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New Academic Librarian as New Adjunct Faculty Member: Trial by Fire

Roxanne Spencer

New academic librarian takes on formal classroom role, as adjunct assistant professor, due to shortage of library education faculty in a library media program. Describes development of an undergraduate children's literature course. Discusses incorporation of web course software, online readings, and evaluative assignments for undergraduates. Gives examples of pitfalls and successes in developing and teaching a course at the college level for the first time. Offers perspective of the librarian in the formal classroom.

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[Librarians as Teachers and Professors: A Rare Commodity](#)

For more than a decade, there has been a dearth of doctorate-holding librarians available to teach library science education at the undergraduate and graduate levels.¹ The shortage of faculty poses a problem for the profession as a whole, raising questions concerning how new librarians receive the education they need to be well-rounded practitioners. Lower enrollments and reduced budgets in the past 20 years have impacted the shortage of faculty. Other factors include low salaries and the unsexy image of librarianship as a profession, despite many ad campaigns from the absurd to the ridiculous, which attempt (often unsuccessfully) to improve librarians' image in the public eye.² Fortunately, the revamping of many library science programs has attracted more students to master's-level Library and Information Science (LIS) programs.³ There is still, however, a shortage of doctoral-level faculty for this broadened profession.

There also has been a debate concerning the gap between the library school professor and the librarian practitioner.⁴ Library Science is as much a service profession as nursing or teaching. Without the theoretical foundations of librarianship and practical applications—such as the how-tos of cataloging or children's librarianship—much would be lost in the practice of librarianship.

It is common in American higher education for graduate students to teach undergraduate

students, especially at large public universities. Upon acceptance to graduate programs, teaching assistants—with the ink on their baccalaureate diplomas barely dry—are recruited to teach sections of introductory courses.⁵ This not only provides some form of tuition remission but makes it possible for faculty to rely on their graduate teaching assistants to handle assignments and grading of huge lower-level classes. It is important, of course, for future professors to gain classroom teaching experience, particularly when, outside the field of education, other academic disciplines often do not emphasize teaching skills for the future college professor. With the shortage of library science educators many library schools have turned to alumni or other professional librarians with professional experience, but not doctorates, to teach as adjuncts.

In the field of librarianship, practical experience is often the best teacher.⁶ To support the practical, library education frequently relies on experienced librarian faculty (preferably with doctorates) to teach theory and history. This lack of doctoral faculty presents an excellent opportunity for professional librarians seeking a different kind of educational career.

[My Move from Public to Academic Librarian](#)

I began my library career in 1999 as the branch manager of a brand-new, small, rural public library. After two years in public libraries as a branch manager, I was getting restless and wanted more of an intellectual challenge. In November 2001, it was my good fortune to be appointed Librarian and Coordinator of the Educational Resources Center (ERC) at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky. The ERC is a specialized library serving the School of Teacher Education and the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences at Western Kentucky University. WKU librarians are accorded faculty status. I was

privileged to be given the rank of Assistant Professor. I am now working toward the required second master's degree as part of the tenure and promotion process in the Department of Library Public Services.

Library Media Education (LME) at Western Kentucky University is a graduate program (not accredited by the American Library Association), which trains future school media specialists for Kentucky's (and some surrounding states') public and private schools. The LME program is, as are so many other library education programs, chronically short of qualified faculty to teach courses. Within the program are several undergraduate courses taken by education majors or others wishing to prepare themselves for the graduate LME program.

First Formal Teaching Assignment: Trial by Fire

Shortly after my appointment as Educational Resources Center Coordinator, I approached the LME chair about filling a vacancy as an adjunct assistant professor for the Spring 2002 semester. I was hired to teach LME 288: Children's Literature, with a class roster of 28 education major and elective undergraduates.

I had never taught a full-semester course before. My library instruction classes were limited to a few teacher education classes and the public when I served as a public library manager. I have a background in publishing, including children's and young adult literature, so I was a good candidate to teach an undergraduate children's literature class. This was my first formal foray into teaching, other than bibliographic instruction classes.

The next three-and-a-half months were as much an education for me as for my students! I was seeking intellectual challenge, and here it was: three 45-minute classroom sessions per week for an entire semester, with nothing but a textbook and an existing syllabus with which to work. What followed was trial-by-fire: successes, close calls, failures, and a determination to emphasize the importance of library education and librarianship to undergraduates who believed everything they saw on the Internet. I will only highlight a few of the ups and downs for this article and hope that other new librarians who step into the formal classroom will gain some insight and ideas.

First Steps: Developing the Course

My teaching experience had been limited to bibliographic instruction. I knew that teaching in the classroom for an entire semester would require much more preparation and creativity. A goal of mine from the start was to tie in teaching and librarianship, especially important for the education of young children. I wanted my students to view libraries and librarians in a more positive, helpful light. Like many undergraduates, even those in education, libraries and librarians are often to be avoided as much as possible! I devised specific assignments, such as requiring students to interview a children's services librarian in a public or school library setting, and to report on their impressions of the field after the interview. The assignment interested and impressed my students more than I had expected, which was quite rewarding.

My first task was to revise the existing syllabus to include assignments I thought particularly valuable. I reviewed many online children's literature syllabi from colleges and universities across the country. I selected several children's literature readings online to add to the syllabus, hoping to demonstrate to my students the use of the Internet as a reliable research tool.

To give myself an additional pedagogical boost I surfed numerous children's literature websites, all of which were extremely helpful in developing the course. I researched articles on teaching and teaching children's literature in particular, to discover how best to convey my enthusiasm and love of the subject to my students. Many faculty members at other universities have developed web-assisted or completely online courses in children's literature and have made their syllabi and lectures generally available on the web.

My inexperience of teaching methods proved my biggest challenge, most notably engaging the class in discussion. The biggest problem was attempting to lecture—especially on readings in the textbook, *Children's Book in Children's Hands* (Temple, Martinez, Yokota, Naylor, 2002)—and provoking some kind of response from somnambulant young adults. I decided to make students responsible for textbook chapter reviews when my lectures on the readings fell on deaf ears. Lecturing is a style of teaching I find least engaging, so this approach worked well. I divided the students into groups and assigned each group a chapter to present. Students had a choice of how to present chapter overviews.

Some did posters, several brought genre book samples, and a few did Power Point presentations. Many students dove right into the assignment and used creative ways to present the facts from the textbook. Other students resented the assigned presentation, but the education students did a particularly fine job of presenting the material.

[Libraries and Librarians as Resources: Guest Lecturers and Treasure Hunts](#)

It is an open secret that LME 288, for education majors and others, is one of the few opportunities for WKU's LME faculty to promote the graduate school library media program to undergraduates. One of the ways I tried to promote librarianship was by inviting school media specialist Eden Kuhlenschmidt of River Valley Middle School, in Clark County, Indiana, as a guest lecturer. Ms. Kuhlenschmidt is a dynamic and innovative teacher-librarian. She engaged the class in library media classroom activities and promoted the advantages and availability of jobs for future school librarians—welcome news in times of economic hardship, particularly in education.

Another assignment was to have each student interview, by phone, in person, or via email, a public library children's librarian or a school media specialist. Many students revisited their old elementary, middle, or high school and gained a new perspective on the diversity and dedication of their school librarians. Others took the opportunity to interview school media specialists or public children's librarians from across the country and gained insight into some of the differences and similarities of how children's services librarians function in different states and communities. I count this assignment as one of my successes—each and every student commented on how they had a better understanding and appreciation of librarians from doing this interview. Praise from undergraduates on a homework assignment is high praise indeed! We made frequent trips to the Educational Resources Center (ERC) during the semester. I created children's literature "treasure hunts"—the old favorite of library school reference courses. Students were permitted to "hunt" individually or in groups for clues to book, audiobook, video characters, authors, illustrators, or titles. The goal of the treasure hunt was to help the students become familiar with the ERC's collection of juvenile

materials, textbooks, audiovisual materials, and curriculum and lesson guides.

[I Am the Teacher: So, Now What?](#)

To encourage students to think about multimedia resources for the classroom more analytically, I introduced an evaluation rubric activity. Rubrics are useful tools to help students with critical and analytical thinking. The rubric contains criteria that define and describe the relevant components of an activity that is being created, examined, or evaluated. A common tool for the evaluation rubric is a table the students are required to complete with weighted assessments of the material being critiqued. Such evaluations are meant to aid students in developing critical and analytical skills. In one exercise for my class, students evaluated websites for authoritative, reliability, ease of navigation, and other factors. The students also used evaluation rubrics for reviewing other multimedia materials. For this and other exercises, I relied on several WebQuest resources and librarians' website evaluation lessons online to learn more about teaching my students how to think critically about Internet sites, books, and multimedia selection.

It was a difficult task getting students to engage in discussion, or even to answer direct questions. I often waited the requisite 20-30 seconds, while an awkward silence grew. I admit, with some chagrin, that I resorted to bribery in moments of desperation and tossed candy at willing participants! The class discussion that provoked the most intense student involvement—even engaging otherwise shy or disengaged students—was on censorship and challenged books. As might be expected, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series tops the list of Challenged Books for 2001, according to the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom. For the most part, my students were in favor of children reading the series, and vocally supported the freedom to read. One of my students strongly opposed children reading the *Harry Potter* series, but needed some encouragement from me to express her feelings. Her opinion was in the minority, but I was very pleased that she was courageous enough to express her views, despite her peers' disagreements or worrying that her opinions would influence her grade.

As a public library manager, I often led story times for young children. At times, the children

were very shy or too young to engage in active discussion about the stories we read together. Other children were quite eager to share their experiences and reactions to stories. When it came to discussing children's literature, I was surprised to find that, at times, there were striking similarities between reluctant and willing college students and their younger counterparts. Leading questions and enthusiastic encouragement, in both instances, helped produce the desired involvement from the audience!

[So Many Books, So Little Time! Assignments Overwhelm Some Students](#)

Children's literature was defined in the syllabus as picture books through easy reader chapter books. I introduced the students to the many genres in children's literature, such as traditional literature, poetry, informational books, and historical fiction, among others. The *Harry Potter* craze was still in full tilt, so I permitted the use of a few young adult novels to be included in the reading and review assignments for the class. Many students had favorite authors or illustrators. To capitalize on their interests and to send them, once again, to the library, I assigned a brief paper such as a biographical sketch of an author or illustrator. I required a list of sources, specifying the use of only authoritative web resources (such as an online encyclopedia, or an author's or publisher's homepage), and insisted on at least one print resource (such as *Something About the Author*). Some students chafed at yet another writing assignment, while others enjoyed researching their favorite childhood authors or illustrators.

There were two major projects for this course. The Critical Performance Evaluation Portfolio (CPEP) is part of the WKU requirement for education majors. The CPEP for this assignment was an Annotated Bibliography of 30 grade-level specific informational and fiction materials, primarily books, with a major topic and at least three subtopics. Examples of some of my students' Annotated Bibliography topics included Safety: Personal, Classroom, and Outdoors; Celebrating Fall and Winter Holidays: Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas; and About Bears: In Children's Picture Books, Species, and Habitats. The anxiety level for this important project—50 points out of a possible 200—was high. Engaging students in reading analytically and applying course readings and lectures to the project proved challenging.

Writing book annotations was a new experience for some students, and many had difficulty distilling their readings into a few relevant sentences. Most tended to overwrite. Examples of the project from previous semesters' proved helpful to the students who took advantage of the reserve materials in our library.

The second major project was a Reading Journal, consisting of 30 titles in several genres of juvenile literature, including traditional literature (folktales), poetry, realistic fiction, science fiction/fantasy, historical fiction, informational books, and biographies. The journal was to include a brief plot summary, discussion of any art or illustrations, and recommendations for classroom use. To many of the students, the task of reading 30 books over in one semester was daunting. Other students welcomed the opportunity to read a wide variety of children's books. The experience reminded many of their childhoods and those students chose books they remembered from their bedtime stories and other family or school story times. These students tended to get the most out of this assignment.

The stress level for the major class projects was very high. Semester-long papers such as the Reading Journal and Annotated Bibliography are excellent ways to teach students to pace themselves to avoid the last-minute deadline crunch. As expected, many students procrastinated or were overwhelmed by other class assignments, and asked for deadline extensions. As a first-time classroom instructor, I was perhaps more lenient than more experienced instructors.

[Reconciling Expectations with Reality](#)

I had high expectations for this class, but the reality was somewhat different. Many WKU students are the first in their families to attend college. Their families may live in remote, rural areas without the economic advantages of participating in higher education. There also exists a strong tradition in some areas of obtaining full-time work after completing one's high school education. I should have taken these facts into more consideration in devising assignments. In most cases, my expectations of first- and second-year students were too high. Students complained about reading 60-plus books, and completing the online reading assignments. Many in the class were not taught critical thinking and had trouble distinguishing

between simply reiterating the story and giving personal opinions and synopsis and evaluating materials for classroom use. Some students felt the additional assignments were “busy work” and expected standard lectures. Since I find standard lectures boring, I tried to introduce more activities, including watching and reviewing children’s videos such as *Magic School Bus* or *Arthur*, as well as trips to the Educational Resources Center to encourage students to become comfortable using the library. Some students found these activities interesting and useful, while others did not.

Overall Thoughts on My Teaching Experience

Teaching semester-long courses offers many more opportunities to develop constructive, learning relationships with the students. The frequency of class meetings; the depth of class discussions; time spent troubleshooting problem areas and encouraging reluctant students; and as grades are due, evaluating students’ abilities, all contribute toward a more focused relationship.

The sense of connection, of having engaged the student’s interest and enthusiasm, is what keeps many struggling teachers in the classroom. It can be the carrot that keeps the instructor striving toward teaching excellence. The challenge of keeping students engaged over the course of a semester is the same as the challenge of keeping students’ interest in a brief BI session, only many times over. Varying styles of lessons; flexibility with the way assignments are presented; changes of venue; and creative, collaborative projects are some of the many ways I used to vary the pace of a three-times-per-week, early afternoon class (the dreaded post-lunch time slot!).

The responsibility of developing and teaching my own version of a children’s literature class was challenging and difficult. Looking back, there are things I would now do differently. This experience reminded me that 20-year-old undergraduates view college differently than I do as their instructor—something I should have realized sooner. In my zeal to get my students to think critically and to appreciate the scope of children’s literature, I became aware that many of my students were never exposed to so many exacting assignments at the lower undergraduate level. The additional assignments I gave my students often dampened their enthusiasm for the subject. As I developed this

course for web delivery, I remembered that these were, for the most part, first- and second-year students, whose motivations and skills often were very different from returning adult students.

Some pointers I would offer other librarians teaching in the formal classroom for the first time:

- Know your students: What is the student body’s general background at the institution? What can you realistically expect from your students?
- Get to know the institution’s policies for students and faculty. If there is any confusion about attendance, you have the syllabus and the institution’s policy to back you up. Bending the rules for extraordinary circumstances may be necessary, but try to establish your rules and stick to them.
- Slipping in an added assignment, even for extra-credit, is probably a no-no. If you stumbled across a relevant article you want to add to your reserve readings, save it for the next time you teach the course, or use it as the basis of a (brief!) lecture and to stimulate class discussion
- Be explicit in your expectations for assignments. Clarify your objectives and requirements for the assignment by discussing it in class and reinforce the information before the due dates. Students often don’t read the “fine print” in the syllabus.
- Balance your expectations for the class with reality. Students always feel under pressure. Undergraduates have part-time jobs and place a high value on the social experience of college life. Graduate or returning students may be juggling families and full-time jobs.
- Seek and use the advice you get from other professors in the department. No matter how many times you run into your colleagues’ offices asking questions, it will be worth it. You may be surprised to find you have ideas and suggestions they will find useful for their classes.

Summary

Teaching provides a chance to grow and develop as a professional for those who are willing to take a few risks, learn as they go, and put into practice their own education and experience. My traditional teaching experiences

have improved my bibliographic instruction sessions. I am better able to target students' interests and to tailor the BI session to their interests in the specific course. I am more familiar with students' interests in children's books; this helps me fine-tune children's literature purchases and enriches our juvenile collection. Teaching a semester-long course requires creativity and imagination. I have a better understanding of the concerns and needs of students—as library patrons, as well.

I hope I influenced some of my students to consider librarianship as a profession. Who knows? Someday, some of my students may develop their own children's literature courses for the next generation.

I am indebted to the innovative educators who developed and posted well-designed and easily navigable children's literature websites for general viewing on the Internet. Students, teachers, and librarians have a wealth of reliable, useful information on children's literature available to them at the click of a mouse.

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