns which might fall under the rubric of one or more of the four “conceptual dimensions” discerned in the research conducted by Cha and Hsieh: Librarian Domain Knowledge, Librarian Professionalism, Curriculum Strategies, and Student Learning (2009, 464). When librarians and discipline faculty have the same objectives, a joining of forces and expertise seems natural and inevitable.

The Australian experience with embedded librarian-faculty collaboration has sparked a cultural shift at the University of South Australia, Adelaide. Pedagogical “silos” are being

broken down and breached with the immediate access to information serving as siege engine. By deconstructing and “understanding the preconceptions and perceptions” that sometimes complicate such cross-disciplinary endeavors, something approaching harmonious seamlessness can be achieved (Doskatsch 2003, 111).

A further by-product of the value of embedded collaboration is the change in perception of the librarian’s role. In a general but very real way, collaboration through embedding has the potential to relax students’ perceptions of librarians and to instill confidence in students that librarians are friendly and approachable (Manus 2009) and are there to help. In a more specific and no less real way, through embedded collaboration, the librarian steps a short distance away from being merely a service provider and treads slightly in the direction of academic colleague, if not of full faculty status. This change in perception is important, if collaboration on the basis of full partnership is a goal of embedding. Presenting and publishing on the embedded experience in venues beyond library journals and conferences suggest the acceptance of librarians as full partners by other disciplines (Caspers and Lenn 2000; Doskatsch 2003; Brown and Duke 2006). It is possible, in this dynamic, to create a working relationship that is nonhierarchical and equitable (Brown and Duke 2006).

Collaboration, whether in-person or online, will inure to the benefit of the students. A 2010 study by Clark and Chinburg showed “no difference between the performance of the online students versus the face-to-face students,” indicating a roughly equivalent level of instructional support and efficacy in both venues (538).

Another goal of collaborative embeddedness is its consequences to the library itself. Facility with and knowledge of library resources have the potential to translate into increased use of the library. This increase could have a ricochet effect in terms of decision makers who have a

say in library funding. As the value of the library to the campus community becomes more evident through the demonstrated increase in usage, there is a greater chance that greater funding will follow (Jacobs 2010; citing Shumaker 2009). This sort of cause and effect dynamic has the potential to become a cyclic fixture, which will inure to the continuing benefit of the campus community as a whole.

In order for learning to be meaningful, it must be purposeful; it must, in other words, relate to something real within the student's life. Collaboration of librarians within the context of a course provides a step in this direction for information literacy instruction. "The faculty member has to contextualize the purpose" of the library instruction (Kenedy and Monty 2011, 120). The sudden appearance of meaning, of relevancy, or purposefulness in context will in most cases translate into student engagement. It is especially beneficial to students and to their perception of information literacy instruction if the skills being taught are those that will help students "successfully complete their degree requirements" (Kenedy and Monty 2011, 119).

Problems of course construction are attacked and solved more efficiently through collaboration (Bielema, et al. 2007). Service to students is more individualized (Bielema, et al. 2007). The "library's role" in any collaborative effort strengthens and "empowers the library in the...distance education frontier (Bielema, et al. 2007, 340). Collaborators feel a "stronger connection to the campus community" as a result of a successful collaboration (Bielema, et al. 2007, 340).

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IS THE GOAL

An area of focus that is a growing concern of academic librarians is student engagement. Student engagement is a multidimensional construct of three interdependent components:

- behavioral (e.g., positive conduct, effort, participation),

- emotional (e.g., happiness, interest in learning), and
- cognitive engagements (e.g., investment in learning).

Through these a comprehensive view of learning and academic influences can be studied (Fredricks and Blumenfeld 2004, 59). By looking through the lens of engagement, librarians can explore students' values, characteristics, and attitudes towards their learning and social environments and offer information and programmatic services geared towards motivating, encouraging, and challenging the overall student learning experience.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is a nationwide survey given annually to freshman and seniors at various colleges and universities. Many librarians use NSSE data to increase campus collaborations and enhance awareness of libraries and librarians as part of the instructional fabric of the institution. The NSSE survey questions are built around five benchmarks that address effective educational practice:

- Level of academic challenge;
- Active and collaborative learning;
- Student-faculty interaction;
- Supportive campus environment;
- Enriching educational experiences.

In 2006, NSSE included four items relevant to information literacy at the request of the Association of College and Research Libraries. Those results proved favorable, that there are modest to high correlations between information literacy and student engagement. Similarly the results show that arts and humanities majors are more engaged with the library and full-time students are more engaged than part-time students (Gratch-Lindauer 2007).

Since students have grown up using the Internet and search engines like Google to locate their information it is difficult to modify search habits. Students frequently over-estimate their abilities to find the information needed for university work because they can successfully find information in Google. Likewise, if they have an academic need they usually talk to their friends first and then their instructors to find a solution. Traditional university students are at an age where they are learning to be self-sufficient and independent in their problem solving skills, and this includes finding information for homework. This reflects back to the skill they have grown up using-- Google searching. Students are not thinking of the library as their “go-to” place for information; nor do they fully realize the scope of a librarian’s purpose other than a “keeper of books.” Of course, a successful way to introduce students to the value of the library and librarians and to engage them while they learn is to embed librarians into their courses of study.

When a librarian is embedded in a course they have the opportunity to provide students a wider view of the learning process. Embedded librarians can draw the students into the library (even if only virtually) and showcase library resources and services. The librarian can engage students in meaningful dialogue about literature research and credible resources. What is most important is that embedded librarianship is user-centric and takes library services and resources outside of the library building to the student, thereby meeting the students’ needs regardless of location. Embedded librarians create customized content for their courses with the intention of leading students to the needed research tools such as subject-specific databases, print resources, e-books and other digital content.

Why are embedded librarian programs so valuable? Because embedded librarians engage students at their point of need within their most familiar learning environment – the classroom. The most ineffective libraries are those that are reactive with their service. Academic librarians

will not be as successful if they are passive and wait for faculty to contact them and tell them what to do. When a library is reactive to requests, librarians are forced to provide service within a constrained measure of already existing limited resources as opposed to embracing an active role by designing services to meet faculty needs with new service points. By actively engaging students through an embedded program librarians can demonstrate that the library is integral to learning and can help them succeed academically. “The purpose is to help the student create knowledge, not simply to show that others have written about a topic” (Budd 2012, 283).

“There’s very strong evidence to suggest that students tend to be more engaged with learning on the whole if they engage with library resources, interact with library staff, and spend time using libraries” (ACER 2009, para. 1). According to Umbach and Wawrzynski, when faculty increase interaction with students, students have great gain in social development and general knowledge (165). “First-year students and seniors reported greater gains in personal social development, general education knowledge, and practical competencies on campuses where faculty members engaged them using active and collaborative learning exercises” (165). “At institutions where faculty more frequently use active and collaborative activities than faculty from other institutions, students report being more involved in these activities. Emphasizing active and collaborative learning appears to have salutary effects, as students at these institutions also participate more frequently in other effective educational practices, such as experiencing diversity and engage in in higher order mental activities” (NSSE 2005).

Soria, Fransen, and Nackerud found in a recent study of first-time, first-year undergraduates determined that students who had used the library in their first semester had higher grade point averages and were more likely to return for another semester (2013, 160). Kuh and Gonyea found that when institutions set high standards for academic work, students

would push themselves to achieve. They also found that “students who frequently use library resources are also more likely to work harder than they thought they could to meet a faculty member’s expectations” (267). An implication of Kuh and Gonyea’s research is the need for librarians to collaborate with teaching faculty to “deliver clear and consistent messages regarding the value of learning about various sources of information, to require evidence that students make discerning judgments about the quality of information they use, and, equally important, to give students feedback on the quality of these judgments” (268).

CONCLUSION

Collaboration, as a benefit of embedded librarianship, is both seed and fruit, cause and effect. And, once fully realized, it is the trunk from which many other benefits branch out; for the value of embedding library research instruction and other library services multiplies, as success follows success. Effective teaching collaborations, we have seen, lead to successful students, who then graduate at a higher rate. Successful research collaborations lead to a more dynamic intellectual climate on campus and increase the knowledge base for everyone. Grants are more likely to be awarded to institutions that foster an atmosphere of dynamic collaboration. In the end, collaboration may be the greatest benefit of embedded librarianship. The progressive symbiosis that is embedded librarianship’s happy by-product will continue to attract increasingly more practitioners. Thus, in many more ways than one, this form of active integration will set a standard for educators of all levels that cannot help but inure to the benefit of students and their home institutions.

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